5. Critical contributions to world-systems analysis
5.3

**Authenticating seventeenth century “hegemonies”**

Dutch, Spanish, French, or none?

*David Wilkinson*

In scrutinizing the history of the modern world-system of great powers, writers have variously attributed “hegemony” (or some cognate) to several different powers at different times. While Spanish, French, British, and American “hegemonies” have been asserted (and contested), perhaps the most contested such imputation is the “Dutch” (or Netherlands) hegemony of the seventeenth century. An examination of claims, counterclaims, and historical evidence in the Dutch case, and in the Spanish and French cases to the extent that they overlap the Dutch, offers us the opportunity to clarify criteria and develop procedures for evaluating “hegemonies.”

**The “Dutch hegemony”**

The claim of a Netherlandish hegemony comes from the world-system writers Immanuel Wallerstein, Terence Hopkins, and others. Wallerstein has provided a definition of hegemony that is generally in accord with standard usage, though perhaps a bit lenient:

Hegemony in the interstate system refers to that situation in which the ongoing rivalry between the so-called “great powers” is so unbalanced that one power is truly *primus inter pares*; that is, one power can largely impose its rules and its wishes (at the very least by effective veto power) in the economic, political, military, diplomatic and even cultural arenas.

*(Wallerstein 1984: 38)*

I mean this to be a relatively restrictive definition. It is not enough for one power’s enterprises simply to have a larger share of the world market or simply to have the most powerful military forces or the largest political role. I mean hegemony only to refer to situations in which the edge is so significant that allied major powers are *de facto* client states and opposed major powers feel relatively frustrated and highly defensive vis-à-vis the hegemonic power.

*(Wallerstein 1984: 39)*

When did this Dutch hegemony exist? Wallerstein gives tentatively suggested maximal bounding points for the Dutch hegemony, and for British and American hegemonies as well: 1620–72, 1815–73, 1945–67 (Wallerstein 1984: 40). There are some confounding propositions: the period 1651–78 is seen as “the height of Dutch hegemony” (in Wallerstein 1980: 65); while
(in Wallerstein 1984: 58), 1650–72 is the period in which the United Provinces fell from “unquestioned supremacy” to “the lesser status of a very powerful state … but nonetheless one state amid several.” Regardless of this contradiction, the period within which a Dutch hegemony must be found, if it indeed existed, is 1620–78.

It may be noted that the exponents of a Dutch hegemony have frequently added to their burden of proof by expounding the argument that, in addition to its politico–military domination, a hegemon must also meet certain economic criteria: when

one core power exceeds all others in the efficiency of its productive, commercial and financial activities, and in military strength. We can call this latter “hegemony.”

(Hopkins and Wallerstein 1982: 116)

Other analysts also accept the Dutch hegemony, for example, Chase-Dunn et al (2005) and Peter Hugill (2009). But there exist alternative readings of seventeenth-century power structures and power transitions.

Alternatives to a Dutch hegemony

The Political Maxims (1746) of Pieter de la Court and Johan de Witt, Grand Pensionary of Holland (1653–72) discuss (228–51) “Alliances which Holland might enter into with mightier Potentates than themselves,” namely France, Spain, and England; of whom the author says “neither of them [sic] fear us, but we must fear them” (228) and “so long as Holland can stand on its own legs, it is utterly unadvisable to make any alliance with those who are more potent … ,” (249), that is, France, Spain, and England. So de la Court (or de Witt), a contemporary of the alleged hegemonies, did not notice any of them. Holland in particular he viewed not as a hegemon but as a second-class power, threatened on all sides by stronger states, yet capable of preserving its independence. (N.B.: Holland was the richest and strongest of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, the Dutch Republic, and the name of the part was and is frequently used as a convenient, if unofficial, synonym for the whole.)

Balance-of-power historians have asserted that in the seventeenth century, and indeed from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, there were hegemonists, but never a hegemony. For Ludwig Dehio (1962), the system of states between 1494 and 1945 saw repeated bids for hegemony: by the Habsburgs under Charles V (34–42); by Spain under Philip II (43–62), by France under Louis XIV (72–90), and again under Napoleon (137–80); and by Germany under Wilhelm II (224–46) and again under Hitler (247–68). But each bid was successfully resisted and collapsed. The outcome of the struggle between Anglo-American and Russian power remained uncertain as of 1962 (269–88).

Paul Kennedy (1987) similarly contended that a Habsburg bid for mastery, 1519–1659, just barely failed. French, British, and German empires were, during their bids for mastery, the most powerful states economically and militarily, but were met by countercoalitions. American and Soviet empires produced a bipolar world; the bid of America, the more powerful, also produced a countercoalition. Neither Dehio nor Kennedy recognized a Netherlands hegemonic bid, let alone a full-blown hegemony.

The leading English-School theorist, Martin Wight (1978: Ch. 2), recognized a sixteenth-century hegemony, but none in the seventeenth or following centuries; instead he saw a series of bipolar or tripolar power structures, regional rather than systemwide hegemonies, usually
geopolitically divided as between a landpower and a seapower. “Dominance,” “hegemony,” “ascendancy,” or “mastery” of the states-system was, in Wight’s view, enjoyed on land and sea by sixteenth-century Habsburg Spain under Charles V. Then it was divided three ways, among Sweden in the Baltic under Charles XII, France in continental West Europe under Louis XIV, and Holland upon the sea. Next it was divided between Napoleonic France on land and Britain on sea. Next it was divided by Kaiserine Germany on land and Britain on sea. Then it was divided between Hitler’s Germany on land and the United States on sea. Most recently it was divided between Soviet Russia on land and the United States on sea. In Wight’s reading, there was no Dutch systemwide hegemony in the seventeenth century, but rather a regional (seapower) hegemony within a tripolar systemwide structure.

The Brockhaus German historical school (Neuhaus 1998; Nicklas 1998) does see seventeenth-century hegemony, and indeed a hegemonic succession, but the succession is from Spain (sixteenth to seventeenth centuries) to France (seventeenth to eighteenth centuries). The Netherlands is not cited as a hegemon. Similarly, The New Cambridge Modern History moves directly from “the decline of Spain” 1609–48/59 (Cooper 1970) to “the ascendancy of France” 1648–88 (Carsten 1961).

The nineteenth–century historian Leopold Ranke (1833) saw two rounds of French hegemony in Europe. France achieved “supremacy” or “domination” in Europe under Louis XIV, but was deprived of it by the eighteenth-century rise of the great powers—England, Austria, Russia, and Prussia. France regained supremacy under Napoleon, and then had its predominance broken once more by the revival of the great powers. Ranke did not observe any “supremacy” of the Netherlands.

A similar picture for the seventeenth century, in the context of a longer-term power evaluation 1495–1975, was seen in the late twentieth century by the political scientist Jack Levy: bipolarity 1495–1556 (France vs. Hapsburgs), unipolarity 1556–88 (Spain), multipolarity 1588–1659, unipolarity 1659–1713 (France), multipolarity 1713–97, unipolarity 1797–1815 (France), multipolarity 1815–1945, bipolarity 1945–75 (US vs. USSR). For Levy, “unipolarity” equals “hegemony”: “If a single state, unmatched by any other, attains a position of hegemony or dominance over the system, then the system is said to be characterized by unipolarity (e.g., Napoleonic Europe)” (Levy, 1985: 47). In Levy’s reading, Spain was then hegemonic 1556–88; there was no hegemon 1588–1659; and France was hegemonic 1659–1713. The Netherlands never appears in a unipolar/hegemonic role, or even as a joint hegemon in a bipolar or tri-polar structure.

In the main and in brief, we may declare that four mutually incompatible claims have been made concerning hegemony in the great power system of the seventeenth century: Dutch hegemony in the mid-century; Spanish hegemony in the early century; French hegemony late in the century; and no hegemony at all, early, mid, or late. At least three of these claims must be mistaken.

How can we arbitrate such conflicting claims?

**Developing a procedure for weighing hegemonic imputations**

Weighing the Dutch candidacy for hegemonic status against those of its rivals can help us develop our understanding of the types and degrees of subaltern subordinations that exist, and of the criteria to be applied in weighing other hegemonic claims.

The existence of a systemwide hegemon necessarily implies that the other powers in the system stand in a relation of inferiority, of subordination, to the hegemon. The term “subaltern” originally denoted a junior officer in the British army, and therefore a person who had authority
over others yet was also subject to the authority of one of higher rank. The most inclusive term for describing states which have power over their own people and territories, and perhaps also over lesser states, yet are also subordinated to a systemwide hegemon, would seem to be “subaltern states.” Let us use this label to encompass both Wallerstein’s “de facto client states” and his “relatively frustrated and highly defensive” opposed major powers.

When it is asserted that at some time for some interstate system state X was “hegemon” to that system, the procedure for verifying or falsifying that assertion must involve a survey of the other states of the system, and an inspection of their relations with the candidate hegemon, to determine whether they did indeed stand in relation to it as “subalterns.” If all other states are indeed subalterns to the candidate, the candidate is undoubtedly a hegemon. If none are, it certainly is no hegemon. If some are and some are not, there is cause for careful reflection.

As regards the place of the “hegemon” in the system of states, we may reasonably expect that when a state attains hegemony, such of its historic objectives as have in the past been balked by the resistance of other powers will be overcome, and the hegemon will clear its backlog of desire.

Further evidence of hegemonic attainment would be the scaling up of previous ambitions, and the attainment of objectives previously out of the question: objectives once local or regional will be expanded to systemwide scale, as local frustrations are replaced by systemwide achievement.

**Appraising Dutch, Spanish, and French “hegemonies”**

Let us apply these procedures to the states in the system farthest from the candidates, all three of whom are at what may be called the “West End” of the interstate system of the era, namely the often-neglected “East End” and “North End” states—the Ottoman Empire, Iran, Russia, Sweden, Denmark. (As of the seventeenth century, the “modern” world-system would also include the European overseas colonies as peripheries, but would exclude the coexisting world-systems of India, China, and Japan, as well as the interiors of Africa and the Americas.) Next we can look at the great powers nearer to the candidates, that is, Habsburg Austria and England. What were they doing 1620–78, and how, if at all, do they display de facto client status, or high frustration and defensiveness, vis-à-vis the Netherlands (or Spain then France)? Finally, we can examine the mutual relations of the three candidates.

In 1620–78, the Ottoman Empire fought Poland, Iran, Russia (via a Crimean vassal), Venice, Transylvania, Austria, Poland again, and Russia again, with shifting fortunes. The Ottomans put down rebellious governors or vassals in Syria and Transylvania, and acquired new vassals in Ukraine. The Netherlands, Spain, and France were not involved. There is no evidence that the Ottomans were subaltern to any hegemon, nor frustrated and defensive vis-à-vis any of the proclaimed hegemons, though such terms would at times describe their relation to their Central and West European and Southwest Asian neighbors.

In 1620–78, Iran established trade ties with the Dutch, (the English had already arrived) fought the Ottomans and conquered what is now Iraq, then suffered losses and became quiescent. Spain and France were not involved; ties with the Dutch were economic, with the Dutch acquiring no political power. There is no evidence that Iran was subaltern to any hegemon, or that it was frustrated and defensive vis-à-vis any of the proclaimed hegemons, though it was indeed frustrated by and defensive toward the Ottoman Empire late in the subject period.

In 1620–78, Russia, having recovered from its “Time of Troubles,” generally followed a cautious policy of the status quo, punctuated by wars with Poland to acquire territory in what is now Belarus, until it became involved in the First Northern War (1655–61) to defend Poland against Swedish expansion. Denmark, Transylvania, Brandenburg, Ukraine, Austria, Holland, Crimea, and (diplomatically) France, successively become involved, some to gain territory, some
to prevent the gains of others. After this war, Russia resumed its war with Poland and made territorial gains. The Dutch role in the First Northern War helped Denmark, hurt Sweden, and did not affect Russia; French diplomacy restrained Sweden, but again did not affect Russia. Spain was not involved in Russian affairs. There is no evidence that Russia was subaltern to any hegemon whatsoever, or frustrated and defensive vis-à-vis any of the proclaimed hegemons.

In 1620–78, Poland fought Russia, sustained a rebellion by Cossacks and Ukrainians aided by Tatar Crimea, fell into chaos under Russian pressure, was attacked in the First Northern War by predators (Sweden, Transylvania, Brandenburg, and Ukraine), then rescued by Russia, Denmark, Austria, and French diplomacy; fought Russia again, fell into civil war and fought Cossacks, Tatars, and Ottomans. Holland and Spain were not involved; France’s role was minimal. There is no evidence that Poland was subaltern to, nor frustrated and defensive vis-à-vis, any of the proclaimed hegemons, though there were periods when it was very defensive vis-à-vis Sweden and Russia, and in a client-state position with regard to several rescuers—but not Holland, Spain, or France.

In 1620–78, Sweden expanded against Poland, intervened on behalf of the German Protestants in the Thirty Years’ War but was frustrated by Habsburg, Imperial–Catholic, and Spanish armies, remained in the war sustained by French subsidies, made major gains in the Peace of Westphalia, attacked Poland (provoking the First Northern War) and after multiple interventions and counter-interventions, gained Polish and Danish territory; joined England and Holland to oppose Louis XIV, but was bought off by France, then fought Brandenburg, Holland, and Denmark with French support, was badly defeated, but rescued by France in the Peace of Nimwegen (1678). It would be fair to say that Sweden was subaltern to France in the last phase of the Thirty Years War 1635–48, and in the last portion of the Franco-Dutch War of 1672–78; Swedish involvement with Holland and Spain was active, but did not show subordination. The major source of Swedish frustration was Austria and Catholic German states.

In 1620–78, Denmark intervened 1625–29 in favor of German Protestants, but was frustrated by Imperial and Catholic League forces and made a separate peace. Later, Denmark repeatedly sought to resist the expansion of Sweden, generally being defeated, but was rescued by Holland in 1658–60, aided Holland against England in the Second Anglo-Dutch War 1665–67, and fought Sweden at Holland’s behest and to no profit 1675–79. It would be reasonable to treat Denmark as a subaltern client to the Netherlands 1658–79, but not earlier; the sources of its frustrations were Austria, German Catholic states, and Sweden.

In 1620–78, Habsburg Austria became fully engaged in the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48), in which it struggled to maintain its local hegemony in the Holy Roman Empire against German Protestant rebels, these supported successively by Denmark, Sweden, and France, while Spain, and a German Catholic League supported Austria. The resulting Peace of Westphalia (1648) greatly decentralized the Empire, weakening Austria. In the First Northern War, Austria intervened to stabilize southern Poland. In 1663–64, Austrian designs on Transylvania were frustrated by Turkey; despite support from France, Austria made a conciliatory peace. Austria joined Spain and Lorraine to support Holland against France in the Franco-Dutch war of 1672–78; France made some gains, at Spain’s expense. There is no evidence that Austria was subaltern to any hegemon, nor frustrated and defensive vis-à-vis any of the proclaimed hegemons during the epochs of their respective purported hegemonies; it was frustrated and defensive against German Protestant rebels and their successive supporters Denmark, Sweden, and France during the Thirty Years’ War (a period of alleged Dutch, and alleged Spanish hegemony), and later followed an independent and cautiously interventionist policy, usually on behalf of a status quo, not as a client of Holland, Spain, or France.

In 1620–78, England’s internecine political strife reinforced a generally vacillating foreign policy. Spain was fought without gain 1625–28; English support for the French Huguenots
1625–29 did not save them from France; three aggressive Anglo-Dutch wars 1652–54, 1665–67, 1672–74 brought little gain; useful assistance to France against Spain 1657–59 gained Dunkirk, soon sold to France; an alliance with Holland in 1668 persuaded France to limit its gains in the War of Devolution against Spain. There is no evidence that England was subaltern to any hegemon, nor frustrated and defensive vis-à-vis any of the proclaimed hegemons; England alternated between indulging in internal war unmolested by its neighbors, and tentatively asserting a rather "forward" policy that lacked commitment and had minor results.

We come at length to the purported hegemons, Holland, Spain, and France. Their involvement in the world-system’s wars and diplomacy was certainly extensive. In the Thirty Years’ War, Holland fought Spain 1621–48; France fought Spain 1635–59. Holland defended itself more or less successfully against England in three Anglo-Dutch wars, restricted French advances against Spain in the War of Devolution, and successfully defended itself against France 1672–78.

All three alleged hegemons certainly displayed classic great-power behavior. Toward the end of the period, the growing strength and aggression of France were reflected by hegemonistic policies directed at Spain and Holland, but the targets and coalition partners contained French expansion with minor damage: accordingly, we cannot say that any of these three powers was hegemonic over, or subaltern to, any of the others. As regards the rest of the system, as we have already seen, although Holland did have Denmark as subaltern for a few years, and France had Sweden as subaltern in several engagements, none of the three had hegemony over the Ottoman Empire, Iran, Russia, Poland, Austria, or England.

Did any of the three candidate hegemons attain historic objectives and then scale up local ambitions to systemwide dimensions? Holland sought to preserve its independence from Spain, then from France, and was successful in this; it sought to prevent domination of the Baltic by Sweden or Denmark, and was again successful. It failed to reacquire and reunite the Spanish Netherlands, lost before 1590. Having defeated Spain’s navy in the Battle of the Downs (1639), Holland acquired naval supremacy in the English Channel, but lost it in the First Anglo-Dutch War (1652–54). Spain failed to reacquire the northern Netherlands (1621–48), was defeated at sea by Holland at the Battle of the Downs and on Land by France at Rocroi (1643). France made significant territorial gains from the Empire (in Lorraine and Alsace 1648) and from Spain (Rousillon 1659, several cities in the Spanish Netherlands 1668, Franche-Comté and additional parts of Spanish Netherlands 1678) but was repeatedly forced to stop short of its war objectives, last of all in its attempt to conquer the entire Spanish Netherlands and the Dutch republic in the Franco-Dutch War (1672–78). None of the candidates was fully successful in its expansionist aims, and none scaled up its ambitions and attainments to systemwide dimension.

Accordingly it cannot be maintained that Holland, Spain, or France was a systemwide hegemon at any time between 1620 and 1678. The hegemonic hypotheses are disconfirmed; the alternative hypothesis that is confirmed is that the system was multipolar throughout the period.

A note on the economics of hegemony

The exponents of a Dutch hegemony have frequently added to their burden of proof by expounding the argument that, in addition to its politico-military domination, a hegemon must also meet certain economic criteria: when

one core power exceeds all others in the efficiency of its productive, commercial, and financial activities, and in military strength. We can call this latter “hegemony.”

(Hopkins and Wallerstein 1982: 116)
If we had found a Dutch, Spanish, or French hegemony to have existed in the seventeenth century, in the classic politico-military sense, we might reasonably have gone on to inquire concerning its economic basis or aspects. Had we found a Dutch hegemony, we might well have associated it with the economics of Dutch “Golden Age” sea trade, global reach, capital investment, merchant concentration, banking, insurance, market competition, advances in productive technology (textiles, shipbuilding, wind power, land reclamation), and labor skills (de Vries and van der Woude 1997: 668–74). Had we found a Spanish hegemony, we might well have associated it with the economics of Spanish “Golden Age” financial dominance through the inflow of gold and silver bullion, used to acquire credit and translated into enormous Spanish armies and fleets (Anderson 1988: 17, 25–26, 36–37; Spooner 1968: 26–28). Had we found a French hegemony, we might well have associated it with the ability of the finance minister Colbert to extract the maximum revenue from France’s imposing population and wealth in a grand national mobilization for war, and pass it on to the expanded army of the great military administrators Le Tellier and Louvois (Anderson 1988: 17, 60–61, 77–79, 83, 96). But as there was no politico-military hegemon, the advantages of the Netherlands in capitalist development, of Spain in specie and borrowing power, and of France in economic mobilization, in essence canceled one another out in the struggle for hegemony, and merely provide a different economic basis for the great power status of each.

Conclusion

In appraising claims that impute “hegemony” to one state or another at one time or another, it is essential to take account of competing claims and to weigh evidence. The methodological flaw that is shared by the otherwise contradictory interpretations of the seventeenth-century power structure of the interstate system is a failure to come to grips with, or even to notice, the existence of the controversy.

In weighing evidence regarding hegemonic claims, it is equally essential to avoid a regional bias, a “View from 9th Avenue.” Saul Steinberg’s famed The New Yorker cover of March 29, 1976, “View of the World from 9th Avenue,” well illustrates a restricted world-image centered on Manhattan in which China, Japan, and Russia are dwarfed in size, detail, and significance by—10th Avenue! In examinations of hegemonic claims, it is important to avoid a focus on a single state or region that overlooks important areas beyond its reach; this can be managed by scrutinizing the world-system state by state and region by region, in search of great powers which behaved independently (i.e., were not under the hegemony of the “hegemon”). In the case of the alleged Dutch (and Spanish and French) hegemonies of the seventeenth century, scholars from the “West End” of the world-system seem to have underestimated the size and power of “East End” states such as the Ottoman Empire, Russia, and Iran, and even of “Central” Habsburg Austria, and to have neglected the importance of non–West-End zones of significant struggles for power such as Iraq, Poland, and Transylvania; had these been attended to from the start, surely all three hegemonic claims would soon have been abandoned.

The key method for evaluating assertions of hegemony must then be the examination of the external relations of each other major power in the system of states with the purported hegemon, without favoring any particular region with research attention. Where there are no relations at all, or economic relations without politico-military connections, there can be no hegemony. Where there is continued fighting without clear victory, there is no hegemony. Where states ally without subordination as a result of coinciding but independent calculations of interest, there is no hegemony. But where one great power commands or buys the obedience of another, or extorts tribute from it, or coercively compels it to abandon its policy objectives (without being itself
reciprocally coerced, balanced, and deterred), we find a bilateral hegemonic relationship; where that great power exerts such control over all other major powers, we find a systemwide hegemony.

References


