



Hegemonic orders and the idea of history

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Accepted: 30 August 2023
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Abstract

This article makes the case that the literature of hegemonic orders and debates on the crisis of US hegemony have been shaped and up to a point intellectually confined by a tradition or idea of world history understood as a series of hegemonic powers. This tradition of history as a succession of hegemonic powers is traced from ancient to modern sources, later reconstituted as a theoretical discourse. In drawing attention to the historical traditions underpinning this literature, these findings contribute to advancing the historiography of International Relations and to studying the role of multiple contemporaneous histories in the emerging international order.

Keywords International order · Hegemony · International history · International theory

Introduction

This article makes the case that the literature of hegemonic orders (Ikenberry and Nexon 2019; Ikenberry 2011, 2001; Gilpin 1981) and debates on the crisis of US hegemony (Ikenberry 2020, 2018; Cooley and Nexon 2020; Goh 2013, 2019; Goddard 2018; Lascurettes 2020; Porter 2020; Mearsheimer 2018; Acharya 2018, 2014; Flockhart 2016) have been shaped and up to a point intellectually confined by a tradition or idea of world history understood as a series of hegemonic powers. In drawing attention to the intellectual sources and historical traditions underpinning this literature, these findings contribute to advancing the historiography of International Relations (Acharya and Buzan 2019; Schmidt and Guilhot 2019; Rosenboim 2017; Ashworth 2014; Hall 2012a; Long and Wilson 1995) and to growing interest in historical approaches to International Relations (de Carvahlo et al. 2021).

I trace the idea of history as a series of hegemonic powers from its ancient to modern sources, then trace how this tradition of history was reconstituted as a social scientific theoretical literature in the twentieth Century. Returning to contemporary

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debates on the crisis of US hegemony that deploy this theoretical literature, I indicate how they can be advanced by broadening their empirical interests to include not only alternative and non-Western conceptions of *hegemony*, but also multiple contemporaneous alternative and non-Western traditions of *history* and their role and influence in shaping the emerging international order.

Hegemonic succession as an idea of history

Debates on the contemporary crisis and emerging future of international order are predominantly concerned with the crisis and decline of the US-led hegemonic order, and the rise of China as a hegemonic competitor (Ikenberry 2020; Cooley and Nexon 2020; Lascurettes 2020; Porter 2020; Johnston 2019; Kitchen and Cox 2019; Goddard 2018; Mearsheimer 2018; Acharya 2018, 2014; McKeil 2021, 2022a, b, c, 2023a, b; Flockhart 2016; Goh 2013; Schweller and Pu 2011). Major contentions in this literature include whether the US-led hegemonic order will endure, how distinct an order is within China's strategic preferences, and whether the prospects of war and other challenges can be managed in this era of hegemonic power shift. These debates are important and significant, as well as among the most prominent in the field of International Relations.

Underdiscussed in these debates are the historical sources and theoretical limitations of the idea or tradition of international history as defined by a succession of hegemonies. This tradition of history is more discussed and familiar in the adjacent field of International History than it is in International Relations. In an illuminating essay, the historian Christopher Clark has suggested that the theme of international history as a series of powers was first established by the *Book of Daniel*.

Until well into the early modern era, it was conventional to think of world history as an eschatological sequence of hegemonies based on Daniel's dream, starting with the Babylonians, then moving on to the Persians (with the optional addition of the Medes), the Greeks and the Romans' (Clark 2021: 5).

In sum, Clark continues, 'The book of Daniel laid the foundation for a way of thinking about the history of the world as the unfolding of a prophesied sequence of empires' (Clark 2021: 7).¹ Although this may be common knowledge to historians, it is arguably an important insight for the literature of hegemonic orders and powershift that its discourse about the future and past have been framed by a certain tradition of history with ancient and theological roots. Herbert Butterfield's much

¹ Although influential in a certain tradition or idea of history, the role of the *Book of Daniel* should also not be exaggerated, because other sources have shaped this literature too, and transformations in modern international history have changed the form of the narrative in crucial ways. Augustine's *City of God*, and its explanation of the fall of Rome, also had its own considerable influence on Christian understandings of history. The emergence of modern history also developed multiple styles and varying traditions of history. Heeren's *History of the Political System of Europe and its Colonies* for instance advanced a history of the strategic interaction of great powers in Europe and their colonial periphery, while Voltaire's *Essay on Universal History, the Manner and Spirit of Nations* instead advanced a more comparative style, examining non-European history, including China and India.



earlier text *Christianity and History* also explained that the idea of history as that of clashing powers was made not in modern times, but ‘in the days when the ancient Hebrews, though so small a people, found themselves between competing empires of Egypt and Assyria and Babylon, so that they became actors... in the kind of history-making that involves colossal struggles for power’ (Butterfield 1950: 2). Here is the idea that this way of imagining history was formed in an ancient historical experience.

Collingwood’s classic *Idea of History* of course made the point that the idea of history has a history. The idea of history as a series of hegemonies itself has a history no less. The idea became widespread in the rise of Christianity, later Roman “world”, and medieval system, and later powers sought to claim the succession of Roman hegemony (Nexon and Neumann 2017). The eschatological ideas of a higher power and end times that framed this idea of history, by the seventeenth century, had begun to be challenged by Pufendorf (Clark 2021: 7). ‘The idea of powers jockeying for supremacy, or at least security’ Clark explains, ‘within a competitive multi-state system helped establish “human history” as an autonomous discourse, distinct from the *historia divina* underwritten by prophesy’ (Clark 2021: 8). Although history became divorced from the idea of a higher power, ‘The habit of imagining history as a succession of empires has been hard to shake’ (Clark 2021: 8). It is an important insight that the literature of hegemonic order theory has reified a secularized narrative rooted in an earlier theological tradition of history.

The writings of Leopold von Ranke, for example, counted among the founding texts of modern history, convey a self-conscious secularizing effort. His essay, ‘The Great Powers’ (1833), is a cool-headed analysis of the economic and military rise and decline of the great powers, from the balance between Spain and France, that gave way to French hegemony, which in turn receded against the strategic competitors, England, Austria, and Russia, and later Prussia too. Where Ranke writes on his craft of history, in his essay, ‘On the Character of Historical Science’ (1830), he explicitly references the *Book of Daniel*, as theological history, and theology understood as revelation. He distances his modern craft of history from theology. ‘The idea that even historical efforts are directed solely toward the search for that higher principle in phenomena must be rejected’ (Ranke 2011: 12). Modern historians such as Ranke and Heeren divorced the story from the assumptions of a higher power, or end times. They also represent a shift in the narrative, to include the modern idea of the “international” (Armitage 2013; McKeil 2018), adjusting the story from a series of universal empires, to one of multiple powers jostling for position and dominance, albeit still in a sequence of hegemonic powers. Gibbon’s *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, so influential in English history texts, (read intently by Churchill in reflection on the rise and decline of British hegemony, for instance), also evoked this theme of history as a succession of powers, by providing an enormous case study in the fall of the most successful hegemon in Western history.

Historia divina became separated from the immanent universe, while the secularized tradition of history as a succession of powers carried on, reframed as a secular process now seemingly without end times (Taylor 2007; Bain 2020). Paul Kennedy’s *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, a highly influential and celebrated text in this literature, for example, continues this narrative, in cool-headed analysis (so similar in



style and content of analysis to Ranke's), of the economic and military succession of powers, including Western hegemony itself, as a player in the larger story of historical successions. Kennedy's text is among the clearest examples of international history imagined and recounted as a succession of powers. In explaining his sources, Kennedy notes that, 'An early model for the present book was the 1833 essay of the famous Prussian historian Leopold von Ranke upon *die grossen Mächte* ("the great powers"), in which he surveyed the ups and downs of the international power balances since the decline of Spain...' (Kennedy 1989: xxiv). In this literature, the past as history is about speculating the future of powershift too, however. 'In examining the "prospects" of each of the Great Powers, he [Ranke], too, was tempted from the historian's profession into the uncertain world of speculating upon the future' (Kennedy 1989: xxiv–xxv).

The major defining texts and thinkers in this literature have carried on this tradition of world history that expects the future to be succession of powers, because this is how it understands the past. Gilpin for instance explains in his influential *War & Change* that,

The theory of international political change to be developed here rests on the assumption that the history of an international system is that of the rise and decline of the empires and dominant states... (Gilpin 1981: 42).

The influential G. John Ikenberry, too, explains that,

Across world history, states have grown powerful and built hierarchically organized political orders. Indeed, for most of the last two thousand years, world politics has been dominated by major states seeking to extend their rule over other people (Ikenberry 2011: 55).

This literature as such has been highly influenced by this idea of history.

Ideas of hegemonic order theory

The secularized idea of history as a series of hegemonic powers began to be reconstituted as a theoretical and social scientific discourse in the 1960's. The post-war search for a scientific theory of international politics (Guilhot 2011) reconstituted the idea of history as a series of hegemonies into abstract generalizations. A.F.K Organski's *World Politics*, for instance, advanced bold claims to generalization and ambitions of a social scientific theory of hegemonic powers. For Organski, 'the dominant nation, the nation that controls the existing international order' (1968, p. 364; see, also Organski and Kugler 1980). Martin Wight, influential in British approaches, was less captured by the scientific idea of theory (Hall 2006, 2012a), but also framed his *Power Politics* around the succession of "dominant powers". 'The most conspicuous theme in international history is not the growth of internationalism. It is the series of efforts, by one power after another, to gain mastery of the states system' (Wight 1978, p. 20).²

² Martin Wight's lectures also suggested that these hegemonic struggles were configured by horizontal ideological forces, and that roughly half of modern international history could be defined by a series



Kenneth Waltz's influential *Theory of International Politics* drew the diverging conclusion that international systems instead tend to establish a balance of power, rather than hegemonies, although this claim has been contested in historical surveys (Waltz 1979; Kaufman et al. 2007; Griffiths 2018). The post-war role of the US as a hegemonic power furthered interest in American academic literature about the rise and fall of hegemonic orders (Gilpin 1981; Ruggie 1982; Strange 1987), notably in Keohane's influential *After Hegemony* (1984), and the literature of hegemonic stability theory (Kindleberger 1973; Snidal 1985; Webb and Krasner 1989). In this context, various Marxian-inspired theories also developed ambitions of social scientific international theory, drawing on the idea of history as a series of hegemonies. Modelski "long cycles theory" of international politics sought to explain recurrent hegemonic war and "evolutionary learning" processes working across each successive struggle (Modelski 1978: 214–235; Modelski 1987). Giovanni Arrighi's (1994) later Wallerstein-inspired hegemonic order theory similarly suggests that hegemonic succession can be explained by economic processes, understanding hegemons as economic nexuses that produce international orders as reflections and extensions of their structural power.³ Gramscian approaches to international order developed Gramsci's distinct horizontal concept of hegemony and emphasized historical forces of change in world politics (Cox 1981, 1996).

Following Martin Wight's earlier studies, Adam Watson's *Evolution of International Society* (1992) and *Hegemony & History* (2007), alongside Modelski's, developed among the most sweeping claims about international history as a series of hegemonies. Through a searching study of international systems in world history, Watson's project sought to explain Wight's earlier suggestion that international history has been defined by 'a succession of hegemonies, in which one great power after another tries to transform the states system' (Watson 1992: 2–3). Watson defined hegemony as when, 'some power or authority in a system is able to 'lay down the law' about the operation of the system, that is to determine to some extent the external relations between member states, while leaving them domestically independent' (Watson 1992: 15). Through his study of world historical international systems, Watson argued that international systems have a tendency toward hegemony, as a sort of modicum between the extremes of a purely anarchical world of 'multiple independences' and the other extreme of world empire (Watson 2007: 17; see, also, Watson 1997: 126–138). Convinced by his findings, Watson's later conclusions maintained this hypothesis,

After half a century of looking at hegemony in the light of international systems in world history, I have concluded that the whole range of known historical systems that lies between suzerainty of an imperial power and the theoretical absolute of real independence for all member states operates hegemonically; and this hegemonial operation has certain well-defined characteristics that appear in local guise in all various historical systems of nominally independent states (Watson 2007: 111).

Footnote 2 (continued)

revolutionary waves, as much as it could be defined as a succession of hegemonies (Wight 1992, p. 8–12; Halliday 1999, 193–194).

³ See, also, Chase-Dunn and Lawrence 2011.



For Watson, and much of this literature, ‘the whole range of known historical systems... operates hegemonically’ (Watson 2007: 111).

Arnold J. Toynbee’s earlier *Study of History* aimed to offer a comprehensive analysis of world history as a series of civilizations, each changing and declining through patterns of “challenge and response” (Toynbee 1957). Among Toynbee’s major and influential ideas, however, was the claim that international systems as civilizational groupings have tended to fall under regional “world” empires, echoing that idea of history as a series of world hegemonies.⁴ Later attempts to utilize a civilizational framing of world history, most prominently in Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations*, have been highly critiqued in theory (Katzenstein 2010; Linklater 2021), although the discourse of “civilizational identities” and “civilizational states” has found persistent and even increasing usage in practice (Hall and Jackson 2007; Coker 2019). The comparative study of international systems in world history, working from earlier works such as Toynbee’s *Study* and Wights *Systems of States*, is now a large and growing literature (Kang 2007; Zhang 2014; Suzuki et al. 2014; Phillips and Sharman 2015; Reus-Smit 2018; Spruyt 2020; Phillips and Reus-Smit 2020; Phillips 2011, 2021; Zarakol 2022; Buzan and Little 2000; Buzan and Acharya 2022), although the concept of an “international system” has been distanced from the earlier concept and notion of an underlying “civilizational” culture (Phillips 2017; Dunne and Reus-Smit 2017). Connected here to this literature is also the growing literature on the historical “evolution” of international systems over the *longue durée* (Neumann 2020; Tang 2010, 2013), as well as major statements on the historical transformations of international orders in world history (Phillips 2013; Buzan and Lawson 2015; Musgrave and Nexon 2016).

In this literature, the idea of history as a succession of hegemonies has come to be theoretically understood as making hegemonic powers decisive agents in shaping international orders, albeit with nuance as both order-makers and order-takers, in their interaction with other lesser powers (Ikenberry and Nexon 2019). The historical turning points after major wars have become a focus of empirical interest, when victor states enjoy greater power disparities and leading statespersons have greater scope for strategic ordering choices (Gilpin 1981; Holsti 1991; Ikenberry 2001). This is not a purely material explanation of the configuration of hegemonic orders in the modern international experience, however, which would be deficient and misleading. The historical context and political character of the actors is also needed to make sense of their strategic choices made after major wars (Ikenberry 2001; Sluga 2021). Having waged a war against the hegemonic gambit of Napoleonic France, Castlereagh for instance sought in Vienna 1815 a different order by “collective hegemony” (Clark 2011; Schroeder 1994). Or, later, in Versailles 1919, having waged a war for “civilization” and “democracy”, the victors had built up public expectations, as well as personal impressions, about the kind of peace that was acceptable (Cohrs 2022). In this sense, the experience of history shapes the victors as much as they may shape history. At the same time, while victors may

⁴ Toynbee later would lead an anti-imperial campaign, in which he advocated a political and spiritual corrective response needed by Western civilization (Hall 2012b).



entertain their own ideas of history, their strategic ordering choices are not entirely made under the conditions of their choosing.

The role of agency within history has not been forgotten in this literature, but the idea of history as a series of hegemonies itself has become increasingly taken for granted. In this literature, when states rise within an established order tensions over threat (mis)perceptions, and contentions over the principles and distributive benefits of ordering institutions, especially hegemonic status and potential succession, are understood to induce stress and strain (Mukherjee 2022; Ikenberry and Nexon 2019; Goddard 2018; Goh 2013). Hence, contemporary debates on the rise of China and decline of the US have come to hinge on theories of the conditions and dynamics of contested hegemonic orders.

Rethinking contemporary debates

Prominent contemporary debates on the crisis of US hegemonic order characterize it as the latest in a series of hegemonic struggles and powershifts. Henry Luce's phrase of the "American Century" often quoted in this literature strongly echoes the idea of history as defined by ascendant powers, making possible the new language of an "Asian Century". The rise of China as a hegemonic challenger, as depicted in these debates, tends to be presented as the latest in a series of such struggles reaching across world history. Graham Allison's widely read *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?* (2017) perhaps most clearly presents idea picture of history as a succession of hegemonies, albeit by recasting Thucydides' ancient and non-Christian *Peloponnesian War* (itself another highly influential text in Western traditions of history and strategic culture) as a kind of historical heuristic for understanding the prospects for war between the US and China today. Allison's popularized idea of "Thucydides' Trap", moreover, mentioned by Xi Jinping, raises concern for the potential unintended contributions of academic debates to public discourse and political tensions in practice. Contemporary debates use history but have neglected the historical sources of this discourse about the rise and fall of powers.

The contemporary theoretical literature of hegemonic orders and powershift is theoretically pluralistic (Ikenberry and Nexon 2019), but is generally influenced by the pervasive idea of international history as defined by a series of hegemonic powers. Contemporary debates on the rise of China as a hegemonic competitor contain roughly four categories of contending theoretical positions. Liberal internationalists for instance suggest the order of 'liberal hegemony' will endure and that challenges can be managed through institutional and strategic modifications (Ikenberry 2020). A range of realist positions instead suggest 'liberal hegemony' has become self-defeating, and that the international order will become more firmly divided relative to US decline (Mearsheimer 2018; Walt 2018; Porter 2020). A variety of constructivist positions that argue that illiberal and non-Western powers are engaged in recognition struggles within the US hegemonic order and are attempting to challenge and reconstruct it (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2020; Cooley and Nexon 2020), broadly along more regional lines, into a "multiplex" or "multi-order" order (Flockhart 2016; Acharya 2014). Critical theorists, forming a fourth broad category, have



argued that the inequities of liberal US hegemony are generating its crisis, both domestically and internationally, producing processes of international instability and disorder (Jahn 2018). The outcome of these debates has considerable significance for the kind of international order emerging in future, its prospects for stability and management of common challenges. It is somewhat methodologically concerning, then, that so much of the contemporary literature on the rise of China and decline of America has not seriously reflected on this understanding of history as a succession of hegemonic powers.

The strengths and weaknesses of competing positions and theoretical explanations offered in this literature for the succession of hegemonic powers are less important than the predominance of this framing of history. It is not so much a matter of *what* it says about history, but *how it is thought* about and understood as history (Buzan and Acharya 2022: 142). In this sense, the kinds of empirical evidence that is considered relevant and the assumptions made about international systems past and future have been shaped and up to a point limited by how history is conceived as a series of hegemonies. The great power-centricity of this literature for instance arguably stems from this framing of history as hegemonies, but this focus has been shown to overlook important ordering processes of interaction between hegemonic powers and middle and small powers (Acharya 2018; Ikenberry and Nexon 2019). International history may offer empirical support for the general claim of this literature that there have been a series of hegemonies and hegemonic struggles, at least in the modern international experience, i.e. the emergence of European hegemony and Franco-British rivalry in the eighteenth Century, with Napoleonic France's bid for hegemony followed by Britain vs. Russia in the nineteenth Century, and Germany's bid for hegemony, alongside Japan's, followed the US versus the USSR in the twentieth Century, and the US vs. China in the 21st. But, if this framing of international history—now become a theoretical literature—has prior largely Western and earlier theological sources, the Eurocentric epistemic limitations of this literature become methodologically concerning (Hobson 2012), and its claimed insights into the contemporary crisis and emerging international order future become less certain.

Debates on the crisis of US hegemony and the emerging international order are ripe for reconnecting the tools history with those of theory more thoroughly (Suganami 2008; Lawson 2010). There are wide, productive, and ongoing debates on the epistemic status of theory, and fruitful directions for reintegrating international history and theory (de Carvahlo et al. 2021). In respect to the specific literature of the of international order theory that this article addresses, engagement with the role of narratives and therein to meta-narratives has become a promising direction of interest (Deudney et al. 2023). An initial and clear way forward here is to further broaden the empirical interests of this literature to include not only alternative and non-Western and particularly Chinese conceptions of *hegemony*, but also alternative and non-Western traditions of *history* (Buzan and Acharya 2022). In other words, if there are multiple contemporaneous historical temporalities present in world politics today, sensitivity to their influence in practice is of interest in studying the emerging international order. In this sense, this literature can be perceived as a debate internal to certain largely Western narratives of international history.



Historical ‘narratives are an important part of all world orders, and no understanding of contemporary politics and the prospects for conflict and concord in the future can fail to take them into serious consideration’ (Deudney et al. 2023, p. 2). The post-Cold War globalization of the US hegemonic order for instance is well-known to have been followed by historical narratives of not only the “end of history” as liberal modernity, but also widespread discourses America’s ‘Roman moment’ as the ‘new Rome on the Potomac’ (Cox 2022, p. 3, 192; Jordheim and Neumann 2011; Murphy 2007). Yet, today, the crisis of US hegemony is being met by the rise of alternative narratives of global modernity, many developed from and refashioning distinct traditions of understanding history. The world historical rise of global Western hegemony, for instance, can be seen from alternative perspectives as disrupting distinct understandings and traditions of history in non-Western worlds, reflected today in political discourses about “restoring” world politics to a “normal” historical condition (Buzan and Acharya 2022; Suzuki et al. 2014).

China for example, as an emergent hegemonic power in East Asia, has been a major focus of debates on the changing international order, working to assess China’s strategic interests and intent. The historical regional international system of East Asia for has been shown to have historically developed distinct traditions of hegemony and order (Kang 2020; Lee 2017; Zhang 2014, 2015; Callahan 2008). But, China’s political culture also includes distinct traditions of history, too. Historical literatures are not necessarily consulted for strategic decisions in China’s leadership, but the contributions of historical understandings to, ‘social and cultural concepts developed and contested over time color their concerns and help set the agenda for people’s view of what their country ought to do’ (Westad 2012, p. 6). Popular public narratives of “the China story” today for instance are often connected to not only alternative visions of modernity but also framings of the past, including the discourse of “national rejuvenation”, rehearsing China’s historical experiences of decline and disunity, to be corrected in future (Mitter 2023, 2020). The role of these public narrative discourses of the past and future contribute to legitimating foreign and domestic policies, but they also set up popular demands and expectations for the future in publics. China’s public political and strategic discourse moreover contains many and often competing narratives about China’s past and future, which in studying China’s rise, let alone India or the Islamic world, shows, ‘how it is necessary to recognize that China has multiple futures – for many China’s’ (Callahan 2013, p. 64). In this sense, broadening interest in traditions of history includes the methodological scope of interest in multiple contemporaneous temporal narratives of the past and future, toward assessing their varied and contested role in shaping the emerging international order.

Conclusion

Better understanding the ideas of history underpinning major debates on the crisis of US hegemony encourages broadening empirical interest to consider the presence and role of multiple contemporaneous histories in the emerging international order. It also raises awareness for the potential unintended contribution of theoretical academic discourse to public discourse and political tensions. The literature of



hegemonic orders and debates on the crisis of US hegemony have been shaped and up to a point intellectually confined by a tradition or idea of world history understood as a series of hegemonic powers. This tradition of history as a succession of hegemonic powers traced from ancient to modern sources has been reconstituted as a theoretical discourse, taking for granted its underlying tradition of history. This argument as such suggests that contemporary debates on the crisis of US hegemony are ripe for broadening their empirical interest in not only multiple conceptions and traditions of hegemony but also the role of multiple contemporaneous ideas of history in the emerging international order.

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