

Neo-Gramscian Contribution on the Concept of Hegemony in International Relations: A Theoretical Analysis

*Uluslararası İlişkilerde Hegemonya Kavramına Neo-Gramscian Katkı:
Kuramsal Bir Analiz*

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Abstract: The concept of hegemony is one of the central concepts in International Relations as both positivist and post-positivist approaches have been utilizing the concept within their theoretical frameworks. However, looking at how theories are utilizing the concept it is obvious that there is a lack of consensus on the meaning of hegemony. By taking this as its starting point, this article aims to explore the concept of hegemony in the discipline from different perspectives with a specific emphasis on the neo-Gramscian approach. In the first section, a brief introduction on the materialistic and static understanding of hegemony in mainstream approaches, is presented. Then in the second section, there is a discussion on the neo-Gramscian contribution on the concept of hegemony. In conclusion, the article argues that neo-Gramscian approach to understand hegemony enriches the concept by adding up ideational elements on the sociological process through which social forces establish exploitative relationship patterns.

Keywords: Hegemony, Realism, Liberalism, Neo-Gramscian Approach, Coercion, Consent.

Öz: Hegemonya kavramı hem pozitivist hem de post-pozitivist yaklaşımların sıkça başvurduğu bir kavram olarak Uluslararası İlişkilerin temel kavramlarından birisidir. Ancak uluslararası ilişkileri anlamak ve anlamlandırmak için sıkça kullanılmasına rağmen kavramın anlamı üzerinde bir görüş birliği mevcut değildir. Buradan hareketle, eldeki bu çalışma merkeze neo-Gramscian yaklaşımı olarak hegemonya kavramının Uluslararası İlişkiler disiplini içerisinde hangi manalara geldiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Birinci bölümde, ana akım yaklaşımların hegemonya kavramını materyal minvalde nasıl ele aldığı tanıtılmaktadır. İkinci bölümde hegemonya kavramına neo-Gramscian bakış açısının yaptığı katkılar tartışılacaktır. Son bölümdeyse neo-Gramscian yaklaşımının baskın ve bağımlı gruplar arasındaki düşünsel faktörleri de analize dâhil ederek hegemonya kavramının tanımını genişletip kavramın uluslararası ilişkilerdeki hegemonik düzeni açıklamadaki kapasitesini arttırdığını iddia edilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hegemonya, Realizm, Liberalizm, Neo-Gramscian Yaklaşım, Cebir, Rıza.

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Introduction

In November 1926 Antonia Gramsci, the Secretary General of the Italian Communist Party, was arrested and subsequently sentenced to twenty years in prison. His long and miserable confinement, which resulted in death in 1937, also resulted in one of the most important works of Marxist thought of the twentieth century that is *Prison Notebooks*. In this work, Gramsci was mainly concerned with the problem of understanding capitalist societies, the meaning of fascism and the possibilities of building an alternative form of state and society. Not surprisingly, he did not have very much to say directly about international relations. However, scholars of International Relations, among them especially Robert Cox, found Gramscian approach and most specifically his concept of *hegemony* very useful for a better understanding of international relations. In this line, starting from 1970s, neo-Gramscian approaches have begun to flourish in International Relations and gained influence in challenging the mainstream approaches of the discipline.

Hegemonia as a Greek word means in linguistics manner “authority, rule, political supremacy.” Merriam-Webster defines it as “preponderant influence or authority over others,” while describing *hegemon* as “something (such as a political state) having dominant influence or authority over others, one possessing hegemony” (Merriam-Webster, 2018). In line with linguistics, a hegemon in international system, in its most simplistic meaning, can be characterized as the leading state of a group of states, which implies necessarily some degree of social order and collective organization. Hence, hegemony is clearly associated with interstate systems. Moreover, as a product of specific historical and political circumstances, it does not exist by itself. Hegemony, in this respect, consists of the possession and command of a multi-faceted set of power resources. Therefore, it is a complex phenomenon that cannot be equated only with material or military dominance as realist scholars argue, nor is it necessarily to be regarded as a desirable public good as in the forms of liberal internationalism. More importantly, structural power, which rests upon material and normative resources, is a common characteristic that all hegemonic states have at their disposal. In other words, having backed by material power, hegemony may also rely on dominant transnational intersubjective reality, which consists of meanings and appropriate behavior patterns that make the existing world order possible, that legitimates the rules and norms of a hierarchical interstate system.

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to scrutinize hegemony in international relations through neo-Gramscian lenses and to question the explanatory capacity of neo-Gramscian approach in understanding the world politics. The concept of hegemony is one of the central concepts in both mainstream and critical approaches of International Relations. In this respect, while the mainstream utilizations present a material understanding of hegemony in which the hegemonic state is depicted as the one who has the most material resources in world politics, scholars

influenced by Gramscian thought has brought a new understanding to the concept of hegemony by taking ideational and sociological factors into account as well. Since this study, mainly, aims to analyze neo-Gramscian notion of hegemony, it is structured to explain and scrutinize the concept of hegemony from the perspectives of Gramscian studies. However, in order to understand Gramscian contributions better, the article first briefly sheds light on the neorealist and neoliberal institutionalist concepts of hegemony and hegemonic stability theory together with the critiques that are directed against them in the first section. Then, Gramsci's original understanding of hegemony is introduced in the second section in order to scrutinize the added value of Gramsci's contributions to International Relations. Hence, in this section, the focus turns into the examination of neo-Gramscian idea of hegemony in International Relations developed by Robert Cox. Finally, in the last section, an overall assessment of the concept of neo-Gramscian hegemony with respect to its explanatory power and limitations is provided.

Traditional Mainstream Approaches to Hegemony

Neorealism is mostly based on the realist approach to understand international relations, yet, it aims to bring a systemic approach to classical realism. According to Kenneth Waltz, founding father of neorealism, it is the structure that shapes relations among actors in international system and it determines the outcomes at systemic level. According to Waltz's approach, the structure of the international system is shaped and re-shaped by changes in the distribution of actors' capabilities (Waltz, 1979: 102 and 129). Regarding the distribution of capabilities among states, on the issue of hegemony, neorealists have been focusing on how the anarchic system creates power hungry states which attempts to install themselves as regional and global hegemons (Mearsheimer, 2001: 2). Neorealist theories of hegemony suggest that order is a product of the concentration of power capabilities in a single actor that is state which exerts its commanding position in order to build and sustain order (Gilpin, 1981: 29; Wohlforth, 1993, 12-14; Mearsheimer, 2001: 40-42). Thus, hegemonic system is created, shaped and maintained by a single state through coercion of one state which benefits from the distribution of power capabilities. Another important feature of hegemony in realist understanding is that the order which is created through hegemonic establishment is heavily depended upon the sustainability of hegemonic power. In other words, with the decline of a hegemon, according to neorealists, the order descends into instability (Kindleberger, 1973: 305; Keohane, 1984; 31).

On the issue of hegemony, neoliberalism attempts to develop neorealist approach with the help of their basic contribution to the International Relations, namely institutionalization of cooperation. Neoliberals emphasize the institutionalization of hegemonic stability for the understanding of world order in international politics. From this perspective, a dominant hegemon is necessary in order to crea-

te international economic openness and stability in world politics. As Charles P. Kindleberger (1973: 305) states, “for the world economy to be stabilized, there has to be a stabilizer, one stabilizer”. On the other hand, once the hegemonic stability has been established by a leading state, there is no need for a hegemon to maintain or sustain the stability. In other words, hegemon is substantial to create a hegemonic order, but since hegemonic leadership creates cooperation and institutionalization in time, the decline of hegemony does not necessarily cause the collapse of that order since the institutions that were established before the collapse of hegemonic state are expected to continue to function independently from the existence of a hegemonic power. In other words, with the decline of the hegemon in liberal understanding, institutions do not automatically dissolve, because they are constructed in a way that serve to the benefit of all stakeholders, and instead, they take on a life of their own, which enable the continuation of the hegemonic order.

To conclude, although liberal theory does not challenge main premises of the realist school as they are two sides of the same coin, it can also be considered as a substantial departure from the traditional understanding of international relations. As Moravcsik (1997: 516) argues, the fundamental promise of the liberal theory of international relations is that relationship between states and the surrounding domestic and transnational society shape state preferences and behaviors by ways of interdependence and international regulations. Within this framework, one fundamental critique of the neorealist hegemony theory from the perspective of neoliberals is that hegemony is not essential for the continuation of cooperation. Once the hegemonic order is established, the absence of a hegemon is not necessarily associated with disorder in the world system due to changes in the preferences and behaviors of states thanks to the existing order (Snidal, 1985: 579). Despite their differences mainly on the issue of the continuation of hegemonic world order after the hegemonic power falls down; both neorealists and neoliberals elaborate on the concept of hegemony from a state centric approach based on material relations among them.

Gramscian Hegemony

Antonio Gramsci’s contributions like the concepts of hegemony, historic bloc, passive revolution, and civil society have become central points of discussions in social sciences. As part of this centrality, the Gramscian formulation of hegemony has long been borrowed by scholars of International Relations. Looking at details of Gramscian hegemony concept, the key question which animated Gramsci’s theoretical work was why had it proven to be so difficult to promote revolution in Western Europe? Marx, after all, had predicted that revolution, and the transition to socialism, would occur first in the most advanced capitalist societies. However, Western and Central Europe provided a different case while Russia became the

first experience of a socialist revolution. Therefore, the history of early twentieth century seemed to suggest that there was a flaw in classic Marxist analysis according to Gramsci. At this point, his answer to this question is related with his conceptualization of hegemony.

In understanding why revolutions did not occur or how the prevailing order was being maintained, scholars mostly concentrated on coercive capabilities of the state. With this framework, it was mostly coercion, or the fear of coercion, that kept the exploited and alienated majority in society from rising up and revolting against the system which was the cause of their suffering. Nonetheless, Gramsci brought a new understanding to the explanation of maintenance of a system other than its coercive capabilities. Gramsci agreed that coercive-centered explanation may be valid for less developed societies, such as pre-revolutionary Russia, but it was not the case in more developed countries of the Western Europe. At this point, according to Gramsci, system was maintained not merely by coercion, but also through consent of the masses so that it is much more enduring (Hobden and Jones, 2001: 210-212). In Gramsci's conceptualization, consent is created and re-created by the hegemony of the ruling stratum in society, which allows the moral, political, and cultural values of the dominant group to become widely dispersed throughout society and to be accepted by subordinate groups and classes as their own. According to Gramsci, all this takes place through the institutions of civil society, which can be defined as the network of institutions and practices in society that enjoy some autonomy from the state, and through which groups and individuals organize, represent and express themselves to each other and to the state. To sum up hegemony, in Gramscian approach, does not stand only through coercive capabilities, but it rests on consent of others, which in turn strengthen the hegemonic order through ideological and moral justification.

Neo-Gramscian Approach to International Politics

Neo-Gramscian approach applies a critical approach to the study of international relations and the political economy that explores the interface of ideas, institutions and material capabilities as they shape specific contours of the state formation, which is heavily influenced by the writings of Antonio Gramsci. Hence, neo-Gramscian approach analyzes how the particular constellation of social forces, the state and the dominant ideational configuration define and sustain world orders. In this respect, neo-Gramscian approach breaks the decades-old stalemate between the so-called realist schools of thought and the liberal theories by historicizing the very theoretical foundations of the two streams as parts of a particular world order, and finding the interlocking relationship between agency and structure. With his studies in 1980s, Robert Cox provided a comprehensive overview of critical theory to hegemony, world order and historical change. Although Gramsci is regarded by many as one of the most important thinkers of the twentieth cen-

tury, his writings, indeed, reflect a particular time and space in a specific field of social sciences. At this point, it was Robert Cox who has done most to introduce Gramsci to the study of world politics and strengthen Gramsci's conceptualization by adding up international elements to Gramsci's bottom-up analysis to understand hegemony.

According to Cox, neorealism puts emphasis on states, and specifically on their material capabilities. This approach, therefore, reduces the structure of world order to the distribution of power as a configuration of material forces. It also dismisses social forces as irrelevant and tends to place a low value on the normative and institutional aspects of world order. Robert Keohane, leading neoliberal, attempted to broaden the realist perspective to include variations in the authority of international norms and institutions by the theory of hegemonic stability. He holds that hegemonic structures of power, dominated by a single country are most conducive to the development of strong international regimes, whose rules are well obeyed. On the other hand, Cox takes Gramscian hegemony and applied it to international politics by focusing on the issue of consent. According to Cox, successive dominant powers in the international system have shaped a world order that suits their interests and have done so not only with their coercive capabilities, but also because they have managed to generate broad consent for that order even among those who are disadvantaged by it.

If the dominance of a single state coincides with a stable order on some occasions but not on others, there may be some merit in looking more closely at what is meant by stability. Dominance by a powerful state may be a necessary but not a sufficient condition of hegemony. The notion of hegemony in neo-Gramscianism as a fit between material capabilities, ideas and institutions makes it possible to deal with some of the problems in the theory of state dominance as the necessary condition for a stable international order. Therefore, in neo-Gramscian notion of hegemony, moral and intellectual leadership is central as well. The two periods of Pax-Britannica and Pax-Americana also satisfy the reformulated definition of hegemony. In Pax-Britannica, material conditions as sea power and ideational powers such as liberal norms of economics, free trade and gold standard were the aspects of world order under British Empire. In Pax-Americana, material conditions such as US economic and military superiority and institutions like Bretton Woods, NATO, UN etc. backed US supremacy on the specific part of the world during the Cold War (Cox, 1981: 126-155). In neo-Gramscian approach, hegemony as in the case of two example does not mean the dominance of one state over others through coercion, but includes intellectual leadership. In other words, it is a structure of dominance maintained by consent through accepting an ideology and institutions consistent with existing structure (Özçelik, 2005: 95-96).

In Cox's writings, there is a difference between the concepts of dominance and hegemony. While the term dominance refers to the neorealist understanding of hegemony, hegemony means "structure of values and understandings about

the nature of order that infuse a whole system of states and non-state entities” (Cox, 1992: 140). In other words, as Andreas Bieler and Adam David Morton (2000: 87) argue, hegemony is manifested in terms of consent and acceptance of ideas combined with material capabilities rather than simply being superior in material capabilities to others. Hegemony is therefore a form of dominance, but it refers more to a consensual order so that “dominance by a powerful state may be a necessary but not a sufficient condition of hegemony” (Bieler and Morton, 2003: 1-3).

Another departure in neo-Gramscian understanding of hegemony from mainstream approaches is that rejecting state centrism in mainstream accounts, neo-Gramscian approach takes social forces within state as its main ontological unit rather than states. This critical stance leads to the questioning of the given status of the state as neo-Gramscian scholars assert that state formation and its historical evolution should be studied retrospectively. From a neo-Gramscian stance, Morton argues that construction of a state formation occurs when a leading class transcends its particular economic-corporate interests and is capable of binding and cohering the diverse aspirations and general interests of various social forces. Indeed, historical bloc, an alliance of social forces, is very closely associated with this hegemonic social class. The construction of a historical bloc is therefore a national phenomenon and cannot exist without a hegemonic social class. Although it is perceived that hegemony is bound within nation-state, Morton (2003: 154-162) proposes that it would be possible for a leading social class to transform into international realm as it shows some change towards a new form of social relations of production.

In parallel, Bieler and Morton (2000: 90) argue that social forces may create hegemonic status within nation state and more importantly in world order by expanding its mode of production. Therefore, range of hegemony is being moved from the mere realm of state to the realm of international sphere. Pax-Americana appeared as hegemonic world order and it continued in this way until 1970s. However, neo-Gramscian scholars argue that Pax-Americana was eroded and substituted by another form of hegemony. This hegemony is circled around the transnational managerial class which altered the class relations and hegemonic stance (see Cox, 1981).

Criticism to the Application of neo-Gramscian Approach in International Relations

Randall Germain and Michael Kenny (1998: 6) evaluate neo-Gramscian school from a critical point of view and their starting point is three-fold: “whether the reading of Gramsci on which this appropriation rests actually constitutes a viable interpretation of his work; whether his key concepts can be internationalized in quite the way that the new Gramscians propose; and whether his concepts are ful-

ly adequate to comprehend the nature of social order in the contemporary period.”

There are certain advantageous, according to Germain and Kenny, in applying Gramscian view on international relations theory. First, Gramscian approach within International Relations provides opportunity to move beyond the limitations of positivism. Second, Italian school is “innovative reading of historical materialism in conjunction with a flexible and ultimately historicist understanding of social class, institutions and power of ideas, make it possible to be used in international relations theory.”. Other premises of Gramscian analysis on civil society which extends to global level can explain today’s development in global politics which runs free of state centrism. For these reasons, Gramscian account is providing a way to conceptualize the world order without putting the state in center and thus opening a way to conceptualize world order without being bounded by premises of nation-state (Germain and Kenny, 1998: 6-7). In this way, neo-Gramscian approach turned to be a serious critic against the realist and neorealist school of international relations.

However, it is argued that neo-Gramscians should be more careful in using Gramscian concepts. In other words, when applying these concepts to today’s international relations, they should be carefully interpreted because the terms may contain inconsistencies which are open to multiple and radical interpretations (Germain and Kenny, 1998: 7). Additionally, neo-Gramscian reformulation of state at international level is problematic. According to Gramsci, state is equal to political society plus civil society. Neo-Gramscians reorganized this Gramscian formulation to internationalize Gramscian approach and they argue that international state is the sum of global political society and global civil society. This is a miscalculation because there are challenges to indicate global political society which can be legitimized and internalized in terms of hegemony (Germain and Kenny, 1998: 14-17).

Lastly, it is difficult to describe the extent of hegemony in world order so the internationalization of Gramscian hegemony is problematic although it is explanatory in domestic context. Hegemony in national context is achieved within the sphere of civil society by consensual means, when a leading class sheds its immediate economic-corporate consciousness and universalizes its norms and values, thereby establishing a political and ethical harmony between dominant and subordinate groups. A dominant class rules, but effectively with and over, rather than against, subaltern classes. In this respect, it is possible to measure the extent of hegemony by the existence or absence of social strife, and by the degree of legitimating the social order and body politics enjoy. At the level of world order, however, engaging in such measurement is more conceptually problematic. Although most of the neo-Gramscians focus on the power of transnational managerial class, according to Germain and Kenny (1998: 17-18), this totalized view of hegemony is inadequately comprehended and counter-hegemonic mobility is ignored to a great extent.

Conclusion

By challenging mainstream international relations approaches after 1970s with new developments in international political arena that did not fit to realist frameworks, Gramscian approaches gained influence and importance among international relations scholars. Emergence of neo-Gramscian approaches as influential theories in International Relations has several reasons which are discussed and explained above. Among them, as the central point in this study, hegemony constitutes an important place in current debates of the discipline.

Neorealists state that hegemonic order is a result of concentration of power capabilities in a single state. Since the hegemonic state is the condition for the emergence of order in world politics, realists argue, the decline of the leading power is automatically accompanied by the disorder. In other words, while the prevailing powerful state is controlling material resources, it establishes and maintains world order for the continuation of its powerful position. Besides neorealist view on hegemony, neoliberals assert that a dominant hegemon is necessary for the existence of a liberal international economy on the one hand and relatively peaceful and secure international system on the other. However, they continue that changes in state behaviors and preferences under international regimes established by hegemonic leader make post-hegemonic stability possible.

The new insight brought by neo-Gramscian scholars on the concept of hegemony in international relations theory suggested a new way of thinking. According to neo-Gramscians, neorealist concept of hegemony is reductionist in the sense that it only focuses on the dominance of one state over others through material capabilities, while hegemony itself inherently involves ideational leadership. According to these scholars, hegemonic dominance rested only on military strength cannot be sustained in the long run without ideological consent of others. In other words, what is also necessary and vital is the ideological consensus between dominant and subordinate groups that leads to the continuation of the hegemonic order. In this respect, neo-Gramscian contribution presents a sociological understanding about the establishment and the maintenance of world order in international relations. Therefore, hegemony in neo-Gramscian approach is a complex phenomenon that cannot be equated only with material or military dominance as realist scholars argue, nor is it necessarily to be regarded as a desirable public good as in the forms of liberal internationalism. In conclusion, neo-Gramscian approach added ideational elements to the concept of hegemony by emphasizing on the sociological process through which social forces establish exploitative relationship pattern, which in turn enables the establishment and the continuation of the hegemony.

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