



Arrighi's pendulum: (Re)reading *The Evolution of International Society* in the twenty-first century

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Abstract

In re-reading Watson's *The Evolution of International Society* through the work of Giovanni Arrighi, this article makes two contributions to the English School (ES). Firstly, I offer a more grounded analysis of Watson's 'succession of hegemonies' from the seventeenth century onwards. Secondly, and relatedly, through closer attention to the dynamics of *capitalist* international society, we are better able to apprehend the current contradictions and challenges facing contemporary international society. Rather than replace Watson with Arrighi, I argue that Arrighi's framework of 'systemic cycles of accumulation' complements and extends the insights offered in Watson's magnum opus. It is hoped that this dialogue between the ES and critical political economy may open the way for further ES research on the (dis)orderly dynamics of capitalist international society.

Keywords Adam Watson · English School · International Society · Hegemony · Capitalism · China

Introduction

Adam Watson's *The Evolution of International Society* (1992) has become a principal example of the English School's (ES) historical and sociological sensibilities. Sweeping across 10,000 years of history, Watson's expansive account of the evolution of diverse international societies has provided a constant source of insight for generations of English School scholars attempting to sift through the sands of history for new discoveries. While Watson's tome may be read (and often is) as merely a window into the past, it also wrestles with the as yet unknown future of 'modern' international society.¹ There are, of course, things we know now that Watson could

¹ Throughout this article, the word 'modern' is used with some frequency, in order to denote the emergence of the Euro-Atlantic international society that eventually encompassed/conquered the entire world from the sixteenth century onwards. Henceforth, I will refrain from putting this word in scare quotes,

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not have foreseen in 1992, when *EIS* was first published. But I would argue that Watson's equivocations are largely due to his reluctance to engage with the *international political economy* of both early modern international society and the post-cold war era itself.

ES scholars are not known for their engagement with political economy, as Barry Buzan periodically laments (Buzan 2004, 2014). Yet Watson was acutely aware that during the post-WWII era the most striking innovations in international society came from the economic sphere. Despite the fact that the post-cold war era was overdetermined by US primacy, international society was increasingly organised by an 'institutionalized directorate' among the great powers, particularly with regard to the G7, the IMF and other IFIs (Watson 1992: 304). Watson observed just how intensely the Global South was chasing export markets, and, more generally, he gestured towards the deepening of 'interests and pressures' emanating from the growing intensity of economic interdependence (ibid: 321). Most suggestively, Watson posited a trend towards world government, one reinforced by an expanding roster of values and challenges, including 'human rights, egalitarian economic justice and protection of the environment', principles which, in Watson's view, were becoming just as important as peace and security (ibid: 320).

In order to make sense of these trends, and the current conjuncture of international society, the article critically engages with Watson's theory of hegemony, and the ways in which his 'pendulum' of world history takes on an historically specific pattern with the emergence of Euro-Atlantic international society from the sixteenth century onwards. Firstly, I offer a close examination of Watson's notion of hegemony, the ways in which it is deployed in his depiction of Euro-Atlantic international society and the conceptual contradictions that arise from it. The antinomies of Watson's 'succession of hegemonies' centres on the constant mismatch between *principle* and *practice*, or, the principle of independence and the practice of geopolitical hierarchy.²

As a possible solution to this conceptual tension, I then introduce Giovanni Arrighi's Gramscian approach to hegemony, as a form of power whose legitimacy is derived from the material conditions of possibility that allow a specific state to project its interest as the interest of all. In grounding the concept of hegemony within a more historicised account of material conditions of production and the international practices and institutions adequate to them, Arrighi offers a quite different set of hegemonic actors across Euro-Atlantic international society, actors which are equally present, though more muted, in Watson's account.

One of the virtues of Arrighi's approach is the identification of specific mechanisms giving rise to hegemonic transition, namely, the emergence of systemic crisis. Remarkably, Watson mentions the word 'crisis' only once, in relation to the first

Footnote 1 (continued)

though I hope the reader understands that such quotes are always implied when employing this contentious term.

² Watson borrows the term 'succession of hegemonies' from Martin Wight's description of the early modern European state system (Watson 1992: 3).



Gulf War. But as Aliber and Kindleberger (2015) note, financial crises have been a 'hardy perennial' in the history of the modern world. Thus, Arrighi's theory of 'systemic cycles of accumulation' reveals a whole series of cyclical yet evolutionary patterns of crisis formation across the succession of hegemonies that take on a remarkably pendular form. While Watson was adamant that his pendular metaphor does not take on any regularity across the evolution of international societies, the pattern of modern international society constitutes a strange exception, marked by: (1) the growth in size and scope of each new hegemonic state; (2) the consecutive internalisation of specific 'costs'; (3) a decreasing periodicity between each hegemonic cycle or pendular swing; and (4) an increased amplitude (*A*) of each swing of the pendulum. As I show through a critical re-reading of Watson, the current impasse of international society stems from a bottleneck in the hegemonic transition between the US and China, marked principally by the inability of one or several states to internalise 'reproduction costs', or, in Watson's words, the values of egalitarian economic justice and protection of the environment.

The final section picks up where Watson left off, with a critical analysis of the (re)ascent of China as a great power. In line with Arrighi's account of reproduction costs (as the internationalisation of reproducing the preconditions of capital accumulation—labour and nature), the principal challenges facing the Chinese state lie in the raising of purchasing power and domestic consumption for its own people, as well as the transition towards a more sustainable mode of economic development. While China has made some remarkable strides in this direction, the specific strategies of accumulation underwriting China's spectacular growth have ultimately failed to internalise reproduction costs, let alone present a hegemonic project for the rest of international society to follow. However, as I further argue, this relative failure to internalise reproduction costs is not indicative of a failure of hegemonic leadership, but symptomatic of an historically unprecedented conjecture in the long history of modern international society. As Watson himself understood, the intensity of economic interdependence, the crisis-ridden and increasingly delegitimised nature of globalisation and the tendency (however vaguely defined by Watson) towards a type of collective hegemony, all points towards the end of a singular hegemonic power leading the system of states in a specific direction. Put differently, the global crisis of labour and ecology requires not just a global solution, but an end to *capitalist* international society itself.

The antinomies of hegemony in *The Evolution of International Society*

Despite the fact that the *EIS* was shaped by a granular historical sociology that did not seek regularities, patterns, or models, there was, in fact, a virtual constant that ran through its entire scope:

'The gravitational pull towards hegemony, and the ubiquity of some hegemonial authority in societies of independent or quasi-independent states, stands



out so clearly from the evidence that the question arises why studies of states systems and political theory underestimate or even ignore it' (1992: 314).³

As it turns out, the concept of hegemony has hardly been ignored among the IR discipline and, since the first publication of *EIS*, has enjoyed a new lease of life (see Antoniadou 2018). Nevertheless, in Watson's view, the concept and indeed the *practice* of hegemony were so central to the evolution of international societies as to constitute a conceptual elephant in the room of world history. For Watson, hegemony is marked by the ability of the hegemonic power to 'lay down the law' (1992: 15) and to essentially govern the external relations between units in the system. Yet Watson never quite drills down into what it takes to lay down the law or, at the very least, which mechanisms, resources and institutions amount to a hegemonic power. Suggestively, Watson poses two questions early in the book: 'To what extent do such [hegemonic] policies depend for their success on a wide measure of acceptance?... Is legitimate authority as necessary for the successful exercise of hegemony or dominion?' (ibid: 17).

Yet it is between the principles of legitimacy and the practice of hegemony that Watson runs into murky waters when tracing the contours of early modern European international society. He suggests that the 'premises' of the Westphalian settlement were 'anti-hegemonial'—in that states accepted the legitimacy of independence and self-determination—yet the *practice* of this system was grounded in Bourbon-Habsburg hegemony as 'an integral and constituent feature' of the Westphalian order (ibid: 196). This mismatch led to a *de facto* hegemony—one whose outline was perceptible but too weak to be durable on a regular and accepted basis (ibid: 253). Watson then marks out Louis XIV as the hegemonic power of the seventeenth century. But this was not a *pax Gallica*, due to the incompatibility between Europe's adherence to the Westphalian principle of sovereign independence and Louis' desire to become the figure 'before whom every other ruler in Europe should bow' (ibid: 190). Indeed, the reign of Louis XIV was overshadowed by the Dutch and English, as 'centres of scientific, technical, banking, industrial and maritime skills so innovative and so mutually reinforcing as to represent something quite new in the world', and thus 'acted as the leaven for much of Europe' (ibid: 192, 229).

Napoleon's unsuccessful bid for dominion transformed into the nineteenth-century 'collective hegemony' of the Concert of Europe, between the five great powers of the continent, which 'combined the advantages of hegemony and the balance of power' (ibid: 250). Yet this was a system that derived its stability from the principle of dynastic rule over the popular classes (and other states), thus putting the practice of the Concert of Europe 'somewhat nearer the imperial end of our spectrum than hegemony as we have defined it' (ibid: 240). Nevertheless, it was Britain who 'emerged from the war [in 1815] industrially and financially strengthened; and its increased power and wealth could be enlisted to oppose the domination of Europe by any single power' (ibid: 238).

³ As the reader may notice, there is some inconsistency in nomenclature throughout this article. While Watson uses the word 'hegemonial', I prefer to use the more common term 'hegemonic'.



Finally, the founding of the League of Nations was based on 'anti-hegemonial legitimacy', yet this principle could only 'function effectively' if it was grounded in the practice of 'collective hegemonial authority' among the victors. However, with respect to the twin goals of 'producing a workable settlement for Europe and a blueprint for rules and institutions for...world society', the League was 'so defective, and so much less courageous with the realities of the situation, that it failed to achieve either aim' (ibid: 282). Thus, the principle of anti-hegemonic independence is as ubiquitous as hegemony itself. Paradoxically, Watson's succession of hegemonies appears to be anti-hegemonic in principle and hegemonic in practice.

This antinomy mirrors the very problem identified by Ian Clark in his reading of the English School's succession of hegemonies. As Clark put it, within the ES approach to hegemony, as first outlined by Martin Wight, it seems that 'we can have either international society or hegemony, but not both' (Clark 2011: 15). While Watson seemingly carries over the vagaries of Wight's approach, his equivocations should not lead us to reject his project entirely, given the inherent complexity and relative indeterminacy of historically specific international societies. But his agnosticism towards the concept of hegemony leads us into a series of seemingly unresolvable problems. Indeed, this tension between principle and practice was one that haunted Watson for much of his career. A few years after the publication of *EIS*, Watson (1998) brought this tension front and centre, noting how ES theory—premised on the concepts of orderly norms, rules and institutions—tended to be constantly 'outrun' by disorderly historical practice. And yet, it is within this tension that a possible solution may be found to Watson's agnosticism: 'In all international societies practice feels obliged to innovate, to deal with new circumstances, but the more the practice appears to conform to the accepted legitimacies, the less unease and resentment there will be' (Watson 1998: 145). In the next section, I suggest that Watson's somewhat confusing picture of hegemony can be brought into tighter focus through his suggestive yet underdeveloped notion of how ideas and material conditions (principle and practice) fuse and fissure through socially and historically determinate processes.

Arrighi's pendulum: re-reading Watson's 'succession of hegemonies'

One way of disentangling Watson's principle/practice dualism is through his famous 'pendulum' metaphor. Undergirding the *EIS* is the idea that across the history of international societies there remains a transhistorical pendular mechanism, ranging (in 'ideal-typical' terms) from 'empire' to '[a] system of absolutely independent states' (see Fig. 3). The closer the system comes to each limit point (x_1 , x_{-1}), 'the greater... the gravitational pull towards the centre' (Watson 1992: 122). This 'gravitational pull' (G) is conceptualised as 'constraints exercised by the impersonal net of interests and pressures'; however, there is 'no regularity in time or rhythm of the swing' (ibid). For Watson, 'interests and pressures' are conceived as (respectively) the polity's desire to maintain its independence and the forces of interconnection binding the whole of humanity together.



Watson's pendulum thus helps to clarify his principle/practice duality in two ways. Firstly, the inter-play between interests (independence) and pressures (interdependence) points towards the dialectical relation between, on the one hand, the conscious self-reflection of historically situated actors that adhere, in the first instance, to the discrete *community* (e.g. tribe, city, nation, etc.), and, on the other, the material contexts that facilitate interaction not just within communities, but between them (cf. Buzan and Little 2000; Deudney 2000; van der Pijl 2007; Rosenberg 2010). Secondly, the contradiction of this dynamic, between fragmentation and unity, furnishes the generative grammar of order and disorder, or rather, the strange combination of anti-hegemonic legitimacy and hegemonic practice. Nevertheless, we are still left with a rather indeterminate metaphor that is as revealing as it is limited. If, however, we re-read Watson's pendulum through the lens of Giovanni Arrighi's world systems framework, the inter-play between interests and pressures across Europe's *longue durée* becomes more intelligible.

In a similar vein to Watson's notion of stable hegemony underpinned by legitimacy, Arrighi begins from the Gramscian notion of hegemony as the combination of *coercion plus consensus*, grounded in the last instance in the hegemon's ability to project its interest as the universal interest. However, Arrighi radically departs from Watson (and indeed, ES theory as a whole) in his incorporation of Marxian political economy into an explanation of the succession of hegemonies. Arrighi proposes two distinct 'modes of rule' ('capitalism'/'territorialism') in understanding how capital and the state inter-relate (Arrighi 1994: 33). The respective formulas for each 'mode' of power, 'Money' and 'Territory' (M-T-M'/T-M-T'), display an overlapping character ([M-{T-M]-T}) of those necessary elements (*social* and *spatial*) involved in both economic and geopolitical competition (ibid: 33). The principal social norm that emerged within early modern Europe, and perfected through the system of Italian city states during the sixteenth century, was that of *high finance*, which acted (as opposed to territorial control) as the principle *goal* of statecraft. While the combination of money and territory was certainly not new to human communities, the emergence of the capitalist-state system was driven by an altogether different dynamic, 'the recurrent contradiction between an "endless" accumulation of capital and a comparatively stable organization of political space' (ibid: 34).

Drawing on Marx's theory of capital accumulation, the endless accumulation of capital and its movement through the circuit M-C-M' (Money-Commodities-Money^{+profit}) eventually leads to a crisis of overaccumulation within the hegemonic state (as the systemic centre of the capitalist world economy), in which an excess of capital is reached 'over and above the level of investment that would prevent the rate of profit from falling' (ibid: 233). At this point, inter-capitalist competition moves from a positive-sum to a zero-sum game, in which 'the losses of one organization are the condition of the profits of another' (ibid). Yet the crisis of overaccumulation in production and trade metamorphosises into a financial expansion, from M-C-M' to M-M'. At this point, the leading capitalist state switches its accumulation strategy towards the one activity in which it remains competitive—the absorption, intermediation and dissemination of the world's mobile capital through its own financial networks. Nevertheless, the endless accumulation of finance capital eventually undergoes its own crisis, as the expansion of material accumulation (as opposed to



Leading governmental organization	Regime type/cycle		Costs internalized			
	Extensive	Intensive	Protection	Production	Transaction	Reproduction
World-state						
		US	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
	British		Yes	Yes	No	No
Nation-state		Dutch				
		Genoese	Yes	No	No	No
			No	No	No	No
City-state						

Fig. 1 Evolutionary Patterns of World Capitalism Source: Arrighi and Silver 2001: 265

financial accumulation) moves into new territorial centres of power that eventually challenges the previous hegemon.

This, briefly put, constitutes the mechanics to Arrighi's theory of 'systemic cycles of accumulation', understood as the political, economic and territorial determinations underpinning the succession of Euro-Atlantic hegemonies. While each cycle is characterised by an A-phase of productive/trade expansion ending in a 'signal crisis', and a B-phase of financial expansion ending in a 'terminal crisis', each hegemonic transition is marked by the growth in size and scope of each new hegemonic state; the consecutive internalisation of specific 'costs' (Fig. 1); an increased amplitude (A) of each swing of the pendulum (Fig. 2); and a decreasing periodicity between each hegemonic cycle or pendular swing (Fig. 3).

However, like Watson, Arrighi contains his own antinomies with respect to exactly how hegemony should be read across the evolution of European international society, and whether each succession can be truly dubbed 'hegemonic'. If we take Arrighi's Gramscian definition seriously, as one based upon not just coercive power, but the ability to project 'intellectual and moral leadership' as well as a 'unison of economic and political aims... posing all the questions around which the struggle rages not on a corporate but on a "universal" plane' (Gramsci 1971: 57–8, 181–2), then it is difficult to square the 'Genoese-Iberian complex' (the first systemic cycle) with the 'leadership' component. The Hapsburg project was hardly on a "universal" plane', fighting for mastery in a wildly anarchic system (Kennedy 1988: 39–45; Teschke 2003: 228–9) And while Holland's capitalist development (the second cycle) provided the select advantage in financing its survival, [g]eopolitically, the system of states established at Westphalia under Dutch leadership was truly anarchic—characterised, that is, by the absence of central rule' (Arrighi 2007: 241).



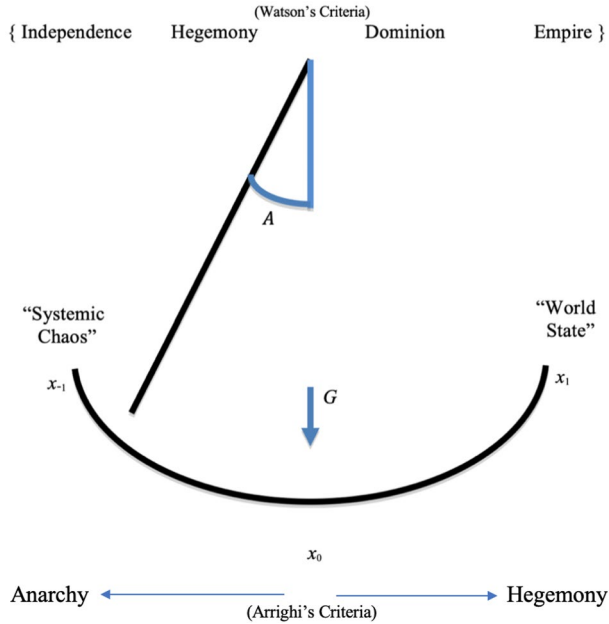


Fig. 2 Arrighi's World-Systemic Pendulum Source: Author's elaboration

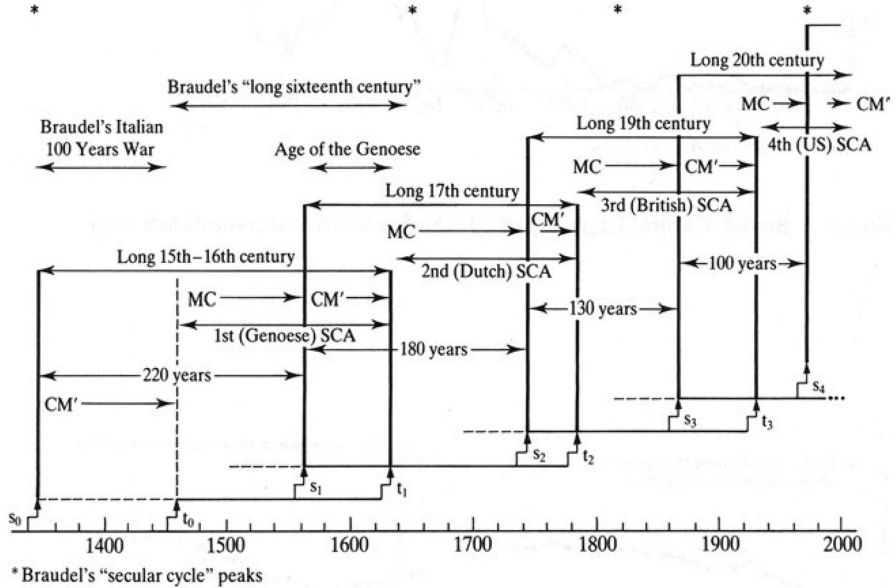


Fig. 3 Long Centuries and Systemic Cycles of Accumulation Source: Arrighi 2006: 220



In this sense, I concur with Callinicos (2009: 142) that it is less accurate to say that Genoa and Holland were truly hegemonic in the strict sense, while Britain and the US (the third and fourth systemic cycles) were a much closer fit to this definition. While this may give the impression of an inherently flawed framework, Arrighi's succession of hegemonies is best understood not as a strict interpretation of an invariant hegemony across markedly different social formations, but rather through the 'cyclical element of the theory [of systemic cycles]... partly compensated for by the attention to historical specificity' (Callinicos 2009: 143). In this sense, Arrighi finds close proximity to Watson's evolutionary tale, with the use of an implicit pendular model yet one that exhibits a curiously cyclical pattern. This pattern is thus more akin to the *cumulative* effects of international society.⁴

A key component in this evolutionary tale, and one that is central to deciphering the current impasse of contemporary international society, is the consecutive internalisation of 'costs' across the succession of hegemonies (Fig. 1). With the rise of Dutch power in the seventeenth century, the Stadtholders of the United Provinces were able to achieve what the Genoese banking network never could—the internalisation of 'protection costs', as seen with the formidable fusion of commercial and military power in the VOC (Blachford 2020). The ascent of Britain in the eighteenth century, meanwhile, was able to more fully internalise 'production costs' compared to the Dutch. While the relative industrialisation and development of capitalist agriculture in the United Provinces should not be overlooked (Barbour 1963: 60; Callinicos 2009: 128–31; Brandon 2015), there remains a qualitative difference between the forms and institutional contexts of capitalist production between the Dutch and English.⁵ The emergence of US power at the turn of the twentieth century, finally, saw the internalisation of 'transaction costs', insofar as the rise of the vertically integrated corporation was able to offset the costly business of organising production and trade across institutionally separated entities (Arrighi 2007: 181, 247).

⁴ This evolutionary approach actually comes far closer to the very sensibilities exhibited by some of Arrighi's fiercest critics. Thus, as Hannes Lacher noted, 'Capitalism... is never capitalist in all its aspects' (Lacher 2006: 42), while Benno Teschke observed that 'There was no "structural rupture" that divided pre-modern from modern international relations... International relations in the long period of transformation were thus not modern, but *modernizing*' (Teschke 2003: 250, emphasis in original). Analogously, capitalist hegemony is never hegemonic in all its aspects, while the evolution of European international society was not marked by a perceptible break between non-hegemonic (Genoa, Holland, Britain) and hegemonic powers (US), as some Marxian scholars claim (Lacher and Germann 2012).

⁵ Firstly, the majority of capitalist enterprises in the Provinces were small scale, producing for local markets (Brandon 2015: 30–1; cf. Duplessis 2019: 23), whereas the British strategy of accumulation created a gravitational centre to the world's raw materials that formed a 'workshop of the world' and oriented to the world market (Arrighi 2006: 164–5; see also Zmolek 2013). Secondly, and more importantly, the position of capital within the social division of labour marked the crucial difference. Rather than the mere scale of industry, it was the lingering traditions of craft production (even in the largest industrial ship-building centres) that held back dynamic accumulation in the Provinces (Brandon 2015: 202; cf. Zacaarés 2019: 144). In Britain, by contrast, the *real subsumption* of labour to capital, thereby stripping workers of their specialist craft knowledge, led to a fully commodified labour market, and a production process governed by the interests of capital (Zmolek 2019: 68). It was this difference, Zmolek notes, that helps contextualise Jan de Vries observation that England maintained an 'uncanny ability to establish a position in an industry enjoying dynamically growing demand' (cited in Zmolek 2019: 66).



Thus, the synthesis of Arrighi's systemic cycles with Watson's pendulum furnishes a visual heuristic to the succession of Euro-Atlantic hegemonies that were more than simply passing the baton of world leadership. The world-systemic pendulum maps the evolutionary nature of capitalist international society, mediated by the historically and geographically specific configurations of material power, institutional construction and social conflict (Fig. 2). From this schema, the dynamics of *redistribution* and *concentration* act in a cyclical (and reciprocal) manner across international society's pendular mechanics. The redistribution of material benefits and normative justice forms the bedrock of a new hegemonic order, all of which is conditioned by the sufficient concentration of power within a single political territory capable of providing system-level benefits to states and peoples (Karataşlı 2023). Yet redistribution also takes place through the dissemination of material/technological capabilities across the system's units, which feeds into the inevitable tendencies towards capitalist crisis (in the form of falling profit rates), and the propensity towards geopolitical conflict. Thus, as the pendular swing comes closer and closer to the empire end of the spectrum—towards the asymptote of 'world state'—the greater the restoring force (G) of capitalist competition and geopolitical conflict, and the more destructive and intense the restoration back to the other side.

Not only does the scale and scope of hegemony increase with each cycle, the cumulative effect of this increasing intensity leads to a curious 'speeding up of world history' (Silver and Payne 2021) (Fig. 3). As a consequence of the sequential inter-nalised costs, each hegemonic *iteration* (rather than hegemon per se), grows comparatively in territorial size. And as with a rotating body whose mass steadily increases, so too does its rate of rotation. In this way, while the size and complexity of the leading state bestows an ever-closer fit to the ideal-typical concept of capitalist hegemon, it is precisely this *expansion* in capitalist-state power that generates a *contraction* in the iterative hegemonic cycle (Arrighi 2007: 217; cf. Doran 2003: 16; Meadwell 2001: 166). Concomitantly, the growing power, size, and capability of the leading capitalist state produce a tendency to 'world polity' (Arrighi 2007: ch. 9), while the spread of the forces of production and forces of destruction exerts a continual centrifugal force on the state-system's units (tendency to 'systemic chaos') (Ashman 2008; Callinicos 2009: 218–26; Davidson 2009: 29ff.).

From this re-reading of the Euro-Atlantic 'succession of hegemonies', I hope to have brought some clarity as to why the gravitational pull towards hegemony is so prevalent across the evolution of modern international society. Using Arrighi as an interlocutor, Watson's 'impersonal net of interests and pressures' takes on a more grounded, material dimension with respect to the *specificity* of hegemonic succession. This reading gives far more scope to Watson's admission that the Italian invention of the sovereign *stato* ushered in not merely the modern dynamic of balance of power and secular statecraft (*ragione di stato*), but the notion of 'humanism' as the epistemic centre of international society (Watson 1992: ch. 14). While mediaeval Europe was steeped in a more organic worldview that was equally shared among lords and peasants, 'The Renaissance created a new educated class with different values from the rest of the people. But it produced within this elite class a new unity of culture, of purposes and of techniques' (ibid: 154; cf. Arrighi 2007: 97ff.). These techniques were eventually perfected by the Dutch and English, acting as the



'leaven' for the rest of Europe, and later adopted by the US (ibid: 192). Thus, reading between the lines of Watson's succession of hegemonies lies Arrighi's model of systemic cycles of accumulation.

Without discounting the roles played by the Spanish or French in the evolution of modern international society, I suggest that the relatively constant mismatch between legitimacy and practice was in large part due to the contradictions between the mediaeval practice of hierarchy and fealty, and the modern(ising) principles of humanism and secular statecraft (Rosenberg 1994). From this angle, it becomes clear how and why the emergence of bourgeois Europe took on such an evolutionary form, given the long, drawn-out process of developing new institutions, new practices and new modes of power to which the principle of independence (at both an individual and state level) could be grafted (cf. Burch 1998), or to put it in Watson's words, for practice to conform to accepted legitimacies. As Gramsci noted, 'Hegemony within the realm of civil society is grasped when the citizenry come to believe that authority over their lives emanates from the self' (cited in Bieler and Morton 2018: 69; cf. O'Flynn 2009). This does not mean that the freedom experienced by individuals in society (or states in international society) is mere illusion, nor that they have no agency or independence of thought and action; indeed, it is precisely because *they do* that hegemony is always grounded on a precarious and contested foundation. Yet the *interests* of individuals and states within *modern* (international) society are nevertheless overdetermined by an 'impersonal' structure of commodity relations, an ontological foundation that is ever-more subsumed under the aegis of each successively 'hegemonic' state. Put simply, the 'successful exercise' (Watson 1992: 17) of capitalist hegemony is determined by the degree to which actors' independence is a function of the leading state's primacy.

It was precisely this condition that crystallised under US hegemony in the post-war period. In seeking to 'law down the law' for the system, 'Americans considered the rules of the new world order which they favoured and which favoured them—democracy, rule of law, decolonization and an open door for American business—to be just and universally valid' (ibid: 291). Of course, as with all hegemonic iterations, US power was also marked by forms of coercion, with Cold War conflagrations in Southeast Asia as perhaps the most striking example (McMahon 1999). Yet even with the struggles for decolonisation leading to a 'swing of the pendulum towards the multiple independencies end of the spectrum', post-colonial states soon came to realise that 'economic and administrative, as opposed to political, independence was impracticable. They therefore quickly came to consider what international arrangements would mitigate the poverty and loneliness of too absolute an independence' (ibid: 297; cf. Prashad 2007).

Thus, the US 'empire of capital', mediated by global governance institutions, maintained the political independence of states while ordering their economic development through vertically integrated transnational firms (Wood 2005: 132ff.; see also Panitch and Gindin 2012). As a result of this global socio-economic compact, '[t]he much looser strategic hegemony of the United States permitted other states greater freedom of action' (Watson 1992: 293). Indeed, this strategy worked so well that the US-sponsored recovery of West German and Japanese capitalism led to intense competition, leading ultimately to the 'signal crisis' of *Pax Americana*,



and the beginning of the end of the system's 'considerable stability' (Watson 1992: 297; cf. Arrighi 2007: 307). In order to overcome falling rates of profit, transnational firms increasingly looked abroad as a means of solving the crisis of labour (low-wage work) back home. As we will see in the final sections, the principal solution to the US signal crisis was found in its financial power as a means of expanding credit creation yet without incurring inflationary effects, primarily through high interest rates that drew in the world's mobile capital into its own financial networks (Konings 2009: 90–3). Yet this new strategy of financialisation was only made possible by the decisive geographical shift in production and trade. Only by tapping the seemingly endless supply of cheap labour in the Global South (particularly China) could states and firms maintain Western consumption on the cheap.

After US hegemony? China and international society in the twenty-first century

For two decades or so, IR scholars have spilled gallons of ink on the implications of China's (re)emergence, and whether this spells an oncoming power transition. The English School has been no stranger to this conversation. Yet much of this discussion oscillates between whether China will be a revisionist or status quo power (e.g. Buzan 2010, 2018; Zhang 2016; Goh 2019). While the question of whether China will accommodate itself to the Liberal International Order or radically re-construct it remains important, the real question remains: *what can China actually achieve within the constraints left behind by US hegemony and its crisis?* This alternative question derives from Arrighi's evolutionary model of capitalist international society, in which the organisational innovations of the emergent hegemon are in many ways a function of what the previous hegemon was unable to achieve. Indeed, the unanswered questions left behind by a declining US hegemon were precisely those that Watson attempted to grasp at the end of *EIS*, namely, the increasingly salient norms of 'human rights, egalitarian economic justice and protection of the environment' (Watson 1992: 320). As with the re-reading of Watson's succession of hegemonies above, Arrighi offers a series of insights that may help to fill in the gaps left behind by Watson on the potential pathways for international society in the twenty-first century.

With the publication of *The Long Twentieth Century* in 1994, Arrighi noted a shift in the world's geo-economic centre of gravity away from the West and towards the East (Arrighi 2006: 343ff.). In identifying the economic expansion of East Asia, Arrighi and Silver suggested that the next hegemon 'must be willing and able to rise up to the task of providing system-level solutions to the system-level problems left behind by US hegemony' (2001: 279). One such problem was 'the underlying contradiction of a world capitalist system that promotes the formation of a world proletariat but cannot accommodate a generalized living wage (that is, the most basic reproduction costs)' (ibid: 276–7). Later, in *Adam Smith in Beijing* (2007), Arrighi gestured towards the ecological contradictions left behind by US hegemony—that not even 'a small minority of the Chinese population' can achieve US living standards without fundamentally unravelling the earth's ecological balance (Arrighi 2007: 387). Having achieved the fastest sustained growth rate of any state in history,



the systemic challenge facing the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) centres on internalising 'reproduction costs' (Arrighi and Silver 2001), thereby overcoming capitalism's tendency to 'undermin[e] the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the worker' (Marx 1982: 638). The remainder of the article aims to bring more clarity to Watson's speculation concerning the limits and prospects for achieving a new set of norms for international society in the twenty-first century. In order to trace the contours of China's capacity to internalise 'reproduction costs', this section will track the specific policies and practices associated with labour markets and environmental protection, respectively.

Twenty-first century international society and the centrality of 'reproduction costs'

As the International Labor Organization recently noted, the bulk of the world's workers are increasingly found in East Asia, with an anticipated shift towards South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa in the near future (ILO 2018). This shift in labour share has accompanied the parallel transformation in world GDP, with the Global North registering just 17% of global growth in the 2000s, while Asia's share rose to 62% (China alone counts for 38%) (Dunn 2014: 108). Thus, within this general swing in the distribution of global growth, China stands out as the epicentre of this epochal change. In absolute terms, China has led the way in wage growth since 1990 (ILO 2008). However, these data need to be contextualised in a more relative measure, insofar as China's wage growth began from an historically low level. By 2007, China's impressive growth in wage levels had only just caught up to those seen in the Philippines and Thailand, still lagging behind Malaysia, and registering only a fraction of the wage levels seen in Japan, Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan (Yang et al. 2010). Indeed, it is precisely through the suppression of wages and consumption that China has been able to affect such spectacular growth in GDP. Already by 1993, the state actively sought to undermine the Township Village Enterprises that had offered a modicum of stability for China's transition in the 1980s, in a conscious strategy to expand labour supplies to coastal manufacturing firms (Ho-Fung 2016: 59ff.). Yet the lot of Chinese workers hardly improved—labour share of income declined relative to GDP, while household and government consumption remained stagnant (Li 2008). Thus, the secret of China's huge domestic savings, levels of domestic investment and near-double-digit GDP growth lie in the super-exploitation of its seemingly unlimited supply of labour.

Since 1980, some 270 million people have moved from the countryside to the cities in search of work (Selwyn 2018: 16). Labour migration in China has been traditionally regulated by the *Hukou* system, forming a wedge between urban citizens who enjoy a series of rights and benefits, and rural migrants excluded from the conditions of social reproduction. In the absence of social supports, migrant workers barely make enough to cover their own reproduction, forcing them to leave behind their families on the farm (as a de facto safety net). This disciplinary migration regime, in which Chinese workers in domestic private firms are routinely paid 30% below the living wage, is mediated by extreme corporeal and disciplinary control by



management layers (Li 2016a: 28). The contradictions arising from China's capitalist transformation have thus led to an exponential growth in labour disputes (Chen 2003; Lee 2007; Smith and Pun 2018). While the Hu-Wen regime (2002–2013) emphasised a 'harmonious' society based on increased social protections for workers, Xi Jinping took a sharp u-turn by cracking down on labour unrest in the hope of overcoming the economic slowdown of 2012 (Chan 2020; Chen and Gallagher 2018).

To what extent, then, can China's development model, particularly its approach to labour, act as a leaven for international society? Unlike the US 'Fordist' hegemonic project, which largely relied on promoting the practice and ideology of industrialisation (Rupert 1990; Ekbladh 2010), the basis for China's rapid economic growth offers neither normative appeal, nor even a practical possibility, to the Global South. Not only does China's 'state-endorsed exploitation' model form a precarious basis of global legitimacy (Siu 2020), the virtually unlimited flow of workers into export zones is essentially non-transferable (Breslin 2009: 827). Of course, this does not mean that China remains entirely illegitimate in the eyes of the Global South. On the contrary, Ian Clark notes the more distinctive elements of China's foreign policy, particularly 'hyper-sovereignty values' and statist forms of development diplomacy (Clark 2011: 26). These values derive from China's 'harmonious world' framework, which emphasises 'people-based' governance and inclusive development (Lynch 2009; Yaquing 2010; Mulvad 2019: 457). Yet behind the touted 'Beijing Consensus' lies a series of socio-economic crises afflicting China's domestic development. Having recorded a high rate of profit oscillating around 25% from 1990 to 2010, China eventually entered into a falling rate of profit by 2007 and hitting 16.2% by 2014 (Li 2016b: 168). With an overaccumulation of capital at home, China is increasingly looking abroad for better investment opportunities. Africa remains one of the principle destinations for Chinese FDI, constituting a 'spatial fix' for over-investment in cement, steel and other capital-intensive sectors (Ho-Fung 2016: 155; Carmody et al. 2022).

Nevertheless, Chinese FDI has failed to offer pathways for any type of labour-centred development for recipient countries. Chinese FDI not only exports capital investment to African states, but also its own distinct development practices embedded in super-exploitative, low-wage labour regimes.⁶ There is, therefore, a relative split between Xi Jinping's hegemonic discourse of the 'China dream'—based on the expansion of public goods, education, employment, higher incomes and environmental quality—and the realities of China's capitalist development based on the suppression of working class consumption, domestic over-investment and FDI as a safety valve for economic imbalances (cf. Xiaoming 2015: 227; Li 2016a).

Coupled with the relative inability to sufficiently reproduce labour, China's accumulation regime is also placing enormous strains on the ecological base. While Xi Jinping has frequently cited the necessity to ensure 'balanced growth' as a means of satisfying the popular aspirations of its people, the CCP has also sought to carve out

⁶ Though it should be noted that super-exploitation and other abuses of labour are also endemic to domestic labour regimes, rather than simply a result of Chinese FDI (see Ofosu and Sarpong 2021).



a new hegemonic vision of 'ecological civilisation'. During the Paris Agreement in 2016, Xi used this civilisational narrative to frame China as 'a responsible developing country and an active player in global climate governance...[seeking] innovative, coordinated, green, open and shared growth' (cited in Geall and Ely 2018: 1179). Xi's words strongly resonate with broader discussions within the English School on the intersections between 'great power responsibility' and 'environmental stewardship' (Kopra 2019; Falkner and Buzan 2019). While previously China had placed much more emphasis on the UNFCCC's norm of 'Common but Differentiated Responsibilities', in which developed states with the largest cumulative share in carbon emissions shoulder the greatest responsibilities (Rocha et al. 2015), the CCP's approach to environmental stewardship took an about-turn since the landmark 2009 Copenhagen UN Climate Conference. Despite its resistance to any substantially binding agreement at Copenhagen, China has subsequently internalised the norm of great power responsibility in its approach to climate change governance (Zhang 2016: 184). As Sanna Kopra observes, given China's runaway consumption of raw materials and rapidly growing emissions, 'the Chinese government has had no choice but to integrate environmental protection, emissions reduction and energy conservation into the country's overall development targets' (Kopra 2019: 159).⁷

Since its official inception in 2007, the CCP's hegemonic project of 'ecological civilisation' has attempted to reconcile the priority of economic development with the necessity of internalising both labour and ecological reproduction costs. In the 12th Five-Year Plan (2011–2015), the CCP identified the twin goals of ensuring more balance growth with greater social inclusion and equity, as well as resource conservation and environmental sustainability (Marinelli 2018: 370). The intellectual development of the concept of ecological civilisation has tended to counterpose the anthropocentrism of Western development models with older Chinese philosophical traditions emphasising 'ecocentric' conceptions of harmony and balance between humans and nature. Thus, one could say that China is establishing its own standard of (ecological) civilisation, as 'an expression of the assumptions, tacit and explicit, used to distinguish those that belong to a particular society from those that do not' (Gong 1984: 3). In one sense, China may feel justified in demarcating itself from the West with respect to its global leadership in green technology investment. In 2017, China accounted for 45% of global investment in renewables, followed by Europe (15%) and the US (14%). In the same year, China generated 118 TWh of electricity from photovoltaic (PV) sources, with the US at a distant second with a total generation of 51 GWh. China also accounted for two-thirds of all jobs within the PV sector globally (2.2 million), while across all renewable sectors, China generates 44% of all green jobs across the world (REN21, 2018).

However, the boundaries between China's normative construction of ecological civilisation and traditional Western conceptions of development are more blurred than they first appear. Notwithstanding the relative greenwashing of China's

⁷ By 2010, China had already surpassed the US in energy consumption (King-chi and Lam 2012), while every year since 2011 China has consumed more coal annually than the rest of the world put together, as well as 40–45% of the world's copper, steel, nickel, aluminium and zinc (Levy 2020).



pre-industrial past which, contrary to official doctrine, was beset by a series of socio-environmental crises, there is perhaps more anthropocentrism found within Chinese philosophical traditions (particularly Confucianism) than traditionally assumed. More substantially, China's ecological civilisation forms a 'sociotechnical imaginary' that attempts to wed environmental sustainability with values of economic growth and market society (Hansen et al. 2018). In many ways, China's approach to ecological civilisation approximates the Western intellectual tradition of 'ecological modernisation', which sees material 'progress' pegged to continued economic growth through green technologies (Xue 2016). Despite being the hegemonic discourse and policy framework of today's 'environmental stewardship', ecological modernisation has failed the test of durable theory, showing no significant net improvement in environmental protection over the past 30 years (Foster 2012; cf. Faulkner 2012: 520).⁸

In seeking to navigate the tempest of the post-financial crisis world economy, China is now seeking to break its dependence on export-led growth, but not from growth per se. The 13th Five-year Development Plan (2016–2020) emphasised the transition towards domestic consumption as driver of economic growth (Xue 2016: 204). In one sense, the switch to domestic consumption would provide a modest step towards internalising the reproduction costs of Chinese labour. Yet the raising of domestic consumption does not fit easily into the wider goal of internalising ecological reproduction costs. If China is expected to meet its climate stabilisation targets, its growth will have to fall below 2%, and after 2035 it will have to contract in absolute terms—a structural impossibility for any capitalist economy to bear indefinitely (Li 2016a: 168). Given the logical impossibility of an endless accumulation of capital within social/ecological limits, it would appear as if contemporary international society is hurtling towards planetary exhaustion, rather than renewal.

Towards the exhaustion of capitalism's succession of hegemonies

As Watson wrote in the final pages of *EIS*, it is 'difficult to see what the next phase of the system will be like' (Watson 1992: 306). What Watson did see clearly, however, was that 'something new is taking place, comparable to the innovations that we saw at the Westphalian settlement', changes that were fundamentally anchored within global economic dynamics (Watson 1992: 306–8). Watson's prognostications strongly converge with Waltz's differentiation between 'changes in the system' and 'changes of the system', with the latter 'turn[ing] international politics into something distinctly different' (Waltz 2000: 6). Both Watson and Arrighi share several points of convergence with respect to the distinctly different aspects of contemporary international society: the resurgence of East Asia; the increasing salience of global economic forces driving international (dis)order; and the relative passing of US hegemony into a frontier of governance as yet unknown. Like Watson, Arrighi's peek into the future was somewhat hazy, positing China's ascendance constituting a

⁸ While I am unable to fully elaborate on this point, the poverty of ecological modernization lies within the logical fallacy of 'green growth'. On this aspect, see Hickel and Kallis (2020).



potential rupture in the cycle of European capitalism and inter-state conflict. While the limits and contradictions of Arrighi's view of China's development have been adequately covered elsewhere,⁹ I find more fruitful Arrighi's notion of reproduction costs as the cipher for the possibilities and prospects for international society in the twenty-first century.

Quite apart from the various challenges faced by China with respect to becoming the next world hegemon, contemporary international society contains a number of concentrated crises and material contradictions that, in many ways, precludes the emergence of any single capitalist hegemon. Unlike previous iterations in the succession of hegemonies, capital's 'spatial fix' has not undergone a decisive break.¹⁰ While new hegemonic states have tended to constitute themselves as world centres of accumulation around which the rest of the world largely revolves, the case of China presents something qualitatively new. Not only does China lack some of the key ingredients for assuming the mantle of world hegemony—particularly its lack of financial leadership and global currency (Germain and Schwartz 2017)—its preconditions for accumulation lie within other territories entirely outside of its political control. Chinese firms' exports to the US act as a recycling mechanism through which their dollar holdings into US treasury bonds simultaneously keep (until recently) US interest rates low, and thereby perpetuate the Fed's credit-fuelled mode of national consumption (Ivanova 2011; Sheng 2016). In this sense, while moments of signal/terminal crises usually imply that 'the losses of one organization are the condition of the profits of another' (Arrighi 2007: 233), the preconditions for successful accumulation within the US and China are found within each other. Thus, to a significant degree, the losses of one state tend to produce a comparable loss to the other (the so-called Chimerica phenomenon). The only way out of this structural co-dependency would be through the raising of China's domestic consumption, thereby internalising the reproduction costs of labour. In fact, China has undergone significant rise in real wages over the past decade or so, in line with the CCP's hegemonic project (ILO 2016). Yet the transition towards domestic consumption, premised as it is on the endless accumulation of capital, simply undermines the reproduction costs of nature (cf. Liu et al. 2021).

And as a final twist in the tale, China's acquisition of power and status has become ensnared by the same tension between principle and practice that bedevilled early modern European states. As Rosemary Foot has argued, the dissonance between China's vision of regional order based on shared development and enhanced cooperation on the one hand, and its assertive geopolitical strategies on the other, tends towards 'dominance rather than hegemony' (Foot 2020: 62). As well as reflecting the organic emergence of China's rising status, a more assertive 'going-out' strategy ultimately reflects the twin challenges of energy constraints and the internal and external limits of food security (Romano and Di Meglio 2016; Zhan and Huang 2023; McMichael 2013, 2019).

⁹ Among others, see the Special Issue in *Historical Materialism* 18(1).

¹⁰ To give one example on how one such decisive break took place between the British and US cycles, see Pradella (2016).



As a result of these historic anomalies, the highly integrated nature of world society (of which Watson was acutely aware), implies that the internalisation of reproduction costs is not something that can be simply achieved by any one state; the socio-ecological logic of this ‘cost’ is such that it must be system-wide. In other words, the inability of China to internalise its reproduction costs is not a ‘failure’ of Chinese leadership, but the result of series of structural contours that stretch far beyond China’s shores, including China’s far lower *per capita* emissions compared to the West, and the specific consumption patterns of American life that underwrites China’s production (and emissions) (Kopra 2019: 160).

From this angle, Ian Clark discounts the continuation of singular hegemonic powers, suggesting instead that ‘it is much more likely to be collective in form than to represent a succession of hegemonies’ (Clark 2011: 28). However, Clark does not go far enough in excavating the roots of this bottleneck in the process of hegemonic succession. Each successive hegemon must solve the problems left behind by their predecessor. In previous iterations, those problems were internalised by a single state, whose accommodation of a new cost laid the groundwork for the capitalist world economy’s continued evolution. Today, it would seem this pattern is coming to an end. Not only is the fate of the world’s states (and peoples) more tightly bound together than ever before, international society is arguably more fractured than at any time since the inter-war period, with all the chauvinistic authoritarianism that goes with it (Buscema 2020). Even if states have attempted to re-articulate new forms of hegemony in the post-2008 world of austerity via new forms of (limited) legitimacy—particularly through racialised anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy, authoritarian ‘law and order’ moralism, and/or broader returns to national ‘greatness’—the wave of ‘global Trumpism’ can only ever be a temporary bump in the systemic decline of an international society hurtling towards unsustainable levels of inequality and ecological collapse (Yin et al. 2023; Silver 2019).

It therefore appears that Watson’s pendulum has reached a structural ‘asymptote’ (cf. Wallerstein 2003), which will lead either to the extremes of ‘systemic chaos’ (one increasingly characterised not just by social, but ecological, destruction) or a type of global compact that may resemble a world state of some kind. Even Watson felt that the specificity of an increasingly globalised international society was evoking new social logics away from the traditional mechanism of market competition: ‘As the impersonal pressures increase, so does the need for conscious regulation’ (Watson 1992: 321). If this latter scenario wins out, as something genuinely new that succeeds the Western-dominated international society in which the world has lived for the past four centuries, one thing remains clear: the safeguarding of socio-ecological reproduction must be led by the social forces who currently bear its greatest costs.

Conclusion

While the present article is concerned with (re)reading Watson’s *magnum opus* as a means of generating insights into the future of international society, my hope is that it may also help redress the rather conspicuous absence of political economic



analysis across the English School community.¹¹ Indeed, given that the majority of ES research is centred on the history of international society from the seventeenth century onwards (and rarely interested in international societies before this historical 'moment') (cf. Blachford 2021), it would seem apposite for ES scholars to more fully engage with the *political economy of capitalism*, as arguably the distinctive feature of modern international society. This does not mean turning the entire ES cannon into merely another branch of international political economy. Instead, I suggest that a more sober analysis of the material, socio-relational and institutional contours of international society—or, a shift 'from constitutional to *social* history' (Keen 2008: 386, emphasis added)—offers a way out of the paradox of practice that continues to plague much ES scholarship. As one particular inroad into solving this paradox, I aimed to bring greater clarity to Adam Watson's take on the succession of hegemonies during the modern era, not only as a corrective historical sociological lens, but as a means of clarifying the terms of analysis necessary for comprehending the current impasse, and future trajectory, of international society.

It is notable that, in a review of *EIS*, the British historian Peter Calvocoressi (1992: 286) observed that Watson, 'like all good Europeans, is captivated and even perhaps a little overexcited' by Roman antiquity. One could say the same of his treatment of the 'great powers' of European international society, from the Hapsburgs and Bourbons of the long sixteenth century, to the great Concerts and Leagues of the long 19th. Yet this over-excitement leads us into an unresolvable paradox in which the central principle of modern international society (independence and self-determination) is continually rebuffed by the largely failed hegemonic practice of these great powers. Thus, somewhat in keeping with the predilections of his mentor, Herbert Butterfield (Watson 1992: 5), Watson tends to *assume* the directionality of history, or at the very least, assumes which great powers bore the mantle of hegemony (cf. Keene 2008). Rather than engaging in a more grounded historicism, one that gives equal weight to both norms and values as well as the material practices and institutions that most fully articulated these values, Watson's use of Martin Wight's idea of 'succession' turned into more of a vice than a virtue. I suggest that rather than merely a 'succession of hegemonies', it may be more accurate to describe this long historical arch as the *evolution of capitalist hegemony across Euro-Atlantic international society*.

In order to identify the contingent and historically specific evolutionary adaptations to new norms, ideas and values across modern international society—particularly those around humanism, independence and secular statecraft—I introduced the work of Giovanni Arrighi as a critical interlocutor with Watson. While Arrighi's model of hegemonic succession contains its own limits, it is most useful when treated as a dynamic, evolutionary process of a *modernising* international society. More remarkably still, Watson himself identifies Arrighi's hegemonic actors as the hidden architects of a new order, the likes of which the world had never seen. The mechanics of this international society, whose interests and pressures were

¹¹ On the few examples that do exist, see Mayall (1991); Hurrell (2007); Gonzalez-Pelaez (2005); Beeson and Bell (2017); Andrieu and Lubbock (2023).



overdetermined by a *world society of commodity relations* (cf. Andrieu and Lubbock 2023), tended towards the uneven development of capital accumulation, with concentrations of power and production in one territory, only to encounter socio-economic crisis and geographical shifts of accumulation to another. Along this chain of crisis and re-ordering, international society underwent an increasingly intense form of interconnection, superintended by successive *iterations* of hegemonic states that gained in size, complexity and capability. While each hegemonic state became successively more equipped to carry out the roles necessary for administering capitalist international society, it also had to deal with the unresolved problems left by its predecessor. As my brief case study of contemporary international society has shown, the apparent hegemonic transition between US and China is in fact nothing of the sort; rather, the 500 year pattern of capitalist international society seems to have reached a structural asymptote, beyond which lies either the future flourishing or impending demise of international society.

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