

Preface

As a child, I understood American “influence” in the world differently than that of the “high politics” of diplomacy and economic policy that I had heard about on the radio or from my parents and teachers. The first time I saw an American car taking up both sides of the main street in my home village in northwest England—brought there for display, not to drive, by a vacationing native son usually employed by Chevrolet (GM) somewhere “over there”—I understood something of the pull exerted on the rest of the world by the American cornucopia.

I was disabused of all this as a university student. I was taught in international politics that the only important American influence was that exerted by the U.S. government as a result of its military strength and the capacity of the economy it governed. But apart from that, all states were more or less the same in striving for global primacy. The fact that the United States had “replaced” countries like Great Britain at the top of the global state-heap was attributed to its amazing industrial capacity, a dose of luck, and the support of such stalwart allies as the British, whose time as a world power had finally run out. My more positivist social science instructors were particularly dismissive of the idea that anything “unique” about American history might have anything to do with anything. The “rise” of the United States was due to rational actors exploiting the universal conjunctures associated with spurts of technological change and the outcomes of wars (predetermined by who had most war materiel). The United States was just another “case” like all of the others.

In the years since, the world seems to have changed beyond all recognition. Much of this change is put down to “globalization,” although quite what that means remains elusive. It is partly about “time-space compression”—the reduction in the importance of distance for a wide range of transactions—but it is also about significant changes in the

geographical scope and the temporal speed of economic transactions and the rapid transmission of cultural messages. Certainly, the old theories of world politics of states bumping up against one another now seem not just antiquated but positively misleading.

This book ties globalization to that American influence on the rest of the world that I had inchoately recognized so many years ago. A paper I wrote previously, "Globalization Has a Home Address," lays out some of the main strands of my thinking. That expresses well one of the main arguments that I make in this book: globalization is to a significant degree "Made in the U.S.A." But now I want to go beyond this idea to make the further argument that globalization under American influence has initiated change in the very spatial ontology of world politics. By this I mean that the geography of power is decreasingly organized on a singular territorial basis by reference to states as we have known them since the eighteenth century. In its place we are seeing a world with an increasingly complex spatiality of power, as localities, global city-regions, regions, and trading blocs connect or network with one another to challenge the primary state-based territorial divisions. So, if the twentieth century was the American century, the twenty first is not likely to be. American hegemony has set in motion a world that can no longer be dominated by any single state or its cultural fruits.

Yet, one of the most common ways of addressing American influence today is to refer to the United States as an actual or incipient "empire." With the disappearance of the Soviet Union as a competing superpower, the U.S. government certainly seems to have no peer. Indeed, particularly since September 11, 2001, the U. S. government has confronted the rest of the world with the hubris and noblesse oblige that are associated with the imperial purple. But the term empire usually implies much more than this. It implies a high degree of territorial organization, effective centralized power, and a directing intelligence. These traits do not seem to match the ways that an essentially improvising American government currently relates to the rest of the world. Perhaps history misleads us in looking for repetition in the behavior of powerful governments. If states with the largest military establishments or GDPs per capita in the past became or tried to become empires, then surely the United States must, too? I think that the empire designation is fundamentally misleading in understanding the current situation and influence of the United States in world politics. In its place I propose the concept of hegemony—not simply in the sense of dominance or equivalence to empire, but as a confluence between a globally dominant

position on the one hand and a set of attributes that that dominance has created, enabling it to spread and be imposed around the world, on the other: what I call “marketplace society.”

Hegemony, therefore, has had a specifically American content, if one open to adaptation as it travels and enrolls others in its operations. This is not the same as modernization or the conversion of people to modernity in an American guise—that is, the adoption by individuals of a set of modern values in opposition to so-called traditional ones. Rather, it is about the adoption of rules of economic and political life that reorient and reorganize world politics. Globalization and the new geography of power that this entails have been the outcome. The temptation of empire, however strongly felt in some quarters in Washington, reflects the negatively charged reverberation of the success of what I am calling American hegemony on the United States itself rather than a coherent forward-looking strategy that grows out of either American experience or the main course of recent world history. Making the case for a new shape to global power that has developed from American hegemony but which now points to a world increasingly outside the direct control of the United States or any other state is the purpose of the book.

1

Introduction

Words matter. Currently, there is much talk and writing about *empire* or *American empire*—words used to describe the dominant force in world politics today.¹ I want to challenge this creeping consensus by proposing a different word to describe the current state of affairs. This word *hegemony* is often confused with empire and frequently appears with such ancillary words as *imperial*, *imperialist*, and so on, as if they all meant the same thing. Of course, they can be made to mean the same thing. But what if the consensus is fundamentally mistaken about what is actually unique about the current situation? And, by way of substitution, what if the word hegemony is given a meaning distinctive from that of empire, a meaning it has long had, thus providing an alternative conception of contemporary world politics? My task is to convince readers that the word hegemony, at least in the usage I give it, is a much better term for describing the historic relationship between the United States and the rest of the world than is the word empire. This is not an aesthetic choice; it is an analytic one. Words can help understanding—or they can obscure it. In this regard, loose use of the word empire fails to fulfill the theoretical duty it has been given.

In brief, I argue that the main thrust of contemporary world politics is the result of the particular hegemony exercised by American society in the rest of the world through the agency of both the U.S. government and a wide range of other institutions, corporate, philanthropic, and inter-governmental—whose basic structures and norms are those of the marketplace society that developed in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Hegemony, therefore, is more than the simple domination implied when it is equated with empire or, as in other conventional accounts, when it is seen simply as the identity of a dominant state without inquiring into the nature of that identity and how it affects that state's relationships with others.² In my usage, hegemony is the enrollment of others in the exercise of your power

by convincing, cajoling, and coercing them that they should want what you want. Though never complete and often resisted, it represents the binding together of people, objects, and institutions around cultural norms and standards that emanate over time and space from seats of power (that have discrete locations) occupied by authoritative actors. Hegemony is not, therefore, simply the exercise of raw military, economic, and political power by the latest in a long line of “hegemons” as if the exercise of power had remained unchanged through the centuries. Neither is it a simple continuation of military and political power exercised territorially as implied by use of the word empire, whether or not qualified by such terms as *formal* or *informal*. Such usage simply shifts the intellectual “territorial trap”—meaning seeing power as invariably territorial—from the level of the state to that of a global empire.³

If empires have a core feature it is that they exercise power territorially through effective centralized command. The Roman Empire, sometimes taken as analogous to the contemporary American empire, was an *imperium* in which all roads led (figuratively and literally) directly to Rome. American hegemony, however, even though it obviously has coercive attributes that have been very apparent in recent years, is fundamentally not imperial in its goals or territorial in its organization.⁴ Indeed, I will claim that *globalization*, in its fragmentation of existing state territories and its increasingly predominant networked geography of power, is the necessary outcome of American global hegemony, not some sort of empire. Globalization today and under American hegemony represents a dramatic quickening and geographical reformulation of the progressive universalization of capitalist commodification and accumulation.⁵ But globalization is not an abstract process of imperialism. Neither is it reducible simply to technological change or firm reinvestment strategies. Globalization is a hegemonic project intimately connected to the geopolitical calculus of the U.S. government and economic interests during the Cold War and to the incorporation of the entire world into its grip in the years since the demise of the Communist project in the former Soviet Union and China by a myriad of U.S.-based agents. From this viewpoint, globalization is not the same as liberalization. Globalization refers to the increasing pace and scope of economic and cultural activities across space. Liberalization refers to a mix of government-enacted policies that tend to expose states to the external pressures that attend technological change and policies that invite the guidance of world-level institutions such as the IMF, WTO, and World Bank through the privatization of state assets, reduction of

state spending on popular welfare, and increased openness to trade and foreign direct investment. Liberalization has been an important mechanism increasing the intensity of globalization, but it is not at all the same thing.⁶

The trend of the U.S. government since the 1980s toward unilateral military and economic action—from refusal to engage in global environmental treaties or participate in the International Criminal Court to the invasion and occupation of Iraq—represents, rather than its burgeoning strength, the weakness of the United States within the very world order that the country has done so much to create. To associate the contemporary United States with the word empire is to imply the exact opposite.⁷ An imperial strategy, whatever its short-term successes might possibly be, and few are immediately apparent, runs against the grain of what American society has brought to the world during the past century in terms of ideas and practices about the centrality of marketplace society to social life: from mass consumption and living through commodities, to hierarchies of class hidden behind a cultural rhetoric of entrepreneurship and equal opportunity, to limiting the delivery of what elsewhere are thought of as public goods and sponsoring an essentially privatized vision of life.⁸ This “central market” paradigm is not simply a package of ideas but a set of social practices in which instrumental (market) behavior tends to displace customary (communal) and command (state-mandated) behaviors as the social standard. It is also more demotic or popular than elitist in its idiom. It presumes that physical force is a very unstable, if sometimes necessary, form of rule.⁹

It was in the United States that this marketplace society first took root as a mass as opposed to an elite phenomenon.¹⁰ Indeed, the argument could be made that American independence was itself an early manifestation of the rumblings of an emergent marketplace society against an imperial or extensive command system.¹¹ In this regard, Karl Marx’s famous phrase in his *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* comes to mind: “Theory . . . becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses.”¹² From this viewpoint, the content of American hegemony owes much more to American society, therefore, than to the machinations of an often incoherent, incompetent, corrupt, and bewildered American state. In other words, it is much more the American Main Street (and shopping mall) than Washington D.C. that has provided the social norms and practices that others around the world have come to emulate and that has provided much of the basis to American hegemony.

Much writing about empire and hegemony as well as being excessively state-centric rests on a peculiarly productivist view of power. This is the case with both the more state-centered and the more class-centered accounts.¹³ According to this approach, because value is created in the production process everything else is traced back to that process. This is mistaken because value is only realized in *consumption* when (at least for Marxists) the M-C-M' circle is closed.¹⁴ Conventional Marxism has lost this “parallax perspective” in which production and consumption play equivalently important roles. To all too many commentators, exchange and consumption are still regarded as illusory spheres in which speculation and commodity fetishism distract potential revolutionaries from taking over their places of employment. But consumption is not merely a “buying off” of workers or an alienating exercise in bourgeois mystification but an essential moment in capitalism itself. In this view, therefore, it was within the vast territory of the United States that capitalism first realized its full potential. People had to be free to consume as well as to labor for the circle of capital to close. With American hegemony this potential has globalized.

The standardization of space that accompanied European settlement and incorporation into the United States in the nineteenth century by, among other things, the township-and-range system of land division, railroads and their timetables, and the logistical innovations of national businesses after the Civil War provided a framework for the birth of the first large-scale consumer economy. The absence of barriers to trade and the presence of a common currency created a massive space within which economies of scale could be captured to realize the liberal dream in which calculation and rationality would provide the basis to realizing the desire to better one's material condition. The United States was the first modern capitalist economy as its avatars such as Adam Smith understood it.¹⁵

At home and abroad, however, American hegemony is much more of a mixed bag in its consequences than either its proponents or its critics tend to claim. In particular, the cultural logic of marketplace society has politically progressive as well as negative effects. For example, it can refocus male emotional commitment around business deal-making rather than warrior dreams. Edith Wharton memorably declared that, for the Gilded Age (late nineteenth century) upper-class American male, “the real *crime passionnel* is a ‘big steal.’”¹⁶ American hegemony can also liberate people from the hold of traditions that disempower various groups, not the least women, whose independent subjectivity (as citizens

and consumers rather than solely as mothers or potential mothers) and parallel participation in society as individual persons have tended to increase with its spread.

Marketplace society also has provided the necessary context for the growth of a public sphere in which social, political, and cultural norms can be debated outside the control of absolutist authority. At the same time, its promise of “Paradise Now or Soon” obviously threatens those political (and theological) projects that put Utopia into the indefinite future. Unremitting critics of the culture of consumption, certainly one of the most important components of marketplace society, often tend to operate with a rosy view of the societies the consumption-based society undermined. Clothing the past with the image of artisans lovingly making goods without desire for monetary profit and consumers as connoisseurs of things-in-themselves is historically problematic to say the least. Karl Marx for one was alive to the paradox of capitalist modernity. At the same time it promised more to greater numbers, it also made them increasingly dependent on the nexus of the marketplace without the kinship and familial resources to compensate for their new vulnerability. From this viewpoint, simple romantic anti-consumerism is a backward-looking or conservative utopia.¹⁷

What the coming of marketplace society did was to democratize desire; to make it possible for the multitude to consume goods in ways previously available only to the rich. Of course, doing so invariably disrupts local ties and dependencies and replaces them with longer distance ones. The “local” sounds good to many American ears, but most of American history has been spent incorporating the local into the national and increasingly into the global. For example, food and information once circulated largely within local confines. This is obviously no longer the case. More significant socially, removing people from preexisting local statuses and giving them new ones in wider spatial divisions of labor required new measures of social value. Goods and people were “shorn of the luminosity of place and the spirit of reciprocity in a full-fledged commodity market.”¹⁸ As a result, new measures of value and status were attained through *commodification* of people and goods. As reciprocity and authority retreated as dominant modes of social exchange, they were replaced by social valuations based on position in the marketplace as signified by income and consumption.

But this commodification is best regarded as neither a simple “top-down” process, nor, in functionalist terms, a deliberate trick to make people conform to what their betters desire. People actively demand

distinctions from one another.¹⁹ Thus, the demand for distinction in the absence of customary and command mechanisms endows persons and things with their particular values in a marketplace society.²⁰ In such a society, therefore, people and things are always actually or potentially commodifiable. Whether this process can continue to be sustainable at a global level, economically and environmentally, may be problematic, particularly now that the growing Chinese and Indian middle classes, hundreds of millions of them, aspire to follow in the consumer path blazed by the Americans, Europeans, and Japanese. As its most prized goods are often positional ones, whose social value lies in their relative scarcity, the whole enterprise ends up rather like a dog chasing its own tail. That, however, does not make it any less central to the way the modern world works.

Perhaps commodification's most negative impact is political. Marketplace society is one in which the role of citizen is increasingly eclipsed by that of consumer. Indeed, notwithstanding an early association with the development of a public sphere, its spread is clearly associated with a redirection of popular political energies from meaningful and effective debate over "the good society" into competition between politicians promising "more."²¹ If the early narratives about what was later called "the American Dream" were predominantly about religious and political freedom, the more recent ones are all about upward social mobility, home ownership, and achieving fame and fortune.²² The quantitative character of the American promise and its link to the benevolence of providence is put brilliantly by Immanuel Wallerstein when he writes: "I think that Americans tend to believe that others have *less* of many things than we have, and the fact that we have more is a sign of grace."²³ This "less-ness" is not just about consumption but also about the relative efficiency of economies, the scope of social aspirations, and the wide range of technological accomplishments. During the Cold War, the American promise constituted the kernel of the American entry in the "ideological geopolitics" of that epoch.²⁴ In this regard, while clothed in the rhetoric of democracy versus totalitarianism, American ideology represented the victory of the promise of ever-increasing consumption over open and deliberative democracy. What De Tocqueville presciently called "the charm of anticipated success" turned workers and employees into consumers whose self-image was of individuals whose fate lay in their own hands not in collective action or solidarity with the poor or the materially less well endowed.²⁵ The shadow of marketplace

society has been cast far and wide even if often challenged by residual and emergent hegemonies. The former would include the republicanism that inspired in part the American political experiment but which was rapidly eclipsed by a socially more powerful liberalism and various religious fundamentalisms urging a return to traditional ways. The latter would include the various socialisms, fascisms, social–democratic experiments, and communitarianisms that have arisen to resist and question marketplace society’s inevitability.

For now these alternatives seem largely quiescent, with the notable exception of religious fundamentalisms. Marketplace society is in a period of absolute ascendancy around the world.²⁶ In late-1980s China, for example, the contemporary leader, Deng Xiaoping, at a time of widespread calls for greater democracy, supposedly announced that “to get rich is glorious” and redirected the country toward full-fledged adoption of the marketplace model, with important adaptations to Communist China. In 1989, Deng successfully challenged the Tiananmen Square protesters for democracy, who paraded with a replica of the Statue of Liberty, not just with tanks but with the promise of more consumption. Likewise, the Bharataniya Janata (BJP) political party in India opened up the country to the world economy when it came into national office in the mid-1990s. Representing a largely middle class (and high caste) constituency, it boldly adopted a liberal model of economic development in place of the state-centered model of the dominant post-Independence Congress party. As in China, a major consequence was a growing polarization in economic growth and incomes between regions and across social classes. This allowed a return to power of the Congress party and its allies in 2004 with the support of those excluded from the fruits of consumption. Its commitment, however, is to spread around the benefits of a burgeoning economy not to retreat to its old model. In present day Italy, the electoral popularity of the Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, is based entirely on selling himself (through his fortuitous control over much of Italian television) as a symbol of the rise of an Italian marketplace society that in its crassness eclipses even that of the United States. That Berlusconi has acquired his position as Italy’s richest person largely through political manipulation and close calls with the law is seen only as evidence of his *sagacia* (astuteness) and *fortuna favorevole* (good fortune)—in other words, the (hopefully positive) magic of the marketplace. This is an Italian adaptation, not simply a wholesale adoption as a word such as *Americanization* would

imply. Part of the genius of American hegemony is its ability to adapt as it enrolls. When the Moslem festival of Ramadan becomes the orgy of consumption that is the American Christmas, then we will know that the hegemony of marketplace society has captured one of its last holdouts. Adopting Christmas itself is not required.

The widespread appeal of consumer sentiments, of course, can be put down to universal “animal spirits” that have inspired consumption for its own sake from the Stone Age to the present. What seems much less arguable than whether marketplace society has at least some local content, however, is that American hegemony by means of enrollment in marketplace society has had a dual aspect to it. On the one hand, U.S.-based institutions have had the power to enact globally a dominant vision of “the good society.” On the other hand, this vision has been one of ever-increasing mass consumption. The hegemony of marketplace society, therefore, is what lies at the center of contemporary world society. In William Leach’s words: “Whoever has the power to project a vision of the good life and make it prevail has the most decisive power of all.”²⁷ From this viewpoint, thinking about contemporary world politics in terms of classic or mutant empires simply obscures the actual mechanisms through which power is exercised in a world no longer reducible to territorial states and empires bumping up against one another in a competition for primacy.²⁸ The contemporary geography of power is too complex for this reduction. In particular, global commodity chains, financial networks, and cultural exchanges linking together the global marketplace have local roots but exercise global reach. This is a networked and fragmenting topology of power rather than a territorializing and homogenizing one. Hence, building global or supranational policies or alternative political positions on outdated images such as that of empire could have mistaken if not catastrophic consequences.

This book is a response to the proliferation of publications adopting the empire motif as if it offered the most powerful purchase on contemporary world politics. So, I begin in Chapter 2 with a discussion of the words *empire* and *hegemony* in relation to recent U.S. involvement in world politics, particularly the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Chapter 3 moves beyond the immediate situation to consider the long-term theoretical connections among hegemony, globalization, and the geography of power. I argue that world politics is not set in stone for all time but has evolved well beyond the “field-of-forces” model of territorial states that still dominates so much discussion of world politics. I provide some intellectual tools to help understand how this evolution has happened,

emphasizing how crucial to the process the particular form taken by American hegemony has been. I challenge the view that U.S. hegemony is simply the outcome of an ad hoc dialectic between conjunctural constraints (e.g., German and Japanese defeat in the Second World War, the revolt of colonies against European imperialism, etc.) and universal processes (such as the pursuit of primacy between Great Powers or class struggle). Instead, I emphasize the historical development of a set of sociological and cultural features that by the late nineteenth century differentiated the United States from other national-capitalist societies and the rest of the world in general but that have become increasingly the “standard” or norm around the world under American hegemony. From this perspective, the place that comes to exercise hegemony matters, therefore, in the content and form that hegemony takes. In other words, a spatial dialectic between the United States and the rest of the world rather than a conjunctural/universal historical dialectic with only incidental geographical features has done most to shape contemporary world politics.

Chapter 4 takes up the specifics of the case for the United States as the first fully fledged marketplace society in which an emphasis on popular mass consumption—largely new in human history—prevailed and from which many of the features associated with globalization have tended to evolve. From this point of view, the growth of popular mass consumption developed first in U.S.-based capitalism and diffused elsewhere, not mere changes in production, has made possible the perpetuation and deepening of capitalism by scaling it up to the global. Within and outside the United States, the emergent marketplace society has had episodic crises of credibility. Particularly in the 1930s, it came close to collapse in the United States itself. But its resurrection after the Second World War was bolstered significantly by its central role in the ideological conflict with the Soviet Union.

In Chapter 5, I argue that the spread of marketplace society defines the core attributes of American hegemony, not the mimesis or restructuring of world politics around a political division of labor redolent of American constitutionalism, as alleged by some theorists of empire, particularly Hardt and Negri.²⁹ It is the dominant character of American society rather than a scaled-up version of the American political structure that has provided the basis to American hegemony. Indeed, this character makes it possible to think of a global hegemony no longer attached to its American roots through the actions of the U.S. government. Indeed, such political actions could be seen, at least in light of

recent events such as the invasion of Iraq, as having become adversarial to American hegemony rather than serving its purposes. Marketplace society may need institutional supports, but these need no longer be identifiably American ones. But the U.S. government itself is now so severely constrained by its constitutional structures, I also argue, to be singularly ineffective in responding to many economic, military, and political challenges. If it is the monster that is so often alleged, the U.S. government is nevertheless a seriously incompetent and incoherent one.

With Chapter 6, I provide a narrative account of contemporary globalization, tracing it back to the achievement of global power by the U.S. government after the Second World War but with older substantive roots (as I argue in Chapter 4) and link this to an emerging geography of power in which long-distance networks are helping to fragment existing territorial arrangements for the organization of societies and economies. Such networks are hardly new (in Chapter 3 their historical rootedness is emphasized). But the ability of the governments of territorial states to direct and limit them—including the U.S. government—is increasingly problematic. Chapter 7 describes the consequences of this new geography of power for global patterns of development. After detailing dominant views among geographers on the new global economy, I use empirical evidence about trends in global income inequalities to show how the new geography of power explains why at the same time inequalities between states have been decreasing (particularly among developed countries and to a certain extent among all countries because of economic growth in China), inequalities within countries have risen considerably.

In Chapter 8, I bring the case full circle: back to the United States itself. Rather than the fearsome imperial force portrayed in so many recent accounts of world politics, I emphasize the vulnerability of the United States to the very forces of globalization that successive U.S. governments and businesses have helped unleash. Inside the United States, the same social and geographical shifts are under way that can be seen elsewhere with increasing polarization of incomes, a declining middle class, and a re-territorialization of the economy around certain regions. The decreasing share of product markets in the United States held by U.S.-based businesses and massive fiscal imbalances bode ill for a ready reversal of social and geographical polarities. Chalmers Johnson has memorably referred to this process as “blowback,” which is

“shorthand for saying that a nation reaps what it sows, even if it does not fully know or understand what it has sown.”³⁰ A brief conclusion summarizes the overall thrust of the book by raising in a different way the whole issue I raised previously: Which word—empire or hegemony—best describes the role of the U.S. in contemporary world politics? If it is an empire, it is a peculiarly incoherent and increasingly hollow one. It is better seen as increasingly subject to pressures from the very hegemony it has released on the world.