

Empire for Hegemony: Race, Hierarchy and 20th Century US State Building Interventions

Stephen Pampinella
Associate Professor
State University of New York at New Paltz

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Scholars of postcolonialism in international relations have finally moved to the center of the discipline. Recent research invoking Du Bois' "global color line" has demonstrated how racial hierarchy has structured the Eurocentric international order since its coercive establishment during the first age of imperialism (Anievas, et. al. 2015). The renewed focus on race and racism overlaps with intensifying debates about the so-called US-led "liberal international order," itself threatened by the illiberal and authoritarian policy actions of the Trump administration. While many observers seek the restoration of the US role as a liberal hegemon, others suggest that the United States had always engaged in its own illiberal foreign policy around the world. As Búzás notes (2021), norms of racial discrimination have survived across the various periods of 20th Century US hegemony up to the present. But precisely how racism informs the establishment and expansion of the US-led hegemonic order remains underexamined.

This paper attempts to fill this research gap by examining US state building interventions, or attempts by the United States and its allies to reconstruct state institutions during or after armed conflict through military occupation. The United States has initiated 18 state building interventions, including the initial occupation of Cuba in 1898 following the Spanish-American War and the United States' successful bid for regional hegemony in the Western Hemisphere

through Afghanistan and Iraq wars (Pei, et. al 2006). Not only are state building interventions instances where one polity dominates another's domestic politics (Doyle 1986), but the relational structure constituting such occupations resembles the heterogeneous contracts of an ideal-typical empire (Nexon 2009). Below, I illustrate how state building contributes to imperial divide-and-rule strategies. US policymakers routinely justify state building on the basis of representations of racial identity that correspond to various positions in a global field structured by Eurocentric racial discourses. Contrary to mainstream scholars of the US-hegemonic order, this paper argues that the United States perpetuates imperial relationships within the sovereign states system by building upon the same global racial field that constituted 19th Century European imperialism. In this way, the "liberal world order" of nominally sovereign states cannot escape the racialized colonial legacy of modern world politics. It is a defining characteristic of both US domestic politics and its foreign policy that can be studied in terms of social relations of hierarchy that subjectively constitute the US as racially superior to supposedly inferior polities in the Global South and East (Go 2016).

The paper examines how these relations of hierarchy enable the construction of the US-led hegemonic order across the 20th Century. It shows how representations of racial difference enable the United States to enact US military occupations structured by more or less intense hierarchies. Those same representations also enable imperial divide-and-rule by enabling occupied peoples to reclaim some degree of sovereignty once they internalize Eurocentric racial stigmas (Zarakol 2010, see also Adler-Nissen 2014). However, occupied peoples continually represented as maximally inferior are subject to more intense and longer hierarchies. These same patterns are shown to be continuous as liberal paternalist discourses of Eurocentrism (Hobson 2012) transition from overt racism in the early 20th Century to a colorblind variant by its end.

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