

The Missing Structure in Structural Theories of Hegemony, and the Contemporary International System

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Abstract

This paper focuses on hegemony and its outcomes on international relations. A theoretical review of academic literature will be combined with an analysis of hegemony's features and related policies in the contemporary international system.

In the first part of the paper, I will look at the three schools of thought that offered the main theoretical frameworks to explain hegemony: long-cycle theory, world-system theory, and hegemonic stability theory. I will argue that these schools are not fully convincing in theorizing the relationship between system polarity and hegemony (defined as relation of power).

In the second part of the paper, I will analyse the distinction that occurs between unipolarity – i.e. the structural feature of the contemporary system – and US hegemony – i.e. the processual feature – and how the former influences the latter. In particular, I will focus on security issues, and suggest that unipolarity implies particularly difficult tasks to US hegemony, since it makes delegation in security provision very difficult, both in regional and domestic settings. In this respect, I will maintain that armed forces are important to carry out these difficult tasks, at the same time underlining the hegemonic weaknesses: The contemporary hegemon is relatively weak in this capability, and the political costs for use of this capability are high. Consequently, I will suggest the hegemonic power of the contemporary unipolar system needs multilateral and institutional support in order to manage world affairs also because of its superior power, and not despite of it.

1. Introduction

The concentration of power is a feature considered crucial in analysis of the contemporary international system. When it is described, this feature recurs in the notions of empire, hegemony, and unipolarism. When it is explained, it is cited both as an independent variable and as a dependent variable. In the former case, the concentration of power helps, for example, to connect the strategies of international actors with the nature of contemporary conflict; in the latter, it is the outcome of

individual foreign policies such as, for example, the absence of balancing policies¹. On the other hand, the USA's solitary position at the apex of the international hierarchy is a feature considered by many to be unprecedented in modern and contemporary international life, so that the debate on the role performed by power in the current system becomes of particular interest.

In this paper, I shall examine this role in the conviction that when one seeks to grasp the peculiarities of the contemporary system, it is important to distinguish the structural and processual aspects of power. That is to say, when analysing the characteristics of American hegemony one must bear in mind the distinction between the distribution of capabilities and the actual exercise of influence². To this end, the paper is divided into two parts. In the first, I shall briefly discuss three ways to theorize the hegemonic concentration of power and its role in international relations, concentrating on the contribution of the authors who have founded or developed the long-cycle theory, the world-system theory, and hegemonic stability theory. On the basis of this discussion, in the second part of the paper I shall analyse the contemporary system, distinguishing among the tasks that unipolarism (as the structural distribution of capabilities) imposes on American hegemony (as the actual exercise of influence).

2.1. The long-cycle theory

The long-cycle theory is a systemic explanatory theory which analyses the international system as a whole: that is, the global political system. It interprets the effects that the distribution of power produces on international politics in light of how that distribution influences the global political system and its operation and

¹ For the absence of balancing policies in the contemporary system, see e.g. Ikenberry [2002]. On balancing and non balancing behaviour, see e.g. Labs [1992]; Schroeder [1994]; Schweller [1994; 2006] and Walt [1985].

² I have elsewhere argued in detail that the processual and structural aspects of hegemony should be kept distinct: see Clementi [2005].

reproduction mechanisms. Modelski, the most authoritative proponent of the theory, writes: “[i]n contrast to the concept of the ‘international system’, an aggregate of states in mutual interaction, the global polity may be viewed, within the global system, as a specialized management network for the organization and regulation of global problems” [1987c, 115].

The distribution of power performs its systemic role within this political network for the management of global problems, both when it is concentrated into a single actor, producing a hegemonic situation, and when it is not concentrated and thus produces a balanced situation. The former enables the system to work by virtue of the role performed by the leader of the international system: the role of global power “has been central to the operation of the global political system. [...] it supplies the leadership and the tools for meeting global problems, and it organizes and coordinates the relationships between the political and other subsystems at the global level” [Modelski 1987c, 116]. The latter acts as a regulatory feedback mechanism which engenders change in the system when the former is no longer able to perform its essential function. This happens when the power of the leader diminishes, weakening its role and favouring the advent of a challenger which threatens the organization of the system: “[t]his information input, the perception of a threat, has operated as a cement that binds a variety of states, in forms such as core alliances (between the old and the newly emerging world power) or in general coalitions, in particular those that fought in the bouts of major warfare” [Modelski 1987c, 121].

In the long-cycle theory, therefore, international life is depicted as a cyclical sequence of hegemonies driven by processes of concentration and diffusion of power, and where the watershed is general war: a conflict in which the principal powers in the system divide into opposing alliances which fight for control of the system. But if the general war closes one cycle and begins another, thus figuring among processes destructive of the international order, it simultaneously performs a systemic function. Its outcome, in fact, is the selection of a new global leader, which having emerged with renewed strength from the conflict, reorganizes the system so

that the new global problems can be politically managed: “[i]n essence [...] the global war has played, in the global system, a role that, in well-run national and local systems, is performed by the regular election process” [Modelski 1987c, 126].

On this view, the concentration of power performs a systemic function consisting in the resolution of global problems: for example, the formation of a modern economic system in the nineteenth century or nuclear war in the twentieth [Modelski 1987b; 1987c]. This function of resolving global problems requires the international system to be orderly, and therefore requires the production of certain collective goods: “peace and security, the enjoyment of territorial rights, the stability of the political authorities, and the regulation of global economic relations” [Modelski and Thompson 1987, 86]. These are the goods which enable the system as a whole to function and to solve its problems, just as they allow the system’s actors to rely on the stability of their independence and their reciprocal relationships. The production of such goods is therefore the essential task of the system’s leader power. In short, the global political system of the long-cycle theory is a mechanism of demand for and the supply of order, with the global leader producing it, the other actors consuming it, and great wars replacing leaders no longer able to perform this basic systemic function.

The point on which I shall dwell concerns the way in which the long-cycle theory connects the international order with the concentration of power. Modelski’s argument moves through two stages: the first one is that the system’s leader power has the capabilities to exert global influence. The leader is in fact selected empirically according to its endowment of ‘global reach’, that is, the naval resources that enable it to achieve a global presence.³ The second stage is that when the

³ In their book explicitly devoted to calculating global reach, Modelski and Thompson specify that “the following criteria will be employed to identify world and global powers. 1. To qualify initially as a world power, a global power’s share must equal 50 per cent of the total naval expenditures or 50 per cent of the total warships of the global powers. World powers retain their status, even though they may no longer satisfy the threshold criteria, until a new world power emerges. 2. A state must possess a minimum share of the world’s naval capabilities to qualify as a global power. A minimum share is equal to 5 per cent of the total naval expenditures of the global powers or 10 per cent of the total

international system is distinguished by a high concentration of these resources, so that the global leader performs its function of maintaining the system and producing order.

To be noted is that the first stage in Modelski's argument is structural in nature, for it is concerned with the distribution of certain capabilities within the international system. The second passage is instead processual, since it is concerned with exercise of the influence accruing to the system's leader from its superior capacity. That this difference is essential for the long-cycle theory to complete its explanatory trajectory also transpires from the words of its proponents.

For example, when discussing global powers, Modelski and Thompson write as follows: "[t]he command of the sea was acquired in a global war and once acquired, laid the foundations for a new world order defined at the close of that war. This would not mean that the world power 'dominated the world' because control over the global system does not confer control over all regional and national affairs. But it does mean a good deal of influence in setting up the structure of world politics and in defining and going about solving global problems. Command of the sea substantially aided their capacity in these directions" [1988, 17]. Put otherwise: the naval capacity of the system's leader (structural dimension) must be translated into actual influence (processual dimension) for the international order to be produced. Modelski further distinguishes between cases in which the dominant states use their superior power resources to pursue merely individual ends and those in which they rely on this unequal distribution of resources to perform collective functions [Modelski 1983].⁴ There is therefore a difference between the order imposed by the

warships of the global powers. Furthermore, its navy must demonstrate ocean-going activity as opposed to more circumscribed regional sea- or coastal-defence activity." [1988, 44].

⁴ To be noted is that, in Modelski's terminology, hegemonic actors are those that exploit their superior resources for individual ends; while the system's leader uses them to pursue collective ends. In this paper, I do not distinguish between the terms 'hegemon' and 'leader', in order not to encumber the treatment with mere lexical distinctions. I shall merely refer to the former actors as coercive hegemons, and to the latter as simple hegemons, benevolent hegemons, or leaders.

strongest power for its own interests and the order constructed by that power in the interests of everybody: only in the latter case does the order assume a distinct qualitative attribute, which is “[in a certain sense [...] the legitimacy of the public order” [Modelski and Thompson 1987, 88]. Once again, the different goals pursued by a dominant actor with superior capacity presuppose a fundamental distinction between the structural dimension of the concentration of capabilities, on the one hand, and the processual dimension of the power currently being exercised for either individual or collective purposes on the other.

While acknowledging that this distinction is essential for the long-cycle theory to maintain its theoretical consistency, it should be pointed out that the latter step produced by the distinction is not theorized in this tradition of inquiry. The long-cycle theory does not explain the conditions that induce an actor to use its power for individual rather than collective ends. It seems to treat this case as hypothetical or, at most, definitional. Nor does it seem to question the individual motivations that induce a dominant actor to produce order. In a certain sense, the theory takes it for granted that these functions are performed if power is concentrated in a single actor. It only hypothesises that failure to perform them will trigger a general war that installs a true global leader at the apex of the international hierarchy. If this is so, one must conclude that the long-cycle theory mechanically derives order from the concentration of power.

This mechanical derivation, however, is not only problematic for the consistency of the long-cycle theory; it raises a further problem to which attention should be paid. The theory’s scant concern with the processual dimension of hegemony also means that it does not deal with how the system’s polarity influences the process by which it produces international order. The long-cycle theory is unambiguously propounded as a structural theory and, starting from the distribution of naval power, it asks: “what does it tell us about the structure of world politics?” [1988, 26]. But when Modelski refers to a global leader, he is referring to the most powerful actor in a certain system, regardless of that system’s power configuration.

The point is made clear in the following passage from Modelski and Thompson: “a 50 per cent leadership position in a six-actor system does not mean the same thing in a two-actor system. A 50 per cent share in a six-actor system could provide an impressive capability foundation for exercising leadership. However, the same 50 per cent share in a two-actor system suggests that the two actors that count must have identically equal capability bases. The upshot of this discussion is that we need to exercise caution in comparing percentage shares across time and different actor configurations ... The problem reduces to the question of whether a given level of concentration means the same thing regardless of the number of actors involved. Does bipolarity mean the same thing as parity between the two leading actors in a multipolar setting? Fortunately or unfortunately, this question has not been resolved theoretically or empirically. In the interim, we choose to continue our reliance on the leader-share index" [1988, 103-104].

Whether or not one agrees with this scepticism concerning studies on bipolar and multipolar systems, the interim conclusion seems to be that the long-cycle theory is uninterested in structural reasoning and regards leadership as a property more of actors than of the international system. In fact, to cite only the most striking examples, among the global leaders which the long-cycle theory selects as cases are Great Britain of the nineteenth century – in an international system traditionally considered multipolar; and the USA of the twentieth century – in an international system of bipolar type. But if global reach assures global influence for actors, and if this superiority must then be translated into processual power – as the reasoning of the long-cycle theory assumes so that international order can be produced – one may ask whether the general distribution of capabilities in the international system performs a role in the shift from potential to actual power.

In short, if the long-cycle theory treats leadership without fully addressing the problem of the international order and its requisites, and if at the same time it does not investigate the processual consequences of the system's polarity for its protagonists, the problem is whether and how the production of international order

by the actor able to do so because it possesses global influence is influenced by the overall distribution of power as a systemic attribute.

2. The world-system theory

Also the world-system theory considers the role of the concentration of power, conceiving the global system in structural terms. Unlike in the previous case, however, the structure considered is not political in nature but economic. The world-system theory studies the processes whereby international power is concentrated and diffused, and their consequences on international politics, doing so on the basis of a “theory of capitalist development” [Wallerstein 1980, 9]: although such phenomena have significant political content, their causes reside in the nature and evolution of the world capitalistic system.

Wallerstein distinguishes among different types of world-system according to the configuration of economic forces within them. He writes: “thus far there have only existed two varieties of [...] world-systems: world empires, in which there is a single political system over most of the area [...] and those systems in which such a single political system does not exist over all, or virtually all, of the space. For convenience and for want of a better term, we are using the term ‘world-economy’ to describe the latter. [...] It is the peculiarity of the modern world-system world that economy has survived for 500 years and yet has not has come to be transformed into a world empire: a peculiarity that is the secret of its strength. This peculiarity is the political side of the form of economic organization called capitalism. Capitalism has been able to flourish precisely because the world-economy has had within its bounds not one but a multiplicity of political systems. [...] This gives capitalists a freedom of maneuver that is structurally based. It has made possible the constant economic expansion of the world-system” [Wallerstein 1974, 348].

In other words, according to Wallerstein, the form itself of international life responds to the pattern assumed by the forces of economic production: in the pre-modern world, devoid of a capitalist economy, the predominant political form was

imperialism; in the modern world, driven by the development of capitalism, international politics has been characterized by its division into autonomous political units. The world-economy theory therefore interprets the anarchic nature of the international system by stressing that it is functional to the development of a particular organizational formula of the economy. Consequently, the international structure as such reflects an economic more than political datum: “the modern world system is an economic but not political entity [...]. It is a ‘world’ system, not because it encompasses the whole world, but because it is larger than any juridically-defined political unit. And it is a ‘world-economy’ because the basic linkage between the parts of the system is economic” [Wallerstein, 1974, 15].

Whilst in the world-system theory, the pluralist nature of the international system responds to the fundamental needs of the capitalistic economy, also the role of the distribution of power among the various units into which the system is pluralistically divided responds to the logic by which that economic system works and expands. In fact, on the one hand, the unequal distribution of power determines the basic distinction among the states at the centre, in the semi-periphery, and the periphery. This distinction allows both the division of labour on international scale, with the central units exploiting the peripheral and semi-peripheral ones, and the spatial expansion of the capitalistic economy. On the other hand, the unequal distribution of power among the central units generates competition at the centre of the world-economy which is translated into a cyclical process of economic growth and stagnation that tends to be accompanied by the cyclical presence of an actor which performs the role of driving the world economy and organizing the entire world-system: this actor is the hegemon of the system [Hopkins and Wallerstein 1979; Wallerstein 1980; 1984].

The hegemonic units – those which emerge victorious from the competition at the centre of the system – are those that, by excelling in agricultural and industrial productivity, attract the capital market and consequently also become the financial centre of the international system. Owing to their superior capacity, these units – like Holland in the seventeenth century, Great Britain of the mid-nineteenth century,

and the United States of the twentieth century – adopt economic and military policies designed both to open up and expand the international capitalist market, from which they derive greater advantages than do the other actors, and to protect and stabilize the international system as a whole, thereby preserving the *status quo* and ensuring that wars among the central states of the world-economy do not threaten their dominant position. Unlike in the long-cycle theory, however, the expansionary and system-stabilizing policies in which the hegemon's role takes concrete form are not considered to serve collective interests: “[h]egemonic power, because it is aimed at maximizing the hegemon's share of the global surplus, is broadly exploitative, by design asymmetrical in its systemic distribution of gains. [...] For Wallerstein, coercive dominance is a fundamental ingredient of hegemony” [Rapkin 1987, 134-135].⁵

The point of interest here is how the world-system theory interprets the international structure. As we have seen, Wallerstein recognizes the importance of political pluralism in international life. However, although he accepts the anarchic principle in his explanation, he does not seem to set value on it for explanatory purposes. This is for two reasons.

Firstly, as Rapkin [1983] has pointed out, the world-system theory explains international politics and hegemony in light of factors internal to the political units, given that it gives crucial explanatory importance to their economic structure. Nevertheless, because the theory states that international political pluralism is necessary for comprehending how those internal factors have produced external

⁵ For this reason, as well, the further development of the capitalist forces automatically undermines the hegemon's dominant position: according to Boswell and Sweat, “Expanded production ... tightens the internal labor market, [...] at the same time that diffusion dissipates its technological advantages. Outward flows of capital occur when the internal investment market becomes saturated [...] . As a result, the hegemon's productivity advantage dissipates as competitors gain both newer equipment and lower labor costs. [...] Military spending to protect the world trading network becomes a drag on growth. Financial concentration is the last hegemonic advantage to disappear, but it is increasingly generated by monetary debt and foreign investment rather than internal profits” [Boswell and Sweat 1991, 128].

consequences, like the expansion of capitalism or war among the central units, and between these and the peripheral semi-peripheral units, one may ask why it entirely neglects the external influences on the behaviour of the political units which are traditionally viewed as deriving from political pluralism itself.

From this point of view, it is difficult not to agree with Rapkin when he maintains that this approach is characterized by a “rather static conception in which the interstate system is reduced to a ‘structural constant’” [1983, 242]. Conversely, if the international political structure has displayed different patterns during the five centuries considered by Wallerstein, why has not it also produced problems and opportunities independently of economic forces, influencing the units in the world-system-world in eminently political ways?

Secondly, one may discuss the role that Wallerstein assigns to the hegemon’s military resources. In theory, these resources and their use in war are crucial because they serve to enlarge the space of capitalism and to stabilize the system once the hegemon has been firmly installed at its apex – and this to an even more significant extent given the coercive nature that hegemony assumes from this perspective. Nevertheless, Wallerstein does not include them among the hegemonic capabilities, given that he operationalises the notion of hegemony only by considering the distribution of agricultural, industrial, and financial capabilities.

The theoretical importance of these potential problems is confirmed by the empirical consequences that derive from them. Wallerstein himself, for example, relies on political-military capabilities, rather than the evolution of the capitalist forces, to explain the collapse of Dutch hegemony under the growing military power of France and England. Again, Zolberg argues that Wallerstein’s reconstruction of the formation and workings of the modern world-system is vitiated by its scant consideration of political-strategic factors like alliances among the principal actors of the sixteenth century [1981].

In conclusion, the world-system theory is a structural theory because it considers the economic bases of hegemony to be an international phenomenon and examines how economic dynamics influence relationships among the units in the world-

system; and moreover because it assumes international pluralism to be the organizational criterion of modern politics. At the same time, one may argue that it fails to consider the international structure as a whole: both when it does not include political-military features when selecting cases of hegemony; and when it does not valorize for explanatory purposes – although this seems necessary given the tasks that the hegemon must perform in international life – the political constraints which derive from the distribution of the political-military capabilities of hegemony, that is, from the polarity of the international system.

2.3. The hegemonic stability theory

The hegemonic stability theory resumes a problem in the long-cycle theory and gives it a development that, to my mind, is more refined. It theorizes the connection between hegemony and the satisfaction of collective interests in the international system by using a distinction between the structural and processual elements in the concentration of power. The point is evident when we consider the author who laid the bases for this perspective, Charles Kindleberger, with his analysis of the Great Depression of the 1920s [1973].⁶ When investigating the factors that triggered – or better, did not prevent – the crisis of the international economic order at that time, Kindleberger identifies two explanatory variables: the ability of a single actor to order the entire system – hegemonic capability; and the willingness of the actor possessing these superior resources to employ them in performance of certain functions of general interest – hegemonic will.

Kindleberger writes: “[t]he explanation of this book is that the 1929 depression was so wide, so deep, and so long because the international economic system was rendered unstable by British inability and U.S. unwillingness to assume responsibility for stabilizing it by discharging five functions: (1) maintaining a relatively open market for distress goods; (2) providing countercyclical, or at least

⁶ For a complete picture of Kindleberger’s contribution to hegemonic stability theory see also Kindleberger [1981; 1986].

stable, long-term lending; (3) policing a relatively stable system of exchange rates; (4) ensuring the coordination of macroeconomic policies; (5) acting as a lender of last resort by discounting or otherwise providing liquidity in financial crisis. These functions, I believe, must be organized and carried out by a single country that assumes responsibility for the system. If this is done, and especially if the country serves as a lender of last resort in financial crisis, the economic system is ordinarily capable ... of making adjustments to fairly serious dislocations by means of the market mechanism” [1973, 289].

This quotation summarizes the arguments put forward in Kindleberger’s study on the concentration of power in the international life. These arguments are briefly as follows. First, the concentration of economic power gives shape to the system: for the latter to be orderly, there must be an actor able, because it has the requisite resources, to perform certain fundamental functions. Second, the concentration of power must be backed by the willingness of the most powerful actor to undertake a hegemonic role so that economic order can be produced. Third, this hegemonic role consists in the assumption of certain responsibilities towards the entire system, that is, in the carrying out of functions whose result is a public good for all the actors in the system: international economic stability. Fourth, the role of stabilizer of the system potentially brings the interests connected with the hegemonic role into conflict with the short-term interests of the most powerful actor, the consequence being that the hegemon’s responsibility also implies that sacrifices may have to be made in terms of national interests.

This theoretical account is substantially shared by many contributions to hegemonic stability theory, even though the latter is a quite diversified body of analysis.⁷ Rather than consider its different versions, here I shall underline what Kindleberger’s seminal contribution to hegemonic stability theory considers to be

⁷ For other versions of hegemonic stability theory see Gilpin [1981]; Krasner [1981]. For discussion and empirical verification see Keohane [1980]; Gowa [1984]; McKeown [1983]; Smith [1987]. Not dealt with here is Robert Gilpin’s [1981] study, despite its importance, because this would require discussion too detailed to be conducted here.

the two distinctive features of hegemony. The first is the causal linkage between concentration of (economic) power and international stability: the latter can be produced only by an actor endowed with superior resources, given that the other actors will avoid contributing to the production of a public good. The second feature is that the concentration of (economic) power is not a sufficient condition for hegemony to exist: the latter requires that the most powerful actor must want to assume responsibility for the production of the particular public good that is international economic stability.

To be stressed is that these distinctive features furnish an interpretation of hegemony which addresses the problem of the international order. In this framework, hegemony does not consist in the concentration of power and its automatic consequences; rather, it is characterized by an actual exercise of power whereby the hegemon uses its own resources to perform functions of collective interest.

In effect, one of the most widely-debated themes in this tradition of inquiry concerns the requisite of the production of public goods, which has been discussed on at least two dimensions. Along the first, various authors have argued that hegemony does not have the benevolent effect of overcoming problems of free riding in the international system, but rather a coercive one which consists in the imposition of interactive conditions which maximize the returns to the hegemon in the international system. Accordingly, the hegemon produces not public but private goods [Conybeare 1984; Snidal 1985a]. Along the second dimension, various authors have argued that the concentration of power is not the necessary condition for the production of public goods, because they can also be produced in other power configurations [Young 1989; Keohane 1984; Snidal 1985b].

As to the first problem, I find convincing Lake's argument that, while free trade is *per se* "rival and excludable and therefore not public [...] the enforcement of trade rules [...] is a public good prone to collective action problems" [1993, 463].⁸ In my

⁸ For further arguments in favour of the 'public' nature of the international economic order see Aggarwal [1983] and Gowa [1989].

view, however, it is worth dwelling on the second criticism, for which public goods such as the stability of international economic infrastructures can also be produced in non-hegemonic contexts: that is, when power is distributed evenly among a plurality of kindred large powers in a coalition. As for the problem addressed by this paper, this objection can be viewed as supporting my argument that the hegemonic stability theory does not set explanatory value on the international structure as a whole.

Returning to Kindleberger, the fundamental difference that his analysis discerns between US policies in the first and second halves of the twentieth century resides in a willingness to undertake a hegemonic role. In the former period, American disengagement favoured if not caused the Great Depression; in the latter, hegemonic will induced the USA to maintain the system in order: “it appears that more than cooperation was provided – namely, leadership – and that mere cooperation would not have built the institutions and policies” of the post-1945 international order [1973, 298].

If I am not mistaken, therefore, Kindleberger does not consider as theoretically important the structural context in which that hegemonic will had to come about and the specific structural problems that it had to deal with to produce international economic stability. In relation to this oversight, moreover, also to be pointed out is that Kindleberger – and many interpreters of hegemonic stability theory with him – treat the power which gives hegemony in the international system by considering economic capabilities alone.⁹

As in the case of the world-system theory, one doubts whether this operationalization can be satisfactorily used to analyse the concentration of power in the international system. If the capabilities that Kindleberger considers are economic ones; and if the actual influence that the hegemon actor exerts when driven by the hegemonic will concerns economic relationships and production of the public good which consists in the infrastructure of the open international economy, one may ask

⁹ Although it does not seem that Kindleberger furnishes a clear and explicit operational specification of what hegemonic resources are.

how, and with what consequences, the resources, influence and outcomes of the hegemony are connected with the other resources, influences and outcomes of international politics. Kindleberger certainly does not ignore the importance of political-military resources and interactions for international life; yet it does not seem that he gives them theoretical form.

Overall, therefore, it seems that also the original version of the hegemonic stability theory assumes, in its own way, that international polarity is a constant with respect to the problem of the production of order, thereby neglecting its possible explanatory role. In other words, on addressing the problem of order, it draws the theoretical boundary between the international structure and the international process by means of the distinction – in this case explicit – between the hegemonic capability and the hegemonic will. But it does not derive from this distinction the consequence that international structures with different polarities can influence both the formation and the exercise of hegemonic will.

3. Hegemony in the contemporary international system.

In the first part of this paper I have sought to show that one may argue that some of the principal efforts to theorize the concentration of power in international life have, in one way or another, neglected the role of the general distribution of power in the international system. If the argument developed thus far is valid, one can agree that the previous approaches are structural in the variables that they identify as theoretically significant but they are not entirely so in their explanatory logic, because that they do not include the effects of systemic polarity in their interpretative schemes.¹⁰

¹⁰ Indeed, in Modelski's case, the polemic with the Waltzian structure is explicit, being based on the idea that when power is concentrated, the international system stops being anarchic: "the notion of international anarchy, meaning literally the absence of government, or established order, in international relations becomes untenable. No one who understands how the world system has worked over the past half-millennium, or longer, can accept the idea that the system has been

The structure lacking in the preceding theories of hegemony probably derives from the reasoning whereby hegemony is considered as supremacy in the international hierarchy and the hegemon as the apex of the power hierarchy. Hence, in the end, hegemony becomes, in theoretical terms, a notion that comprises both the structural aspects (an uneven distribution of power) and processual ones (the relationship between the apex of the hierarchy and the other actors) of an international system. But the fact is that international history has examined hegemonies – or at least has tried to theorize international life in light of this concept – in structurally different periods: hegemony has been studied both in multipolar contexts (for example the British hegemony of the nineteenth century), in bipolar ones (for example the American hegemony of the twentieth century), and in unipolar ones (the American hegemony of the twenty-first century).

In my view, however, this factor hampers our understanding of the hegemony phenomenon both in general and, especially, in the case of the contemporary international system, giving rise to two problems. Firstly, it obscures the fact that supremacy in the international hierarchy does not necessarily entail that the distribution of capabilities is constant; rather it can be achieved in different structural contexts. Secondly, it obscures the fact that the power processually exercised by the apex of the international hierarchy can encounter diverse systemic constraints.

Also in regard to the contemporary international system it seems evident that the processual and structural aspects of power are superimposed without distinction. An eloquent example of this manner of framing the question is provided by Cohen: “[i]n the end ... the applicability of a particular term ... does not matter. The fact of the overwhelming power of the United States does. ... the United States will not, as some hope and other fear, bind itself to an international institutional and legal order

anarchic or lacking in an ordering principle or authority. Quite to the contrary, ... the world has seen, at the global level, a succession of orders of leadership. ... Anarchy means, if anything the absence of specialized provision for the production of order; my experience and analyses point entirely the other way” [Modelski 1983, 121].

that will domesticate and restrain it. ... The 'Age of Empire' may indeed have ended, then, but an age of American hegemony has begun. And regardless of what one calls it or how long it will last, U.S. statesmen today cannot ignore the lessons and analogies of imperial history" [2004, 56-57]. That is to say, American hegemony consists in overwhelming power.

The problem, nevertheless, is that if we take this approach – of which there are numerous examples – we end up by considering hegemony as a structural notion. Whilst in different structural contexts this may not have been evident, the contemporary case clearly evinces it: hegemony conceived in structural terms has now become a mere synonym for unipolarism, in that both consist only in the concentration of capabilities in one actor in the system.

In my point view, hegemony must instead be conceived in not structural but processual terms. It naturally presupposes that there is some form of concentration of power in the international system, but this does not consist of concentrated distribution. It consists instead of the specifically current power relation where one actor exercises great power over other actors by virtue of its superior resources.

If this perspective is accepted, the problem becomes explaining how the unipolar condition produces specific tasks that hegemony as a phenomenon does not encounter in systems with different polarity. The question to be addressed is therefore the following: what constraints does unipolarism give to hegemony – understood as the leadership role that produces the public good of international order – with particular regard to the dimension of security.

When addressing this question it is advisable to start from the strategic features of the unipolar system, and from their repercussions on the tasks and challenges that the hegemon actor must deal with to maintain order in the international system. These features can be grasped by considering two separate but closely interconnected dimensions: the first concerns the relationship between hegemony and globality; the second concerns the relationship between hegemony and the control and political stability of the other strategically important actors.

As regard the first dimension, one can argue that the USA – the hegemon of the contemporary system – must undertake a task more complicated than in the bipolar period. Firstly because during the Cold War the USA could mediate among the interests of the allied great powers whose security concerns were identical: in a bipolar context the American leadership could count on the cement constituted by the presence of an enemy common to the Western countries, a feature which also dampened conflict within the anti-Soviet block.¹¹ In the present system, by contrast, the identity of security appears to be more a diplomatic convention than an empirical reality. Moreover, and above all, the mediation that the hegemon must perform among the interests of the main actors in the system has systemic extent, in the sense that it concerns all the great powers and regional theatres in the absence of a common threat to coalesce individual security concerns.

Secondly, mediation among the positions of those contributing to international stability and supporting the hegemonic order, and the absence of a threat producing identical security concerns on a global scale, become all the more important if one takes account of the relationship that ties regional theatres to the global space. During the Cold War, the policy of reciprocal containment adopted by the superpowers generated a process of hierarchical absorption of regional theatres into the global one: regional problems were incorporated into the bipolar opposition and subordinated to it. Consequently, they were managed and controlled in accordance with clear strategic imperatives. The unipolar system, by contrast, lacks a clear strategic imperative which dictates the conditions for dialogue among the various regional theatres, and the superpower is left on its own: the only actor with sufficient interests and resources to perform a global role.¹² Hence derives the hegemon's fundamental task of pursuing its own global interests through mediation among the regional interests of the great powers, and ensuring stability and international order as the final outcome, in the absence of a predominant strategic ordering principle.

¹¹ The literature abounds on this topic: see at least Kaplan [1999].

¹² On the complexity of the contemporary strategic panorama see e.g. Colombo [2001].

To this dimension belong, for example, the difficulties of managing a consistent and univocal strategy to address the challenge of nuclear proliferation in North Korea, with its impact on the regional competition involving Pakistan, India, South Korea, Japan, and China; but also on global competition, with especial regard to China; and nuclear proliferation in Iran, with its impact on regional competition in Asia and the Middle East, but also on global competition if the role of international terrorism is considered.

In regard to the second dimension, to be stressed is that one of the principal causes of contemporary instability is intra-state conflict, whether in the form of civil wars or of failing or failed states.¹³ From a certain point of view, also this matrix of conflict stems from the unipolarism of the system. Whilst in the bipolar confrontation the respective spheres of influence generated incentives because each of the superpowers produced, in one way or another, political stability in their respective blocs, in the unipolar system this particular effect of reciprocal balancing has disappeared, facilitating – or not restraining – the explosion of weak, fragmented and heterogeneous state contexts. To this dimension belong, for example, the crises in the Balkans, Afghanistan and post-war Iraq.

Both these dimensions raise particular challenges for the hegemonic management of the international order. These challenges are already complex in themselves, and they become all the more so because they fuel each other, producing the same type of problem: the difficulty of delegating management of international affairs.

In the case of the relationship between hegemony and global space, the problem of delegation arises because regional competition is a global problem in a unipolar system [Mastanduno 2002; Wohlforth 1999, 2002]. On the one hand, in the short period, regional competition may follow the spiral of the security dilemma, heightening international tension and escalating local conflicts, so that the hegemon's task of stabilization grows increasingly difficult and costly. On the other hand, regional competition may lead to the rise of a regional pole which, in the long run, seeks to balance or even to challenge the global hegemon, thereby increasing

¹³ See on this e.g. Kaldor [1999] and Paul and Hall [1999]

the costs that the latter must pay to defend its position and the order that it has constructed (or is trying to construct).

If, therefore, as Buzan and Waever also argue [2003], the stability of the system depends on the production of stability in the regional theatres, in a context where military victory is not enough to resolve regional crises, the hegemon encounters a serious obstacle in its ordering function. Because regional equilibrium derives from equilibrium among the aspirations of the regional competitors, in their mutual relations and with their claims on failed or failing states, only in very exceptional circumstances can management of a region be delegated to a regional power.

In the case of the control and political stability of the strategically important actors, the problem of delegation arises because the internal fragmentation of these actors makes it difficult to identify a component, ethnic or political, able act as an internal ally for the external power in its endeavour to impose order. Ignatieff has argued that the hegemonic effort of the USA should consist in “nation-building lite”. That is to say, the USA’s contribution to reconstruction of failed states should be based on alliances with domestic actors that enable the organization of efficient police forces, and the reconstruction of political institutions and economic infrastructures [2003].

As Mann points out, however, this strategy “requires that the country already possesses some social and political cohesion, and that the overthrown regime was popular and the new regime popular. ... These conditions might not be found very often. Afghanistan is not yet such a case. There the US and its client are forced to rule, not through ‘nation-building lite’ but ethnic ‘divide and rule’” [2003, 85]. But governing through ‘divide and rule’ entails the military presence of the external actor that governs precisely by dividing.

If we jointly consider these two difficulties from the point of view of their consequences for the hegemon, we may conclude that they generate the same incentive for the USA. The first one increases the likelihood that the hegemon is present in first person in the various regional theatres, given the difficulty of delegating the management of regional competition to friendly powers. The second

likewise increases the likelihood of the hegemon's presence in unstable states, given the difficulty of delegating the management of domestic competition to an internal group.

If this reasoning holds, one may conclude that the hegemon of a unipolar system encounters systemic constraints which induce it to become involved in (i) regional conflicts, so that it acts as the arbiter of regional competition and as a supervisor ensuring that such competition does not promote one of the regional powers to the rank of global competitor; (ii) conflicts internal to politically unstable countries of strategic importance, where it acts as the moderator of domestic competition.

It may seem that these considerations counsel in favour of strategies in American foreign policies that many consider imperialist. But this is not so: pointing to a very different conclusion is a final consideration, which concerns the relative weakness of American hegemony in accomplishment of the tasks that unipolarism imposes on it.

If the challenges of unipolarism increase the incentives for the USA's presence, they also require the hegemon to possess the specific capability – i.e. sufficient manpower – necessary to meet those challenges. The problem is that American weakness in regard to this dimension of power is obvious and widely commented upon. The problem is demonstrated by the following facts: the “US has only 5 percent of the world's soldiers” [Mann 2003, 19]; the percentage of US manpower in the total for the great powers is around 20%,¹⁴ the US armed forces represent 1% of the country's active labour force, against the around 0.3% of China and Japan. These figures are all the more eloquent if they are compared to American military spending, which amounted to 67% of the total by the great powers in 2003.¹⁵ In light of these data, is difficult not to arrange with Mann: these forces are “obviously insufficient to patrol the whole world” [2003, 19]. This consideration is further strengthened by empirical research on the possibility conditions for military occupations. In this regard, a study by Edelstein shows that the existence of a threat

¹⁴ Figure calculated by BICC [2003] and ILO [2004].

¹⁵ Figure calculated by SIPRI [2004]. The great powers considered are: Russia, India, China, Great Britain, France, United States, Japan.

common to the occupying power and to the country occupied, and the absence of conflicts internal to the occupied country, are conditions which favour the success of a military occupation [2004]. Both these facilitating conditions, however, are lacking in the present unipolar system.

We may accordingly conclude that the hegemon actor is unable fully to perform what may be one of the principal tasks imposed on it by the unipolar system. What the hegemon lacks to fulfil its function of stabilizing the system are not so much satellites or guided missiles but soldiers.¹⁶ To bear out this conclusion, I make two final points.

Firstly, this weakness is exacerbated by the strong specialization with which the USA have aimed at the development of the Revolution in Military Affairs (Rma) and by its “conviction that military preparations should be guided by the business principle of investing in success” [Kagan 2006, 102], as if the nature of the war allowed the logic of comparative advantages to be applied to military matters. Secondly, this weakness has been exacerbated by the fact that the production of soldiers has costs different from the production of satellites or guided missiles. In other words, the main cost that the USA must pay to increase its military personnel to a level where it can perform that task is political in nature, given the democratic nature of its own political regime.

4. Conclusions

This paper has argued, firstly, that the effects of the concentration of power in the international system had been theorized without taking adequate account of the explanatory capacity of the relationship between hegemony and systemic polarity. Secondly, it has argued that analysis of the concentration of power should distinguish between the structural and processual aspects of international life: in this way it would be possible to interpret the tasks of structural origin that the hegemon

¹⁶ On the importance of armed forces in the present context see also Kupchan [2002] and Waltz [2000].

must undertake in a unipolar system. Thirdly, on this basis, the paper has stressed the difficulty faced by the hegemon in producing international order by delegating the management of local competition to regional powers or to politically unstable internal actors or 'clients'. This therefore sets structural constraints on the hegemon's presence in regional and local theatres. Fourthly, having identified manpower as one of the crucial hegemonic resources of contemporary unipolarism, the paper has shown that the USA is relatively weak on this dimension of power, and that its significant increase appears problematic both organizationally and in regard to domestic politics.

These arguments lead to the conclusion that the structural constraints of unipolarism make it difficult for the USA to act on its own as the stabilizer of the international system, and they show that eminently unilateral policies are not viable. There are therefore structural reasons for the USA to involve other countries in the multilateral management of international affairs and in the production of international stability. And they should also induce the USA to set value on the institutional frameworks that partly underpin its hegemonic legitimacy. The multilateral and institutional approach is thus the best response to the incentives of a system in which the USA wields overwhelming power. This choice would have a pay-off both externally, since it would give solidity to alignments crucial for the system's stability, and internally, since reducing the costs of maintaining a global presence would strengthen domestic support, with positive impacts on the stability of the USA's hegemonic will.

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