

# Hegemony, consensus building, and pedagogical colonisation: new ways of external interference?

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**Abstract:** This study is a theoretical effort to rethink International Relations from the perspective of Neo-Gramscian Critical Theory in which its empirical object is the US hegemony in the scope of Latin America. More specifically, this study refers to the fabrication of consensus directed by an American ruling class through its own vehicle for this – the Atlas Network – which finds legitimacy and support in its Latin American counterparts. Based on primary data, public documents, and specialised bibliography, this study aims to contribute to the rethinking of International Relations using this institute as an object of empirical relation to theoretical study. More than presenting domination strategies through private hegemony apparatus, this study encourages us to reflect on relatively forgotten (or marginalised) practices and concepts in International Relations, such as imperialism, hegemony, and the role of consensus building. Finally, from Critical Theory, it contributes to understand the role of ruling classes in the creation of consensus in subaltern countries and classes to maintain this same hegemonic structure.

**Keywords:** Hegemony; Critical Theory; USA; Latin America; Atlas Network.

## Introduction

No hegemony remains without a symbolic organisation of ideas in the form of consensus. The use of ideas to maintain the US dominance over Latin America is the main subject of the article presented here. In this sense, this study is a theoretical effort to rethink International Relations – largely a US, state-centric, and androcentric domain (Hoffman, 1977; Tickner, 2003; Acharya and Buzan, 2010; Tickner and Inoue, 2016; Villa et al. 2017) – from the perspective of Neo-Gramscian Critical Theory. Indeed, Antonio Gramsci was fundamental to understand and emphasize the role of ideas and intellectuals from a Marxist perspective.

Assuming that '[a]ll theory is for someone and has some purpose' (Cox 1981:87) and that relations in the international system are based on a relationship between centre and

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periphery in which the centre features ‘technical knowledge’ (Cox 1981:87) that develops ideas and theories that are then imported and reproduced by the periphery, it is understood that the ideologies developed by the first would be anchored in a dominant position, given a difference in terms of material wealth. In this context, a first observation needs to be highlighted: in this study it is understood that the prevailing approaches in the International Relations (IR) area produced by the centre do not only limit the understanding of the prevailing dynamics in the international sphere, but are also harmful to peripheral actors given that the world views diffused (and produced) by the centre aims to maintain and reproduce this unequal structure.

This ‘centre,’ however, concerns less to an abstract entity, such as the ‘state,’ and more to a ruling class (economic and political) of a certain country that is considered developed. In other words, when we centralise in the ‘state’ as a single unit that presents a single national interest, we take no account of the role that the ruling class plays, including in the maintenance of certain ideologies domestically and around the world. In this sense, it is worth remembering that contrary to ‘problem solving theories’ (Cox 1981), critical theories regard the ‘state’ in its complexity including all social forces that compose it.

A second observation, derived from the first: we understand in this study that there is no such thing as one ‘national interest.’ The alleged ‘national interest’ is nothing more than the interest of a ruling class in maintaining its privileges, which finds resonance (or resistance) with regards to other classes. As de Souza (2020:11, translated by the author) states in the case of this ruling class in the USA, ‘[...] this is not about opposition between nations, but the leadership by the American élite of an imperialist process of world domination, including over its own people.’ It is worth remembering that, in the United States case, the practical effects of the political and economic discourse of its ruling class also criminalise a significant part of its population (Alexander 2017). Therefore, the interests of a US ruling class are more associated with those of another ruling class – even if from another country – than to the subordinate class within their own nation. Thus, the focus shifts from the threat to the survival of one state versus another state, to the threat to the maintenance of an economically dominant ruling class versus another economically subordinate class, whether it is inside or outside its own state. In this sense, consensus building receives a privileged space.

What we call here hegemony through consensus building correlates with a form of contemporary capitalist-neoliberal imperialism that has an important ally in ruling classes of peripheral countries. According to Ellen Wood, the United States is the first capitalist empire in the world: it is ‘[...] the capitalist empire in which the main characteristic is to operate as much as possible through economic imperatives and not by direct colonial exercise’ (Wood 2014:10, translated by the author). To Utsa Patnaik and Prahbat Patnaik, the contemporary form of imperialism defines itself by the adoption of neoliberal practices. As such, ‘[i]n contemporary capitalism, contrary to the colonial period, the application of neoliberal politics is the main vehicle to impose an income deflation to workers in the periphery’ (Patnaik and Patnaik 2020:24, translated by the author). This imperialism, in a less direct way than a military intervention but by no means less effective, is only possible

if it manages to produce a world view that is shared by the ruling classes of the very states it dominates. This neoliberal<sup>1</sup> world view, of interest of the ruling class that disseminates it, is not for nothing characterized and promoted as moral and universal. As symbolic violence, this 'imperialism of the universal' (Bourdieu 2003:15, translated by the author) presents itself as liberator.

In fact, the movement towards the use of the Gramscian approach applied to International Relations has been slow and relatively new, as stated by Stephan Gill (1993). Likewise, with the end of Cold War and, in particular after 9/11, there seems to be a tacit understanding among internationalists that Latin America had been neglected by the United States (Hakim 2006; Riggiozzi and Tussie 2012; Lima 2013; Long 2015). We point here that the region not only remained a US priority, but the interventionist practices carried out by US leaders did not cease with the advent of the 21st century. In this sense, it is worth bringing here the empirical study by Livia Milani (2021) that corroborates this argument. Based on two categories of analysis (economic assistance and the role of the Southern Command), the author shows how US foreign policy continued to operate in Latin America even after 9/11.

Indeed, with the end of the Cold War and the decrease in military incursions by US institutions in Latin America, it seems that the idea of self-responsibility has been absorbed in the region – after all, as the neoliberal logic widespread in US foreign policy in that continent points out, we are responsible for our own destiny as individuals and as a nation. There appears to be not even a question about how the neoliberal logic, as a 'way of the world' (Dardot and Laval 2016), is introduced in Latin American countries in a strategic way, even though it is shrouded in a curtain of causality or naturalness that hides an external interference and a symbolic violence. Finally, as there is no lasting hegemony in which the minds of the oppressed are not colonised, we are still witnessing Latin American societies being criminalised and made subordinate by neoliberal ideals; glorifying and approving its importation, after all, the knowledge that comes from the centre is to be copied according to the international division logic of labour in which centre creates and exports 'scientific' analyses, while periphery consumes and reproduces them. As was well stated by Patnaik and Patnaik (2020:31, translated by the author), 'the invisibility of imperialism today means that it became even more powerful, not that it disappeared.'

Recently, some authors have been resuming (or initiating) studies based on the relationship between the role of ideas in the maintenance of the capitalist structure. In this context, some of these studies point to the dominance of a certain ruling economic class in relation to a subordinate one through the naturalisation of ideas and practices and through consensus creation and maintenance (Piketty 2020; Boron 2021; Blyth 2020; Alperovitz and Daly 2010). Here in Brazil, this endeavour has been particularly expressive in the field of History with Virginia Fontes and Flavio Henrique Casimiro's studies. There are also recent studies in the International Relations area that seek to rescue certain concepts, such as imperialism (Lopez 2020), as well as unveil others, such as the concept of hybrid wars<sup>2</sup> (Korybko 2018). Finally, some authors have resorted to Gramscian concepts in the study of the contemporary far-right, emphasising the role of ideas in the hegemonic

maintenance of certain ruling classes (Burian and Sanahuja 2020). Thus, from this re-sumption of critical studies on domination and hegemony, there is a possibility of developing research aimed at existing interrelationships and connections between the practices developed by ruling groups within a given state and the way in which they are related and reproduced in the international system.

This study is also based in another observation: The United States exerted and still exerts direct and indirect interference in Latin America. If the military interventions of that country had an emphasis on the Cold War period in the region, indirect interventions were strengthened at the end of this period characterizing the third phase of imperialism (Boron 2020)<sup>3</sup>. Although less visible, current interventions are not less subtle or innocent – they remain part of a hegemonic project led by a ruling US economic class that finds legitimacy and support in its South American counterparts. The consensus building among the subjugated, ‘a euphemism for deliberate manipulation of the masses against their best interests’ (de Souza 2020:104, translated by the author), plays a key role in this strategy of domination by being characterised by an ‘imperialism based on indirect economic and cultural influence [and] which replaces with advantages the direct, costly, and violent military domination’ (de Souza 2020:12).

In this context, this study seeks to build a bridge between the already established consensus about the US academic domain in the scope of International Relations – specifically in the formation of the fundamental theories of the area (Hoffman 1977; Tickner 2003; Acharya and Buzan 2010; Tickner and Inoue 2016; Villa et al. 2017) and the empirical study of this domination on the political and ideological place in Latin America. If, as Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) state, theory without empiricism is empty and empiricism without theory is blind; the effort here takes place, in particular, in the study of US interference in South American countries through a US ‘pedagogical’ effort. Therefore, it refers to the promotion, by the ruling classes, of a neoliberal ‘economic education’ (Forms 990 2002) through institutes that propagate costly doctrines, values, and interests to this same ruling class in the US and Latin American spheres. The defended idea is that the ‘partner’ institutes of the American Atlas Network in the Latin American scope reproduce hegemonic neoliberal practices based on ‘educational’ (or pedagogical) strategies for the creation of consensus.

Thus, the starting point of this study is the understanding that the ruling elite legitimises its role by persuading society to think in a certain way – one that reproduces economic and social inequality – either through force or through consensus. In the study carried out here, this takes place from the internalisation and naturalisation of neoliberalism which, even though it serves certain particular interests, presents itself as universal<sup>4</sup>. This true ‘market civilisation’ (Gill 1995) is obviously not internalised naturally, but through ‘educational’ practices produced and legitimised by technical knowledge in the centre and that aim precisely to create a consensus in society (transported, afterwards, to the political arena).

To spread the neoliberal reason in the Latin American region, an increasingly pronounced development of centres of ideas has been observed. As private apparatuses of

hegemony (Gramsci 2007), these voluntary organisations by civil society present themselves as autonomous and non-partisan based on their organic intellectuals but are related to the ruling economic class that seeks to maintain and propagate its system of domination<sup>5</sup>. The American Atlas Network stands out as a clear example. Its main purpose is the 'economic education' of societies outside the United States. In this context, Atlas is perhaps, in the current period, the best Gramscian consolidation of the consensus-building strategy: it manages to organically spread the interests of the hegemonic class in societies so that its domination is accepted and reproduced by the subordinate classes.

Thus, through a neo-Gramscian Critical Theory perspective, this study aims to contribute in International Relations to studies that prioritise concepts such as hegemony and the use of institutions to disseminate certain ideas for the hegemonic maintenance of a ruling class. For this, we first present concepts and a theoretical approach to then investigate the role of Atlas as a disseminator of a neoliberal consensus in Latin America and, specifically, in Brazil through partner institutes that serve to maintain the interests and privileges of an American ruling class. Based on primary data available on the websites of this institute, public documents, and specialised bibliography, this study is characterised by the effort to rethink International Relations using this institute as an object of empirical relation to the theoretical study.

Therefore, the US ruling class acts through institutes such as Atlas aiming to exercise domain and leadership practices in other subordinated classes and countries. These private apparatuses of hegemony serve as a means to the creation, diffusion and maintenance of ideas consistent with the economic interests of its own ruling class. As the condition of hegemony is related to the 'possibility of giving state activity an autonomous direction, which influences and resonates with other states' (Gramsci 2007:55), a system of alliances with other ruling classes abroad is created in a way that extends its interests beyond its borders.

Finally, more than presenting the close bond between two dominant layers in the US and Brazil and their efforts to promote a neoliberal agenda through private apparatuses of hegemony, this study encourages us to reflect on practices and concepts in International Relations according to Neo-Gramscian perspectives while questioning the predominant role that traditional theories and concepts in International Relations play in the area. Specifically, this study makes us return to critical theoretical approaches, such as the Gramscian Critical Theory, in order to apprehend the role that ruling classes (still) play in maintaining societies and countries unequal and colonised.

## **Consensus building as a tool of domination**

In the context of Critical Theory applied to International Relations, we can define hegemony as a set of tools used by the ruling class in order to obtain the consent or the subjugation of the dominated class. As such, hegemony is understood as a set of functions of domain and direction exercised by a certain ruling social class over the rest of society that uses a 'combination of strength and consensus that variously balance themselves, without

force supplanting too much consensus' (Gramsci 2007:73). While the function of domain traditionally represents the use of force (the military as an example), the function of direction represents the use of ideas to create and maintain a consensus in society. The battle for the maintenance of the ruling class should be played, firstly, in the realm of ideas within civil society aiming to a consensus building. It is within the historical bloc that the ruling and the subordinate class functions through its intellectuals and the direction of the economy and the state. In order to conquer and maintain hegemony, it is necessary, therefore, that the ruling class may exert moral, political, and intellectual leadership aiming to obtain the consent and the internalization of values, world views and ideas that are of interest exclusively of the ruling class but are diffused as universally beneficial to all civil society. In sum, it is the organization of consent (Barrett 1996).

Therefore, hegemony, at the global level, is understood as a form of domain and direction where the predominant state(s) create(s) a world order consistent with its own ideology and values, serving for the reproduction of that same hegemony and its ruling class through consensus practices and/or through force when consensus alone is not effective. As such, it is an economic order that is diffused in all countries and work to maintain the division of labour and the production mode through certain norms developed by the centre and internalised by the periphery. In this sense, this global hegemony is one that represents and correlates social, political, and economic structures that organise and legitimise the subordination of peripheral classes and countries.

In this sense, this global hegemony is an expansion of that hegemony initially shaped as dominant within the state and later exported internationally using, for this purpose, a consensual (or coercive) apparatus to ensure the subordination of peripheral classes and countries that do not consent (Gramsci 1989). Thus, the 'state' in the international system acts as a representative of the interests of those agents who occupy dominant positions in their domestic spaces. The 'national interest', therefore, is the interest of the economic (and political) ruling class that aims to maintain its privileges and its hegemony. The case of US hegemony corroborates to the argument.

Contemporary US hegemonic domination has sought to minimise military and clearly identifiable interventions (such as the case of military interventions in Central and South Americas during the second half of the 20th century) and to increase consensus building through ideological persuasion techniques that meet the interests of the US ruling class. Traditionally, the hegemony exerted by the ruling social class in the United States at the international level is one that combines strategies of coercion and consensus. The first is very familiar to us, as Latin Americans. The second, though less visible, is not less violent. As a symbolic violence<sup>6</sup>, it is present in the International Relations field itself – a typical American discipline (Hoffman 1977) –, and in the way we think about the role of the state, of public policies and of the international system. Thus, the current US ruling class domination in this region is not only ensured by coercion, but also (and mainly) by mechanisms of consensus through social institutions that serve to justify and legitimise this same system of domination through moral and intellectual directions. As Stephen Gill

observes, 'central to the maintenance of hegemony is a system of rule premised more upon consensual aspects of power rather than direct coercion' (Gill 2008:14).

For Gramsci (1971), the ruling elite legitimises its role by persuading society to think in a certain way – one that maintains the privileges of that same social class and reproduces economic and social inequality. A 'hegemonic state', according to him, does not swing or change courses because it is the hegemonic state that determines the will and the actions of states abroad, not the other way around (Gramsci 1976). The strategy of maintaining the US hegemony is, therefore, the strategy of maintaining an economic ruling class that strives to enforce its values and interests in the international sphere in the form of naturalisation of certain ideologies and forms of society, such as the case of the neoliberalism – understood, in addition to as an ideology, as a normative system that influences not only economic policy, but also social relations (Dardot and Laval 2016)<sup>7</sup>.

This structure of domination is supported by the belief that the centre exerts 'technical knowledge' (Cox 1981) producing ideas, concepts, and theories, while the periphery imports and consumes them in a reproduction of knowledge proper to a relation of dependency. If we consider, as Cox (1981) states, that every idea of the world is made for someone and has some interest, we can realise that importing these ideas is not only problematic in terms of differences regarding material and symbolic resources, but it is also harmful to the extent that it reproduces world views that are alien to our economic and social realities. This means saying that the 'scientific' and 'universal' world views and theories that will guide the action of the ruling classes have a direct relationship with the economic and political demands of that same class. As Arturo Jauretche states, the appearance of universality (and scientificity) of these ideologies is only possible due to the power of universal expansion that the centres (that create them) hold. Thus, 'Taking these relative values as absolute is a defect rested in the genesis of our "intelligentsia" and hence its colonialism' (Jauretche 1975:6-7, translated by the author).

In fact, the dominance performed by these US ruling classes in the Latin American sphere would not be possible without the role of the local 'intelligentsia' – native intellectuals whose interest in their own class maintenance is allied with the interests of the hegemonic economic class (Jauretche 1975). For Gramsci, the 'organic intellectuals' as social group that 'create for themselves and in an organic way one or more layers of intellectuals that give them homogeneity and awareness of their own function, not only in the economic field, but also in the social and political fields' (Gramsci 1989:3) play this role. In a Gramscian perspective, the masses need to be ideologically educated through the direction of intellectuals that represent the ruling class as well as its goals and values. This effort to consensus building is needed so that the values and interests of the ruling class may appear as the values and interests of all civil society and, as such, incorporated in politics and in the economy. For Jauretche, the conquering of the alien mentality by the dominant power takes place in a kind of neo-colonisation, or pedagogical colonisation, which guarantees the subordination of semi-colonial states to the hegemonic power. Intelligentsia, thus, is deliberately constructed as a tool of subjugation and with the goal of maintaining a hegemonic class. It is, in the end, a colonised mentality. As such,

The 'intelligentsia' is the consequence of a pedagogical colonization and this is very different than the spontaneous incorporation of universal values into a national culture, and reciprocally, as the aseptic experts on the subject claim, that dispense the analysis of objective conditions (Jauretche 1975:3, translated by the author).

The form of colonisation through the creation of a neoliberal consensus disguised as an economic education is also considered by Gill (1995) as 'market civilisation'. That is, the propagation and acceptance of an idea that certain neoliberal economic and social policies are equally beneficial to countries and peripheral classes when that is not the case. It is worth remembering the report issued by one of the main actors in the propagation of the neoliberal model: The International Monetary Fund. This report highlights the increase in social inequality as a consequence of the adoption of free market practices (Ostry, Lougani and Furceri 2016). As Gullo states, imperialist practices developed by hegemonies at the global level have a close link with the international financial oligarchy through practices of ideological-cultural subordination that take place precisely in the neoliberal ideals and discourse:

The ideological subordination is generally carried out by the great powers, allied with the international financial oligarchy and detain as its privileged victims the less powerful political units, commonly known as 'peripheral countries'. [...] From the economic point of view, the ultimate goal of ideological subordination is to persuade the whole of the population of the intrinsic uselessness of state intervention in the economy (Gullo 2018:191, translated by the author).

For Brzezinski,

As the imitation of American ways gradually pervades the world, it creates a more congenial setting for the exercise of the indirect and seemingly consensual American hegemony. And as in the case of the domestic American system, that hegemony involves a complex structure of interlocking institutions and procedures, designed to generate consensus and obscure asymmetries in power and influence. [...] America stands at the centre of an interlocking universe, one in which power is exercised through continuous bargaining, dialogue, diffusion, and quest for formal consensus, even though that power originates ultimately from a single source, namely, Washington, D.C. (Brzezinski 1998:15).

Historically, American political leaders have justified interventions abroad in peripheral countries on behalf of 'humanitarian aid'. The Manifest Destiny and the self-proclaimed American exceptionalism are still justifications of an active role played by US foreign policy. Nowadays, institutions well established such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, as well as newer ones such as the National Endowment



for Democracy (NED) and Atlas, play the part as vehicles for American ‘aid’ abroad. The individuals working within these institutes constitute the ‘true professionals of hegemony’ (Guilhot 2003:213) whose origins reflect the continuity of political operations carried out by the CIA and formally banned in 1977<sup>8</sup>. Through the ‘privatisation of foreign policy’ (Guilhot 2003:213), these individuals work as branches of American foreign policy and on behalf of an economic ruling class in US and abroad. These are institutions that present themselves as neutral, private and non-partisan, but, not only do they live in the same Washington D.C., they receive public funding and work closely with political leaders<sup>9</sup>. As Guilhot states,

This tangled structure seems to believe on the premise that public money, if filtered through a sufficient number of bureaucratic layers, turns into ‘private’ financing. Indeed, the presence of a foundation that acts on a private basis [...] allows the government to disengage itself while maintaining a certain type of political interventionism (2003:213-214).

Endowed with the intellectual legitimacy that the academic and institutional credential gives them, these professionals of hegemony (or, according to Louis Althusser (1996), professionals of ideology) not only export certain ideas and world views but are also responsible for implementing them as in the case of the institutes that work to promote neoliberal ideals. In the form of consensus, they naturalise and universalise their own interests while presenting them as public ones. As Guilhot states,

[I]t should not be ignored that technical knowledge aimed at the constitution and preservation of democratic institutions is nothing more than a version of this more general knowledge that concerns the means capable of founding, preserving, and expanding a kingdom, like Botero defined the reason of the State (2003:236).

For Casimiro,

This process of ideological diffusion and institutionalised materialisation of certain assumptions produces – with deliberate and other spontaneous and even unconscious actions on the part of society – an appearance of a ‘truth’ that is socially accepted and reproduced as a doxa. This kind of symbolic one-drop (in the words of Bourdieu), to which printed and televised news, institutions, and intellectuals contribute very strongly, produces very profound effects towards the naturalisation of certain values of some class fractions, overflowing those for the totality. This is how, to a large extent, private property, market ideology, and capitalism itself come to be socially presented and reproduced under the guise of a supposed inevitability (Casimiro 2018:25, translated by the author).

The US hegemony and the process of pedagogical colonisation for consensus building through these institutes and professionals indicate that private interests can be conformed into public ones if placed in a virtuous garb or if labelled as humanitarian aid and/or development. As the Assistant State Delegate in the field of Human Rights during the Ronald Reagan Administration clarified: ‘[w]e have the right to say: what increases the power of the United States and the respect we impose is good for human rights’ (Fairbanks, cited in Guillhot 2003:216).

This universalisation of particular interests is reflected quite explicitly by centres of ideas and research. As private devices of hegemony, they use certain strategies and techniques to conquer the rest of society. Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that the values and ideas diffused by these centres, as observed by Althusser (1996), does not emerge from the centres itself, but rather emerge from the dominant class that uses these private devices as a tool to legitimise and diffuse their private interests. According to a former NED expert: ‘[p]olitics must be conducted in a Marxist-Leninist way, but without the goals that this presupposes. [Hence] the importance of mass mobilisation, ideology, and ideological line of political fight’ (Manatt, cited in Guillhot 2003:221). In this strategy of winning hearts and minds through an apparent ‘bottom-up crusade’ (Guillhot 2003:230), these organisations and institutes of thinking wage a class war. As Virginia Fontes comments, ‘[t]he class war that they move is relentless and, organised in an impressive way, they act to completely disorganise workers, disqualifying their language of struggle, adjusting it to a language of the market and of subalternity’ (Fontes 2018:15, translated by the author). In this sense, the US Atlas stands out; it has been playing an active role in Latin America ‘educating us economically’ while contributing to our subordination.

## **Atlas Network and liberal institutes in Latin America**

The US hegemonic condition within the scope of neoliberal ideals is not a direct and coercive achievement of actions undertaken by a set of agents. On the contrary, countless activities carried out by individuals come from institutes that aim at disseminating neoliberal ideas and values around the world. Neither does it rely on a single strategy. The hegemony of a given class assumes the constant adjustment and readjustment of performance techniques for its permanence. In this sense, it is necessary to seek innovations as an attempt to universalise and naturalise particular interests – whether through institutions that have the role of creating and maintaining a consensus, or through force or coercion when this first mechanism fails. Even though they seek to present themselves as independent from the government, political parties, and pressure groups – thus separating the public from the private and covering material interests with a kind of ‘curtain of neutrality’ – these institutions operate from financial and intellectual resources that use professional and academic credentials for greater legitimacy. Atlas, in this context, is an emblematic case.

Legally called Atlas Economic Research Foundation, Atlas is an institute created in 1981 by a British businessman, Antony Fisher, with the aim of disseminating neoliberal

economic policies (defence of private initiative, free market, entrepreneurship, individual responsibility, private property, meritocracy, and minimum government) through the creation and support of partner institutes on all continents. There are currently 508 partner institutes in 98 countries (Atlas 2020) as shown in Image 1 below. With the rise of the Argentinean Antonio Chafuen to the presidency of Atlas in 1991, the network has its actions focused on the Latin American scope, currently counting on 98 partners in Latin America (table 1) and with the first regional centre of Atlas, the Atlas Network's Center for Latin America, created in late 2018. Directed by Roberto Salinas León, this centre aims to develop a joint front in the region in defence of neoliberal public policies based on strategies for allocating financial resources, training, and necessary support for individuals and neoliberal institutes. In Brazil alone, there are 14 partners: *Instituto Atlantos*, in Porto Alegre, RS; *Instituto de Estudos Empresariais*, in Porto Alegre, RS; *Instituto de Formação de Líderes*, in Belo Horizonte, MG; *Instituto de Formação de Líderes*, in Florianópolis, SC; *Instituto de Formação de Líderes*, in São Paulo, SC; *Instituto Liberal*, in Rio de Janeiro, RJ; *Instituto Liberal*, in São Paulo, SP; *Instituto Liberdade*, in Porto Alegre, RS; *Instituto Líderes do Amanhã*, in Vitória, ES; *Instituto Ludwig Von Mises Brasil*, in São Paulo, SP; *Instituto Millenium*, in Rio de Janeiro, RJ; *Livres*, in Rio de Janeiro, RJ; Mackenzie Center for Economic Freedom, in São Paulo, SP; and Students for Liberty, in São Paulo, SP.



Image 1: Atlas partners around the globe

Source: Atlas 2020.

Ironically, this US neoliberal institution remains active through resources from the federal government<sup>10</sup> and great entrepreneurs<sup>11</sup>. As a strategy, it propagates and exports around the globe policies and ideals that are sympathetic to the material interests of the US economic and political elite through its 'partners,' creating a kind of 'sphere of influence' (Fang 2017) that cultivates and propagates neoliberal ideas in societies. Through a capillary network where Atlas is the core, it seeks to 'strengthening a global network

of independent civil society organizations that promote individual freedom and remove barriers to human flourishing’ (Atlas 2019).

Table 1: Atlas partners in Latin America

| Country     | Partners |
|-------------|----------|
| Argentina   | 11       |
| Brazil      | 14       |
| Bolivia     | 4        |
| Chile       | 14       |
| Colombia    | 2        |
| Costa Rica  | 5        |
| Ecuador     | 4        |
| El Salvador | 3        |
| Guatemala   | 6        |
| Haiti       | 1        |
| Honduras    | 2        |
| Mexico      | 4        |
| Panama      | 2        |
| Paraguay    | 1        |
| Peru        | 11       |
| Uruguay     | 1        |
| Venezuela   | 5        |

Source: Elaborated by the author based on Atlas 2020.

In this sense, Atlas’ strategy is based on funding and training personnel from other countries to integrate or create institutes along the lines of Atlas. Thus, it offers resources for the creation of neoliberal organisations around the world, sponsors networking events to bring these institutes and their members together, ‘educates’ and trains individuals who will reproduce these ideas and persuasion techniques in their countries of origin, and promotes courses on political management and mobilisation strategy that includes, but is not limited to, neoliberal theoretical discussions and tools to influence public opinion through the use of social networks and online videos (Fang 2017).

According to its income tax forms, Atlas’ purpose is educational. Atlas is characterised as a non-profit organisation that aims to ‘economically educate’ individuals and societies within and outside the United States (Forms 990 2002). Its actions range from funding for other institutes ‘[...] to help develop worldwide independent research institutes specialising in the analysis of current public policy issues,’ to the promotion of conferences and consultancy services (Forms 990 2002) aiming to ‘educate participants in current public policy issues’ (Forms 990 2005). Practicing a kind of educational colonisation, Atlas ‘strengthened new and established think tanks in different regions of the world through regional support programs that offer grants, advisory services and trainee

opportunities' in addition to funding institutions and individuals 'who are working to improve the understanding of the working of a free and prosperous society' (Forms 990 2006). Its mission is briefly described as: '[t]o foster public demand for public policies based on sound economics and respectful of individual liberty, Atlas discovers, trains and supports 'Intellectual entrepreneurs' in the US and worldwide.' Thus, it supports: '(A) organisations that operate as non-profit research institutes, (B) 'intellectual entrepreneurs' embarking on the creation of such organisations, and (C) scholars working in fields of intellectual inquiry relevant to Atlas programs' (Forms 990, 2008). Regarding support and training in external institutes, the driving force of its organisation, Atlas 'strengthened new and established think tanks in different regions of the world through regional support programs, advisory services, training workshops, and networking/ skill building events' (Forms 990 2009).

Directing its efforts primarily to the external context, this organisation aims to strengthen the global 'freedom' movement by supporting individuals and organisations with potential to develop a 'more prosperous and freer' society:

The mission of Atlas is to strengthen the worldwide freedom movement by cultivating a highly effective and expansive network that inspires and encourages all committed individuals and organizations to achieve lasting impact. The vision of the organization is that there will be effective independent organization in every country building a public consensus around the principles that foster freedom, economic opportunity, prosperity, and peace. These principles include individual liberty and responsibility, property rights, free markets, and limited government under the rule of law. Atlas accomplishes this via educational projects, training workshops, grants and prizes programs, and services that foster collaboration among think tanks that perform and promote policy research to improve the climate of ideas (Forms 990 2014).

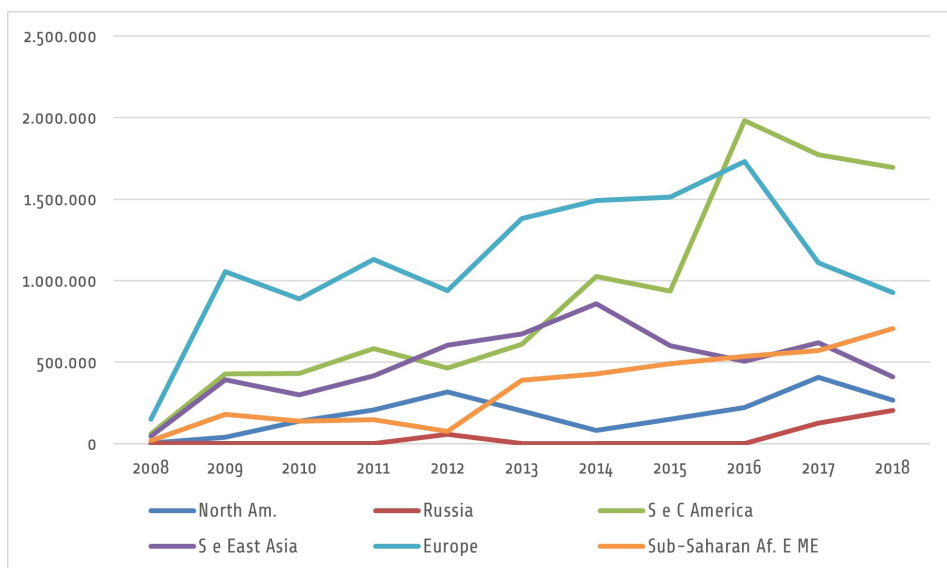
Recently, Atlas presented its actions at a global level from the so-called '3Cs: Coach, Compete and Celebrate' defined as:

- a. Coach: Atlas Network provides world-class training and mentoring to inspire professionalism and improve performance among its independent partners.
- b. Compete: Atlas Network offers grants and prizes competitions that fuel its partners efforts to achieve extraordinary outcomes.
- c. Celebrate: Atlas Network fosters camaraderie and stokes ambitions among its partners by celebrating their greatest accomplishments through its events and media outreach (Forms 990 2018).

In a typical Master Business Administration-style educational model, Atlas is responsible for creating the Atlas Leadership Academy, an educational system of online and/or in-person courses that teaches how to create and maintain a neoliberal institute. It aims to offer 'a robust series of credit-based training opportunities that allow you to sharpen your

skills in management, communications, and fundraising while building your free-market organization' (Atlas 2020). When it happens in person, Atlas is generous: it pays for accommodation, meals, training materials, course registration, and registration including dinner at Atlas Network's Liberty Forum. The participant only needs to pay their ticket. Among the courses offered, there are: Regional Training; Impact of Think Tanks; Lead Lab; Lights, Camera, and Leadership; Global Influence Forum; and Building Your Organization with a Small Group of Donors. At the end of the training, students become Atlas Alumni – which entitles them to circulate within the institution, forming even deeper networks with Atlas Network's leaders, donors, and shareholders.

The name Atlas Network is self-explanatory given its potential as a global network through funding and training of personnel in other countries, thus contributing to the 'economic education' of society and to the implementation of public policies. In 2018 alone, Atlas sent US\$ 1 695 361.00 in financial resources to 44 partner institutes in South and Central America (Atlas Report 2019), making Latin America the region that most received resources from Atlas, as shown in Graph 1 (in green).



Graph 1: Donations made by Atlas per region (2008–2018) (US dollars)

Source: Author elaboration based on Forms 990 (Return of Organization Exempt from Income Tax).

Thus, Atlas does not play an innocent role. It aims to influence the implementation of economic and public policy agendas and during political changes in Latin America. Atlas' Center for Latin America was launched precisely to be a core for the dissemination of neo-liberal ideas in the region, a sort of regional umbrella that brings together Latin American partner institutes to facilitate these partners' contact and access to Atlas. In this sense, the Center works with civil society and other institutes 'to solve complex issues from the bottom up' (Center for Latin America 2020), stressing that 'together we can build an inclusive

prosperity and a future of freedom in Latin America' (Center for Latin America 2020). Thus, 'educating' individuals is not enough, it is necessary that this pedagogical colonisation, as well-expressed by Jauretche (1975), be absorbed by the mass of the population. There is nothing safer and cheaper for maintaining a hegemonic class based on neoliberal economic and social policies than conquering the minds of the dominated. After all, how to be against an ideology that preaches freedom and emancipation? How to be against an ideology that is being defended and proclaimed by the oppressed class itself?

The Centre excels in offering to its partners 'world-class training and mentoring [...] and networking opportunities' (Center for Latin America 2020). Thus, through training and networking opportunities – including the Latin American Freedom Forum – this umbrella institute: a) 'teaches' 'the benefits of trade and the dangers of protectionism, so that political leaders will less inclined to indulge in demagoguery that could undermine beneficial trading relationships' (Center for Latin America 2020); b) weakens corruption and political privileges in the economic game; and c) uses tools from the World Bank to identify reforms to increase 'economic freedom' (Center for Latin America 2020). Indeed, the US ruling class acts through institutes such as Atlas aiming to exercise domain and leadership practices in other subordinated classes and countries. These private apparatuses of hegemony serve as a means to the creation, diffusion and maintenance of ideas consistent with the economic interests of its own ruling class. As the condition of hegemony is related to the 'possibility of giving state activity an autonomous direction, which influences and resonates with other states' (Gramsci 2007:55), a system of alliances with other ruling classes abroad is created in a way that extends its interests beyond its borders.

The work of persuasion of the masses for political ends is nothing new. In the United States, it starts in the middle of the First World War with the creation of the Creel Committee and the work of publicist Edward Bernays, who realised the potential of manipulating society to think in a certain way based on a set of strategies. Bernays is emblematic in defending the consensus building by US leaders, considered mentally and morally superior to the rest of the population who can (and should) contribute to the mass educational process. According to his article, *The Engineering of Consent*:

The average American adult has only six years of schooling behind him. With pressing crises and decisions to be faced, a leader frequently cannot wait for the people to arrive at even general understanding. In certain cases, democratic leaders must play their part in leading the public through the engineering of consent to socially constructive goals and values. This role naturally imposes upon them the obligation to use the educational processes, as well as other available techniques to bring about as complete an understanding as possible (Bernays 1947:114).

In this context, he concludes that, 'the engineering of consent will always be needed as an adjunct to, or a partner of, the educational process' (Bernays 1947:114).

The use of leaders and intellectuals to build consensus in society is not new. Nevertheless, the organisation and articulation of individuals 'legitimised' (either because of the role they occupy in large companies or because of the academic credentials they hold) seem to have deepened in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. From spheres of influence that originate in the USA and spread themselves in various Latin American institutes, these individuals build consensus with the purpose of 'guiding' and 'educating' society in the economic sphere. In Atlas' case, this strategy is extremely organised, aggressive, and possesses substantial financial resources to make it viable and successful.

In Brazil, it is worth pointing that one of the most important players during the protests against President Dilma Rousseff, the Free Brazil Movement (MBL – *Movimento Brasil Livre*), was an Atlas partner, and, in Argentina, the *Pensar* organisation, which played an important role in anti-Kirshnerism and was later incorporated into the party of elected President Mauricio Macri, was also a partner of Atlas. The Venezuelan *Cedice Libertad*, another important Atlas partner, was a key player in the campaign against Hugo Chavez. In Honduras, a close ally of Atlas was the Eleutera Foundation, active in the Honduran coup that deposed Manuel Zelaya (Aharonian and Rangel 2018).

Indeed, it was during Luis Inácio Lula da Silva's administration (2003-2011) and in the course of Dilma Rousseff's administration (2011-2016) that the greatest number of Atlas partner institutes emerged in Brazil. According to Antony Fisher, Atlas-affiliated 'freedom fighters' 'became the main organisers against the Workers' Party (PT) and the presidency of Dilma Rousseff' (Fisher 2018:9). Atlas supported mobilisations against this government, whether through the dissemination of 'popular' demonstrations on its website, which were treated in a very positive way, or through the physical presence of its leaders in some of these demonstrations. As the then-president of Atlas, Alejandro Chafuen, explains when referring to Brazil, 'there was an opening – a crisis – and a demand for change, and we had people trained to press for certain policies' (Chafuen, cited in Fang 2017).

It is worth remembering that the partnership between Atlas and liberal institutes in Brazil is not new. Atlas played a fundamental role in the construction and feasibility of the first institutes of this kind in the country. Figures like Friedrich Hayek, who visited Brazil more times between 1970 and 1980 than anywhere else except Europe<sup>12</sup>, and Antony Fisher (founder of Atlas) were responsible for creating a network of relationships among members of a national business elite, such as Og Leme, Donald Stewart, Henry Maksoud, Nahum Manela, and José Stelle, for the construction of a thinking centre in neoliberal style. The first ones to look for Fisher were Nahum Manela, an entrepreneur in the clothing sector, and José Stelle, an economist, who were looking for 'advice, contacts, expertise, and financial support for their attempt to found an institute in São Paulo' (Onofre 2018:283). For the creation of such an organisation, Fisher advised them to work on two fronts: one being the search for financial support from entrepreneurs who would be the sponsors of this institute; and another, by promoting a group of liberal intellectuals that he called 'academic advisory board.' As Gramsci notices, 'one of the most striking characteristics of every social group that develops towards dominance is its struggle for



the assimilation and ideological conquest of traditional intellectuals' (Gramsci 1989:9). The creation of a liberal institute in Brazil would then be managed within Atlas' extent.

Created and financed by entrepreneurs as well as by public resources, it is not clear where the public interest ceases to exist, and private interest begins its existence. Likewise, it is less clear whether the 'economic education' proposed by Atlas and its partners have any kind of positive impact for the peripheral classes and countries. Nevertheless, this type of instrument helps to develop a symbiosis between the Brazilian economic elite and the American one.

Finally, not only can Atlas be seen as an informal branch of American foreign policy due to its relationship with State Department in terms of its feasibility through public financial resources and outsourced foreign policy strategy, but its Latin-American partners, as in the case of the liberal Brazilian institutes, have also developed a close link to the political leaders. Both ruling classes in Brazil and USA act similarly diffusing practices of consensus around the idea of the inevitability of neoliberalism. Its goal, likewise, is the same: the maintenance of their privileges that a hegemonic position can provide.

The strategies of these institutes rely on a series of pedagogical activities including material and symbolic resources that aim to universalise the interests of the ruling class in the form of consensus. As an example of these activities, there is the dissemination of books and texts, organisation of events, and the creation of projects that link a wide network of international organisations – especially Americans. These liberal institutes aim to gain greater cohesion from their proposals and activities to spread their neoliberal agendas in society and contribute to the implementation of free market political and economic reforms in the country, forming a link between civil society and the political sphere.

This was Kim Kataguirí's case, who was launched into politics after the visibility of MBL and the support of consolidated liberal institutes, such as the *Instituto de Estudos Empresariais* (IEE). This was also Marcel Van Hattem's case, to whom this same IEE played a key role in his candidacy and election. According to him: '[i]f I am a deputy today, I also owe it to the Freedom Forum' (Van Hattem, cited in Amaral 2015). Gustavo Franco (former president of the Brazilian Central Bank), Paulo Guedes (Minister of Economy in Jair Bolsonaro's administration), and Salim Mattar (director of Localiza and Special Secretary for Privatization and Divestment of that same administration) are some of the individuals who work in Brazilian liberal institutes and now are in the high rank of national politics.

US post-Cold War interventions in the Latin American hemisphere have not ceased, they are just less visible and more fragmented. We went through a 'new legal status of the colonised' (Gullo 2018:294, translated by the author), that is, the subordination of national political and economic systems to a hegemonic power that has political and economic interests in making this type of neoliberal ideology viable. This external interference is only possible with the support of the ruling classes in these same peripheral countries, with the financial support of large businessmen (who are also interested in neoliberal economic policies) and the prominent role that organisations such as Atlas play in these institutes.

## Final Considerations

Even though it does not present itself or is directly linked to strategic objectives of the USA government, Atlas, by receiving financial support from organisations linked to the USA government (such as NED), acts as a tacit extension of the US foreign policy, contributing to the promotion of neoliberal policies and the destabilisation of those governments and classes that challenge the maintenance of the hegemonic class. In fact, informal imperialism in Latin America is strengthened with the end of the Cold War, whether from actors strongly anchored in the United States, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, or from organisations such as Atlas. Through the institutionalisation of different organisations, the US ruling class managed to achieve a wide diffusion and naturalisation of a specific order. In this context, Atlas, by ‘educating’ Latin American societies about the ‘benefits’ of free market, acts to build a consensus while directly participating and creating conditions to influence the political reality of several countries in the region, thus building a favourable environment for the implementation of economic policies of its interest in the region.

Therefore, we understand that hegemony, in the international sphere, is directly associated with private apparatus of hegemony that is used by the ruling economic class in other countries with the collaboration of regional ruling classes. This study aims to contribute to the discussion of practices and concepts such as imperialism – often treated as *démodé* (Lopez 2020) –, hegemony, and the role of ideology in maintaining the ruling economic structure. Furthermore, this study makes us return to fundamental theoretical approaches for understanding the role of ruling classes in creating consensus for countries and subaltern classes with the aim of maintaining these same hegemonic structures and colonizing ‘hearts and minds’.

I now return to Marcelo Gullo, who defends that we can insubordinate the symbolic violence exerted by the centre through neoliberal consensus:

The anti-hegemonic intellectuals always carry out an ideological insubordination which implies the rejection of ideas, principles, theories, doctrines, and ideologies exported as subordination tools, in the exercise of cultural imperialism by the hegemonic power. An ideological insubordination is always, in itself, an anti-imperialistic action. An ideological insubordination can result in forming a new ideology, an ideology of liberation, or simply set the outline of it<sup>13</sup> (Gullo 2018:190, translated by the author).

May we, thus, ideologically insubordinate ourselves.

## Notes

- 1 We understand neoliberalism from Laval and Dardot’s (2016:7) perspective, that is, ‘[...] neoliberalism is not only an ideology, a type of economic policy. It is a normative system that amplified its influence in the world, extending the capital logic to all social relations and spheres of life.’

- 2 A kind of indirect warfare commanded by the United States in recent Syria and Ukraine crises, called ‘Colour Revolutions.’
- 3 The first phase of imperialism being the division and colonization of Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the second being the years during Cold War.
- 4 For Bourdieu (2003:8), ‘The universalization of private interests is the legitimization strategy by excellence, which imposes itself with a particular urgency on cultural producers, always driven, by all their tradition, to be considered as the bearers and spokespersons of the universal, as ‘employees of humanity.’
- 5 Although Atlas may be considered a think tank (or a network of think tanks), we chose here to avoid an institutionalist perspective, mainly the case in the studies on think tanks (Abelson 2018; McGann 2007; and Medvetz 2012), and treat it as an institute formed by certain individuals that represent the ruling class and work for it through the dissemination of a neoliberal consensus. In this sense, this study treats Atlas from a Gramscian perspective as a private apparatus of hegemony that, through the work of its organic intellectuals, seeks to maintain the privileges and hegemony represented by the ruling class.
- 6 ‘Symbolic violence is Bourdieu’s way to rethink and to elaborate the Gramscian concept of hegemony’ (Eagleton, 1996:224).
- 7 Here we borrow the concept of neoliberalism presented by Dardot and Laval (2016: 17): ‘Neo-liberalism can be defined as the set of discourses, practices, and devices that determine a new way of governing men according to the universal principle of competition.’
- 8 According to Allen Weinstein, acting president of NED, ‘a lot of what we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA’ (Weinstein, cited in Guilhot 2003:230).
- 9 It is worth remembering that NED – which has funding approved by the Congress – when created by the US federal government, prohibited its association with an agency or institution of that same government.
- 10 Resources from USAID and the State Department via the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) (Fang 2017). Atlas member economist, Judy Shelton, served in the Trump administration as president of NED. Antony Fisher, in 1982, was already sending requests for resources to the then President Ronald Reagan when Atlas was founded (Fang 2017).
- 11 Koch brothers, Exxon Mobil, MasterCard, and Philip Morris are some of the several funders. Other giants, such as Pfizer, Procter & Gamble, and Shell financed its feasibility when it was created (Fang 2017).
- 12 Hayek’s trips to Brazil were conducted through sponsorship granted by *Revista Visão*, a mechanism for the dissemination of liberal thought in Brazil under the direction of Henry Maksoud, a businessman, engineer, and friend of Hayek.
- 13 In the original, ‘Los intelectuales antihegemonicos llevan siempre adelante una insubordinacion ideológica implica siempre ele rechazo de ideas, principios, teorías, doctrinas e ideologías exportadas como herramientas de subordinación, em ejercicio del imperialismo cultural por la potencia hegemónica. Uma insubordinación ideológica es siempre, em si mesma, uma acción anti-imperialista. Uma insubordinación ideológica puede terminar conformando una nueva ideología, una ideología de la liberación, o simplemente plantear el esbozo de ella.’

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## Hegemonia, criação de consenso e colonização pedagógica: Novas formas de ingerência externa?

**Resumo:** Este estudo é um esforço teórico para repensar as Relações Internacionais a partir da perspectiva da Teoria Crítica Neo-Gramsciana na qual seu objeto empírico é a hegemonia dos EUA no âmbito da América Latina. Mais especificamente, este estudo refere-se à fabricação de um consenso dirigido por uma classe dominante americana através de seu próprio veículo para isso – a Rede Atlas – que encontra legitimidade e apoio em suas contrapartes latino-americanas. Com base em dados primários, documentos públicos e bibliografia especializada, este estudo visa contribuir para repensar as Relações Internacionais usando este instituto como objeto de relação empírica com o estudo teórico. Mais do que apresentar estratégias de dominação através de aparelhos privados de hegemonia, este estudo nos incentiva a refletir sobre práticas e conceitos relativamente esquecidos (ou marginalizados) nas Relações Internacionais, como o imperialismo, a hegemonia e o papel da construção de consensos. Finalmente, ele contribui para, a partir da Teoria Crítica, compreender o papel das classes dominantes na criação de consenso nos países e classes subalternos para manter esta mesma estrutura hegemônica.

**Palavras-chave:** Hegemonia; Teoria Crítica; EUA; América Latina; Rede Atlas.

*Received on 02 July 2020 and approved for publication on 05 October 2022.*



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