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From Heartland to Hegemony: Changing the World in Political Geography

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Abstract: The heartland theory in political geography is compared with recent uses of the hegemony concept to order international relations. Both sets of ideas are described in terms of the basic content of their models, the context in which they were created, and the political contest that they prioritize. It is found that both models represent academic attempts to advise the political elites of declining major powers on how to cope with a changing world. In the final section a synthesis of the models is presented.

Introduction: International Political Geography

Modern political geography is about a hundred years old. Throughout this period the primary focus has been upon the state as a territory. Geographical paradigms have come and gone but whether territory is seen as a unique segment of earth and landscape (Ratzel, 1897; Whittlesey, 1939), as a functional political space (Hartshorne, 1950; Jones, 1954), or as a socially constructed place such as an electoral arena or site of cultural (national) identity (Johnston, 1979; Knight, 1982), political geographers have studied the state largely in terms of its boundaries and internal structures. But the international dimension has never been wholly neglected. Although of secondary concern, there has been an important tradition within the sub-discipline that has dealt with relations between states (Taylor, 1995). Very often this has been of a practical nature when leading geographers are called upon to provide expert input into foreign policy making. The contributions of political geographers to the deliberations at Versailles in 1919 remains the classic practical input but this continues today through, for example, the Office of the Geographer

in the U.S. State Department. In addition there have been notable theoretical excursions into the international domain in political geography and it is these I concentrate upon in this paper. In particular my purpose is to compare and contrast two key organizing concepts: heartland and hegemony.

Many readers will be surprised by the choice of heartland and hegemony for such a comparative exercise. It is not just that the concepts were developed for international politics many years apart, they are associated with very different politics. Heartland has become part of the lexicon of a hard-headed realism in international politics which found particular favour with conservative Cold Warriors. Hegemony, on the other hand, is generally associated with radical social science approaches and has a respectable Marxist pedigree. But they do have much more in common than seems to be the case at first sight.

I will argue that they exhibit fundamental similarities in their respective treatments of time. They are both based upon very rich historical analogies. Both identify a modern era which is coming to an end. In addition, as exercises in comparative history, their purposes are to inform the present so as to influence the future. Hence although neither deals with the

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particular details of a practical political geography, this does not mean that the two concepts are in any sense 'objective' or their theories 'universal'. Both heartland and hegemony are at the centre of clusters of ideas that are intended to be of practical relevance as broad temporal overviews within which policy should be set. Hence there is much material for a comparative analysis.

The paper is divided into three sections. Heartland and hegemony are considered in turn using the same organizing frame: we start by identifying the relevant content of the theory, then move on to the context of its creation before describing in more detail the basic contest that each model prioritizes. In the final section we draw on these comparisons to devise a synthesis of the two approaches.

Heartland

The 'heartland theory' is probably the most famous intellectual product of political geography. It is traced back to a seminal paper by Halford Mackinder read before the Royal Geographical Society in London in 1904. Here he identified a large section of central Asia as the 'pivot area of history' on the basis of its isolation from sea power; the area was enlarged and renamed heartland by Mackinder in 1919.

(i) *Content: general—Columbian age, specific—great game*

In his paper Mackinder (1904) argued that we were coming to the end of the Columbian epoch. For 400 years the maritime powers had expanded their influence until it covered the whole world. But Mackinder suggested that this pattern was historically quite exceptional. In the pre-Columbian era the most mobile societies had been those of central Asia which periodically descended on the coastal regions of Eurasia and decisively changed the course of history. At the end of the Columbian era the time was ripe for this traditional pivot area to reassert itself. The means to this end would be the development of land transport to catch up with the advantages of sea transport. For instance Mackinder (1919) compared Britain's ability to transport troops thousands of miles by sea to South Africa during the Boer War with Russia's equivalent

achievement using the trans-Siberia railway in the Russo-Japanese War. Hence the era when maritime powers could dominate the world was over and in the post-Columbian era the state controlling the great land mass of the heartland would inevitably come to rival and overtake all states in terms of political power. The heartland was the natural basis for world empire because it was inaccessible to sea power but could perennially test other great powers at locations of its choosing throughout maritime Eurasia.

Behind every general model there is a specific case from which it is derived. For the heartland model this is particularly easy to identify. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century Britain and Russia had been rivals in much of Asia. While Britain was consolidating its hold on India and the route to India, Russia had been expanding eastwards and southwards producing many zones of potential conflict from Turkey through Persia and Afghanistan to Tibet. But instead of war this became an arena of intrigue, of bluff and counter-bluff, known as the 'Great Game' or as one historian has astutely termed it, the 'Victorian Cold War' (Edwardes, 1975). Mackinder's presentation to an audience at the Royal Geographical Society would not have seemed so original as it appears to us reading this paper today (Hall, 1955; Taylor, 1990). Put simply, the heartland model is a codification and globalization of the Great Game: it brings a relatively obscure imperial contest on to centre stage.

(ii) *Context: the relative decline of Britain*

Mackinder's 1904 paper cannot be separated from his personal political allegiances that were going through a major change in the early years of the century. As a member of the Liberal Party, Mackinder had been a natural supporter of Britain's traditional free trade policy but in 1903 he began to change his views and joined the campaign of Joseph Chamberlain for tariff reform, the contemporary political euphemism for trade protection. It is instructive, therefore, to compare Mackinder's famous 1904 paper with a series of lectures to the Institute of Bankers delivered and published in 1900. On both occasions Mackinder uses a broad historical overview to locate the current role of Britain in the world. In the first he discusses the 'great trade routes' of the world as the basis of capital

accumulation and sees a communality of interests between industry, commerce and finance. This confirmed the role of the City of London, and thus his audience, in Britain's economic leadership in the world. But as a tariff reformer Mackinder had very different views. Accumulating capital by the City of London was not a viable route to maintain Britain's pre-eminence. The Boer War exposed Britain's political isolationist policy and if a great European War was to come then it would not be won with bank portfolios however extensive. In short Britain had to follow the lead of other countries and protect its 'real economy', the productive capacity of its industry. In the 1904 paper, therefore, Mackinder is employing his historical knowledge to new ends. He is more pessimistic about Britain's future and is thinking strategically about where the threats will come from. It is this train of thought that leads to identification of a pivot area beyond Britain's reach that can become the base for challenging Britain.

Mackinder's post-Boer war pessimism was part of a general national mood which did lead to a great policy reassessment of Britain's role in the world—the geopolitical transition of 1904–7 (Taylor, 1993a)—but not along the lines Mackinder hoped: the Unionists (Mackinder's new party) were not able to agree a tariff policy before they were voted out of office. But the key point is that Mackinder's seminal paper is produced in the context of the ruling elites of the leading country in the world grappling with their country's relative decline. Mackinder is trying to locate this crucial problem in a broad historical pattern so as to provide an understanding as the basis for providing advice on how to change such an unpromising contemporary world. Hence rather than being a paper defining timeless truths as some Cold Warrior supporters have asserted (Dalby, 1990), Mackinder's 1904 paper is very much a statement of its times.

One of the truly remarkable features of Mackinder's geostrategic model is its longevity. Whatever its specific context of creation, it has remained an influential theory throughout much of the rest of the century. This has been largely due to two specific sets of state policy advisors. First in the inter-war years the heartland theory became an integral part of German geopolitics. It fitted the needs of those who advocated *lebensraum*, the policy of expanding into eastern Europe, coupled with accommodating the

U.S.S.R., as a grand continental policy for making Germany a great power again. Second with the onset of the Cold War after World War II, the heartland theory got another lease of life as the geostrategic basis of nuclear deterrence theory. The west's nuclear arsenal was originally justified in part as compensation for the U.S.S.R.'s 'natural' strategic advantage as the heartland power (Walters, 1974). Such arguments have survived the end of the Cold War (de Blij, 1992). It is perhaps ironic that the U.S.S.R. itself never seems to have directly made use of Mackinder's model. This is because of the association of geopolitics with Nazi Germany and the consequent removal of political geography from the Soviet academy. We can only speculate what Soviet propaganda would have made of the notion of their country was the pivot area in world politics! Nonetheless it is clear that the heartland model has been very portable beyond its original context. To understand why this should be we need to look at the nature of the contest at the centre of the model.

(iii) Contest: sea power versus land power

One of the key secrets of the Heartland model's success is undoubtedly its simplicity: it provides a geography to match the basic organization of the military arm of states. By developing a model on the basis of sea power versus land power, Mackinder was, of course, entering a well-worn debate about the efficacy of army and navy. In the case of Britain in the early 1900s there was a policy reassessment going on that was to upgrade the importance of the army in relation to the 'senior service', the navy. (In overall policy terms the argument for promotion of the army fitted in with industrial protection against traditional pro-navy and related free trade policy). Hence Mackinder's model was part of a strategic reassessment framed in terms of navy versus army.

This British military debate was one of several occurring at the beginning of the century in a period of increasing inter-state competition. In Germany the push towards world power status via a large navy precipitated the naval arms race with Britain thus allowing the Royal Navy to remain 'senior' with respect to the (unroyal?) British army up to 1914. But Mackinder's geostrategic model is closest in structure to the writings of an American admiral, Alfred Thayer Mahan (1890). Mahan is briefly mentioned in

Mackinder's 1904 presentation as a writer on naval strategy and political geographers have often viewed Mahan as the 'sea geostrategist' to contrast with Mackinder as 'land geostrategist'. In fact their overall geographical interpretations of sea versus land power are quite similar. Although focussing upon the insular advantages, as he saw it, of first Great Britain and then the U.S.A., Mahan did identify the unique continental location of Russia and the inevitable contest with the major maritime powers in what he termed the 'Debated and Debatable Middle Strip' running from Turkey to China (Sloan, 1987). This has obvious parallels with Mackinder's 'Inner or Marginal Crescent', the area identified around the pivot area in 1904, and the contestable 'rimland' in Spykman's redesign of the heartland model in 1944. The main addition Mackinder makes to Mahan's model is to set it in a global context. While Mahan sets his ideas in the context of 'the problem of Asia' and U.S. concern to create an international 'open door' policy in China, Mackinder is a theorist of 'global closure', of the end of imperial expansion and therefore of one political world (Kearns, 1984). This is even more explicit in his 1919 book where the pivot area of Eurasia becomes a heartland in the 'world-island' (Europe-Asia-Africa). But in 1919 Mackinder also expanded the historical scope of his sea power versus land power contest back to classical examples (Alexander versus Egyptian sea power, Hannibal versus Roman sea power) thus opening the way to later interpretation of his model as an eternal truth for Cold War use.

The great paradox of the longevity of Mackinder's model is that it was devised just as air flight was invented which was to transform warfare in the twentieth century. Surely the new trilateral military power pattern should have despatched the simple sea versus land power thinking to history. Certainly the importance of air power was clear to see in World War I and was decisive in World War II. Subsequently the emergence of inter-continental missiles should have made all thought of an invulnerable heartland unsustainable. But the concept not only survived but prospered during the Cold War. There are three separate reasons for this. First the model could be used to rationalize Cold War policies and even legitimate them by association with eternal truths. This can be identified to some extent in the use of 'Mackinderesque language', see Taylor (1990) for examples at

the beginning of the Cold War and O'Tuathail (1992) for an example by President Reagan towards the end. Quite simply since the pattern of a threatening heartland corresponded so closely to the U.S.S.R., Mackinder's model, albeit from another era, was too good to waste. Second the basis of the heartland's significance was changed to its resource potential. This can be traced back to Mackinder with his idea of railways helping mobilize land resources but it is with Hooson (1964), after the demise of military invulnerability, that this becomes the prime property of the heartland as future powerhouse of the world. Third there remains the centrality of the U.S.S.R./Russia on the world political map bordering many more countries than any other state. In strictly realist terms the U.S.S.R./Russia had and have direct security interests in many neighbours: compare the Caribbean as the U.S.A.'s 'backyard' with China, India, the Middle East and Europe as the U.S.S.R.'s old 'backyard'.

Hegemony

Hegemony is not, of course, a concept devised within political geography. In the very different multidisciplinary context of the late twentieth century, hegemony is a general social science concept that has been introduced into international political geography via world-systems analysis (Taylor, 1993b). Its theoretical origins are in the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1971) who developed the notion of hegemony to help explain the rise of fascism in his country in the 1920s. For him hegemony was a situation of class leadership within a society that was based on consensus more than coercion. He interpreted the fascist success as a result of the failure of the Italian bourgeoisie to become hegemonic, thus enabling fascists to use coercion to fill the political vacuum. Most recent applications of the hegemony concept have been applied to the inter-state system where one state is said to be hegemonic in much the same way as a class at the individual society level: instead of imperial dominance, hegemonic states lead by consensus through promoting ideologies of freedom.

(i) *Content: general—hegemonic cycles, specific—Americanization*

With the emergence of the modern world-system in the 'long sixteenth century' (c 1450–1640) as a capital-

ist world-economy, there developed a new form of societal cycle based upon hegemonic states. There have been two-and-a-half such cycles, the one in which we are today based upon the U.S.A. which peaked in the middle of the century, the rise and fall of Great Britain centering on the mid-nineteenth century and the Netherlands cycle peaking in the mid-seventeenth century (Wallerstein, 1984). These three states are very special in their periods both politically and economically (Arrighi, 1990). They are responsible for creating new political economies that other countries adopt. The Dutch stimulated mercantilism and provided the model for the Westphalia system of sovereign states. The British pioneered industrialization and the ordering of the inter-state system through the Concert of Europe. The Americans led the world in consumerism and constructed the international organization centred upon the United Nations. In quite different ways and with a minimum of coercion each of these states led the world-system to a new stage of development in their periods of 'high' hegemony (i.e. at the peak of the cycle).

The historical analogy that underlies identification of these cycles is quite a persuasive one. **Economically each hegemon was pre-eminent first in agro-industrial production which led on to pre-eminence in commerce culminating in pre-eminence in finance.** High hegemony occurs when the hegemon is the leading state in all three economic sectors. As other countries catch up the pre-eminence is lost in the order that it was gained—hence Amsterdam banks, then the City of London and today the New York finance centre outlive their respective state's economic pre-eminence. Economic leadership is expressed by the hegemon promoting international policies for a liberal world-economy: the Dutch with *mare librium* (freedom of the seas) policies, the British with free trade policies and the Americans with free enterprise policies. But hegemons are much more than super-economies. In each case the hegemon is instrumental in defeating, with the help of its allies, the three major imperial threats to the inter-state system as a collection of formally equal states. The Dutch resisted and finally overcame the Hapsburg dream of a 'universal monarchy' in the Thirty Years War. The British defeated the Napoleonic attempt to dominate Europe and create a new continental empire. The Americans in this century led the coalition that was able to defeat the Nazi attempt at

world domination. The hegemons are, therefore, in some sense the guardians of the system. But it works both ways. As largely naval powers and harnessing the army resources of coalition partners, each hegemon had 'good wars' which launched their world leadership: while all their rivals, both friend and foe, are devastated by the 'world war', the hegemon emerges economically stronger than before the war (Taylor, 1993c).

The specific case out of which the theory of hegemonic states derives is as easy to spot as it was for heartland theory. The post-World War II period was a time of immense American prestige and power. Although curtailed by the Soviet challenge and the Cold War, there was no doubt that for people in most countries, America as affluent society represented their ideal as shown through emulation. The world was duly 'Americanized' through the expansion of U.S. multinational corporations, the Hollywood film industry but above all as consumption (Taylor, 1993c). Coca-colonization, McWorld and with blue jeans a seeming compulsory uniform for young people across the world, the American dream became transmuted into a world dream of shopping malls. The revolutions of 1989 showed, among other things, that even the communist world could not resist the appeal of consumerism.

(ii) *Context: the relative decline of the U.S.A.*

It is a fact that during the period of American high hegemony, usually dated from 1945 to 1967 (or 1971), there were no studies of state hegemony (Rapkin, 1990). It seems that interest in hegemony only began once the latest hegemon had passed its prime. Studies of world leadership in the context of the relative decline of the U.S.A. are usually traced back to Kindleberger's (1973) study of the lack of leadership in the 1930s and Robert Gilpin's (1975) comparison of the U.S.A. with British leadership in the nineteenth century. **This generated a large amount of research in International Relations which produced the hegemonic stability theory, the idea of a positive relationship between world order and the existence of a single world leader.** There is a debate about whether the U.S.A. has indeed declined (Strange, 1987) and also, if it has, can it make a comeback (Modelski, 1987)? The policy relevance of these

studies and the general American public concern for the question of American decline has meant that this literature has largely merged with a popular 'what went wrong' genre, the most successful being Paul Kennedy's (1988) *Rise and Fall of Great Powers*. Hence as with heartland and British decline, the study of hegemony represents part of an on-going debate about how to interpret an unpromising contemporary world so as to advise ruling elites on how to change it.

The particular hegemony theory that has been introduced into political geography is somewhat different. Writing in the same context of U.S. relative decline, world-systems analysts devised their theory to extend beyond simple comparison with the demise of British power. By adding a controversial third hegemon, the Netherlands in the seventeenth century, the theory was not only broadened it was made integral to the whole operation of the modern world-system. The key contribution was to treat hegemony as a systemic feature rather than merely a state characteristic (Hopkins, 1990). This meant that in world-systems analysis it is not only the contemporary decline of the latest hegemon that is the issue but the question of the future of the system itself. Will there be a fourth hegemon? Given contemporary level of globalization the consensus seems to be that is no longer possible for a single state to be hegemonic and the implication is that without a hegemon the modern world-system will gradually disintegrate (Taylor, 1993c). This is the radical side of hegemony theory predicting as it does the end of the system. In this case changing the world takes on a more fundamental meaning: the practical implications are for the anti-systemic movements in devising their strategies to change the system.

(iii) Contest: geopolitical power versus geoeconomic power

According to some contemporary commentators the end of the Cold War signals the demise of geopolitical competition as the prime process in international relations. With the defeat of the U.S.S.R, competition between states has become primarily to do with economics: we are entering the geoeconomic era (Luttwak, 1990). The joke that goes with this argument is to answer the question 'who won the Cold War?' with 'Japan and Germany, of course'. But this

is all very ahistorical. It is to coin a new term for what is an old form of international relations; geoeconomics is none other than a new mercantilism by another name. In fact in world-systems analysis it is the third mercantilism since there have been different forms of 'economic warfare' created in each of the hegemonic cycles.

As we have seen, the hegemonic state is the creator of new political economy practices which represent stages in the development of the system. It is the hegemon that shows the efficacy of the economic dimension of state competition against a purely political or military definition of state power. For instance, it is the first hegemon, the Netherlands, that develops a *raison d'etat* that is political and economic in contrast to the traditional political *raison d'etat* which is defined in terms of the glory of the monarch (Taylor, 1994). The seventeenth century is often referred to as the 'age of mercantilism' because the success of the Dutch stimulated emulation by other states, resulting in the first sustained period of state economic warfare in the modern world-system. In a similar manner the political economy promoted by Britain in the nineteenth century stimulated industrialization behind protective tariffs in the late nineteenth century which is sometimes referred to as the 'new mercantilism'. And so we come to the intense inter-state economic competition, with worries about a new phase of protectionism, which is contemporary geoeconomics.

The three rounds of economic warfare briefly described above are not the defining contest in hegemonic theory. As previously noted each hegemon has come to its leadership position as the result of world war victory. Although this is important as a political victory, in each case the economic prowess of the hegemon is particularly highlighted in contrast to the defeated great power. In their turn, the Hapsburg realm, Napoleonic France and the Third Reich, had their political ambitions ultimately constrained by their respective economies. Each in their very different ways embarked on projects that were only sustainable with continual territorial aggrandizement. Such states are incompatible with the medium-term reproduction of the capitalist world-economy and therefore this defeat of political power by economic power is a victory for the system as well as for the hegemon and its allies.

But how does this square with the contemporary role of the U.S.A. as suffering from 'imperial overstretch' as Kennedy (1988) terms it? Quite simply it seems that declining hegemonies use their still impressive political power to compensate for their relative economic decline. The classic case is Great Britain who, as late as 1865, were very much anti-imperial in their foreign policy but, when the great land grab of the late nineteenth century took place, were able to create the greatest empire the world had ever seen. In hegemonic theory this empire is actually a sign of weakness, at its peak Britain did not need to fence off territory for itself. Similarly it is in the late seventeenth century, as decline set in, that the Dutch devised the most comprehensive system of economic protectionism. Thus Reaganism fits into this pattern as a way of asserting American pre-eminence during a time of economic challenge (Wallerstein, 1984). By creating the so-called second Cold War in the early 1980s, U.S. political leadership over economic rivals was reasserted. The irony is, of course, that in compensating for economic decline this policy contributed to accelerating the economic decline. And where do Japan and Germany fit into this analysis? They are, of course, the great success stories of American hegemony, required by the U.S.A. after World War II to employ the very 'isolationism' upon which the hegemon itself rose to leadership.

Synthesis

In the introduction we rehearsed the reasons why we should not expect to find much similarity between the clusters of ideas surrounding heartland and hegemony. I hope that my two discussions of the concepts have suggested definite parallels between the two theoretical schemas above. In this final section of my argument I attempt to go a step farther than this comparison and explore the possibility of a synthesis between the two models. Two points need to be made before I embark on this task. First I use the noted portability of the heartland model in the contemporary post-Cold War spirit of intellectual heterodoxy based upon a distrust of theoretical certainties and a willingness to evaluate the salience of ideas across competing traditions. The dangers of a superficial eclecticism are acknowledged and hopefully mitigated by a transparent recognition of alternative contexts and purposes in knowledge production. Second, my

adaption of Mackinder's ideas will be no more a departure from the original context and purposes than Cold Warrior claims to be following in the 'great man's' footsteps (see O'Tuathail's (1993) exposé on this matter).

Although Mackinder's 1904 paper is strictly political in content whereas studies of hegemony are inherently political economy, we have shown that Mackinder's geostrategic ideas were devised as part of a larger concern that was of a holistic political economy nature. In fact both heartland and hegemony are concerned with general societal questions about the end of one era and look towards a new epoch. The 'Columbian age' and the modern world-system start at the same time but have a different calendar for demise. As several critics have pointed out (Hall, 1955), Mackinder failed to appreciate the rise to prominence of the U.S.A. This resulted in him mis-specifying the decline of Britain as the end of sea power domination: the U.S.A. extended the Columbian age through the twentieth century by becoming a great sea (and air) power to rival any that has gone before (Modelski, 1987). But what is crucial in Mackinder's model is the identification of global closure: the twentieth century was most certainly to become the global era. With the end of geographical expansion as a sort of safety valve for great power rivalry, the nature of international politics changed profoundly. The military turmoil of the twentieth century can be seen as failures to come to terms with this new circumstance. As such Mackinder's global closure fits into world-systems analysis as the first secular trend to reach its limit and therefore as the first marker in the demise of the system (Wallerstein, 1980). In this argument the end of the system approaches as options to solve crises are used up; geographical expansion is one option that can no longer contribute to solving systemic crises.

It will have been noted that hegemonic states have been the great sea powers of their times. Hence Mackinder's contest of sea power versus land power identifies the same contestants as in the hegemon's world war triumphs. In this Columbian age, the dominant land power's threat to the capitalist world-economy was defeated, in each case, by the hegemonic state. But as we enter the long transition to another world-system we can use the heartland model as a possible future scenario. Wallerstein (1983)

identifies several projects that can lead to a replacement of the capitalist world-economy. Perhaps the most likely is what he calls the domination project where there is a transition to a new state-bureaucratic system where inequalities are retained but no longer through world market competition. This conservative scenario is the world empire that Mackinder feared and his heartland model provides a geography of its development. And this is where we can reintroduce the U.S.S.R. into the argument. Despite its radical anti-systemic origins, in practice the U.S.S.R. operated as a dominating bureaucratic empire. Hence Wallerstein's (1983) suspicion that it represented a route to the perpetuation of world inequalities after capitalism. Today, after the passing of the U.S.S.R. into history, we can interpret the Soviet Union as the first heartland attempt to devise a domination project in contradiction to the capitalist world-economy. This first heartland threat has been defeated but it need not be the last.

This paper does not have a conclusion as such. We cannot know what form 'changing the world in political geography' will take in the future. In a period of very rapid social change such as the present, it is easy to dismiss past concepts as unsuitable for our times. Certainly if the processes underlying heartland and hegemony are to play a part in making future worlds, they will operate in quite a different manner to the past. But we must be careful not to define the present as more than new, as separate from the past. Such 'nowism' has been common at several periods during the twentieth century and it is particular rampant today. Both heartland and hegemony are based upon historical analogies that have provided interesting interpretive frameworks for understanding aspects of social change over half a millenium. It is a brave 'nowism' that claims all that stops in our times. By embedding both concepts into a broad historical political economy context, I hope I have provided a framework for evaluating the continuing salience of heartland and hegemony. Only time and space will tell.

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