

the consent machine

the crisis of american hegemony



**THEORY  
is  
ALWAYS  
FOR  
SOMEONE  
AND FOR  
SOME  
PURPOSE**

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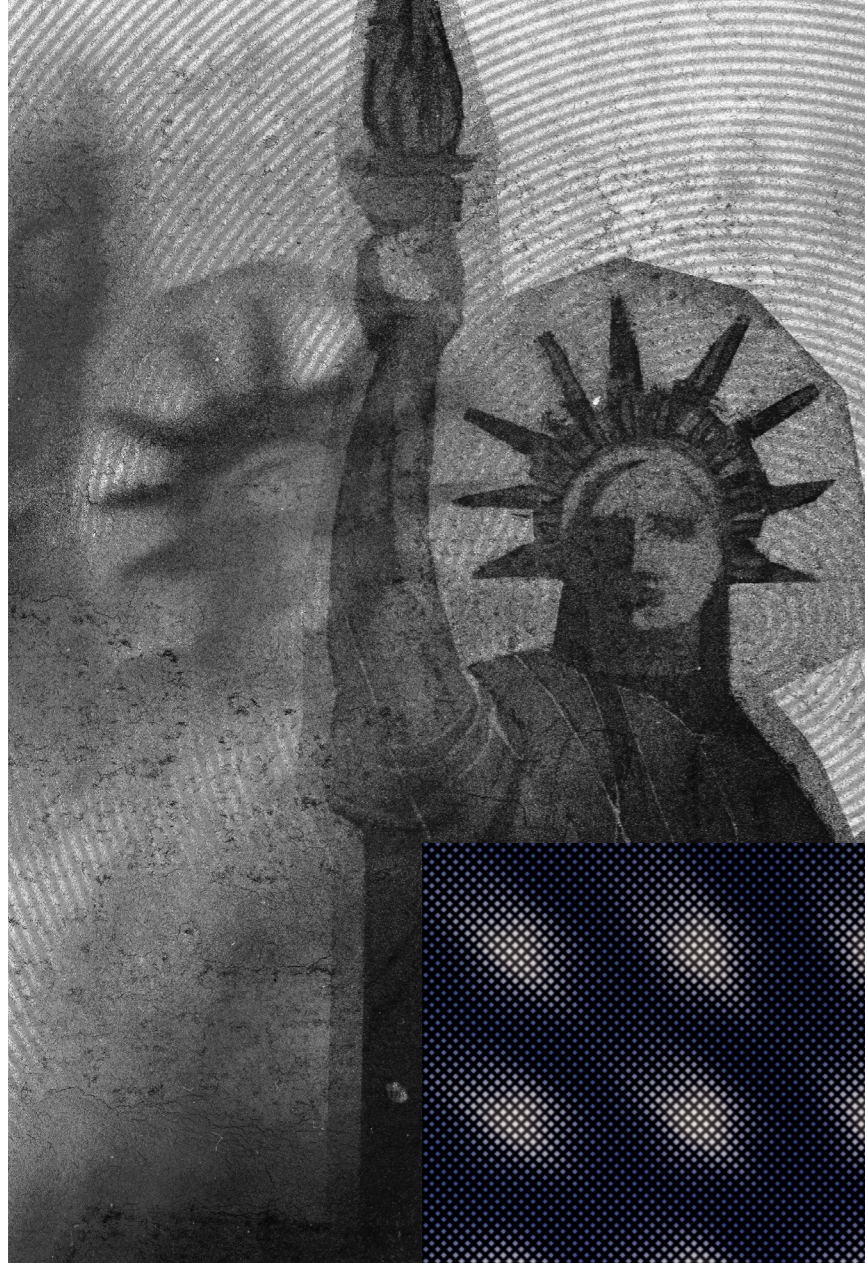
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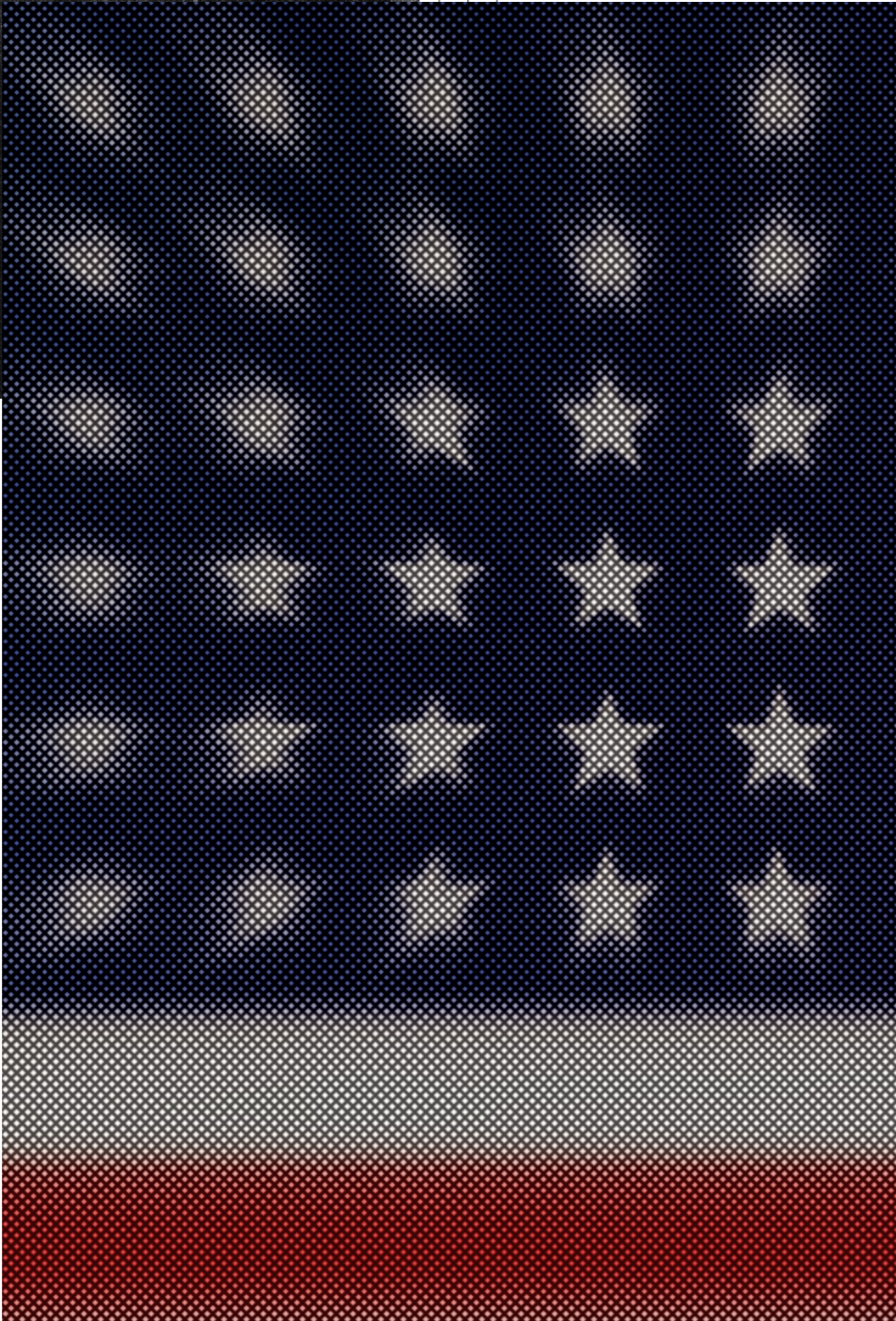
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# **POWER** **CONSENT**

## **AND THE POSTWAR ORDER**

The theoretical problem that confronted Antonio Gramsci's work was how incredibly resilient advanced capitalist societies remained despite the contradictions that Marxists regarded as inherently destabilizing. Writing from a Fascist prison cell, Gramsci was faced with the inconvenient reality that coercion, on its own, is poorly suited to sustain durable political order; Gramsci argued that dominant social forces reproduce hegemony through aligning institutions and social norms around their preferred vision of order. The primary terrain through which consent is organized is implemented through civil society, unions, schools, churches, and media; collectively, these act as intermediaries that legitimize and diffuse the interests of dominant groups into the conceptual framework through which social reality is understood. Hegemony, for Gramsci, was constituted by material relations and manifested through ideological authority; hegemonic ideas become effective when they were anchored by social forces capable of reproducing them.

Robert Cox internationalized Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony in 1981 with his article "Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory." Cox and subsequent neo-Gramscian scholars applied Gramsci's insights to the global level; for Cox, the world order acquires stability when social forces, states, and institutions coalesce into a historical bloc capable of converting a contingent order into lasting authority. While mainstream international relations theories can explain the specific mechanism, such as, institutional cooperation and material capabilities, that sustained the postwar order; neither, respectively, fully addresses how this particular international order acquired its legitimacy and durability.

Hegemony, in the Neo-Gramscian tradition, is the successful organization of consent around a historically specific formation of ideological forces, material capabilities, and institutional authority. Thus, a hegemonic actor derives its

authority from domination and leadership; securing compliance alongside consent. A hegemon's authority is expressed through its ability to influence behavior and construct the categories the give meaning to political reality. A successful hegemonic state is distinguished by its ability to universalize a particular model of political, social, and economic framework; whereby the particular worldview of the hegemonic bloc acquires the appearance of being common interests of the international order. While a hegemonic crisis arrives once force and compulsion have begun to occupy a larger role in sustaining the particular order than consent does.

By deploying neo-Gramscian framework, we can conceptualize the postwar United States as the hegemonic nucleus of a liberal-capitalist world order, rather than as a merely preponderant great power. The foundations of this hegemony derived much of its stability from the alliances, institutions and norms that fostered acquiescence to a U.S.-led order; the American-led order became widely accepted, with its historically constructed yet delicate combination of consent and coercion appearing as legitimate rather than imposed. The erosion of these foundation has become a defining feature within contemporary U.S. foreign policy; the growing reliance upon unilateral and coercive forms of statecraft has weakened the mechanisms through which American hegemony is reproduced. The displacement of consent, along with the growing centrality of coercion, transactional diplomacy, nationalist rhetoric, and unilateral action reflects a declining capacity to portray a U.S.-led order as serving the wider collective interest. By undermining the historical structures that once universalized American interests, the current administration is contributing a hegemonic crisis thereby contributing to an increasingly disordered interregnum.



# The Construction of American Hegemony: Legitimacy, soft power, and common sense

Contrary to the retrospective liberal narrative, the United States global primacy was not achieved through the power of love and friendship; this global dominance was strategically and systemically built into the international order by embedding the belief that what benefited American strategic priorities was synonymous to international stability itself. Since 1945, The U.S. has occupied a position of unparalleled capacity within the liberal international world order. Being the only major power that had escaped the physical devastation of the war the U.S. had an unprecedented advantage and dually occupied a position of preponderant military and material power; which established the structural basis of American hegemony.

The social foundation of American hegemony emerged from the Fordist regime of accumulation. Fordism was organized around mass consumption and mass production and sought to embed liberal capitalist relations into the prevailing framework of the postwar international economy. Through the diffusion of this system across Western Europe, the expansion was inseparable from the Cold War anti-communism; European capitalist classes coalesced around opposition to communism and containment of Soviet influence, resulting in the leadership of the United States being legitimized as the guarantor of reconstruction, collective security and general Western order. In the neo-Gramscian tradition, this configuration is representative of a historic bloc; a transnational alliance of dominant social forces, allied elites, and state actors; a complex ensemble that secures the consent of subordinate groups and allies, while reproducing a particular given order.

This historic bloc was institutionalized through an expanding architecture of global governance. The Bretton Woods settlement was critical in construction of this global governance, establishing the World Bank, NATO, IMF, GATT, the UN and the dollar standard; which were all presented as impartial mechanisms of international cooperation. This institutional architecture was a critical component of the U.S.'s postwar hegemony, these institutions helped stabilize the economy and embed American preferences into the structures of world order. The U.S. maintained a privileged structural position within these arrangements, and its commitment to institutionalizing leadership worked to obscure American power, thus enabling it to appear as a beneficial and legitimate feature of international order rather than domination.

Consent for the postwar order depended upon the combination of collective security arrangements, material advantages, and participation in a U.S.-led institutional framework. Thus, to sustain American hegemony, subordinate states required institutional bargaining that combined economic and security benefits while moderating unilateral American action<sup>20</sup>. By accepting institutional self-restraint, the United States transformed its predominance into legitimacy. The Marshall Plan illustrates this dynamic: participation in the postwar settlement was viewed favorably by many European elites, due to the convergence between European and American interests. What emerged was manufactured consent, which was reinforced through a combination of incentives and political coordination; yet it remains distinct from compliance secured through coercion. Security relations similarly rested upon the same logic; NATO's durability was widely perceived as beneficial collective security by member states. Hence, U.S. military presence within Europe was welcomed, and actively encouraged by governments.

The maintenance of hegemony requires more than the construction of institutional architecture<sup>26</sup>. Without the continual reproduction of consent, institutions begin to lose legitimacy and become incapable of securing consent. The reproduction of hegemony in the postwar order depended upon a realm of liberal principles such as self-determination, free trade, and democracy; these ideals were increasingly universalized and became closely associated with the normative boundaries of legitimate statehood, and American leadership. At the same time, the prosperity and global diffusion of U.S. culture furthered the production of common sense; a condition in which liberal-capitalist social relations are successfully reframed as universally beneficial and natural. This phenomenon would later be labeled as soft power by Joseph Nye<sup>30</sup>, but through a neo-Gramscian lens, this constitutes evidence of a successful global hegemon that achieved securing consent through universalizing historically specific interests<sup>31</sup>. By the late twentieth century, the endurance of American hegemony rested on its predominance as well as the production of common sense.

THE  
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SYMPTOMS APPEAR

# The Trump Administration and the Crisis of Hegemony

The current administration is a symptom of a hegemonic crisis, while simultaneously acting as an agent of this crisis. The social and ideological foundations that underpinned U.S. hegemony had already begun to erode, but this has been accelerated by the policies implemented under the current administration through its continued practice of transactional statecraft and unilateralism, which has weakened the ideological and institutional foundations that organized and reproduced consent.

For decades, postwar trading was justified as a framework that reflected collective interests, mutual gain, and development, rather than unilateral preferences that serve the interests of a single state. The administration's tariff regime weaponizes market access as a coercive instrument; emergency powers were invoked in 2025 to impose tariffs on many major U.S. trading partners, while the subsequent increases to Section 232 further underscored the shift toward coercive economic statecraft. These actions undermine the perception that the particular interests of the U.S. are universal.

Further erosion of consent is evident within the administration's approach towards the institutional foundations of American hegemony. Organizations that once functioned to secure legitimacy now face retrenchment or abandonment or have been utilized as instruments of leverage: USAID faces sustained retrenchment, NATO is reframed as a conditional arrangement, and multilateral institutions have increasingly become objects of skepticism. The incorporation of subordinate states and allies into the postwar governance structures the relations of hierarchy were obscured, presenting American predominance as a collective enterprise; as they recede, the universalist appearance becomes harder to maintain, exposing the hierarchical foundations of the order.

Since hegemonic authority necessitates a worldview capable of successful universalization of its particular interests, then the current administration represents a challenge to that conception itself. The National Security Strategy critiques "globalism" and projects hostility toward the institutional dimension of the postwar hegemonic settlement reflect a repudiation of the common sense that justified a U.S.-centered world order. From a neo-Gramscian perspective, the challenge is ultimately ideological: hegemony cannot sustain itself without the continued reproduction of a broader common sense which is rendered and legitimized through institutional arrangements<sup>40</sup>. The consequences of these actions are visible in the behavior of allies: allies increasingly cultivating diverse alternative partnerships, and greater strategic autonomy whilst confidence in U.S. leadership declines. Under the current administration a central dynamic has emerged: hegemonic decline.

While the United States material predominance has still been maintained, the legitimacy has eroded; without consent, predominance becomes indistinguishable from dominance; from this, the risk lies not in the emergence of a new hegemon; it lies in the deterioration of an existing order and the absence of a clear replacement. The cumulative effect of the current administration's actions, in neo-Gramscian terms, is an international order that is marked by declining hegemonic authority, weakening of common purpose and proliferation of hedging strategies. Thus, the administration is contributing to a less stable international order, stemming from the gradual erosion of the legitimacy that historically converted American predominance into hegemonic authority that was broadly accepted.

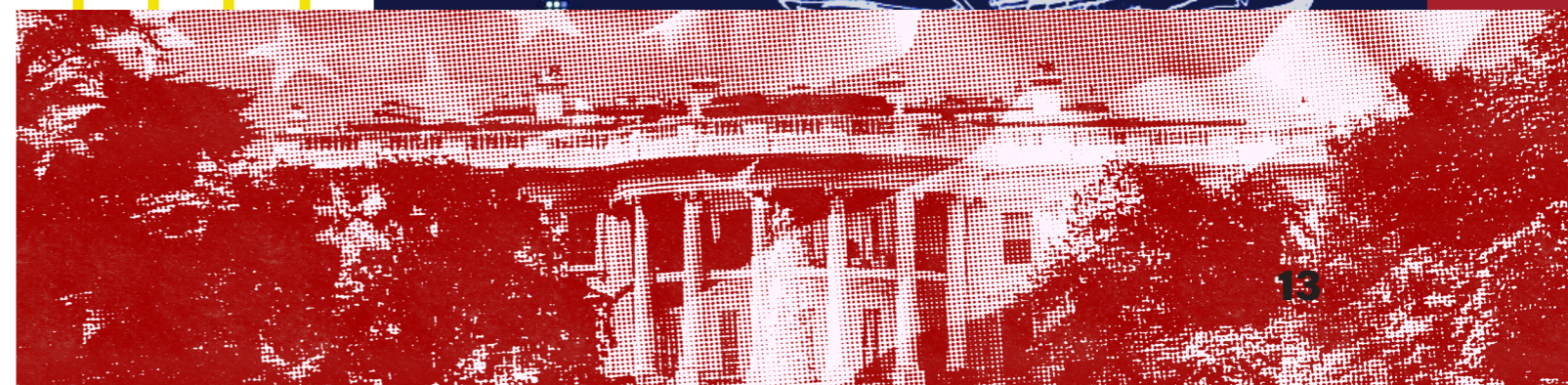
THE  
TRUMP  
CARD

I will avoid the overused cliché stating the ‘revolutionary concept’ I learned from this course was that “International Relations is about more than just economic and military power,” as I already knew this. A lesson that appeared quite frequently within the course structure was that influence depends upon more than material capabilities alone; a state that is influential holds more power than those that purely rely upon compulsion. While through this project, I became more conscious of the contingency of the international order; as an American, the United States involvement in the international order can often appear fixed, something that we just consider to be a natural fact when in reality it has been historically constructed. Understanding the context that built our place in the international order, and the political choices, continual maintenance, and cooperation that sustains it makes contemporary U.S. foreign policy issues reveal themselves to be far more consequential than they might initially seem.

More broadly, I felt encouraged to think more critically, beyond the normalized assumptions; to analyze the structures of power, normalized forms of power, and how they are produced. While development, security, stability, and order are often thought of as neutral or universal, they are frequently shaped by unequal power relations and often defined by the perspectives that obtain the power to define them. In the current political climate, it is vital to look beyond contemporary understandings of legitimacy, politics, and economics to truly understand world politics, and the weight of American geopolitical decisions. While the United States retains its influence in international institutions’ architecture, American power still structures the political possibilities available to others, and the choices of American policymakers can result in consequences felt by those outside our borders.

**POWER  
TO THE  
PEOPLE**

## Reflection



# COLOPHON

## spring 2026 rabbit holes

the voynich manuscript (attempting to solve)

bioShock (my beloved)

corporate feudalism

orcas (<3)

call me by your name (currently reading)

waterworld (the best kevin costner film)

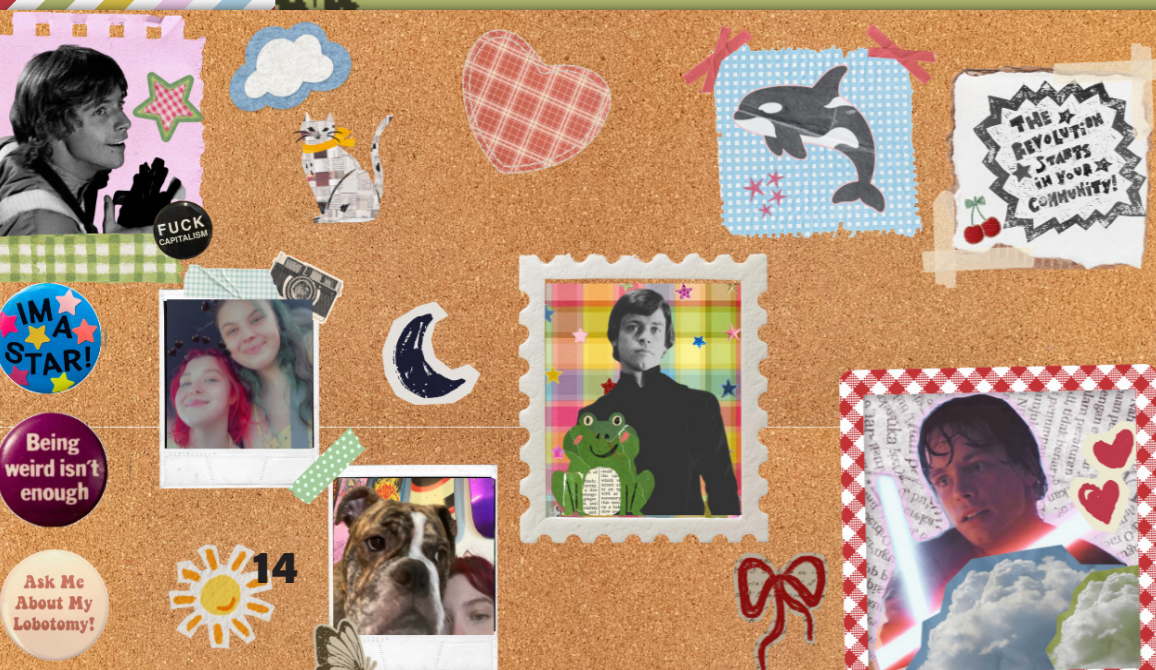


## PLAYLIST

SPRING TERM 2026 // LISTENING REPORT

Most Played Tracks

1. Spillways — Ghost
2. Neoperreo — Secret Society & ALIC3E
3. 4 Raws — EsDeeKid
4. Christ — Ashbury Heights
5. Headphones — jomber & maxwellbean
6. I Feel So Weird — Cheekface
7. Love My Way — The Psychedelic Furs
8. Cherry-Coloured Funk — Cocteau Twins
9. Yes Sir — Chief Keef
10. Hoodtrapstar — Icegergert



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