



Book Review

First-Class Passengers on a Sinking Ship: Elite Politics and the Decline of Great Powers. Richard Lachmann. 2020. London: Verso Press. 477 pages, ISBN 978-1-78873-407-3 Hardcover \$34.95

Reviewed by **Corey R. Payne**

Johns Hopkins University

cpayne@jhu.edu

Following the upheavals of the first half of the twentieth century, Karl Polanyi indicted the British capitalist class as having “no organ to sense the dangers involved” in their social arrangements, and that the “all but sacramental belief in the universal benefice” of their own profits “disqualified them as the keepers of other interests...vital to a good life” (1944: 139).¹ In his masterful new book, *First-Class Passengers on a Sinking Ship*, Richard Lachmann shows us that, far from being unique to the period of British denouement, the destructive pursuit of such narrow self-interest by elites has repeatedly caused the decline of great powers throughout historical capitalism. Through a rigorous analysis of modern empires and world hegemons, Lachmann argues that the rise and, especially, the fall of great powers can only be understood through the interests, conflicts, and compromises of elites. A brilliant synthesis in the styles of Giovanni Arrighi and C. Wright Mills, *First-Class Passengers on a Sinking Ship* is an instant classic of the world-systems and comparative historical canons.

¹ Thanks to Beverly Silver for her comments.



Articles in vol. 21(2) and later of this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System](#), [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#) and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

For Lachmann, great powers, like all polities, are not unitary entities. Instead, they “are amalgamations of institutions...controlled by an elite capable of guarding its own interests.” It is “elite conflict over, and appropriation of, resources” which “explains why the richest and most powerful polities often failed to attain or sustain dominance.” In his view, “decline is the result of internal political dynamics that are specific to each great power” that can only be understood through an analysis of “the ways in which elites seek and attain the capacity to protect their particular interests” (12). The power of elites thus derives as much “from the structure of relations among various coexisting elites as it does from interclass relations of production” (26).

This structure of elite relations is the book’s primary concern. Lachmann finds that modern great powers varied both in the extent to which colonial elites were autonomous from metropolitan elites and in the level of influence colonial elites had on the metropolitan political-economy. The particular structure of elite relations in the Dutch, British, and U.S. empires—in which colonial elites had high influence but low autonomy—allowed each to achieve world-hegemonic status. Building from Wallerstein and Arrighi (and in explicit contrast to Mann), Lachman (49) defines world hegemony as “not just a quantitative or qualitative edge,” instead, it is the international institutionalization of a power’s advantages over rivals, grounded in both consent and coercion. Lachman finds that great powers were unable to become hegemons if there was too much elite conflict in the metropole, too much colonial autonomy from the metropole, a dominant metropolitan elite that was too unitary, and/or an infrastructural incapacity to control colonial elites. He demonstrates that the three hegemons of historical capitalism lacked all these factors, and that it was the (re)emergence of one or more of them that unraveled their hegemony. In more general terms, Lachmann shows how elites’ “success in preserving their particular privileges precluded the reinvestments and strategic shifts necessary to maintain hegemony” and thus yielded its undoing (56).

At its core, Lachmann’s analysis of the three world-hegemonic powers demonstrates that the very arrangements among elites which propelled great powers to preeminence ultimately proved to be their downfall. In less apt hands, the identification of such a pattern of elite politics in hegemonic powers—innovation, institutionalization, contradiction, transformation, paralysis—could verge on structural functionalism. But Lachmann’s analysis has no such flaw. By tracing the intricate political and economic relations among elites *and* among their actions, he demonstrates the contingency inherent in such a pattern. In this sense, Lachmann upends the faulty binary of ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ to demonstrate how the actions of elites at earlier points in time constrain the options available to elites at later points in time. While at first glance his analysis may appear to be one of ‘path dependency,’ upon closer inspection it becomes clear that it is, in fact, one of how such paths are produced, reproduced, and upended.

One of the most impressive features of the book lies in Lachmann’s ability to highlight the central role of elites without neglecting other angles of vision on the rise and fall of great powers. Although they are not his primary subject of analysis—nor are they, in his view, sufficiently compelling causal factors—Lachmann deals with class struggle and interstate conflict in a serious way. Scholars may quibble over the relative weight Lachmann gives them in his causal

explanations, but none can argue that he does not address them with deep and thoughtful analysis (e.g. 82, 208, 245-251, 262, 271-276, 367). Still, there's an occasional tension between the book's definition of "hegemony" (which emphasizes consent of subordinate groups/states alongside coercion) and the implication that elites in hegemonies are actors with the power to set the global rules (largely) as they please (e.g. 49, 352, 413).² This occasional tension is merely a reminder that even the most impressive tomes must be read alongside accounts of other angles of vision on historical capitalism—such as that of class conflict and compromise—to arrive at the most complete picture.

In fact, this is how Lachmann presents his work in relation to that of Giovanni Arrighi, whose trilogy on world hegemonies and historical capitalism serves as one foundation for the book. Arrighi's analysis of states and classes is compelling, Lachmann argues, but for a complete picture it must be combined with a review of the internal political dynamics of hegemonic powers. While Arrighi is able to "specify what is needed in each era to achieve hegemony in the world system," he is "less successful in explaining why particular countries achieve hegemony in the first place while others fail" (81). This gap is caused by Arrighi's tendency to present countries as unified actors instead of addressing the internal conflicts within polities that, in his view, determine their changing positions in the world-system. Lachmann makes a convincing case. Arrighi demonstrates how innovations in political-economic arenas propel powers to world-hegemonic status, and how such success draws new competitors into the hegemon's path of development. As capitalists in dominant powers come under increasing competitive pressure from these rivals, the virtuous circle turns vicious. Heightened competition leads to escalating social conflict, financialization, and the eventual breakdown of the bases of hegemony. Lachmann adds an important dimension to this story. As the virtuous circle turns vicious, he demonstrates how elites turn to political rivalry, guarding their own particularistic interests, shattering the bases of their previous cooperation, and setting off a spiral into conflict, autarky, and paralysis. Thus, by viewing the rise and decline of world hegemonies through the lens of elite conflict and compromise, Lachmann provides unique and timely insights into both historical transformations and contemporary challenges.

In a different (but far from incomparable) moment, Polanyi surmised that "Unless the alternative to the social set up is a plunge into utter destruction, no crudely selfish class can maintain itself in the lead" (1944: 163). After reading *First-Class Passengers on a Sinking Ship*, such an observation seems to verge on ahistorical optimism. Lachmann's magisterial book shows us that it is, in fact, the narrow self-interest of elites that is driving not only U.S. hegemonic decline, but also an increasingly chaotic world system, characterized by escalating militarism, a seemingly

² This tension is less pronounced than the analogous problem in Immanuel Wallerstein's work. Wallerstein defines hegemony as one state's ability "to impose its set of rules on the interstate system, and thereby create a world political order as it thinks wise" (quoted in Lachmann, 49). Arrighi and his collaborators push back against this top-down definition, instead emphasizing leadership and compromise (Arrighi and Silver, 1999: 26-31). Given that Lachmann leans more heavily on Arrighi, an interesting line of future research could investigate more rigorously how the changing structures of elite relations in the hegemonies (and their colonies) interact with elites in polities that are not dominated colonies, but junior partners in the hegemonic bloc. Thornton's (2020) work on Mexican elites and the construction of the U.S.-led world order is one model in this line.

unending rise in social inequality, and a pending climate catastrophe. Lachmann's sobering and bleak conclusions for our collective future—in which the first-class passengers on our sinking ship head for the lifeboats while the rest of us are left to drown—are compelling. His truly brilliant analysis forces readers to confront the crude selfishness of elites and, with eyes wide open, face the prospect of a plunge into utter destruction.

References

- Arrighi, Giovanni, and Beverly J. Silver. 1999. *Chaos and Governance in the Modern World-System*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Polanyi, Karl. [1944] 2001. *The Great Transformation*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Thornton, Christy. 2020. *Revolution in Development: Mexico and the Governance of the Global Economy*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.