Transnational Elite Theory: Understanding Hegemony in International Relations

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Abstract

Transnational class theory was in vogue in the 1990s among neo-Gramscian international relations theorists. In the past decades the concept of the transnational class has fallen out of fashion along with structuralist 'class' theories more generally; however to understand the interplay between international hegemony and the apparent loss of state sovereignty, the author argues that it is necessary to reintroduce the transnational elite as a global actor. Hegemony, meaning leadership, is based on values. The transnational elite embodies these values and adapts them to the changing global context, integrating counter-hegemonic tendencies and establishing a consensus. That consensus is transmitted through the transnational elite members to domestic societies whose consent – active or passive – is required for socioeconomic reforms which benefit the transnational elite. The role of states as sites for political contestation and debate has decreased, as policy-making, supposedly of a technical/expert nature, is shifted to the inter-state level, leading to an increase in international regulatory regimes which are dominated by the transnational elites. Instead, the state is increasingly becoming an instrument to transmit and enforce the transnational consensus. While transnational values remain largely liberal and elite membership is accessible to anyone sharing them, the manner of establishing consent is increasingly authoritarian. This article retraces the concept of the transnational class in international relations theory and, through a case study of the Trilateral Commission, looks at how the transnational elite has evolved since the 1970s, and how it is integrating counterhegemonic pressures today, becoming increasingly powerful – as the rapidly growing income gap between rich and poor underscores.

I picked up the term during my political science studies in the University of Amsterdam in the early 1990s; but the 'transnational class' became a palpable reality during two decades of working abroad in statebuilding and related jobs. I was part of it myself, working for international NGOs, the UN, the World Bank, donors and performing academic research. From that position I could observe its workings, and how changing norms and values were spread through it with a curiously strong disciplinary power. I saw many international careers being built in interventions such as the one in Afghanistan, and private, non-governmental or interstate organizations achieve rapid success. Puzzled by the failure of international interventions I was participating in, I came to wonder what their purpose is. This practical question, not theory, led me back to neo-Gramscian concepts like hegemony, consensus, and transnational class.

The transnational elite, unlike the state or any other construct based on the state, such as 'the international state system', is not merely a social construct. It is a network of people that share a common interest in maintaining a system on which is based their power, wealth and influence, but also the sense they make of the world. I prefer the term 'elite' to 'class' because the latter *is* a socio-political construct. However, since transnational *class* and transnational *capitalist class* have been amply discussed in international relations theory, and I build on that discussion, I will use both terms here: transnational class to refer to the theory, and transnational elite(s) to refer to both the prime agent of globalisation and to my own emerging theory.

The transnational elite exerts hegemony (i.e. leadership) by constantly reformulating the value system on which hegemony is based, with the purpose to form a hegemonic *consensus* – i.e. voluntary agreement on the direction to be taken – and to consolidate popular *consent*[1]. Popular consent, as Gramsci argued, is essential for hegemony. A value system is instrumental in organizing such consent, to make it wholesale instead of piecemeal. In a Foucauldian perspective, it provides the foundation for a grand civilisational narrative which is necessary for governmentality (Hamilton and Neumann 2018, 297) It is commonly agreed to call the currently hegemonic value system 'liberal', and it dates from at least the Enlightenment.

It is only in this light that the international statebuilding intervention in Somalia – my original object of doctoral research – can be grasped. A lengthy and costly intervention in a post-conflict country without any obvious returns such as access to valuable natural resources[2] to build a domestic state cannot make sense from the perspective of the interests of a single dominant power (the USA) or an alliance of states (the 'West'); but it does make sense when seen as a project by the transnational elite. In the short term, its members, as well as the institutions they serve, gain wealth and influence by participating in the intervention, which is generally funded from public sources (taxpayers). In the long term, and despite occasional setbacks, the intervention spreads and consolidates the value system which sustains the hegemony of the transnational elite.

Before continuing, I must address the uncomfortable thought which may already be rearing in the reader's head: this smacks uncomfortably of conspiracy theory, as if there were a group of people 'in charge' who are serving themselves through the institutions of the contemporary world. This is an objection made among others by Bertrand Badie who does note the homogeneity and solidarity of elites that benefit from the current world order, but refuses to consider that these elites may be *leading* the current transformation because their interests are divergent and any such reasoning, he argues, can too easily fall in the 'trap of conspiracy theory thinking' (Badie 2019, 135). Besides the dubious intellectual

[1] For Gramsci, consensus is "the belief that the demands for conformity are more or less justified and proper" (Femia 1981, 38) while consent refers to a psychological or mental state of acceptance, whether conscious and convinced or reticent and based on fear of alternatives. For example, in 2020 the transnational elite established a *consensus* that Covid-19 is a threat justifying severe measures of protection (just like terrorism after 9/11); based hereon, they require the *consent* of all citizens for measures curtailing personal freedoms and social life. Many people consent only unwillingly but they comply, rather than attack the consensus and dissent.

[2] Interventions in countries such as oil-rich Iraq and Libya and uranium-rich Niger are often construed as being motivated by access to their resources for the prime intervening states; however even in these cases, evidence lacks that such access was a primary motivation for intervention, and often the intervention does not have that result. US oil majors, for example, have not taken over the Iraqi oil production as a result of the US intervention in Iraq, even though they backed it.

virtue of avoiding a line of enquiry because it may be derided by others, the French theorist confuses hegemony with dominance, and is convinced that hegemony can only be attributed to a single state, so he has no use for the notion of a transnational elite. Below I will set out the difference between hegemony and dominance; argue that to lead is not to control; and search for common denominators to the divergent interests of the transnational elite.

After a summary definition of the transnational class in terms of international relations theory, its evolution from the Cold War era to today is described, notably through a case study of the Trilateral Commission. Next the identity and structure of the transnational elite is analysed, focusing on how it absorbs counterhegemonic forces while continuously transforming itself. A high degree of adaptability and a fluctuating identity do not invalidate the notion of a transnational elite. This will lead to a new, operational definition of the transnational elite which I hope will be useful to other political theorists.

Concepts of Transnational Class and Elite

In neo-Gramscian analysis, the transnational elite consists of *private entrepreneurs, politicians, senior civil servants, academics and members of the global media* who enjoy privileged access to the circuits of international power and influence (Gill 1991, van der Pijl 1998, Sklair 2016). The transnational class is "*an informal global power structure*" (Gill 1993, 7).

We will here deal with three questions which serve to refine the concept of the transnational elite: is its power based mainly on material or symbolic capital? What is exactly the relation between the transnational elite and the state? What are its defining characteristics, or boundaries? These questions have been the subject of vivid debates between International Relations scholars that avail themselves of Gramscian concepts, notably that of hegemony (Pass 2018, Staricco 2016, Jessop & Ngai-Ling Sum 2017).

In Gramsci's view the hegemony of the ruling class was based both on its control of the relations of production and capital, and on its capacity to establish a consensus in society through ideology; what we may call, referring to Bourdieu, as material and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1994). Gramsci conceived of hegemony only within a nation-state, for the same reasons Marx & Engels believed capitalist classes were constrained by national borders and all bourgeoisies were perforce nationalist. Robert Cox, writing in this journal, seems to have been the first theorist who applied the concepts of Gramsci to international relations (Cox 1983). At first this new vein of IR inquiry was called transnational historical materialism (Gill 1993, 46-49), later the 'neo-Gramscian' analysis of international relations. Influenced by world systems and neo-Marxist theories, the emphasis initially lay on material sources of power, notably unequal terms of exchange between the core and the periphery.

Therefore, the transnational elites were first referred to by the term 'transnational *capitalist* class', whose power is articulated around the control of transnational capital flows (van der Pijl, 1984). The term 'transnational bourgeoisie' was also used. Since the 1980s was also the period of the neoliberal turn, when the social consensus underlying the social democratic model that had been hegemonic in the West crumbled as financial capital took precedence over productive capital, it is understandable that the

ideological aspects of Gramsci's concept of hegemony took second place to the much easier to observe material aspects.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, and notably after the proclamation of the 'End of History', neo-Gramscians have given precedence to the ideological factors underlying hegemony, sometimes neglecting the material ones altogether. Thomas Piketty has returned the study of capitalism as a political force to fashion, and his demonstration that wealth has largely supplanted productive capital (Piketty 2013) has reopened the debate, also among neo-Gramscian scholars (Pass 2018).

I prefer following Bourdieu in giving a central role to forms of symbolic power and seeing the power of capital as deriving from that. In my life I have observed that even for business managers, and certainly for the professionals working in international institutions, money is not a prime concern; reputation, acknowledgement and influence, what Bourdieu calls 'symbolic capital', are. Wealth is but one form of social recognition. Moreover, unlike the capitalists of yesteryear, who dealt in iron, oil, textiles, cars and the like, objects that at least produced the illusion of having material value, capital today is mostly generated mostly in the symbolic domain, such as financial derivatives, monetary policies, brand identities and narratives – the ungraspable 'bitcoin' being a perfect example. The valuation of a tech company like Facebook seems to rely more on social consensus (symbolic capital) than that of an oil company which has access to a sizeable percentage of the world's oil reserves. Control over material resources allows the transnational elite to establish its dominance, but here we are concerned more with hegemony, so symbolic capital and narrative will be the focus.

Now, to the second question: the relations between the transnational elite and the state. When the concept of the transnational class emerged, the term 'transnational' was already in use to designate international linkages that do not pass through the state, as opposed to 'inter-state'. For example, any cross-border contacts that are not mediated by the state between businesses, academia, NGOs and civil society organizations but also criminal networks were termed transnational, with the formula

inter-state relations + transnational relations = international relations

Since international relations had traditionally only dealt with inter-state relations (foreign policy, diplomacy and war) the concept of 'transnational' constituted a widening of the scope of the discipline. Neo-Marxism, and its development in the field of IR as 'International Political Economy' studied the political effects of the growing economic relations between countries that were not mediated by the state, the multinational corporations foremost among the new actors. When it was recognised that the directors of these companies had a determining influence on the foreign policy of states (think of the ITT engineering of the 1973 downfall of Allende in Chile), the term transnational capitalist class came to designate this elite compact.

Putting actors (the transnational elites) and structures (the state) on a par created an ontological difficulty; the term transnational *class* seemed to provide a solution, as the actors were seen to be structurally determined by their relation to capital. Cox argued that the internationalisation of the capitalist mode of production had led to that of the social relations of production (Cox 1987). Hegemony spread from the most powerful states, where these relations had been restructured – where the working class consented to the rule of the capitalist class in its own interest through collective

negotiations amendable through the democratic process – to the international scene. While arrangements with the working class and other productive forces in society were internal state affairs, on the international level the arrangement took place between the ruling elites of core and periphery states. The latter were enticed to apply the hegemonic model in exchange for membership in the transnational class and support of their rule (Cox 1983).

Cox, as well as most other neo-Gramscian IR theorists (such as Gill, van der Pijl, Arrighi) maintained that the state was, after all, the prime actor in international relations. The new transnational actors had to mediate their influence on international affairs through their domestic states, or at the very least within an existing inter-state system. The transnational elites, whether in the core or the periphery countries, remained 'state' elites. Arrighi argued that "The concept of 'world hegemony' (…) refers to the power of a state to exercise governmental functions over a system of sovereign states" (Arrighi 1993, 148).

It might be that Gramsci was rarely well read; this may be due to the unorganized nature of his 'prison notebooks'. His concept of hegemony was routinely confused with the concept of 'domination' and was therefore attributed to states (the USA, or the West) rather than to a social class. Gramsci, following Machiavelli, distinguishes *egemonia* (leadership) from *dominio*. In their summary of Gramsci's political thought, Hoare and Nowell Smith summarise the difference as follows: *the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as 'domination' and as 'intellectual and moral leadership'. A social group dominates antagonistic groups, which it tends to 'liquidate', or to subjugate perhaps even by armed force; it leads kindred or allied groups. A social group can, and indeed must, already exercise 'leadership' before winning governmental power (this indeed is one of the principal conditions for winning such power); it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to 'lead' as well.* (Gramsci 1971, 57-58)

The relation of transnational elites to hegemony was succinctly formulated by William Robinson, who expels *statism* or the nation-state from the concept of hegemony to "*revert to a more 'pure' Gramscian view of hegemony as a form of social domination exercised not by states but by social groups and classes operating through states and other institutions*" (Robinson 2005, 561). Robinson argues that national actors become transnational through all sorts of horizontal linkages that do not necessarily involve institutions of the state.

The transnational elite, in its current form, has thus grown largely independently of the nation-state (Sklair 2016) (Robinson and Harris 2000) (Robinson 2004). Its members may have used institutions of the nation-state as steppingstones, but they have moved beyond it, and in many cases positioned themselves above the state, using it as a tool to deepen the integration of their countries into emergent hegemonic global structures. French President Macron comes to mind as a recent example, reordering and sometimes undermining what remained of the old, nation-state based domestic elites to improve France's integration into the global economy.

To understand the nature of the transnational elite, the concept of *socialisation*, especially as developed by the 'Amsterdam School'[3], may help. I here refer to the concept both in its psychosocial meaning, as

[3] I refer here to the school built up around neo-Marxist 'International Political Economy' (IPE) and a fresh reading of Gramsci from the mid-1970s onward. IPE was based principally on Wallerstein's World Systems Theory and

the process of internalizing the norms and ideologies of society; and more casually, as 'being social and making friends'. Socialisation takes place at school, in the workplace and in private life. When we speak of the socialisation of transnational elites, we mean they tend to go to the same schools and universities, find jobs in the same organizations or branches of work, read the same books and press, follow the same dress codes, go to the same restaurants, receptions, conferences and other events, and the same holiday places. For Western elites, this may seem so natural that no thought is given to it, but for aspiring members the chance of rubbing shoulders with the transnational elite and having one's family or friends benefit from this access can be a major driver of behaviour. In the periphery, transnational elite homogeneity is both the driver and outcome of development programmes that promote synergies between international actors and local 'partners' (Williams 2013).

International organisations are one of the places such socialisation takes place. "*One mechanism through which the universal norms of a world hegemony are expressed is the international organisation. Indeed, international organisation functions as the process through which the institutions of hegemony and its ideology are developed. Among the features of international organisation which express its hegemonic role are the following: 1) they embody the rules which facilitate the expansion of hegemonic world orders; 2) they are themselves the product of the hegemonic world order; 3) they ideologically legitimate the norms of the world order; 4) they co-opt the elites from peripheral countries and 5) they absorb counter-hegemonic ideas.*" (Cox 1983, 172). It may be noted that Robert Cox worked most of his life for the International Labour Organisation, so he knew the international organisation from within.

International organisation allows elite talent from peripheral countries to be co-opted into the hegemonic consensus. Counter-hegemonic ideas are usually absorbed without effect (i.e. *neutralised*), but they may also change the institution incrementally, without changing its hegemonic role and purpose. What is remarkable about the transnational elite, as seen in international organisations but also in other sectors, is its apparent openness in terms of contemporary identity politics: skin colour, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background and sexual orientation appear to be no barriers for entry; one need only agree to the hegemonic values, which are presented as common sense or the result of scientific expertise: subscribe to the general civilisational narrative and join the consensus on as many issues as possible. In common parlance: talk the talk, walk the walk. This may lead to what Gramsci named 'contradictory consciousness', but what could also be termed 'cognitive dissonance': when one realises that the actions that flow from the consensus have a negative impact (e.g. on oneself, one's family, country or the environment) while one mentally agrees with it. For example, one might agree that democratic elections are essential for public life, but not vote feeling it is a waste of time.

Consent of domestic populations is mostly arrived at through two sources of power states wield: the law and education (Bourdieu 2012). While education is the main vector of socialisation, the law enforces compliance and is quite an adaptive instrument, as demonstrated by the flurry of laws passed to prevent the spread of Covid-19 through restrictive measures. Beyond the state, the international media remains an efficient instrument to spread the opinions of the transnational elite, as evidenced by the almost

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Gunder Frank's development studies. The main proponent of the Amsterdam School is Kees van der Pijl, professor at the University of Amsterdam, and it includes other Dutch political scientists such as Henk Overbeek, Bastiaan van Apeldoorn and Naná de Graaff. It is not a readily recognized school in international relations, it has no clear defining boundaries, and the corpus of scholarly work associated with it is meagre, excepting van der Pijl's own production. Bob Jessop first referred to the 'Amsterdam School' in print (Jessop 1990).

universal negative coverage of Donald Trump's presidency, which formed a main challenge to the hegemonic consensus and was narrowly defeated in November 2020.

In summary, the transnational elites form an informal network of actors with privileged access to power, that spans the globe and almost all international activities. Although control over capital flows allows the transnational elites to exert dominance, their hegemony rests on the consensus of a shared 'liberal' value system that is spread throughout the world by seeking the buy-in and adaptation of local elites; this hegemony ultimately rests on the active or passive consent of the population. Consensus is mostly achieved though processes of socialisation, in which international organisations play a large part. Although the state is one of the main instruments used by the transnational elite to solicit consent, mainly through education and the law, transnational hegemony is autonomous and not bound up in state structures.

Evolution of the Transnational Elites since the Second World War

The destiny of the transnational elite is tied up with that of hegemony; if we consider that the origin of this hegemony – i.e. of the liberal value system – lies in the European Enlightenment, and that it has gradually (and haltingly) spread throughout society and over the world since then, the transnational class will be at least just as old. However, for the purpose of this dissertation, we examine the transnational class since the end of World War Two. A major war shakes up society and is bound to have a strong impact on the transnational class. World War Two saw the defeat of many of the old European classes and their systems of privileges, and the corporatist-statist and imperialist economic models on which their power was based, while a new elite was rising from within the USA that would soon establish its global hegemony.

The transnational elites that emerged from the war on both sides of the North Atlantic reached a new consensus based on social democracy, class compromise in the mixed economy of Fordism, and international trade (Gill 1991, 46). Protectionism had played an important part in the crisis of the 1930s that led to the second World War, reasoned the statesmen and scholars who convened at Bretton Woods in 1944 to design the post-War economic system. This reasoning also opportunely served the interests of an already strong American industrial economy, pumped up by the war effort, seeking to expand beyond its borders. As to social democracy, it was a compromise solution seeking to address the threat of communism by the application of Keynes' economic theories, which posited that sharing the proceeds of capital and work more fairly within society would increase 'the size of the pie' and thus strengthen the system generally.

Progressive politicians, economists and social scientists, non-revolutionary trade union leaders and leaders of finance and industry joined state elites in cementing this into the base of a new Western 'post-ideological' civilisation that should spread to the rest of the world (Gill 1991, 49). The new Western social-compact was defined as 'post-ideological' because, it was reasoned, ideologies had brought nothing but misery and war, while technical solutions to social and economic problems analysed scientifically were indeed possible. As French philosophers such as Foucault later demonstrated, our 'free Western world' was at least as ideological as the Soviet Bloc we opposed. Pretending it was not ideological was a supremely ideological act, transforming belief into dogma and opinions about the

world into unassailable ‘common sense’ (Bourdieu 1994). On the other side of the Iron Curtain, ‘scientific socialism’ similarly pretended it was completely rational and non-ideological, and that the West was in the throes of an ideological class struggle that, historical dialecticism scientifically proved, was bound to end in the overthrow of capitalism.

The social democratic compact worked well for the West; from the mid-1940s to the mid-1970s, during what the French called ‘*les trente glorieuses*’ there was constant economic growth, which fuelled unprecedented social well-being: the social welfare state. In Gramscian terms, the first twenty years were one of integral hegemony, where a significant majority of the population actively consents with the ruling class and the direction it is taking society in.

A new challenge emerged for the West with decolonisation, which was accompanied by an intellectual questioning of the assumed non-ideological nature of Western thought. A third way seemed possible, between Western liberal capitalism and Soviet communism, and this current of thought picked up steam from the mid-1960s onward. Academic neo-Marxism and Dependency theory and attendant social and political movements (student riots, Euro-communism, the non-aligned movement, the search for autonomy through import-substitution industrialisation and higher import tariffs among developing states, Arab, African and Southeast Asian socialism…) threatened Western hegemony from within. This brings us to our case study, which will shed light on the subsequent development of the transnational class, how it maintained hegemony and what changes were wrought in the value system underpinning it to achieve this.

The Crisis of Democracy (1975)

The Trilateral Commission was formed in 1973 by “*leaders in their individual capacity from the worlds of business, government, academia, press and media, as well as civil society*” from North America, European Union countries and Japan, with the purpose “*to foster closer cooperation among these core industrialized areas of the world with shared leadership responsibilities in the wider international system*” (Trilateral Commission, 2020). This neatly dovetails with the definition of the transnational elites reached above. Note the use of the terms ‘leadership’ and ‘individual capacity’.

The focus on the Trilateral Commission, not only of IR theorists but also of some members of the general public who usually see it in conspiracy terms, comes largely because of the seminal report published by the commission in 1975 entitled 'The Crisis of Democracy', where the authors (including Samuel Huntington) try to analyse what should be changed in the Western democratic system to restore its vitality. In the field of International Relations it gained prominence after the publication of Stephen Gill’s ‘American Hegemony and the Trilateral Commission’ in 1991, one of the foundational texts of neo-Gramscian IR theory.

The report is emphasized here because it explains the reasons for the global policy changes which would later be called ‘neoliberalism’. US political elites, in particular, had reason to be shaken by events of the past years: the anti-Vietnam war protests, student revolts and the environmental and personal liberation movements, the defeat in Vietnam, the challenge posed by the ‘developing world’ with the OPEC oil price hike of 1973 and the Watergate scandal which had led to Nixon’s downfall were all fresh on the minds of the US delegation, while in Europe protest movements and the questioning of the state were also challenging the political consensus.

The authors of this report suggested that 'the belt needs to be tightened' on citizens who have become spoilt by well-being and no longer appreciate the system that has brought them material wealth, safety, education and access to knowledge. "*The incorporation of substantial elements of the population into the middle classes has escalated their expectations and aspirations, thereby causing a more intense reaction if these are not met in reality. Broadened political participation has increased the demands on government. Widespread material well-being has caused a substantial portion of the population, particularly among the young and the "intellectual" professional classes, to adopt new life-styles and new social-political values.*" (Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki, 1975, 158)

The authors define the current state of *anomic democracy* as 'consensus without purpose'; consensus that the democratic system is better than any alternative. A new direction must be found. "*In a democracy, however, purpose cannot be imposed from on high by fiat; nor does it spring to life from the verbiage of party platforms, state of the union messages, or speeches from the throne. It must, instead, be the product of the* collective perception by the significant groups in society of a major challenge to their well-being *and the perception by them that this challenge threatens them all about equally.*" (Crozier et al, 160, my emphasis).

The authors of the Trilateral Commission report further argue that the successful working of democracy has produced results which now impair it. Under the heading 'The Dysfunctions of Democracy'' they note that: equality has led to the general delegitimating of authority and loss of trust in leadership; expanded participation has created an overload on government capacity to meet political demands, which has led to inflationary pressures; intensifying political competition has led to fragmentation of the political landscape; and democratic responsiveness has led to nationalist parochialism, also in the conduct of foreign relations (Crozier et al, 161) .

The neoliberal reordering of the world by transnational elites

The 'Crisis of Democracy' report by the Trilateral Commission has often been hailed as the seminal act of the neo-liberal project, or the 'authoritarian turn' (van der Pijl 1998, 127), although it was likely only the visible part of a series of intense consultations and discussions that had been taking place among elites for years, most likely since the 1967-68 student revolts. In the perception of neo-Gramscian authors, the report established the consensus between the ruling elites of the Western world that their hegemony could only be preserved by restraining democracy through the unleashing of market forces. However, a close reading of the document indicates serious disagreement between participants, many of whom seem seriously committed to democratic values and even dispute the premise of the research, that there is a 'crisis of democracy' in the first place – including the Japanese co-author of the report.

Although the report reflects a search for consensus rather than a doctrine, as many of its detractors believe, it signalled an overture toward the radical market theories that were simultaneously being developed by the Chicago School of Economics, notably by Milton Friedman, who advocated a focus on monetary policies together with laissez-faire to let the invisible hand of the market work its magic. However, from idea to practice is quite a step, and it is instructive to see how the world gradually adopted the suggested new direction: how hegemony reoriented itself from the social-democratic ideal to the neo-liberal era we now live in.

Radical free market policies were advocated by the 'Chicago Boys' in Latin America from 1975 onward; in the Western world they were first put into practice in 1976 when the UK labour government put into place monetarist policies in exchange for a loan (Gill 1991, 100). It seems counterintuitive that a left-wing government acceded to implement neoliberal policies, but Friedman received the Nobel Prize that year for his theories, which seemed innovative rather than hawkish. The neoliberal turn was not a 'coup', a right-wing assault on left-wing policies. It seemed like a good idea then to 'tighten the belt' on a population which had become spoilt by 'anomic democracy' for a sizeable, centrist portion of the transnational elites worried about regaining the initiative and overcoming the 'Crisis of Democracy'.

The wider ideological shift to regain 'leadership', i.e. hegemony, must also be seen in terms of foreign policy. One of the main architects of this shift was Zbigniew Brzezinski, one of the founders of the Trilateral Commission (the other was David Rockefeller), its director from 1973 to 1976, and National Security Advisor of President Carter from 1977 to 1981. He argued that the détente with the Soviet Union, which was epitomized in the late 1970s by the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, should be linked to Soviet conduct; this is what led him to declare that "*SALT lies buried in the sands of the Ogaden"*, by which he meant: Soviet support of Ethiopia and its sending of military advisors there should be taken as proof of the negative intentions of the Soviet Union (Woodroofe, 2012). The USSR was restored to its enemy status. This dovetails with the observation by Huntington in the Trilateral Commission that "*détente has had negative implications for the cohesion of Trilateral societies*" (Crozier et al, 1975, 195). The Carter administration initially opposed this resumption of hostile attitudes, but Brzezinski's views eventually prevailed.

The resurrection of a powerful enemy aligned Western populations behind their ruling elites; this dynamic served the rise to power of Margaret Thatcher in the UK in 1979 and Ronald Reagan in the USA in 1980. The election of Reagan, like that of Trump 36 years later, posed a serious challenge to the transnational elite. Reagan was a vocal opponent of the Trilateral Commission, finding that its pursual of international objectives was detrimental to the USA; he noted that Carter, as well as two of his Republican contenders in the primaries (George Bush senior and John Anderson) were all Trilateral Commission members, feeding conspiracy theories about an anti-American global cabal about to definitively take over the White House (Novak 1980).

In turn, many Commission members initially disproved strongly of Reaganomics which led the world into a long recession because it eschewed international cooperation in its extreme version of laissez-faire (Gill 1991, 105-111). But his policies were successful for Wall Street, as were Thatcher's for the City, and soon the ruling elites in other Western countries – also left-wing governments – rallied to these neoliberal policies.

As to the developing world, it was both forced and coaxed into the neoliberal shift of the world economy. The debt crisis that followed the global recession in 1979 was caused by Reagan's administration's insistence that market forces determine the interest rates, which sharply rose in consequence. Many developing countries that had been encouraged to take loans when Western financial institutions were flush with petrodollars (Perkins, 2004) suddenly faced the impossibility to pay back the loans or even the interest on it; to qualify for debt restructuring and new loans, the IMF imposed structural adjustment plans along the lines of what came to be called the Washington

consensus[4], opening vast new territories for Western (often speculative) financial capital. With a few strokes most of Latin America and much of Africa and developing Asia were integrated into the budding neoliberal global economy, on the terms of the transnational capitalist elites.

Other developing countries, such as the 'Newly Industrialized Countries' of Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea, but also Chile and other South American countries that had successfully overcome left-wing contestation with the help of the USA, benefited from the access to the US market and the high dollar, which gave them an important competitive advantage. Their success story provided a model for local elites in the rest of the world, a positive narrative that allowed them to restructure their economies riddled by debt into export-oriented growth, putting an end to the non-aligned countries' efforts at import-substitution industrialisation protected by high tariffs.

Wallerstein's World Systems Theory, developed in the 1970s, had initially been a warning to developing nations that they were facing a new kind of economic imperialism, forcing them into a subordinate role in the world economy (the periphery); now it became a description of a reality embraced by local elites, who could now enrich themselves on Wall Street and other stock exchanges by sacrificing their nation's economic independence. Developing country governments had to spend part of the loans they had obtained in exchange of structural adjustments to their economies (and societies) on debt-servicing; how they spent the rest was up to them, fuelling patronage politics and corruption (Bayart 1989).

The Trilateral Commission reflected these changes and grew more friendly toward laissez-faire economies as opposed to regulation. In the second term of President Reagan his ideology and that of the Commission merged in the person of James Baker III, in turn Reagan's White House Chief of Staff, Treasury Secretary and later, under George Bush Sr, Secretary of State, who was well-disposed toward international cooperation. Bush Sr. was himself a longstanding Trilateral Commission member. This took the edge off the disruptive effects of Reagan's 'America first' policies on the global economy during his second term; by then, also, they were having a negative impact on the US economy (Gill 1991, 118-119).

The above account focuses on the economic aspects of the neoliberal shift because this has been best documented. The foreign policy shift which ushered in the second phase of Cold War confrontation has also been mentioned. But the global shift that realigned American-led Western hegemony can also be

[4] The term 'Washington Consensus' was coined in 1989 by the British economist John Williamson to refer to the set of 'free market' policies that were imposed as loan conditions by the IMF and the World Bank and in their wake other global financial institutions from the early 1980s onward. Williamson declined the rules of the Washington consensus as follows:

1. Low government borrowing, to discourage high fiscal deficits relative to GDP
2. Diversion of public spending from subsidies to important long-term growth supporting sectors
3. Tax reform to broaden the tax base and adopt moderate marginal tax rates
4. Market-determined interest rates which are higher than the inflation (real interest rate)
5. Free-floating currency exchange rates
6. Free trade policies: liberalization of imports by removing trade barriers such as tariffs and quotas
7. Relaxing rules on foreign direct investment
8. Privatization of state enterprises
9. Deregulation to encourage competition and open access to the local market
10. Development and stronger protection of property rights

I put 'free market' between quotation marks because these policies restructure local markets with the likely end result that they are subjugated to powerful foreign interests, who are then 'free' to take them over.

observed in the entertainment industry, notably in Hollywood (Žižek 2002). In social sciences, the rise of the behavioural approach underlined the message that the individual is responsible for his own acts, and elevated the *homo economicus* which makes rational, self-interested calculations to the ideal model of human behaviour at the expense of the *homo politicus*, who is also guided by concerns of national community and solidarity (Brown 2015).

The Trilateral Commission was doubtlessly influential in the second half of the 1970s, but it was put on the defensive during the great upheaval of the world economy in the early 1980s. Reagan's policies were counter-hegemonic and were only absorbed in the mid-1980s, when transnational elites accepted free-market policies to replace the social democratic compact, while Reagan's administration agreed that more global cooperation was necessary to mitigate the negative effects of the 'laissez-faire' policies. This shows that instead of a 'transnational class' that structurally dominates international relations with its privileged access through capital to the most powerful states, we are in the presence of transnational elites that are constantly adapting to counter-hegemonic tendencies, seeking to absorb them when they cannot be neutralized, all the while pursuing their own objectives (as individual members of the elite seeking to increase their influence, wealth and global reach).

National elites who did not adapt to the neoliberal shift, who did not transnationalise their links, socialisation and activities – who could not or did not want to speak English – lost out in this process (this could be an explanation for the fall of the Soviet Bloc, whose elites never socialized transnationally). By the mid-1980s the scope for national contestation of transnationally agreed policies was greatly reduced. This became apparent when left-wing 'socialist' governments in Europe implemented neoliberal market reforms, which seemed to validate Thatcher's statement that 'There is No Alternative' (to the market economy).

Although organised labour and other domestic opposition groups attempted to create transnational coalitions, these efforts mostly failed, in part because the transnational hegemonic model, where production was largely outsourced to non-Western countries to overcome organised labour's limitations on capital accumulation, was hostile to such efforts. However, insofar such domestic groups did manage to push their agendas – for example by insisting on humanitarianism, fair trade or gender and racial parity – their objectives were framed by international organisations to allow their incorporation into the transnational hegemonic model.

Despite the monumental global socioeconomic reordering, the membership of the transnational elites and the hegemonic values that they embody did not change much; some domestic elites in core countries were replaced by new groups more closely linked to global capital flows, but the continuities stand out. In fact, the hegemony of the transnational elites was *strengthened* by the absorption of the counter-hegemonic transnational forces of 'free' capital, which weakened the state-capital-labour compact.

To many political scientists it was clear by the 1990s that the state had come out of the neoliberal shift much weakened. This is when it was commonly assumed that the transnational 'class' (in its structural sense) was antithetical to the state and hopes were pinned on a revival of civil society to recapture the domain of national politics (Cox, 1999). In a political sense – as an autonomous site for political contest,

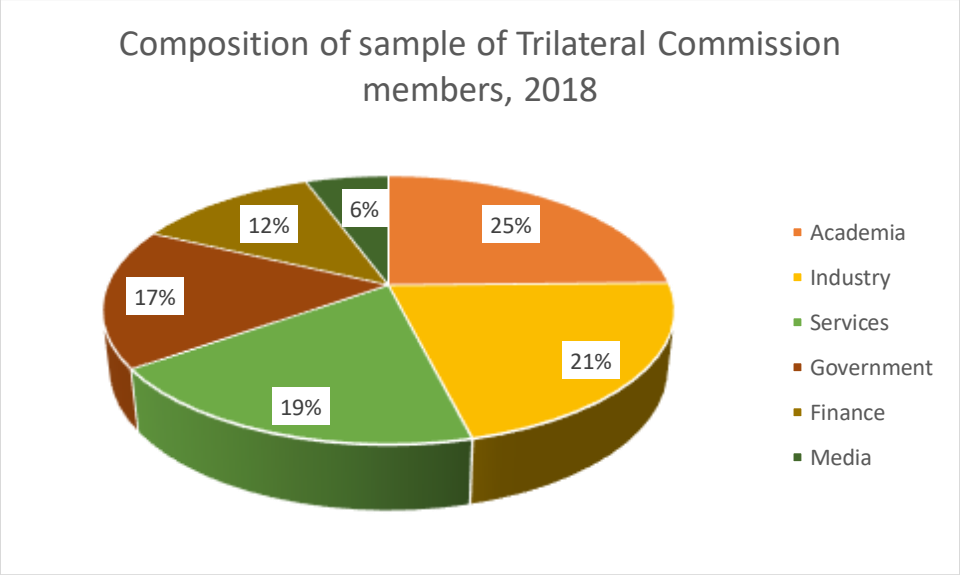
or indeed as the repository of popular sovereignty - the state had indeed lost a lot of power; but not in its administrative or coercive functions.

The consensus underlying the new world order was most famously worded by Francis Fukuyama in his book 'The End of History and the Last Man'. The political analyst argued that the collapse of the Soviet Union put an end to the dialectic development of socio-political structures that was the basis of historical development (Fukuyama 1992). In the popularized view, the End of History was ushered in by the final victory of the rational, liberal, capitalist and humanist Western model for the governance of the world. This was the coronation of the Western grand civilisational narrative. The ideological nature of the Western system was thus concealed from view; it became common sense or 'doxa': a belief that presents itself as a certitude (Bourdieu 2012); in Gramsci's terms, it ushered in a period of integral hegemony.

The Trilateral Commission today

The evolution of the Trilateral Commission over the past 45 years indicates at once the staying power of the core transnational elites, and the adaptability of the group to contemporary currents and socio-political shifts.

The Trilateral Commission's membership list in October 2018 consists of 444 names, split as follows: 198 Europeans, 141 North American and 102 East Asians; there are also three 'global members' from Lebanon, Turkey and Russia. I selected three pages from the seventeen pages-long list, one random page each for the European, North American and East Asian member lists. Of the 89 (20% of total) members on these pages, the breakdown is roughly:



Surprisingly, 25% of the members represent an academic institution, indicating that 'organic intellectuals' are needed in the Commission. More than half of the members work in the industry, services and financial sector – almost all multinational companies. Members working for the media represent a broad scale of the global media, Facebook, and the main national media outlets of the biggest countries. Their relatively small presence may suggest that they are invited as transmitters

rather than as strategists. There are no representatives of civil society (labour movement, NGOs, development community) although, on the commission's website, it does purport to include members of civil society (Trilateral Commission, 2019). The disappearance of trade union leaders, who between 1973 and 1986 constituted 5% of the Commission, signals shifts in transnational elite composition.

It may be further noted that almost all members come from OECD countries; in our sample, only 11 out of 89 members come from non-OECD members - China (3), India (3), Malaysia, Singapore, Bulgaria and Serbia. All other countries in the world are excluded, with the occasional exception. The Commission thus appears to be concerned with creating consensus at the core, both in geographical and thematic scope.

In terms of values, on the commission's 'about' webpage it is stated: "*Its members share a firm belief in the values of rule of law, democratic government, human rights, freedom of speech and free enterprise that underpin human progress. Members are also committed to supporting a rules-based international system, closer cooperation across borders and respect for the diversity of approaches to policy issues*" (Trilateral Commission 2020). In the summer of 2019, the Trilateral Commission published a pamphlet called 'Democracies Under Stress' in which it reaffirms its original mission but indicates it is rejuvenating itself to accomplish it. The main threat it identifies to a 'rules-based international order' is the rise of nationalism and populism while "*Beijing in particular is offering the world what many see as a viable alternative to democracy*" (Trilateral Commission 2019). It does not mention US President Donald Trump, but clearly identifies him and his populist co-leaders in the developed world as a problem that must be confronted by closer cooperation between commission members.

The 'rejuvenated' commission (Labour leader Keith Starmer was a member in 2019[5]) "*has identified a number of contemporary themes—such as technology, populism, economic competitiveness, rule of law, and demographics—to which it will return regularly. The Commission is also identifying issues that can be advanced by its mix of policy and business leaders and do not necessarily require the adoption by national governments to have an impact*." This statement clearly indicates how the organisation seeks to influence policy without passing through the state and domestic politics. It also wants to draw in a more diverse membership and increase its transparency. It seeks to return to publications as seminal as 'The Crisis of Democracy' discussed above (Trilateral Commission 2019).

Of the anticipated outputs, two are particularly interesting: "*Reassurance of American allies about the depth of U.S. commitment to playing a leadership role in the world; and the forging of personal relationships spanning countries, cultures, and sectors*". The second quoted output indicates the 'how', the first one the 'what', albeit incompletely. By acknowledging the need to restructure the North-American panel of the commission by including 'non-elite representatives from the American heartland' alongside 'coastal elites', the Commission is obviously reacting to political tendencies epitomized by Donald Trump; by forging personal links between the old elites, already part of the Trilateral Commission, and these new elites the Commission hopes to reconcile the 'non-elite representatives from the American Heartland' with the current world system – form a consensus – as much as reassure American allies about the US commitment to play a leadership role. The new North America executive director of the Commission, Richard Fontaine, is the CEO of the Center for a New American Security

[5] The list of members can be downloaded on the Trilateral Commission website.

(CNAS), a think-tank that stands firmly on the right of the political spectrum, likely to appeal to 'non-elite' Americans more than to the international members of the commission. Here we see how the transnational elite at once absorbs a counterhegemonic tendency and evolves itself, by seeking consensus through socialisation, including at the bar of convention centres.

Similarly two of the expected impact bullet points are worth dwelling over: "*Better domestic and foreign policy outcomes achieved by injecting new, innovative prescriptions into the national debate and governmental process; and a growing consensus for global engagement encompassing elites and non-elites—which is a prerequisite for leadership in international politics and business*". The prescriptive element may worry those who would like such debates to take place in the democratic arena, instead of being 'injected' by members of the unaccountable commission. As to the consensus, it seems the authors of the pamphlet are reflexively following Gramsci's prescription for establishing hegemony.

The study of the Trilateral Commission suggests that the composition of the transnational elites and the values that underpin them have only undergone gradual shifts while the socio-economic basis of global society morphed from social democracy to neoliberalism, and maybe in the future into a more authoritarian model.

It is of course not the only institution representative of the transnational elites: the World Economic Forum and the Bilderberg Meetings are but two of the better-known organisations that bring together a similar mix of leaders from business, government, and opinion influencers. The focus on the Trilateral Commission here is not to give it more importance. In fact, it is probably less important than the other two, but each group has its own role. For example, participants to the Bilderberg meetings belong to the power elites, including the security establishment and royals, and membership is generally restricted to Western Europe and North America. Bilderberg is also more secretive than the Trilateral Commission. The WEF in contrast prides itself on its open character, drawing in a much wider circle of participants in its search for consensus.

Explaining hegemony through transnational elites

The transnational elites do not *control* world affairs. We saw how the election of Ronald Reagan by the American people in 1980 came as an unwelcome surprise to elites who were comfortably ensconced in the social democratic model. The side-lining of first labour and then of national state elites changed the composition of the transnational elites, bringing to the fore those circles of capital and government which were internationally oriented (Gill 1991) . Likewise, thirty years later the transnational elite is no longer the exclusive domain of old white (and Japanese) men: women and people with other skin colours are gradually increasing their presence. This is not an internally engineered process but the reaction to a changing environment.

Nevertheless, the transnational elites do exercise hegemony, or leadership. And the elite's core is still composed of old white men with liberal-conservative ideas. They still refer to Locke and Hobbes when discussing politics, and maybe Machiavelli but not 孔子 or Öcalan. The dress code of power – suit & tie etc. – has barely changed over the past century. Cultural tastes also do not change fast; having a grounding in Western classical culture may no longer be a prerequisite for transnational elite membership, but it still helps. And one must of course be fluent in English.

The transnational elite is not a superstructure that is brought into being by social relations of production, as neo-Marxists would have it, who replace the 'bourgeoisie' of the 19th century with today's transnational class. Of course, the material sources of transnational capital matter, but they cannot define the group; after all, what constitutes wealth is also a social construct. Production, which had always been considered the basis of the capitalist system, has mostly been outsourced to China and functionally replaced by speculative capital and wealth. The control of prime resources and basic commodities like steel, rubber and bananas is no longer as important as the control over brand identities, the attention of consumers and online retailing; within the transnational elites the industrialists of yesteryear have been replaced by tech and social media giants; and while fossil fuel majors have maintained their power until today, that may change in the coming decades.

It seems more appropriate to see the transnational elite as a web of relations, constituted around a set of values that is itself also subject to change, but at a much slower rate. Within that set there are certain core values, some of which might belong to all human cultures such as 'thou shalt not kill': these are universal values. Others – such as the inalienable right to property, or the perception that men are superior to women, or that it is wiser to distrust than to trust fellow human beings – might have a long history of dominance without being truly universal. Some hegemonic values may be antithetical to universal ones. The ideal of the homo economicus, who always chooses for his self-interest based on calculation, is antithetical to the universal appreciation of generosity and care for humans and nature.

Around core hegemonic values others may form, survive for centuries and then quietly disappear; European racial theories, for example, were dominant during the second half of the 19th century but were dropped completely after World War Two, leading to only minor modifications in the elites that had espoused them previously. There is no established list of values to go by. A list of liberal values from Wikipedia includes 'free market, free trade, limited government, individual rights, capitalism, democracy, secularism, gender equality, racial equality, internationalism, freedom of speech, freedom of the press and freedom of religion'. Each of these values is open to interpretation, and each individual member of the elites may have an idiosyncratic set of values, norms and principles. The transnational elite is nebulous, gradually shifting in shape, size and movement. It is not rhizomatic because it has a core consisting of men (and a few women) who mostly remain near the centre for decades, providing stability. It is not the sources of material power or the modes of socio-political control that define the transnational elites, but these values.

Gramsci mentions two manners by which hegemony spreads through society: *trasformismo* and passive revolution. 'Trasformismo' is the process by which counter-hegemonic ideas are absorbed, and the opposition (e.g. organised labour, or an ethnic minority) assimilated into the political class, which grows as a result. I find that neither Gramsci nor neo-Gramscian authors highlight that the political class itself is also transformed as a result of this absorption (Gramsci 1971, Q19§24) (Cutler 2005, 536ff), as we have seen in the case of Reaganomics. It is more than adaptability, more than resilience, because by absorbing the opposition, hegemony becomes stronger - what Nicholas Nassim Taleb calls 'anti-fragility'(Taleb 2012). Inversely, hegemony could become weaker when unopposed.

What Gramsci means by passive revolution is not quite clear but later authors understood it to be a process of emulation, whereby elites reproduce the results of a revolution – for example the industrial revolution (in economics) or the French revolution (adoption of new political structures) (Gramsci 1971, 117) – without actually losing power; they apply the end results of a revolutionary process in another

context to their own country. This allows the transnational elite to reproduce itself in peripheral countries, where local elites are eager to copy the codes of conduct if it provides them access to the transnational elite, in the same way English capitalism spread to the European continent (van der Pijl, 1998, 83).

These two ways in which hegemony spreads are accurately reflected in the Somali context. The manner in which Somaliland created a modern state, army, central bank, democratic elections etc. without external support (and unrecognised) could qualify as a passive revolution; while the manner in which the international community is engaging Somali leaders to build a state in Somalia seems a textbook example of transformism.

The state, as mentioned, has become less of a site of political contest, and the sovereignty which used to be conferred vertically, by the domestic population, is now conferred horizontally, by other states; sovereignty has been transferred to the inter-state system. The state has thus not disappeared, certainly not in the Weberian sense as an administrative and coercive apparatus. From 2000 to 2015 the average state footprint relative to GDP grew by 1/3 throughout the world, from 32 to 43% of GDP (World Bank online datasets). Since 2001 the State has made a comeback as security provider for the population, from terrorists, other criminals and now also viruses. The state is essential as instrument to establish the domination of the transnational class, not its hegemony.

This brings us to the notion of an 'authoritarian liberal global order' (Hameiri 2010, 6) where national sovereignty, and indeed the rights of people to self-determination, are sacrificed to strengthen a global order that may present itself as dealing with technical problems, but which remains highly political (Easterly 2013). It is authoritarian because it provides almost no inroads for popular participation in decision-making. It is liberal in the sense that it defends the values of the liberal elites throughout the world – those that believe in free markets, their right to own unlimited wealth, their freedom of expression and other rights that they are willing to share with those who join the hegemonic consensus. It is global in scope, penetrating all societies with the pretence of universality; and it is an order in the sense that it bases itself on rules and laws to maintain stable governance.

Nationalist-populist contestation movements that have erupted in the heartland of the transnational elites threaten transnational hegemony, because there is a large divergence between the values of both. But it may not be a counterforce too large to integrate, as the alluded-to shifts in the composition of the North American delegation to the Trilateral Commission indicate. This leads the consensus to shift toward the values of the groups newly integrated, which may favour authoritarian modes of government; current members of the transnational elite who hold opposing values (e.g. civil rights) will in turn lose their position in the core. The constant transformations of the hegemonic consensus seem difficult to predict, but one sees that in moments of crisis like 2001 and 2020 its evolution is accelerated.

In 2020 the construction of international regulatory regimes and complex binding agreements limiting the autonomy of states is similarly accelerating, while the efforts of citizens to retrieve their national sovereignty and, for example, decrease the income gap and maintain social services, are by and large unsuccessful. Counterhegemonic movements seem difficult to sustain today; the global environmental youth movement has been silenced by the measures taken to contain the coronavirus, while Islamists who want to set up their own state are relentlessly persecuted. Where populist demands (e.g. more security, less immigration) coincide with transnational political objectives, they are integrated easily, but then also, they impact the transnational consensus.

This process sparks revolts in peripheral and in core countries; the revolts are spurred on by the closing of political space in national institutions such as the legislative to discuss, for example, austerity measures, civilian freedoms or the alignment of the domestic tax system and labour market to the exigencies of global capital. In the transnational consensus, these are technical issues best left to experts. Since parliament no longer provides space for debate, political contestation returns to the streets. So far, however, these revolts have not challenged the hegemony of the transnational elites, but only encouraged its authoritarian exercise of power.

The overview of the dynamics of transnational hegemony since the mid-1970s, when the neo-liberal shift in world politics and the capitalist system was announced, have provided us with the following insights into the nature of this hegemony:

1. Hegemony is based on values, not on material capability (which undergirds dominance). The values form the basis of transnational consensus and are woven together by a grand civilisational narrative. The values and the hegemony and narrative that are based on them evolve gradually in reaction to the changing global environment.
2. The transnational elite is a web of relations with a slowly evolving core (the value system at its heart and the old white men that preserve it) and more fluctuation at the periphery.
3. The elite is defined by shared values, which are spread mostly through socialisation. Access to the elite is in principle open to anyone who integrates the hegemonic values.
4. The absorption of counter-hegemonic forces gradually transforms and strengthens transnational elite hegemony, allowing it to adapt to the changing global context.
5. We are currently in a phase of integral hegemony of (neo-)liberal values and the socio-political and economic system they support. While counter-hegemonic forces exist, there is no counter-hegemonic project (or 'bloc') that mobilizes and unites them.
6. The process of transnational hegemony is best seen as organic: nobody is in control, but the elites extract maximum benefit from its stability and gradual growth
7. The transnational elites are formed historically by the predominance of the West and the accretion of non-Western elites into the liberal value system

Relationship between the state and the transnational elites:

8. Transnational elites stand above the state, which is a social construct that they use as a tool to reorder the world to their advantage. The state is the instrument of dominance, foremost in the symbolic domain (establishing consensus through education and the Rule of Law).
9. Although the state has lost significance as a locus for the expression of national political conflict, it has grown as a tool of world governance, mainly by its functions of administrative and coercive control of the populations, taxation and generating currency.
10. State sovereignty is gradually being transferred to the inter-state domain, which is regulated by the transnational elite, and expressed through inter-state regulatory regimes.
11. US and European dominance is decreasing, but the hegemony of its transnational elites is not as most of the tools of world governance are developed in the Western heartland.

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