Beyond Hydro-Hegemony:
Gramsci, the National, and the Trans-National

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This paper is sadly still incomplete, with the final section (on hydro-hegemony) missing. A completed version will be circulated at a later date.

Abstract

This paper is a response to Zeitoun and Warner's article 'Hydro-hegemony: a framework for analysis of trans-boundary water conflicts' (*Water Policy*, 2006), and more broadly to the notion of 'hydro-hegemony' being developed within the London Water Research Group. The paper argues that while Zeitoun and Warner's hydro-hegemony framework offers a powerful contribution and corrective to the existing water politics literature, it nonetheless does not go far enough – it being to this extent that there is a need to go 'beyond hydro-hegemony'. The central argument is that existing hydro-hegemony theory is premised upon a state-centric worldview, which is both theoretically and empirically problematic, and places unnecessary limits upon the analysis of the relations between water and power. Theoretically, hydro-hegemony theory deploys an essentially realist conception of hegemony, which is at odds with its professed debt to Gramsci. Empirically, in turn, the theory overlooks those aspects of water politics which do not mesh with its realist premises: it focuses on the international, but largely ignores both the national and the trans-national. The paper argues that this inattention to the national and trans-national dimensions of water politics is deeply problematic, especially so given the nature and continuing transformation of the global capitalist world order. It thus calls for a broadening of the hydro-hegemony framework to make it less dependent upon an outdated model of international politics, and better suited to the analysis of water and power within an era of globalisation.

1. Introduction

In a recent article in *Water Policy*, Mark Zeitoun and Jeroen Warner (2006) articulated a new 'hydro-hegemony' framework for the analysis of trans-boundary water politics. Zeitoun and Warner (and behind them the London Water Research Group, which has been holding a series of international workshops on hydro-hegemony) argue that conventional analyses tend to downplay the importance of power in water conflict and

cooperation, and that fuller attention is needed to the dynamics of hegemony over water. Zeitoun and Warner start by observing that the much-feared threat of 'water wars' is 'non-existent', and that trans-boundary cooperation has been much the more widespread feature of international water politics. They go on to contend, however, that it would be a mistake to view 'cooperation' or the absence of all-out 'water wars' as evidence of an absence of conflict. To the contrary, they argue, the assertion of control over trans-boundary water resources can take place through any number of power tactics, ranging from military force at one extreme, to the agreement of unequal water treaties and the construction of prejudicial 'truths' at the other. Within the context of highly asymmetrical power relations, the distribution of water resources is largely determined by the strategy pursued by the hegemonic power. In some cases, hydro-hegemons adopt a guiding role and style of leadership, bringing well-distributed benefits to all water users; whereas in other cases they establish unilateral and exploitative forms of water control, with serious negative consequences for hegemonised states and populations. These and related points are illustrated with examples from the Tigris-Euphrates, Jordan and Nile river basins.

Zeitoun and Warner's framework, and the work of the London Group, provide a powerful contribution and corrective to the existing water politics literature. However, in my view they do not go far enough in their analysis of the relations between hegemony and water politics. Theoretically, their work is premised upon a limited and essentially state-centric conception of hegemony, which is both at odds with its professed debt to Gramsci, and neglects to consider those social and trans-national relations which are characteristic of Gramscian analyses. Empirically, in turn, their work overlooks those aspects of water politics which do not cohere with its state-centric premises, focusing exclusively on the inter-national aspects of hydro-hegemony, and in doing so ignoring both its national and trans-national dimensions. These gaps are doubly significant, I argue, given that international politics has been fundamentally transformed by processes of globalisation. For these reasons I submit that there is a need to go 'beyond hydro-hegemony', as currently understood by Zeitoun, Warner and the London Group.

The paper unfolds as follows. Section 2 discusses the notion of 'hegemony' employed within hydro-hegemony theory, highlights the state-centric, realist assumptions on which it is premised, and overviews the contrasting conceptualisation of hegemony found within Gramscian and neo-Gramscian analyses. Section 3 turns to the character of politics under conditions of globalisation, arguing that a realist focus on inter-state relations fails to get a handle on many of the most pressing concerns of contemporary global politics, and that Gramscian and other critical approaches provide far richer tools for political analysis in today's world. Informed by and on the basis of this discussion of contemporary global politics, section 4 then at last discusses questions of water politics, first by considering the international, and then the national and trans-national dimensions of hydro-hegemony. If much of this analysis is about issues other than water, that is because water politics is best viewed not as an independent variable or topic, but rather as one that reflects and can only be properly understood within the context of broader structures of power. In an era of globalisation, I argue, national and trans-national as well as international water conflicts should all fall within the orbit of hydro-hegemonic analysis. Hydro-hegemony, I conclude, occurs at a multiplicity of levels, not just the international.

2. Understanding Hegemony

Zeitoun and Warner's hydro-hegemony framework aims above all to identify contrasting types of hegemonic behaviour towards water resources. Zeitoun and Warner first distinguish between 'hegemony' and 'dominance', where the former is considered to be 'leadership buttressed by authority', and the latter 'leadership buttressed by coercion.' 'Theories of hegemony,' they observe, are concerned with the means by which power is exercised 'other than through mere repression' – for instance, by establishing ideological and normative authority, or by defining common sense truths and 'rules of the game' (2006: 438). Hegemony, so conceived, can take either positive or negative and positive forms. Positively, hegemony can involve practices of regulation, management and ordering that are beneficial to weaker actors, and that may even allow such weaker actors to 'free ride' on the system of benign hegemony. Alternatively, hegemony may be 'negative and dominative', oriented to the maintenance and indeed extension of power asymmetries and structural inequalities. Hydro-hegemony, in turn, can involve either 'enlightened leadership' or 'oppressive domination' – or, more commonly, something between the two. Positively, hydro-hegemony can lead to beneficial water sharing and river basin management; negatively, by contrast, it can involve rules of the game, as well as forms of oppression, that are oriented towards resource capture (2006: 439). Zeitoun and Warner invoke a range of political theorists – Antonio Gramsci (1971), Ian Lustick (2002), Robert Keohane (1980, 1984) and others – in support these conceptualisations and distinctions.

Now, one problem with this theoretical framework is that there is some slippage on the question of whether domination is the opposite of hegemony, or one possible dimension of it. Domination and dominance are on the one hand defined in terms of coercion, and on this basis are contrasted with hegemony (2006: 438); and on the other hand, are equated with the negative, repressive form of hegemony described above (2006: 439). This issue is clouded further by the fact that 'hegemons' are conceived as 'groups with power' – with power that presumably rests upon coercive as well as normative and ideological capabilities (2006: 438). In fairness, it should also be noted that such slippage is common within discussions of hegemony (including in the work of Gramsci discussed below).

The bigger problem than this is that Zeitoun and Warner's notion of hegemony revolves exclusively around states. In Zeitoun and Warner's hands, the 'hegemons' themselves are always states; the consequences of hegemony, whether positive or negative, are always experienced by states; and trans-boundary conflicts are always understood as conflicts between state (or quasi-state, in the case of the Palestinian Authority) actors. The difficulty here is that many of the political theorists invoked by Zeitoun and Warner do not understand hegemony in state-centric terms. Some undoubtedly do: within realist and other mainstream traditions of International Relations, hegemony refers to the dominant position of an individual state within international politics (see e.g. Keohane 1980 and 1984). Zeitoun and Warner utilise just such an understanding of hegemony. But many

theorists of hegemony understand it quite differently from this, this being most obviously the case within the work of the most famous theorist of hegemony, Antonio Gramsci, whom Zeitoun and Warner invoke in support of their hydro-hegemony framework (2006: 437).

Gramsci was an early twentieth century Italian Marxist endeavouring to make sense of the weakness of the Communist movement within his own society, and it was within this context that he introduced the notion of hegemony to modern socio-political analysis. Gramsci argued that in eastern Europe (and especially within Tsarist Russia), the internal fragility of the state was a function of its reliance upon domination and coercion. Within modern Western Europe, by contrast, state and class power rested in addition upon structures of consent achieved by and through civil society:

In the East the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous; in the West, there was a proper relation between State and civil society, and when the State trembled a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The State was only an outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks… (Gramsci 1971: 238).

These 'fortresses and earthworks' are the structures through which consent is manufactured and reproduced within modern capitalist societies: parliaments, education systems, the media, the pronouncements of 'organic intellectuals', and assorted other means of disseminating 'common sense' ideas about how society should be organised. It is through these means, argues Gramsci – that is, through social guidance, leadership and education rather than primarily through oppression – that dominant social groups manage to maintain their power within modern capitalist societies. And it is these practices of consent formation which lie at the centre of Gramsci's conception of hegemony. In most of his work, Gramsci equates hegemony and the manufacture of consent (as he famously put it, 'State = political society + civil society, in other words hegemony protected by the armour of coercion' – 1971: 263), while elsewhere hegemony is depicted as 'a combination of force and consent' (e.g. 1971: 80) – this slippage being mirrored by that of Zeitoun and Warner discussed above. But either way, the value of the Gramscian theory of hegemony lies in its emphasis on the means through which the state and dominant groups maintain their power over society, and in particular on the ideological, normative and cultural aspects of these state-society relations.

Late-twentieth century political and social theorists have developed Gramsci's arguments in two main ways. On the one hand, Gramsci's emphasis on the importance of manufacturing consent, and his investigations of 'historical blocs' of ideas and institutions through which social hegemony is secured (1971: 366), have been applied to a range of contemporary and historical settings. Thus Perry Anderson has argued that the distinctive character of British society emerged from a post-Civil War compromise between an emerging capitalist class and feudal landlords – this fusion resulting in a culturally-specific form of gentlemanly and amateurish capitalism (Anderson 1992). Quite differently, Stuart Hall and others have analysed the 1980s Thatcher revolution as a hegemonic project, one that involved both the dissemination of a new 'common sense'

about unemployment, taxes, welfare, the individual and so on, and the construction of a new historical bloc compromise between traditional conservatism and the new right (Hall 1988; Jessop 1988). In these and many other respects, Gramsci's theory of hegemony has proven an immensely fertile resource for analysing conflicts, compromises, continuities and change within national-level politics and society.

A second main way Gramsci's thought has been developed is in the study of class structures, ideologies and institutions that are trans-national, and that – unlike the forms of hegemony that Gramsci analysed – are not limited within the confines of national boundaries. For instance, Kees van der Pijl has explored the makings of what he views as a cohesive 'Atlantic ruling class' spanning Holland, Britain and the US, and the development of this class's liberal, Lockean thinking within institutions ranging from the Freemasons to the World Economic Forum (van der Pijl 1984). Robert Cox, Stephen Gill and other neo-Gramscians have examined the trans-national expansion and consolidation of neo-liberal ideas and institutions since the 1970s (Cox 1987; Gill 1990; also van der Pijl 1998). And on a different but related theme, William Robinson has investigated contemporary democracy promotion discourse, analysing its emergence as a new 'common sense' during the second Cold War, and showing how it has been promoted by a range of capitalist state and non-state institutions alongside, and in support of, economic liberalisation (Robinson 1996). What connects these various analyses is their assessment that, in today's world, hegemonic structures and projects are no longer simply national, but are primarily trans-national in form.

The point of this theoretical excursus is that we should not simply assume, as Zeitoun and Warner do, that hegemony and hydro-hegemony operate exclusively at an inter-state level. In the view of its most famous theorist, Gramsci, hegemony was a matter of relations between state and society; while for many contemporary Gramscians, hegemony is established and maintained at a trans-national level, through classes, ideologies and institutions which have all transgressed nation-state boundaries through processes of globalisation. Only in mainstream schools of the discipline of International Relations is 'hegemony' understood in the state-centric fashion invoked by Zeitoun and Warner. Of course, that in itself does not mean that their application of a state-centric notion of hegemony to water politics is necessarily problematic. But as will be argued in the remainder of this paper, there is good reason to believe that in the contemporary world the national and trans-national dimensions of hydro-hegemony are just as significant as its international dimensions – if not more so.

3. Politics in a Global Age

In order to rebut the assumption that hegemony and hydro-hegemony only operate internationally, we need first to transcend the theoretical worldview on which this assumption is premised: realism. Realism holds that there are essentially two types of politics – one within states, and a second that takes place between them. The former, domestic politics, exists under conditions of state sovereignty, is as a result rule-governed, and thus provides opportunities for political progress. International politics, by contrast, is played out in the absence of a supra-national Leviathan, being characterised not so

much by sovereignty as by anarchy. In the absence of a supra-national authority, realists claim, international politics is governed not by rules but by a logic of power and self-interest. Conflict and violence are thus natural features of international politics, being abated only in circumstances where power relations and calculations of self-interest militate against them. Global or regional hegemony – where the overwhelming power of one state effects a degree of order – is one such circumstance (see e.g. Carr 1939; Morgenthau 1978; Waltz 1979; Gilpin 2002).

The essence of the realist worldview, then, theorised most lucidly by Kenneth Waltz, is that while domestic politics is characterised by government, law and potentially progress, the international arena is defined instead by anarchy, self-interest and an endless return of conflict that is moderated only by power (Waltz 1979). Now, this worldview is arguably flawed on numerous grounds, historical as well as theoretical (see e.g. Rosenberg 1994; Walker 1993; Wendt 1992). But in the contemporary world it is more flawed than ever – in at least two regards.

Firstly, the assumption that the domestic political sphere is more orderly and less conflict-ridden than the international sphere appears mistaken. The attainment of state power over territory and populations has always been a precarious and violent endeavour, involving processes of war-making that are in many respects analogous to, even indistinguishable from, organised crime (Tilly 1985). This was so during European state formation, and it has been even more so the case in the twentieth and early twenty-first century global South. Under European colonial rule, the larger part of Asia, Africa and Latin America were carved up in the most artificial of fashions, and governed at a distance by colonial administrations or local elites who had only the thinnest of legitimacy within their newly-defined societies. With the demise of formal colonialism, these same artificial entities were suddenly re-labelled as 'states' – albeit 'states' which often had extremely limited control over their territories and populations, and that derived their legitimacy above all from the external recognition of the international community; in Robert Jackson's terms, these are not 'empirical' but 'juridical' 'quasi-states' (Jackson 1990). In many parts of the South, most notably in Sub-Saharan Africa, state power continues to be more juridical than real; indeed, as Christopher Clapham has argued, the reality of political control in much of Sub-Saharan Africa is one where states and governments, in their structures, functions and legitimacy, are often indistinguishable from non-state rebel movements – the main difference being that 'states' are recognised and empowered at the UN, by international donors, and so on (Clapham 1998).

Elsewhere Southern states have managed to attain a large measure of internal hegemony, albeit ineluctably through means that have been conflict-ridden, violent and extremely painful. Thus internal repression, civil war and genocide have all been commonplace features of post-colonial state formation. Equally, population displacement and the resettlement of trusted social groups in geographical peripheries have been widely used as means of consolidating control over territory. Economic development, often led and directed by the state, has involved the simultaneous destruction of traditional forms of subsistence and ways of life. And southern states have also universally endeavoured to ascribe themselves greater legitimacy through the construction of national narratives and

identities, these nation-making projects being pursued through education systems, public media and other instruments of ideological hegemony – and mostly being fiercely contested. Processes of 'internal colonialism' (see e.g. Hechter 1975; Zureik 1979), combining coercion with the manufacture of consent, have in sum been a universal historical feature of state-building processes, especially within the post-colonial global South.

Processes of economic liberalisation since the 1980s have exacerbated many of these dynamics. The neo-liberal counter-revolution, with its critique of the state as agent of development, has resulted in a fundamental global shift in the balance between state and market – this shift having been brought about by the force of the new neo-liberal 'common sense', but above all because of the power of Northern financial interests to enforce liberalisation, especially within heavily indebted Southern states (see e.g. Toye 1993; Corbridge 1999). The retrenchment of state sectors (through reduced state ownership, regulation and subsidies) alongside the opening up of protected national economies to global competition (through reduced tariff barriers, as well as capital market liberalisation) and generally more business-friendly and less distributive taxation policies (especially reduced corporation taxes and the replacement of direct with indirect taxes) have together resulted in profound social transformations. In North and South alike income and wealth inequalities have sharply increased, especially in post-Communist states and in those states, like the UK, Israel and South Africa, where neo-liberal policies have been most extensively implemented (see e.g. Milanovic 1998; Nederveen Piertese 2002; Wade 2004). In parallel to this, internal regional inequalities have increased, as the state's ability to subsidise and redistribute in favour of its economic peripheries has declined – this being especially the case in those countries, most notably China and India, which are experiencing rapid but entirely urban-led economic growth. In addition, and notwithstanding these internal variations, there been a general crisis of development in the global South, to the extent that during the 1990s, absolute declines in GDP per capita were experienced by 54 so-called 'developing countries', with many more witnessing income stagnation (UNDP 2003).

The upshot of these economic transformations has been that societies across the global South have become increasingly polarised politically between predominantly minority Northern-oriented business, political and middle classes on the one hand, and the majority poor on the other; and well as between urban and rural areas, between urban rich and urban slum areas, and between different provinces. In Latin America, economic stagnation and marginalisation have given rise to self-conscious class conflict revolving around issues of social inequality and neo-liberalism (Veltmeyer et al 1997), while elsewhere they have been refracted through ethnic, religious and other cultural forms of identification into growing violent internal conflict and lawlessness (Chua 2003). Given all this, the realist assumption of a basic ontological distinction between an ordered domestic arena and a conflict-ridden international one appears misleading indeed.

This is especially so when one considers that the last twenty years in particular have witnessed a startling degree of international and trans-national integration, and a concomitant reduction in inter-state conflict. This integration has of course been first and

foremost economic, involving the globalisation of production chains, increasing levels of international trade and investment, and the liberalisation of (and construction of ever-more new types of) global capital markets. But it has also been cultural and, most importantly in the present context, political. International and trans-national policy structures and norms have simultaneously proliferated, and become more powerful in constraining and constituting state action. The number of international agreements has multiplied, especially in the areas of trade, finance and the environment, and an increasing number of these agreements have become binding: state signatories to institutions such as the International Criminal Court and the World Trade Organisation now facing the prospect of international legal action and sanction if they commit war crimes or engage in unlicensed protectionism. Parallel to this, the military integration of command and control systems, intelligence structures and arms production is now such that many states are no longer capable of waging war except with the cooperation of allies, and with the US in particular: the freedom to wage external war independently, so often taken as the very badge of state sovereignty, for many states no longer exists (Shaw 2000). In addition, a new category of trans-national technical and policy institutions has emerged, these taking their authority and legitimacy not simply from states, as is the case of institutions like the UN and ICC, but rather from complex coalitions of state and non-state actors. The World Economic Forum, the Extraction Industries Transparency Initiative, the World Intellectual Property Organization and countless others besides are all examples – institutions which bring together governmental, corporate, financial, academic, NGO and other assorted actors in the trans-national exchange of views and global formulation of policy consensuses. Consensus-building on many key policy issues now takes place primarily at such a global level, with policy recommendations and ideas about best practice then being fed down for implementation at national or local levels – a development which has been captured by the expanding academic literature on 'global governance' (see e.g. Held and McGrew 2002; Barnett and Duval 2005; Cochrane et al 2003; Duffield 2001). International and trans-national structures and norms, in sum, have increased both in number and density, simultaneously limiting and guiding state action as never before.

One consequence of these processes of economic, political and regulatory globalisation has been marked changes in types and incidence of warfare. Since 1945 there has been a consistent decline in the number of inter-state armed conflicts, as well as in their intensity (defined in terms of battle-related deaths). By contrast, over this same period there has been a broad increase in the incidence of internal armed conflicts (or to put this more precisely: between 1945 and 1990 the number of intra-state conflicts was consistently on the rise; since then, the number has steadily declined but still ranks higher than at any time before 1977). In 2005, according to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, there were 31 ongoing armed conflicts in the world, of which all but six were intra-state conflicts (Harbom et al 2006; see also e.g. Mueller 1996; Vayrynen 2005). War, in sum, which has traditionally been imagined as an attribute of international politics, now primarily takes place within the civil, domestic arena. Of course, realist international relations scholars typically view the domestic realm as a site of sovereignty, value and progress, and the international as home to anarchy, self interest, and an eternal return of violence. But *pace* this realist model, it would now be truer to say that the international arena is a field of

regulation, governance and cooperation between trans-national elites and institutions; while the domestic arena, especially within fragile post-colonial states, has become the major site and arena of violent conflict.

Such an 'inverted realist' picture of global politics needs qualifying in at least two regards, however. First, it is clearly not the case that political conflict between states has dissolved and disappeared – not only because political differences continuously arise over an array of issues (from national security to economic and environmental security); but more important in the present context, because conflicts are increasingly practised and pursued through institutional and regulatory mechanisms (whether UN organisations or law courts, or indeed bilateral and regional treaties which are as much forums for conflict as they are for cooperation). Second, we should not imagine that the trans-nationalisation of political authority affects and constrains all states and societies equally. To the contrary, the institutions and networks of today's 'global governance' are centred firmly in north America and western Europe; and their advice and commands are directed above all to the post-colonial global South. To this extent, the contemporary global order is not so much a realist or even an inverted realist one, but an imperial order characterised by strong continuities with classical nineteenth century imperialism (see especially Barkawi and Laffey 2002). The nineteenth century British empire, as Gallagher and Robinson famously observed, consisted not only of 'those colonies coloured red on the map', but also of an 'informal empire' of formally independent territories which were however subject to British paramountcy – a reality that is nicely captured by Canning's statement of 1824 that 'Spanish America is free and if we do not mismanage our affairs sadly, she is English' (Gallagher and Robinson 1970: 142, 152-3). In the nineteenth century, imperial power extended far beyond the formal political sphere, and often expanded in tandem with (the myths of) state sovereignty and political independence. And in the early twenty-first century, exactly the same holds true.

4. The Three Levels of Hydro-Hegemony

With these broad political contexts in mind, we can now return to the immediate subject of hydro-hegemony. In their framework paper, Zeitoun and Warner mirror Harold Lasswell's famous definition of politics (Lasswell 1958), describing their interest as being with 'the perennial and deeply political question' of 'who gets how much water, how and why?' (2006: 435). When it comes to operationalising this interest, however, Zeitoun and Warner concentrate entirely on one dimension of hydro-hegemonic politics – that which takes place between states. Yet in light of the above, I would argue that hydro-hegemony needs to be analysed at not just one but at three levels – international, national, and trans-national. The remainder of this paper considers these levels in turn, in each case seeking to complement but also go beyond current hydro-hegemony theory.

At the level of the international, states engage in various degrees and tactics of conflict, competition and cooperation over water, especially over trans-boundary water resources.

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