



Before Hegemony: Britain, Free Trade, and Nineteenth-Century World Order Revisited

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This article argues that neo-Gramscian theorizations of “hegemony” have failed to illuminate the role of nineteenth-century Britain in the rise of a liberal world economy in three respects. First, they have provided mutually exclusive accounts of the social forces underpinning domestic and international hegemony. Second, they have failed to show Britain’s agency in the making of a liberal world order. Third, they have posited a uniformity of social forces and liberal state forms that elides the differences between British and continental societies, thereby obscuring the real reasons for the general shift to liberal internationalism. We argue that it was the structural differences in the economic, social, and political organization of Britain and continental Europe that made free trade without a hegemon possible. Neo-Gramscian theorists of hegemony—just like their mainstream peers—have unduly generalized from the *unique* structures of American hegemony after 1945. Instead of serving as a master concept to organize the history of international relations, hegemony itself needs to be historicized: as a singular and temporally limited possibility of societal and international rule, preceded and succeeded by other forms.

The concept of “hegemony” has been central to how scholars of International Relations and International Political Economy (IR/IPE) have approached the study of history over the last three decades. Comparisons between British and US hegemony in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in particular have served as a key frame of reference for explaining the structural dynamics underlying international cooperation and conflict. Critical approaches, too, have adopted this framework in order to historicize world order. But where realist and liberal-institutionalist IR/IPE has privileged the role of states, critical theory has emphasized the agency of social classes in the constitution of hegemonic orders. And where realist conceptions of international history have focussed on the cyclical rise and fall of great powers, critical scholars are wont to point out that historical hegemonomies also involve qualitative changes in the form and direction of capitalist development.

The purpose of this paper is to probe the explanatory power of the concept of hegemony in illuminating the historical development of world capitalism and geopolitical order. We extend the re-examination of the role of Britain as the alleged hegemon of nineteenth-century world order, which has been addressed to mainstream approaches in a systematic way, to critical theory. Hegemonic stability theories (HST) have been criticized for failing to show how Britain’s economic preponderance translated into the ordering of interstate relations and

the construction of an open international economic order (McKeown 1983; Spiezio 1990; Schroeder 1994; Latham 1997; Onuf 1997; Hobson 2002; O'Brien 2002). However, critical theories of hegemony, and critical interpretations of the era of *pax britannica*, have been largely exempt from interrogation.

We propose to begin this task by re-evaluating the particular conceptual and historical accounts of British hegemony advanced by neo-Gramscian scholars such as Robert W. Cox, Henk Overbeek, and Kees van der Pijl. More than any other approach, neo-Gramscians have contributed decisively to the formulation of critical IR/IPE, and in so doing have put the concept of hegemony at the very center of this endeavor.¹ We ask whether this approach, with its emphasis on the power and social purposes of class forces, and its focus on transnational consensus-formation, can withstand the criticisms levelled against competing theories of hegemony. We will argue that empirical support and conceptual precision are found wanting with respect to the domestic basis, internationalization, and transnational class constellation of so-called British hegemony. The role of Britain in nineteenth-century world order, we conclude, does not fit the criteria established by neo-Gramscian theories.

The theoretical implications of this historical argument are far-reaching and point to a common challenge facing divergent perspectives in IR/IPE: to rethink how we historicize international systems. For if Britain was not a hegemonic power or “state/society complex” in nineteenth-century world order, we are left with only one plausible case of world hegemony: the United States after World War II. With only a single referent, the concept of hegemony fails as a fundamental organizing concept of IR/IPE. Instead of providing the theoretical basis on which to build historical analyses of international systems, it turns out that hegemony itself needs to be historicized, as a singular and temporally limited possibility of international rule. This task involves a renewed and historically informed appreciation not only of the specificity of US hegemony, but of the forms of societal and international organization that have preceded (and succeeded) it. Chief among them, we argue, is the position of nineteenth-century Britain, whose distinctive role and character is misunderstood and, in important respects, underestimated when framed in terms of “hegemony.”

History and Hegemony in IR/IPE: From Capabilities to Historic Blocs

The concept of hegemony first entered the vocabulary of IR/IPE in the crisis years of the 1970s (Onuf 1997:95–96). Devised by realist scholars to explain what was widely perceived to be a causal connection between the socioeconomic and geopolitical turbulences and a loss of American global power, hegemony sought to capture the *status quo ante*: the bygone era of effective liberal international institutions and stable international regimes of trade and finance constructed and maintained through strong American leadership. Theories of hegemony also sought to predict the future: without a predominant state hegemon to provide international order and offer economic incentives to its potential rivals, a relapse into economic nationalism seemed on the horizon (Kindleberger 1973; Gilpin 1975:72; Krasner 1976:343).

¹Cf. Cohen 2008:92. The concept of hegemony has also received significant attention from world-systems theorists such as Wallerstein and Hopkins (1979), McMichael (1985), Arrighi (1994), and Chase-Dunn (1998). Though there are Gramscian aspects to Giovanni Arrighi's work, it remains much more focused on states as actors than the neo-Gramscian accounts under review here with their emphasis on social forces as founts of hegemony. As such, his arguments are arguably much more immediately subject to the critiques leveled against mainstream HST. Whether that is indeed the case, and whether world-systems theory—with its focus on core-periphery relations rather than the intra-core dynamics at the heart of realist, liberal and neo-Gramscian approaches—presents an alternative conceptualization of (British) hegemony that remains viable even as other approaches fail, deserves separate investigation. We plan to undertake this in a separate article.

The liberal-institutionalist response to this argument served to further entrench the concept in the field even while it challenged the fatalistic conclusions of realist scholars. Liberal institutionalists focussed their critique on the likely consequences rather than the facticity of American hegemonic decline, which it took for granted. Contrary to the gloomy predictions of many realists, liberal institutionalists argued that institutions and regimes could provide order—as the title of Robert Keohane's (1984) seminal contribution puts it—"after hegemony." The future, from the vantage point of the late 1970s, might thus be open. Yet, there was little disagreement that international order in the past, where and when it existed, had been built on hegemonic leadership. Two systemic effects of hegemony were highlighted: firstly, the softening of the conflictual dynamics of interstate politics during those periods where one state possessed overwhelming material capabilities. Secondly, both realist and liberal theorists of hegemony posited a close relationship between a hegemonic disposition of power in the international system and economic openness. Whereas realists tend to stress the predatory nature of free trade regimes in which the overbearing capacities of a single leader are utilized to force other countries to play by rules which would largely benefit the economy or political power of the hegemon, liberals usually highlighted the presumed systemic benefits of free trade which was thus conceptualized as a public good which could not (or not easily) be achieved without the services of a (benign) hegemon (Strange 1987:554–555). Many intermediate positions could be, and were of course, taken, yet the proposition of a clear causal relationship between hegemony and economic openness stands as the center piece of mainstream theories.

The critique of these perspectives has proceeded in two steps. The first round of revision, largely from within IR/IPE, led to the introduction of a number of intervening variables in order to explicate the link between hegemony and economic openness (cf. McKeown 1983; Stein 1984; Neff 1990). It also raised doubts about the prevailing periodization of free trade and protectionism. Not only was there an increasing recognition of the varied nature of "free trade" regimes (cf. Ruggie 1982), but the seemingly obvious characterization of 1846–1879 as "open," 1879–1914 as "protectionist," and 1945–1970 as "open" turned out to be dubious in the face of new research. Most importantly, the world economy of the "belle époque" can today no longer be seen as simply "protectionist" (Coutain 2009). Insightful as some of these critiques were, however, they did not, for the most part, question the basic parameters of the "hegemony story." While they scrutinized the correlations that had been proposed, the image of international relations as a sequence of hegemonies remained intact. What exactly hegemonic powers did and for what reason may have become less clear as time went by; yet the status of hegemony as the fundamental structuring category remained.

The second type of critique, often informed by a "historical sociology of international relations," has questioned the usefulness of this image itself (Schroeder 1994; Latham 1997; Onuf 1997; Hobson 2002; O'Brien 2002; Coutain 2005, 2009). Historical sociologists have been less prone than scholars of IR/IPE to accept generalizations about the supposed global structures of an epoch derived from its leading actors. They have retained a keen sense for the divergent societal paths that combine in any particular historical conjuncture and conceive "the international as the simultaneously differentiated and interactive dynamics of historical development" (Hobson, Lawson, and Rosenberg 2010:33). The central question raised by these scholars is whether we can indeed conceptualize international history as successive bids for hegemony. For all of them, the reconsideration of the British case provides the historical entry point. Instead of problematizing the relationship between a presumed systemic variable (hegemony) and a posited institutional outcome (openness), these scholars ask whether

Britain during the “long nineteenth century” acted as a hegemon in actively structuring the international order according to its interests and needs.

Robert Latham spells out the two conditions which Britain—in keeping with mainstream, state-centric theories—would have to meet in order to be considered hegemonic: “First, Britain would have had to be preponderant in economic and military power...Second, Britain would have had to act like a liberal hegemon. That is,...Britain would have had to constitute a central force in the provision of system-wide political relations and the emergence of liberal relations, either by being a leader inducing states and other actors to cooperate and act more liberally or by becoming the central component of the institutions and organizations associated with a liberal order” (Latham 1997:425). Britain, Latham goes on to argue, met neither of these criteria. Its industrial and financial preponderance never, after 1815, translated into the military dominance over Europe which would have allowed British governments to secure their interests by force or threat of force. As John M. Hobson (2002:306) notes: “Britain ‘failed’ or rather chose not to transform this [economic preponderance] into hegemonic capacity.” Britain’s military expenditure as a proportion of national income was, as Hobson (2002:309) adds, the lowest of the Great Powers for the period from 1820 to 1913; moreover, “the lowest real military burden that Britain enjoyed in the 1700–1980 period, was achieved between 1815 and 1914—the very period of its alleged hegemony” (Hobson 2002:310). Its army was allowed to decay, and even its navy was on the verge of being overtaken by France’s new iron-clad warships in the 1850s. In the Concert of Europe, Britain did not play an elevated role (Holsti 1992:34); Russia and (after 1848) France were widely feared as the most powerful European states with real capacities to intervene in the social and political affairs of the Continent.

For Nicholas Onuf (1997), the “long peace” from 1815 to 1914 must therefore be understood in terms of the emergence of a form of “heteronomous” rule (rather than anarchy or hegemony) which was sustained by the Concert of Europe. In this system, states accepted reciprocal limitations on the autonomy of each state, yet the system had no single author or guarantor. A consensual element may have existed in the form of the European emulation of British institutions, but remains a subordinate element in the structure of mid-nineteenth-century world order. Britain’s relationship to its formal and informal empire, by contrast, was premised on coercively reinforced hierarchy; hegemony played even less of a role in this context.

Some theorists of hegemony did of course recognize Britain’s rather limited role and capabilities in Europe. Gilpin (1975:81) suggests that British hegemony had less to do with ruling Europe than with balancing against European competitors while ruling the waves of distant seas and shores. This view accords well with a prevailing self-image of British statesmen during the nineteenth century. It obscures, however, the utter inability of Britain to intervene for these purposes at any of the major turning points in the nineteenth century (cf. Imlah 1969:5). During the 1850s, repeated waves of hysteria washed over Britain as a French invasion seemed imminent. British statesmen knew full well that Britain had no real ability to counter such threats. But because of constitutional obstacles and parliamentary opposition, they were unable to build up an army capable of meeting such threats. And despite the clear recognition that Prussia’s wars of German unification did indicate the rise of a rival with a potential to impact Britain’s overseas interests (and notwithstanding a British security guarantee to Denmark), Britain was unable to take credible action against Prussian plans (cf. Schroeder 1994:146; Hobson 2002:312; Coutain 2005). Once it became obvious that Britain had failed to contain the rise of a potential rival, the British government reneged on “splendid isolation;” but even then the paucity of British military forces in the European theater failed to deter German expansionism (Hobson 2002:313).

What, then, of free trade, which is surely the core claim of any theory of British hegemony? Britain's repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 and of the Navigation Acts in 1849 is widely seen as the inaugural acts of a European free trade system. But as Neff (1990) points out, few European countries seemed willing to follow suit in the aftermath of these Acts. There was little that Britain could do to compel them in this direction (Hobson 2002:315). Having shifted to free trade unilaterally, Britain proved unable and unwilling to negotiate or enforce reciprocal tariff reductions and to include its trading partners in an institutionalized system of free trade (Davis 1997:197; Onuf 1997:105). Bryan Coutain (2005:17) therefore rightly concludes that "[t]he Repeal of the Corn Laws was not the inauguration of British hegemonic leadership. Britain not only abandoned commercial treaties with the tariff autonomy principle, and military force to open markets in continental Europe with the policy of political non-intervention, but even friendly persuasion and all the tools of hegemonic leadership." The critical result of the insistence of British governments on unilateral free trade and tariff autonomy was the absence of an institutionalization drive under Britain's supposed hegemony, and thus no attempt to either exclude free riders or, more consequentially, to prevent back-sliding and a return to protectionist policies among Britain's trading partners. The European network of commercial treaties that emerged with the conclusion, against British preferences, of the Anglo-French Treaty in 1860 had France as its principal architect (Hobson 2002:315).

The brunt of these critiques undermines the applicability of the very concept of hegemony to the British case, at least as far as mainstream theories, with their focus on material capabilities and their attempted correlation with economic openness and geopolitical stability, are concerned. In our view, these critiques have decisively damaged both realist and liberal theories of hegemony. The question at this point remains whether neo-Gramscian theory is equally susceptible to these historical-sociological critiques.

One significant difference between mainstream and neo-Gramscian theories of hegemony is that the latter refrain from establishing hypotheses regarding the expected effects of the absence or presence of hegemony. Where hegemonic stability theorists have postulated cause-effect relationships between hegemony and systemic consequences such as trade openness or relative geopolitical stability, neo-Gramscians have been much less specific about expected effects. Their focus has been on the social forces that are held accountable for the formation and decline of hegemonic orders rather than on the presumed regularity of hegemonic provisions.

Nevertheless, differences between critical and mainstream theories of hegemony can easily be overstated. There are patent similarities with those HST perspectives, in particular, that see hegemons as providers of public goods rather than predators. The Gramscian distinction between true "hegemony" and mere "domination" highlights the consensual elements in hegemonic orders, which outweigh, but never displace, force and coercion. Indeed, we know that a system is hegemonic rather than predatory because of its stability, as coercion provokes resistance and contestation (Cox 1981:144). With this conceptual move, stability now appears as an *attribute* of hegemony, not as a *causal effect*. Much the same applies to free trade. Unlike HST, neo-Gramscian IR/IPE does not start from the postulate that free trade is difficult to achieve in a world of sovereign states; hegemons do not appear to solve a collective action problem. Despite the absence of such a conceptual foundation, neo-Gramscians see liberal trade regimes associated with the presence, and protectionism with the lack, of hegemony. A liberal trade regime is conceptualized here not as a public good but as a mechanism for the formation of consensus between states—and between capitalist elites across state borders—and thus emerges again as an attribute of hegemony.

The absence of clear hypotheses does not mean that critical theories of hegemony are immune to critique (though as critical theorists we cannot help but notice the much greater vibrancy of critical probing in mainstream debates). We can and should probe their assumptions, cogency, and historical arguments in order to evaluate their value and validity as a social theory of international relations. The substantial core of this theory is premised on a creative re-working of the prison writings of Antonio Gramsci, which furnished Cox, Overbeek, and van der Pijl with the conceptual tools for the most powerful challenge to the dominant perspectives in IR/IPE while engaging them on common ground, the rise and fall of hegemonic powers. Where HST had conceived of international order and rule formation as the product of a concentration of material capabilities in a preponderant state, Cox's ground-breaking 1981 article on "Social Forces, States and World Orders" inserted a crucial qualification: for hegemony to obtain, the material power of a state needed to be underpinned by a set of ideas and institutions that endowed this order with a degree of universal appeal. This conceptual move, Cox (1981:139–141) contended, enabled him to better explain periods of hegemonic transition. Even militarily preponderant states could become hegemonic only after a thorough-going domestic transformation, once they had organized the consent of subordinate and potentially rival states and their leading social forces around a uniquely successful, dynamic, and sufficiently coherent strategy of social stabilization and economic expansion. Conversely, the decline of material capabilities need not necessarily spell the end of a world order built upon such foundations (Cox 1981:139).

Like John Ruggie (1982), Cox charged that hegemonic stability theories failed as guides to the emerging post-hegemonic order because they misunderstood the past. But "social purposes" were not disembodied ideas detached from class forces for Cox, who advocated for a historical materialist approach. A hegemonic world order, in the Gramscian sense, would emerge from a transformation of the underlying social relations of production. It would be premised upon a generalized model of accumulation and regulation that would benefit not only the hegemonic state/society complex that pioneered and sponsored it, but provide opportunities to those states and social forces that adopted it. And it would involve not only a political order among states based on their respective positions within the world economy, but "a globally-conceived civil society, a mode of production which brings about links among social classes of the countries encompassed by it" (Cox 1983:171). The state retains central importance, but instead of the unitary actor of realism that stands apart from society, Cox sees the state, and the social purposes it embodies, as the historical product of contending social forces.

Over the last 30 years, these insights have been expanded into a systematic theorization of geopolitical systems and capitalist development (Cox 1987; Overbeek 1990, 2000, 2008; Murphy 1994; Rupert 1995; van der Pijl 1996, 1998, 2006; Gill 2008).² International history has been conceptualized by these neo-Gramscian scholars as a succession of British and US hegemonic orders separated by a non-hegemonic interim of rivalry and systemic instability (Cox 1981:139–140; Overbeek and van der Pijl 1993:8). From this perspective, the form and direction of world order and capitalist development are shaped by the contest over the definition of the general interest of the capitalist class at both the national and international level for a certain period of time. Periods of disorder and rivalry are

²The account of the rise and fall of hegemonic blocs, and of British hegemony in particular, has been echoed by many scholars of critical IR/IPE. More recent explorations of the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have placed the concept of passive revolution rather than hegemony at their center (see Morton 2010 and other contributions to this special issue of *Capital & Class*). While these studies have tried to show the international factors at work in numerous national processes of late development, it remains to be seen whether they can yield a revised neo-Gramscian conceptualization of the history of world orders itself.

described as situations in which ruling class interests and strategies work at cross-purposes. Conversely, hegemony at the level of world order is seen as an international congruence of elite projects of capitalist organization, built around a transnational “historic bloc” which has managed to coordinate the interests of a specific class fraction with those of allied and subordinate groups at home and abroad (Cox 1983:171). Overbeek similarly argues that “[h]egemony in the global system is a form of class rule, and not primarily a relation between states” (Overbeek 2000:176). On these foundations, neo-Gramscians go on to suggest that the military supremacy of nineteenth-century Britain was underpinned by a program of “liberal internationalism,” which in turn expressed the domestic and global hegemony of Britain’s leading classes (Cox 1981:141; Overbeek 2008:153). This hegemonic program and historic bloc prevailed between the 1840s and 1880s, after which they were displaced by nationally organized capitalisms, which entered into increasingly sharp rivalries with each other (Cox 1987; Overbeek and van der Pijl 1993:8).

Before we examine these claims, we should note that neo-Gramscian theory builds on the notion of divergent and potentially conflicting interests within the capitalist class. Just how to specify these “social forces,” “elites,” or “capital fractions” remains subject to contention (Overbeek 2008:52). In Cox’s account, social forces are related to 12 distinctive “modes of social relations of production” which constitute specific interests and orientations (1987:32). When this theoretical apparatus confronts historical reality, however, these categories give way to a much more descriptive and haphazard use of the concept of class interests. Functionally derived capitalist class fractions like landed, productive, or finance capital are invoked on an ad hoc basis as agents of change or conservation. Nationally and internationally oriented class forces intersect with these fractions (Cox 1981:148). However, we rarely find a systematic attempt to specify the dominant and subordinate groups in any sociological depth and to demonstrate their historical agency in concrete cases. Instead, a particular class fraction or “social force” is seemingly proclaimed “hegemonic” when it derives disproportionate benefits from a given political-economic framework.

Other neo-Gramscian scholars, in particular, Overbeek and van der Pijl (1993), have sought to overcome these problems by rigorously conceptualizing capitalist class fractions and their strategic orientations; nationalist or internationalist programs are here not seen as *additional* elite preferences that intersect variably with the categories of money, commodity, and productive capital. They are instead conceptualized as consistent expressions of divergent capital interests. Central to their analysis is the claim that the “moneyed interests” of financial and commercial capitalists have a preference for the free flow of capital, goods, and services; by contrast, the “productive interests” of industrial capitalists are said to be inclined toward state regulation, economic protectionism, and welfare provision (van der Pijl 1984:10; Overbeek 1990:26; Overbeek and van der Pijl 1993:4; van Apeldoorn 2002:28–29). The resulting account presents the ebb and flow of hegemony over the last 200 years as the predominance of either the money-capital or productive-capital fractions and their respective hegemonic programmes (or “comprehensive concepts of control”). Though much more methodical than the analysis offered by Cox, it remains to be seen whether this ideal-typical fractionation of the capitalist class lends itself to a convincing explanation of the rise and fall of so-called British hegemony.

In the following section, we will examine the often complementary, but sometimes competing narratives of “British hegemony” developed by Cox, Overbeek, and van der Pijl. We will argue that neo-Gramscian theories of hegemony *cannot* be applied to nineteenth-century Britain for three principal reasons. Firstly, attempts to explain Britain’s pre-eminent international position with reference to the hegemonic social forces within British society have been inconclusive and

contradictory. Secondly, there is an apparent lack of hegemonic agency on the part of the British state and/or ruling class in constructing or maintaining a liberal international economic order. And thirdly, the international constellation of dominant state and class interests amounts not to a stable and cohesive historic bloc but to a passing moment of complementarity made possible precisely by the structural *differences* of the societies involved.

Hegemony without a Hegemon? Britain in the Nineteenth-Century World Order

Classes, States, and Hegemonic Blocs

The end of the Napoleonic Wars may have brought a cessation of conflict abroad, but in Britain, civil strife continued unabated. Bread riots, labor strikes, and mass protests were the order of the day in a society burdened by economic slumps and rising rural pauperism (Cain and Hopkins 1986; Thompson 1991:59; Feinstein 1998). Realist accounts can date the beginning of British hegemony to the end of the Napoleonic Wars only because they abstract from the internal constitution of British state and society and can thus ignore the significant degree of social unrest of the postwar decades (Hobsbawm 1962:121–124; Thompson 1964:660–780). If, however, we follow the neo-Gramscian definition that hegemony at the level of world order is “in its beginnings an outward expansion of an internal (national) hegemony established by a dominant social class” (Cox 1983:171), identifying the balance of social power becomes critical for explaining the international role of Britain. In this perspective, a hegemonic order emerged only after working-class contestation and middle-class mobilization had been brought to an end in the late 1840s. While there is general agreement on the importance of this period, there are divergent opinions among neo-Gramscians as to who represented the hegemonic agent within British society. For Cox, the incumbent mercantilist historic bloc of landed and commercial wealth had become an obstacle to the further development of industrial capitalism by the late eighteenth century (Cox 1987:117, 130). An alternative historic bloc, however, only emerged gradually and through protracted struggles, culminating in the repeal of the Corn Laws and the introduction of the 10-hour working day:

Where Cobden was calling for a middle-class dictatorship, Peel became the architect of a new hegemony. Repeal removed an obstacle to the aristocracy’s regaining its status as Britain’s natural leaders. It also removed the principal reason for the political mobilization of the middle class, enabling it to return without distraction to its preordained activity of making money. An aristocratic governing class running the state in accordance with the requirements of the liberal economy could also make some concessions to workers without undermining the basis of bourgeois order. (Cox 1987:137)

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel, Cox suggests, the aristocracy managed to secure the consent of the manufacturing middle classes and appease the working class (cf. Gray 1977). State power was now deployed for bourgeois purposes: the New Poor Law (1834) encouraged the flow of labor into the northern manufacturing centers. The removal of the sugar preference for West Indian planters and the repeal of the Navigation Acts dismantled a mercantile trading system that had become inimical “to the commercial aims of the new bourgeoisie” (Cox 1987:127). Together with the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, these legislative measures heralded a new hegemonic order based on a new form of state that refrained from intervention in the economic sphere but secured the framework conditions of free markets, sound money, low inflation, and (under the gold standard) fixed exchange rates.

The argument that the British bourgeoisie had gained control over the levers of economic power while the aristocracy was left in charge of a state increasingly tasked with providing for the interests of the bourgeoisie is of course a classic *topos* of historical materialism going back to Marx and Engels themselves (Hickox 1995:312–313). To couch this relationship in terms of bourgeois “hegemony” may stretch this frame rather far, but what is more important here is that some neo-Gramscians have argued the very opposite. For whereas Cox (1987:431; cf. 1981:141) argues that “the dominance of industry over society was making the bourgeoisie a hegemonic ruling class,” Overbeek (1990:45) emphasizes the continuity—going back to 1688—of the old ruling bloc of landed, financial, and commercial interests on the basis of a comprehensive concept of control that “was still largely defined in aristocratic terms.” Seeking to explain the historical roots of British hegemony’s subsequent demise, Overbeek (2008:149) suggests that the inability displayed by Britain around the fin-de-siècle to adapt to new industries and newly industrialized powers was directly related to the incapacity of the industrial bourgeoisie to translate its economic power into a hegemonic position within British society over the course of the nineteenth century (cf. Anderson 1964; Nairn 1964). Hence where Cox sees the coming-to-power of a new hegemonic force, Overbeek (1990:30–31) argues that the industrial bourgeoisie “was never able to replace the aristocracy as the hegemonic class fraction in Britain.”

Clearly, then, we are confronted with two mutually exclusive accounts that employ the same basic concepts for very different results. Cox and Overbeek each reason back from particular outcomes to the hegemonic forces that are thought to account for them. Cox concludes that because a liberal international regime of free trade and *laissez-faire* was established, the manufacturing elites *must* have been the hegemonic agent. Overbeek (1990:41; 2008:142–146), on the other hand, suggests that because Britain’s industrial supremacy began its long-term decline in the latter half of the century, the ruling bloc of the landed, commercial, and financial aristocracy *must* have persisted over the whole preceding period. That leaves the question why free trade should have been adopted in the first place—why this continuously ruling class alliance shifted from mercantilism to liberal internationalism. For these were the very forces that, according to Cox (1987:117), were invested in mercantile trade and protected agriculture and which were “resolutely opposed to the further steps necessary to emancipate wealth for capitalist development.” Overbeek assumes the opposite—without providing a convincing account of the shift to free trade in class-fractional terms. With the financial and commercial aristocracy already dominant since 1688, Overbeek and van der Pijl (1993:112) present us with an account not of the epochal struggles of competing class fractions for hegemony but the incremental and tactical reorientation of class interests within an existing power bloc.

Neo-Gramscian attempts to link social forces and international hegemony have arguably thrown up more questions than answers. What stands out is that the identification of supposedly hegemonic forces and agency is in each instance based on ascription, not careful historical research. Each account can claim superficial plausibility but provides us with little evidence of the efficacy of the privileged social forces in bringing about the shift to free trade and liberal internationalism. Reference to domestic hegemonic blocs—the fundamental starting point for the neo-Gramscian analysis of international hegemony—has thus served to evade rather than elucidate the historical structures of mid-century Britain. Indeed, it may be the very concept of hegemony itself, operationalized as the ability of a particular “social force” to represent its interests as the “general” interest, which prevents critical theorists from appreciating the qualitative changes in the nature of the British state during the period under review here. For the real importance of the emergence and strengthening of productive

capital and manufacturing elites, over the first half of the nineteenth century (which Cox, *pace* Overbeek and van der Pijl, rightly highlights) was not that these groups became hegemonic. Its result, rather, was that the old way of organizing the state, as a domain within which one particular social force defined the national interest, was increasingly recognized as untenable. The fight against “Old Corruption” between 1815 and 1848 hence was about the formation of a public realm and “Weberian” bureaucracy no longer colonized by private and predatory interests of a handful of magnates and merchants—or, for that matter, uppity industrialists (Rubinstein 1983:63, 73). The significance of the 1830s and 1840s was the reconstruction of the state so as to accommodate competing capitalist interests (and to some extent the interests of the newly enfranchised segments of the working class). Divergences of agrarian, financial, commercial, and industrial interests could now be settled through economic competition and political compromise and without putting the underlying capitalist order as a whole into question (Gray 1977:78, 91; Thompson 1978:260, 283).

In an important sense, therefore, the qualitatively new process at work in mid-century Britain served to make capitalism itself (rather than any particular capital-fraction) “hegemonic.” The successful stabilization, in the face of massive social unrest from below, of a capitalist society—with all its glaring inequities—through institutionalized mechanisms of incorporation of the progenitors of these challenges, was of epochal importance. The repeal of the Corn Laws was of particular significance in this respect. The Anti-Corn Law League had offered an alternative vision of what ailed Britain—and how to fix it—which had helped to undermine working-class support for Chartism by promising increased living standards even in the absence of further enfranchisement (cf. McCord 2006:78). To designate British society after 1848 as “hegemonic” in this particular sense is at once to recognize its uniqueness. In Europe and the rest of the world, capitalism by mid-century had either yet to be introduced or was still fundamentally contested from above or below. The “internal hegemony” of capitalism in Britain, we argue below, coincided with decidedly non-hegemonic forms of rule on the Continent. The continental attempts to confront similar challenges through the construction of “national hegemonies” half a century later would turn out to be quite different, with grave geopolitical implications (cf. Green 2011).

The Problem of Hegemonic Agency

The previous section has shown that neo-Gramscian attempts to ground international hegemony in the social transformations within the leading state/society complex of a historical epoch rest on shaky foundations as far as mid-nineteenth-century Britain is concerned. But our suggestion that capitalism itself, rather than any particular class fraction became hegemonic in this conjuncture, is on its own hardly fatal to this theoretical perspective. It could likely be accommodated with some adjustments if neo-Gramscians were able to prove a strong and coherent account of how the rest of the world came to embrace the principles and institutions allegedly espoused by Britain in the 1840s. Neo-Gramscian scholars have specified two such mechanisms: one, a project of internationalization; the other, a process of transnationalization. In the first instance, the dominant state and class forces undertake to create and maintain an international order based on norms, principles, regimes, and institutions that purport to serve a universal interest (Cox 1983:136, 189; 1987:7). In nineteenth-century Britain, therefore, the “historic bloc projected its social hegemony outward through its control over the British state and its overwhelming military power, and through the promulgation of its liberal internationalist concept of control around the globe” (Overbeek 2000:176). In the second instance

(which we will consider in the following section), the new hegemonic society unleashes expansionary forces that spill over into other countries. In this way, “[t]he economic and social institutions, the culture, the technology associated with this national hegemony become patterns for emulation abroad” (Cox 1983: 137; van der Pijl 1996:82).

The first mechanism suggests that for Britain to be considered hegemonic in any meaningful way, its undoubted economic preponderance would have to have been mobilized for a concrete strategy with which to win the consent of its potential rivals and remake the system. In this regard, much of the empirical evidence which historical-sociological critiques have marshaled against HST and its explanation of the international free trade system applies to neo-Gramscian accounts, too. British governments did little to foster the institutionalization of free trade principles—or to promote the creation of institutions through which the inevitable drawbacks of free trade for particular countries in particular circumstances could be addressed in order to encourage long-term adherence to free trade.

The openness of the British market for grain and other food and non-food primary products was an opportunity of which certain groups and states were keen to avail themselves. Yet the very fact that Britain’s turn toward unilateral free trade was unconditional, and retaliation therefore precluded, meant that there were few reasons for European governments to follow suit with similar arrangements. The most striking feature of Britain’s free trade policy is thus that it denied its statesmen and negotiators the ability to pry open European markets. When France sought a free trade treaty with Britain in the 1850s, it was confronted with great reluctance on the part of the British. In 1860, Cobden sought to dissuade his French counterpart by pointing out that the expansion of trade would result in greater demand for labor in Britain, thus strengthening the working class and increasing the likelihood of unrest (cited in McKeown 1983:84). If Britain finally acceded to the French designs, it was for reasons of perceived military weakness. According to Gladstone, the Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1860, “[f]or this panic [the feared French invasion], the treaty of commerce with France was the only sedative....[The] choice lay between the Cobden treaty and not the certainty, but the high probability, of a war with France” (cited in Coutain 2005:22). The threat of war came, of course, from France, not from Britain. “Britain’s reluctant conclusion of the 1860 Treaty,” Coutain (2005:22) concludes, “was a classic appeasement policy aimed at mollifying a militarily stronger opponent by bandwagoning.”³

Subsequently, it was France that became the hub of a European network of free trade treaties that institutionalized the most-favored nation principle. Simultaneously, the United States sought to promote this principle as a mechanism of institutionalized reciprocity. Britain generally resisted such efforts (Onuf 1997:105); in 1882, after the threat from France had passed, it allowed the Cobden-Chevalier Treaty to expire (Coutain 2005:23). Britain’s preference for autonomous tariff reductions, by contrast, could not become the basis of the European and global trading system.

To what extent, then, did free trade represent a universalist program of global economic organization? In fact, in as much as a conscious strategy vis-à-vis the European powers existed, it may have been of a mercantilist bent: the “imperialism of free trade.” One of the recurrent themes of the protracted

³The *Westminster Review* (1860), a leading liberal periodical, made the same case for the treaty: “Considering, then, the vast military and naval power and means at present in the hands of France, her preponderating influence over the Powers of Europe, owing to those means; her warlike propensities, to say nothing of ancient rivalry...it would seem to be utter infatuation were we to neglect whatever measures may be necessary to save us from insult and degradation” (cited in Coutain 2005:21–22).

discussions on the repeal of the Corn Laws was the imperative to secure Britain's status as the "workshop of the world" (Semmel 2004:146–150; Kindleberger 1975:33; 1978:197; McCloskey 1980:304; Onuf 1997:107; Landes 1998:521; Chang 2002). By opening markets for agricultural products and primary goods in exchange for British manufactures, so the rationale embraced by both Cobdenite free traders and their conservative sceptics, the industrialization of the Continent could be halted and the emergence of economic rivals prevented. While cautious not to give these strategic considerations causal primacy in explaining the repeal of the Corn Laws, Kindleberger (1975:33) argues: "The political economists in the Board of Trade—Bowring, Jacob, MacGregor—sought free trade as a means of slowing down the development of manufacturing on the Continent." Such considerations may easily be accommodated by theories of hegemony that place state power and predation at their center, but the same cannot be said for approaches that emphasize the consensual nature of hegemony.

While liberal and realist theorists of hegemony have mostly focused on trade liberalization,⁴ neo-Gramscian accounts have placed at least equal emphasis on the monetary system as a pillar of Britain's hegemony. Yet the evidence here is no more convincing than in the case of trade. For most of the period during which Britain was supposedly at the height of her powers, the international financial system to which most Western European states adhered was centered on bi-metallism (1848–1873), not the gold standard. This system required a high degree of coordination—under French direction rather than British hegemony (Flandreau 2004). Ironically, the gold standard only became a relevant feature of the world economy in the 1880s—at a time, therefore, when Cox, van der Pijl, and Overbeek see Britain in decline and British hegemony displaced by an age of "rival imperialisms" (Cox 1987:109,145; Overbeek and van der Pijl 1993:8; Overbeek 2008:154). This incongruity notwithstanding, the gold standard is given pride of place in securing *laissez-faire* through its enforcement of automatic adjustment between trade surplus and deficit countries (Cox 1987:145; Overbeek 2008:145). Evidence of British hegemonic leadership, however, is nowhere to be found: "The shift to the gold standard and sterling as the international exchange currency was based on their stability and the centrality of the British economy—a reflection of British economic preponderance—rather than any purposeful political-economic actions by the British state. In this respect, it was the actions of other European states that built the gold standard as each turned to the metal in the 1870s" (Latham 1997:429).

Even after the gold standard had replaced the bi-metallism promoted by France (as a result of its military defeat by Prussia) (Flandreau 2004), Britain never assumed responsibility for creating or maintaining an international monetary system (O'Brien 2002:22–24). In fact, its regulatory powers were confined to influencing the policies of colonial or peripheral trading partners and indeed often used to keep them *off* gold (Knafo 2006a:273). Nor was there ever any concerted international effort to institutionalize a system of monetary governance based on gold (de Cecco 1984:60). To be sure, the idea of a self-regulating monetary mechanism governing international commerce and finance embodied the principles of *laissez-faire* and appealed to a range of internationally oriented financial, commercial, and manufacturing forces (Gallarotti 1995:151). One must not, however, take liberal doctrine at face-value. The danger is to take too literally the idealized version of the gold standard propagated by its supporters particularly after its breakdown in 1914 and

⁴See Walter (1991:85–115) for a systematic examination, and refutation, of the supposed link between British hegemony, the gold standard, and monetary stability.

thus to miss out on its actual origins, purposes, and operation (de Cecco 1984:60–61).

Although strict adherence to the full convertibility of national currencies into gold was welcomed as a check on government, the social forces that pushed for the adoption of a gold standard reflected not simply a demand for stable monetary values but a societal project of “modernization” (Milward 1996:89). The assumed “automaticity” of the gold standard also needs to be qualified substantially. In practice, central banks were expected to provide sources of credit and liquidity in support of industrialization, and, as a consequence, often felt compelled to deviate from the principle of full convertibility at fixed exchange rates (Knafo 2006b:82). More than a matter of liberal economic orthodoxy or even simply national prestige, states adopted the gold standard in an effort to establish unified national currencies, enhance control over their banking sectors, and create stable conditions for foreign investment (Milward 1996:89–90). Instead of subordinating their national economies to an equilibrating monetary mechanism governing international commerce and finance, as Cox (1987:145, 147) suggests, the shift to gold enhanced the regulatory capacities of states and formed part of a broader strategy of nation-state building and late development (Knafo 2006b:79, 92). Not unlike the patchwork of commercial treaties that made up the liberal trade regime (Stein 1984), the slow and diffused manner in which the gold standard spread from the mid-1870s onwards underlines the primacy of domestic political considerations over liberal internationalist motivations, and the dynamics of geopolitical competition rather than hegemonic stability (Helleiner 2003:222 fn. 21; Flandreau 2004).

The fact that Britain was at no point actively engaged in a process of international rule formation that sought to secure the consent of other powers strongly suggests that its interests lay elsewhere. Rather than pursuing a hegemonic project vis-à-vis Europe, the British state was preoccupied with consolidating its formal and informal empire overseas (Hobson 2002:307). While in this process Britain did make a world capitalist infrastructure of open markets, capital investments, and an international gold standard available to the major powers, it did so for particularist and mercantilist reasons that had nothing to do with any conscious leadership in constructing and maintaining a consensual international order (McMichael 1985:120). Indeed, the widespread turn to gold may have reinforced underlying competitive dynamics, as the various strategies of linking (as well as delinking and relinking) national currencies to gold and maintaining sterling as a reserve asset created difficulties for Britain’s monetary policy. As more and more countries entered into competition for access to gold supplies, and as pressures from speculative capital flows across currencies increased, Britain turned toward formal empire, provoking colonial acquisitions among its competitors (de Cecco 1984; Knafo 2006a:270–271).

What is missing in neo-Gramscianism, therefore, is a convincing account of “the making,” rather than “the coming of the liberal world order” (Cox 1987:111). While there can be no doubt that we find an increasing embrace of liberal economic principles during the middle decades of the nineteenth century, it remains unclear how Britain fostered this situation—except perhaps by going its own way.⁵ Britain, as one neo-Gramscian acknowledges, “was the

⁵Despite the affinities expressed by many neo-Gramscians, Polanyi (1957) provided an account of the rise of “nineteenth-century civilization” *without* reference to British hegemony. Though Britain’s turn to liberalism in the 1830s appears exemplary, Polanyi invokes Britain neither as sponsor of similar developments elsewhere, nor as a source of stability in Europe (the “peace interest” is attached to the anti-liberal powers of the Concert of Europe before 1848 and to “haute finance” after 1848), nor indeed as underwriter of free trade. With respect to the gold standard, Polanyi does recognize a particular British role, without however turning this into an argument for a British-dominated world order.

power least interested in leading the political movement toward a more integrated world economy” (Murphy 1994:39, 78–79). This leaves neo-Gramscians with a final lever of state agency to explain the European embrace of free trade and economic liberalism: Britain’s balancing strategy as the central mechanism through which bourgeois hegemony is internationalized (Cox 1987:123; cf. Overbeek 2008:143–144). Through manipulating the European balance of power, Britain is said to have created the conditions in which liberal ideas and practices could become universal. Cox (1987:126, 148) argues that balancing “removed external obstructions to the bourgeois-liberal transformations of Western European states in the 1820s and 1830s” and “secured a permissive environment for Western European countries to adopt liberal forms without risk of intervention from old-regime restorationist powers.” In this view, British support for the spread of political liberalism paved the way for the emulation of economic liberalism.

These claims, however, rest on shaky historical foundations. On the one hand, they overestimate the extent to which Britain was in control of the balance of power as well as willing to put it in the service of liberal regime change. British foreign secretary Castlereagh (1812–1822) clearly sided with restoration, and while Canning (1822–1827) defected from and denounced the reactionary Holy Alliance, British balancing did little to prevent the *anciens régimes* from suppressing liberal-nationalist movements in Spain, Italy, Germany, Poland, and Hungary. There was also a clear lack of intervention on the part of liberal forces under Palmerston, despite the latter’s public heroics (Latham 1997:432). Even if one acknowledges British sponsorship of liberal regimes in a few select cases (McMichael 1985:128), the fact of the matter remains that prior to 1848 only France (with many qualifications) and Belgium could be described as liberal regimes (Hobsbawm 1962:146; Latham 1997:437). Moreover, while many more subsequently embraced liberal economic policies, they were rarely of a liberal constitution. On the whole, therefore, Britain failed to “lead” continental Europe toward a liberal state/society model. On the contrary, the remainder of this paper argues that by providing an open world market for primary goods, Britain reinforced the domestic class structures of Europe’s *anciens régimes*. Conversely, it was precisely the illiberal character of these regimes, in which bourgeois interests were far from determinant, that allowed European states and state elites to insert their economies into the British-dominated international division of labor in a subordinate position, as suppliers of inputs for Britain’s industry.

The Myth of Liberal-Bourgeois Convergence

Realist theories of hegemony have been criticized for focussing on power differentials among states while eliding the question of hegemony as a process (McKeown 1983:79). More specifically, with respect to nineteenth-century Britain, a lack of convincing evidence of “hegemonic agency” has been claimed (Latham 1997). The evidence presented above suggests that this applies equally to neo-Gramscian approaches. Yet, as we noted above, neo-Gramscians (Cox 1987:144; Overbeek and van der Pijl 1993:8) specify one further avenue of hegemonic formation, which is largely absent from HST: emulation or leadership by example. Acquiescence to the liberal ideology of Britain’s dominant classes may spring from the emergence of similar social forces abroad even in the absence of a clear and successful British role in promoting them.

With Britain pioneering a new model of politics and economics and even a new type of society, international order might emerge from the coalescence of the strategies of like—and like-minded—social forces in different countries all steering their countries according to the institutions and social relations elaborated by Britain. “Consent” would in this constellation be almost organic;

the supposed universal appeal of Britain's liberal internationalism would stem not from anything Britain did, but from what Britain was and what (some) continental European states were becoming. Neo-Gramscians, of course, have never suggested that emulation alone could carry the weight of hegemonic theorizing. We consider the viability of this proposition simply because the other elements in the neo-Gramscian equation are deficient. A careful examination of the "bourgeois convergence" thesis in its own terms, moreover, may help us to better understand the explanatory limits of the "hegemony story"—and its propensity to obscure rather than illuminate historical transformations.

The most systematic argument for a transnational hegemony from the ground up, as it were, comes from Cox, who argues that the early decades of the nineteenth century saw the rising influence in many European countries of the same industrial capitalist social forces that underpinned the mid-century British state (Cox 1987:126–128, 148). In this sense, "*pax britannica* was based both on the ascendancy of manufacturing capitalism in the international exchange economy, of which Britain was the center, and on the social and ideological power, in Britain and other parts of northwestern Europe of the class which drew its wealth from manufacturing" (Cox 1981:141). The foundation of this international order was the emergence, within the core societies, of civil society as the real repository of power that allowed for both the reorientation of foreign policies and the emergence of transnational linkages and consensus.

Almost simultaneously with the new industrial capitalist hegemony in Britain, continental Europe thus underwent a parallel transformation. For Cox, it seems that this process of bourgeois state formation was concluded with the 1848 revolutions, *despite* their overt failure. The results, too, were similar to those in Britain: the entrenchment of capitalist ruling classes who, having renounced their own revolutionary aspirations, left actual governance to others: "Because their hegemony was firmly entrenched in civil society, the bourgeoisie often did not need to run the state themselves. Landed aristocrats in England, Junkers in Prussia, or a renegade pretender to the mantle of Napoleon I in France, could do it for them so long as these rulers recognized the hegemonic structures of civil society as the basic limits of their political action" (Cox 1983:163).

The structural similarities of European societies thus made it possible for hegemony to operate across countries even with the bourgeoisie rarely in charge of government. More than a political bargain or stalemate, this symbiosis between aristocratic and bourgeois elites oversaw the fundamental reshaping of state/society relations in the image of the self-regulating market and for the purposes of industrial capital. The division of labor between aristocracy and bourgeoisie coincided with a separation of political and economic spheres of activity under a liberal state that stands apart from the economy. This separation of politics and economics was then grafted on the international sphere, creating a liberal world economy as a component of the international system (Cox 1987:127).

Overbeek and van der Pijl, too, conceive of British hegemony in terms of a transnational equivalence and synchronicity of class fractions and constellations. However, echoing their divergent interpretations of Britain's internal balance of power, they see liberal internationalism supported by an "abstract and cosmopolitan money capital perspective" (Overbeek and van der Pijl 1993:6). Where Cox, with his more eclectic understanding—and ad hoc invocation—of functional and geographical divisions within the bourgeoisie, sees the liberal international economic order as underpinned by the transnational convergence of the productive interests of Europe's industrial bourgeoisies, Overbeek and van der Pijl (1993:6–9) are forced to argue the opposite by the logic of their class-fractional approach. Given their axiomatic assumption that productive capital tends to protectionism, their explanation of the British shift

to—and European embrace of—free trade is by necessity based on the agency of finance capital in conjunction with its commercial and aristocratic allies.

Whatever its supposed composition, we contend that in either formulation the notion of a liberal international historic bloc implies a degree of uniformity that misrepresents the actual constellation of social forces. While we agree that Britain's socioeconomic and political transformation had a profound impact on Europe (and elsewhere), we find the lens of "hegemony" far too constricting to conceptualize the contradictory processes of adaptation, emulation, and substitution it gave rise to. For what any survey of European and non-European societies and the way they are integrated into an expanding and deepening world market is forced to confront is the fundamental unevenness of development. Even in Western Europe, social relations were fundamentally different from those prevailing in Britain. Not only did industrial capitalism lag decades behind its emergence in Britain, but agrarian social relations, which in England had undergone a shift to capitalist farming since the fifteenth century (Brenner 1982), for the most part were not reconstructed on a capitalist basis until the nineteenth century in Europe (and in many cases long after Britain supposedly becoming a hegemon).

Far from being structurally similar, European societies were substantially different. Politically, moreover, while the social hegemony of capital, after hundreds of years of gestation, had become firmly established within Britain at the close of the 1840s, the 1848 revolutions in Europe reflected a very different constellation of social forces—on which notions of "bourgeois hegemony" have very little bearing, as we will show with respect to Prussia/Germany and France. For the failed 1848 revolutions in the German Confederation and beyond were just this: a failure of the bourgeoisie (industrial, commercial, financial, or otherwise) to establish its hegemony.

Although the post-1848 period entailed a certain "bargain" between monarchical and aristocratic forces on the one hand and the bourgeoisie on the other, this was fundamentally a bargain on the terms of the incumbent regime. It entailed a clear subordination of the bourgeoisie even while states fostered capitalist development within their boundaries. Few contemporary observers had any illusions regarding the true balance of power in these countries. Neither, it may be noted, did Gramsci (1971:114–115), who had seen the bourgeoisie in ascendance since 1789, with France (not Britain!) as the epicenter of the historical transformation of Europe. For Gramsci (1971:83), not only the rise to power of Louis Napoleon in France, but the Prussian division of labor between an aristocratic governing class and the wealth-accumulating bourgeoisie (which Cox sees as constitutive of the bourgeois epoch) indicated that "the limits of bourgeois hegemony [had been] reached and the position of the progressive classes reversed." The post-1848 abrogation of the will to lead their societies in favor of "making money" meant, for Gramsci, a regression to a more "corporate" form of bourgeois interest, not the universalization of its ideas and principles. The bourgeoisie no longer maintained its long-standing claim to be the standard-bearer of freedom and progress and instead supported repressive regimes in order to contain Jacobin threats from below (Thomas 2009:145–146).

Our point here is not that Gramsci is, *eo ipso*, right. We nevertheless find the neo-Gramscian failure to take seriously the full force of his argument problematic: where this is the age of passive revolution for Gramsci, it becomes the age of bourgeois hegemony for the neo-Gramscians. Cox recognizes, for instance, that in the United States the industrial bourgeoisie remains secondary, while the France of Napoleon III was not a case of triumphant bourgeois hegemony (1983:166) and subsequently goes so far as to declare that "in France no hegemony was achieved as in Britain" (1987:138). But these are treated as exceptions; no conclusions

seem to follow for the viability of the general formula of British hegemony as resting on the social hegemony of industrial capital in Britain and elsewhere.

Far from coincidental, however, the coercive and illiberal reassertion of the leading role of monarchs and aristocrats in government, the bureaucracy, and the military provides us with a key to understanding the “cosmopolitan interlude.” For it was the *dominance* of the nobility, not the *hegemony* of the bourgeoisie, which ensured the subordinate incorporation of Prussia into the international division of labor, as a supplier of food and non-food inputs for Britain’s industry, and as a market for semi-finished and finished industrial products.

It was precisely among the Prussian landed nobility that the idea of free trade found its warmest reception. The Junkers supported the opening of Germany to trade even before 1818 and until the 1873 crisis of agricultural overproduction (Bondi 1958; Born 1976:18–19). Their support for liberal economic policies after the Napoleonic Wars has to be understood in the context of the long-standing confrontation between a Junker class dependent for its material reproduction on the ability to export grain, wool, and timber to England and Poland, and a dynastic state which sought to regulate agriculture and commerce in accordance with its own fiscal and military objectives (Obenaus 1988:307–308; Hagen 1989:333). While the latter sought to extend its lands at the expense of peasant holdings, the monarchy sought to preserve the peasant basis for military recruitment and taxation (Schissler 1978:53). In order to encourage domestic manufactures, the absolutist state tried to prohibit the import of luxury goods, imposed export restrictions, and bought and stored grain and wool in order to regulate prices (Kaufhold 1981:111–113). In response, many nobles championed the ideas of Adam Smith; the maxims of free trade and minimal state intervention spoke to their desire to limit royal prerogatives, a view that had ardent supporters within the state bureaucracy itself (Kehr 1965:84–85).

In the wake of the military defeat and impending collapse of Prussia in 1806, the bureaucracy gained some independence from the king and his cabinet and displaced dynastic absolutism (Kehr 1965). The adoption of a low tariff in Prussia in 1818, its extension to Germany through the *Zollverein*, and its defense against protectionist pressures from the relatively new large-scale textile and iron industries and the traditional small trades reflected both the interests and influence, in the state apparatus, of the nobility (Lambi 1963:3; Best 1979:263–264). Prussia’s free trade posture also reflected the growing importance of agricultural trade with England for state revenues in the eyes of the bureaucracy (Schissler 1978:59–60; Lee 1988:354).

The agricultural trade that had developed with Britain since the late eighteenth century and was to enter a 40-year period of prosperity after the Napoleonic Wars and the agricultural depression of the 1820s had a profound impact upon the social structure of Prussian society (Berdahl 1988:266). It created the conditions for the continued social and material reproduction of the Junker class and contributed to their ability to withstand revolutionary aspirations of the middle classes. Many industrialists in the Rhineland, by contrast, early on sought protective tariffs in order to shield themselves from British competition (Pollard 1973:641; Best 1980:285). Without ascribing a homogeneous interest to “the industrial bourgeoisie” (among whom there were those who imported semi-finished products, as well as capital goods, from Britain for their own manufacturing processes), it is clear that there were significant manufacturing interests for whom *laissez-faire* was far from satisfactory a strategy in the face of Britain’s industrial advantages. The unwillingness of the Prussian state to respond to this challenge with import tariffs to enable infant industry growth was the subject of persistent complaints from manufacturers, as well as the target of their “organic intellectuals” who, like Friedrich List, argued for a program of rapid

industrial catch-up rather than the reaping of profits from existing comparative advantages.⁶

What stands out here is the divergence of social forces, state forms, and productive systems in Britain and Prussia—one at the height of capitalist industrialization and the other only just undergoing a transition to capitalist farming and (even more hesitantly) industry. Far from, *pace* Cox, a synchronicity of industrial bourgeoisies, each having established hegemony over their respective states, it was the (*temporary*) *complementarity of divergent state/society complexes* that secured the possibility for cosmopolitan “harmony” in mid-century international economic relations. In the case of Prussia, at least, the corollary of Britain’s unilateral turn toward free trade was the strengthening of the land-owning elements. Turning their countries into supply zones for British industry provided them not only with incomes and status, but also with the ability to contain industrial interests (though commercial capitalists found it easier to live with this arrangement).

In France, where peasant proprietors rather than nobles account for most agricultural production, the mix of interests was even more complex than in Prussia. Yet, societal pressures did not ultimately provide the decisive impetus for French policy, as Kindleberger (1975:41; cf. Lebovics 1988:54; Smith 1980:31–33) notes: “The French movement to free trade was taken against the weight of the separate interests, in the absence of strong export interests, with an admixture of economic theory of a dynamic kind, and imposed from above.” The need for massive imports, in the absence of a sufficiently developed domestic industry, in order to build up a railway network in France was central to this shift and drew support from those investors who stood to benefit from this policy. The ability to secure access for French wine to the British market at reduced rates also created an important lobby of producers and sellers (Nye 1991:36). They were opposed by the overwhelming majority of industrialists, agriculturalists, workers, and peasants that supported protection both before and after the Second Empire (Lebovics 1988; Todd 2008:415).

Free trade, moreover, may have been victorious in policy, but it had lost the battle for intellectual pre-eminence. Protectionism had, in the early 1850s, become the dominant ideology within French society, enjoying the support among radicals as well as conservatives, and including the landed classes. The protectionist *Association pour la Défense du Travail National* had captured numerous regions, industry groups, and organs of public opinion, and free trade was henceforth confined to anti-democratic leaders of the Second Empire like Michel Chevalier. Nevertheless, in 1860, Napoleon III imposed the commercial treaty with England “in the face of the united opposition of the Chamber of Deputies” by simply by-passing the legislature with an imperial decree, just as he had done during successive rounds of tariff reductions in the 1850s (Kindleberger 1975:38; Coutain 2005:232).⁷

France’s turn to free trade formed part of an authoritarian project of economic modernization that was meant to strengthen the commercial, financial, and colonial position of France. In this strategy, industrial capitalist interests seem to have been sacrificed, and industrial growth may indeed have been stunted by free trade (Todd 2008:412). This evaluation, however, requires modification. For despite the turn to free trade, official French policy did not embrace *laissez-faire* and the liberal internationalism that Overbeek and van der Pijl see as hegemonic. With Comte Henri de Saint-Simon rather than Adam Smith as their lodestar, Napoleon III and Chevalier pursued a state-led program

⁶Bondi (1958:22) points to fear of retaliation as a motive for the refusal of protectionist tariffs in Prussia. Cf. James and Lake (1989:12) for similar concerns in the United States.

⁷On the geopolitical motivations for France’s free trade policy, see Iliasu (1971).

of modernization aimed at improving “national welfare.” The express intent of tariff reform, in addition to lowering the price for food, raw materials, and machinery, was to expose French industry to the stimulus of international competition in a strategic and selective fashion. Taking the comparative costs of production between French and British manufacturers as their starting point, a French tariff commission fixed French duties on most articles at 10–15%—high enough to offer French industries protection but low enough to subject them to international competition (Coutain 2005:265). France, in other words, pursued a late industrialization strategy as one (subordinate) element of its modernization project—but one that was opposed rather than supported by the industrial bourgeoisie and in whose formulation financial capital was never the dominant element.

Despite important differences, it is clear that those who governed Prussia and France did so not merely “for” the industrial bourgeoisie, or within the parameters of bourgeois interests, as Cox posits.⁸ But Overbeek and van der Pijl’s alternative proposition of a “cosmopolitan community” of merchants, bankers, and aristocrats is hardly better suited to shed light on the post-1848 conjuncture (Overbeek 2008:156). Even in France, where financial, commercial, and aristocratic interests were clearly privileged over industrial interests, the former were hardly “hegemonic.” Rather than acting out a general interest defined by finance capital and its allies, the French state incorporated capitalist and non-capitalist social forces in a complex and contradictory fashion, subordinated to a project of order-making that was never truly bourgeois. These problems are exacerbated when either of these class constellations is then taken to be typical of Europe at large and in turn considered constitutive of a transnational hegemonic bloc that ties European states into a liberal internationalist order. Not only were different social and political forces dominant in different parts of Europe, but often we find that even seemingly identical social categories reflect rather different socioeconomic realities. “Aristocrats” did not form a general status group across Europe with similar interests; landed property relations and interests were vastly diverse. Among apparently identical capitalist class fractions in different countries, moreover, the very different levels of technological and social development introduced the possibility for interest conflicts as they confronted the products and services produced by their counterparts in Britain in world economic competition. Thus, when Overbeek and van der Pijl (1993:6) note that manufactured goods were “marketed on a world market dominated by British industry, commerce and transport to such an extent that notions of universal free trade and harmony developed in Britain were also embraced in countries whose capacity to compete was undermined by unmitigated exposure,” they provide us not with an explanation, but with a paradox in need of illumination.

The resolution of this paradox requires that we place the unevenness of developmental trajectories at the very center of our analysis and in this process displace hegemony from its position of organizing principle of the study of world order. Conceptually, we need to start from the recognition that (i) capital interests in free trade or protectionism are not fixed by their location in the circulation process but depend on the competitiveness of specific producers in specific countries as they confront others in world market competition; that (ii) the dominant capitalist class fractions or social forces differed in various parts of Europe and the Atlantic world in the mid-nineteenth century; and that (iii) the states that oversaw and promoted capitalist late modernization were rarely if ever bourgeois states or subject to “bourgeois hegemony” of whatever capitalist class fraction.

⁸Cox seemingly remains torn between the attempt to read the French case as fitting into the general formula of bourgeois hegemony combined with aristocratic or monarchical government (1983:163, 166; 1987:141), and the recognition that the bourgeoisie really was not hegemonic in France (Cox 1987:138, 140).

In the time-frame under consideration here, European state elites pursued agendas that only partially coincided with capitalist interests. Rulers and administrators responded to the perceived backwardness of their economic systems vis-à-vis Britain and fostered capitalist development. But they did so with a keen awareness for the threats to their position, and to traditional positions of authority and privilege, posed by emerging industrial bourgeoisies in particular. The implication is that we need to distinguish between capitalism and the bourgeoisie. Capitalist late development, in nineteenth-century continental Europe, was not simply a project of the bourgeoisie (or of capitalists). In the context of the burgeoning development of the first capitalist society in Britain, the need to respond by rearranging agrarian relations and stimulating industry was not lost on, for instance, members of the Prussian aristocracy. As managers of their states, (self-)tasked with maintaining geopolitical competitiveness, economic development, and social order, they responded by not simply fostering, but channeling and *limiting* capitalist development. They oversaw projects of modernization *and* conservation, far-reaching reforms, in other words, designed to maintain, as much as possible, existing forms of authority and hierarchy.

For these reasons, and because capitalist late development took place under conditions of market penetration by British products and industries, modernization strategies could not simply be emulative of the institutions and social relations Britain had developed over the course of the preceding three centuries. Instead, they entailed attempts to develop substitute mechanisms with which to achieve rapid development without some of the “undesirable” consequences it might yield (Shilliam 2009:18–22, 104–106). This meant limiting the political mobilization of the bourgeoisie, but especially preventing the emergence of rural and urban “rabblés” as a consequence of dispossession and industrialization—a shared concern of noble and bourgeois groups. The particular amalgamation of economic liberalism and political illiberalism that we find so widely in mid-century Europe is thus to be understood in terms of, not bourgeois hegemony and international convergence, but the largely successful attempts of incumbent elites to promote capitalism without allowing the bourgeoisie to gain control of this transformation.

Conclusion

It is not our intention to deny that Britain was an extraordinarily important country for the understanding of the global political and economic system of the long nineteenth century. It stood at the center of the world economy, and its social institutions and political arrangements had a profound impact in Europe and around the world, though rarely through simple emulation. This role, we argued, cannot be understood in terms of “hegemony.” In some ways, Britain was less than a hegemon; in other ways, it was much more. Just how we should grasp Britain’s role, and how to conceptualize the world order(s) of the nineteenth century, is a question that we can address newly once we move beyond the hegemony story.

The picture that has emerged from our analysis is hardly compatible with the claim, advanced by some critics against HST, that Britain remained “passive” in foreign economic policy. Britain’s unilateral free trade strategy, while uncondusive to international institution-building, was not devoid of agency geared toward restructuring international economic relations, foreign production systems, and societal balances. Its demand for primary products created avenues for conservative paths of “modernization” elsewhere, strengthening the hands of social forces opposed to political liberalization and to rapid industrialization. This was not, therefore, “hegemonic” agency in the Gramscian sense, for it sought to retard late industrialization elsewhere, rather than build consensus around

shared regimes of accumulation and programs of rule. Our emphasis on the predatory nature of Britain's world ordering strategy does *not*, it should be noted, imply a vindication of realist theories of hegemony. For what is unique about the mid-nineteenth century was that developmental advance could be translated into economic advantage *despite* the absence of military or diplomatic mastery, and even without the significant deployment of "economic resources" to bribe or punish reluctant "regime takers." These means, which Britain deployed lavishly in its relations with African, Asian, and Latin American countries, remained largely irrelevant for Britain's ability to structure European and Atlantic economic relations. Britain, in other words, was able to shape the world economy without making or enforcing rules *within the core areas*. Its ability to do so by providing a vast import-market for food and for non-food industrial inputs, thereby influencing domestic coalitions in other countries, and even their definition of general and national interests, is not easily incorporated into a realist framework.

Critical IR/IPE, by contrast, claims this as its home ground, and the value and validity of this approach is our main concern. We have argued that neo-Gramscian attempts to read international hegemony as the extension of domestic hegemony through the construction of transnational "historic blocs" has resulted in a "flattening" of the historical landscape. As a consequence, they have failed to grasp the fundamental *divergence* of the social forces, state forms, and production systems. More than a matter of historical accuracy, it is precisely this divergence that holds the key to explaining the cosmopolitan moment—and the puzzle we have encountered above: why the unilateral free trade strategy of Britain with its predatory intent was not contested by European governments seeking to protect and advance their own industries. The answer, we suggested, is to be found not in generalizing from the hegemonic nature of capitalism in Britain, but in recognizing its singularity at this historical moment. Mediated by the world market, capitalist hegemony within Britain found its structural correspondence in the repressive dominance of landed and monarchical interests on the Continent. Committing European producers to the pursuit of comparative advantages within an international division of labor with British manufacturers at its apex, continental agrarian interests in particular were able to make substantial gains, which in turn reinforced their status and societal positions and the conservative programs of governance they supported. It was the passing complementarity of differently developing economies and societies, therefore, rather than any "cosmopolitan community" of financial or industrial class forces, that made the European free trade system possible.

Critical theorists might object that only the specification of the historical bloc underlying mid-century world order, not the conceptual apparatus itself, needs readjustment. After all, British industrialists and bankers, Prussian Junkers and *antebellum* planters in the United States were tied into a transnational historic bloc of sorts even in the alternative perspective we have indicated above. Such a response would be inadequate for two reasons. Firstly, *this* historic bloc of divergent social forces entails a much more shallow form of consensus than the neo-Gramscian notion implies. To be sure, the Junkers and Napoleon III consented to free trade, but they themselves ruled their societies without being hegemonic. The degree of "universality" embodied in this international arrangement was far lower than in the industrial or commercial transnational capitalist communities posited by Cox and Overbeek, respectively.

Secondly, once we jettison the notion of a synchronicity of similar social forces across borders as the social foundation of successive world orders, we lose the explanatory framework which seemingly allowed neo-Gramscians not simply to account for the structures of any particular world order, but for the rhythms of world history. Greater historical specificity would here be achieved at the

expense of understanding historical change. The purported ability to *explain* the rise and fall of hegemonic powers in terms of the formation of parallel class coalitions, with similar social purposes, in the core capitalist states, is lost and it remains unclear what might take its place if not a purely descriptive account.

The implications of these arguments for the viability of critical theories of hegemony are, we think, significant and extend beyond the historical interpretation of the British case. Not only is its claim that we can understand the history of international relations *and* global capitalism through the lens of hegemony in doubt, but critical IR/IPE's most resonant promise, that it can overcome artificial distinctions between domestic and external, rings hollow. The neo-Gramscian attempt to merge social and international analysis through the lens of hegemony has been built on a simplistic conflation of the two—an imprudent “socialization” of the international realm, where world orders appear as the social order of the leading state writ large.

Where does this leave us with respect to hegemony as a “master concept” in IR/IPE? Deprived of the British precedent, we are left with a single plausible instance of “international hegemony”: the role of the United States after World War II. The postwar reconstruction of global capitalism under US leadership was truly unprecedented and meets the criteria of Gramscian hegemony. The United States set out to integrate its allies and former rivals into a multilateral institutional framework of trade and finance and to incorporate their economies into an open and expanding capitalist world market. Most importantly, it sought to reshape the socioeconomic and (geo)political foundations of Western Europe and Japan in the image of its own state/society relations. The United States actively supported centrist and Atlanticist political parties and moderate trade unions and encouraged a new social compromise between corporate capital and organized labor on the basis of productivity gains made possible by Fordist methods of mass production (Maier 1977; Rupert 1995).

In the structure of American hegemony, we *do* find not just the pre-eminent state's hegemonic agency but the transnational historic bloc of similar social forces and the parallelism of social purposes. We find a constellation in which one state, on the basis of its domestic transformation, reorders the world while making concessions to subordinate states and social forces so as to gain some degree of consensus for this order. Social and international hegemony here go together. Moreover, the institutions of world economic order are constructed so as to reinforce domestic stability and legitimacy within not just the leading state but within subordinate core states, too. Though we should not underestimate the uses of force and coercion within this system—hegemony, indeed, wears thin at the margins (Cox 1987:150)—there can be no doubt that it marked a real break with the preceding international political economy and its ordering mechanisms.

Critical theories of hegemony tend to elide rather than illuminate these qualitative differences. Empirically, the analogy between *pax britannica* and *pax americana* prevents us from understanding the particular—and historically unique—international roles of either of the two “hegemons.” Conceptually, the focus on states and social forces as the builders of successive world orders bears the risk of passing over longer-term qualitative transformations of world economy and interstate system over the last two centuries: not the rise and fall of hegemonic powers, but the rise and possible demise of hegemony itself as a global ordering mechanism over the course of the second half of the twentieth century.

It was in mid-Victorian Britain that “hegemony” first emerged as a *domestic* mode of capitalist stabilization. Its successful establishment in Britain, however, correlated with the continental reassertion of autocratic rule over societies in the midst of a transition to capitalism. Liberal internationalism, we have argued, was predicated upon an international symbiosis of hegemonic and non-hegemonic

forms of rule. Free trade without a hegemon was dependent on the repression of industrial interests in continental Europe—and on the marginalization of those who demanded that the pursuit of the wealth of nations through comparative advantages be replaced with active strategies of industrial catch-up and military mobilization for the advancement of national glory and geopolitical competitiveness. But it was only with the emergence of a real threat from the European working classes that the foundations of this system were shaken to the core. As Europe's rulers, in the face of these revolutionary challenges, sought to rebase their power on some degree of consent, the measures they took to incorporate oppositional forces led them into a retreat from the liberal international economic order. At century's end, therefore, the formation of hegemony at the national level in continental Europe would lead to rivalry in the international arena. In this sense, the reconstitution of the economic organization, balance of class power, and state forms of Western Europe and Japan after 1945 was fundamentally different. Under US leadership, internal and external forms of capitalist organization were, for the first time, brought together and harmonized. Social and world orders entered onto parallel planes; international politics underwent a process of societalization (*Vergesellschaftung*).

The ultimate aim of introducing the concept of hegemony into IR/IPE, of course, was to anticipate, rather than simply reflect back upon, world order change. In this respect, our analysis raises a further question: if retrofitting the concept of hegemony to match a putative British precedent has proven to be untenable, just how helpful is it to project it into the future?

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