



Jaša VESELINOVIČ
Berlin Graduate School for
Global and Transregional Studies,
Freie Universität Berlin

Richard Lachmann
**First-Class Passengers on a Sinking
Ship: Elite Politics and the Decline
of Great Powers**

Verso, London in New York 2020,
p. 496, EUR 25.00
(ISBN 978-1-78873-407-3)

In his new book, the renowned US historical sociologist Richard Lachmann presents us with an ambitious intervention at the intersection of two crowded fields – macro histories of past hegemonic transitions and narratives of the decline of the latest hegemon, the USA. The book is a valuable contribution to both by combining an explicitly formulated theoretical framework with a very rich and historically wide-ranging empirical and descriptive component. Lachmann's first observation is that the USA is in decline in many areas – infrastructure, healthcare, life expectancy, the military's ability to win wars, and economic well-being among others – and it is time to overcome the "fruitless hope" (p. x) that this trend can be halted or reversed. Generally, however, the decline of a hegemon is not inevitable; "it is not determined by grand-historical cycles and does not conform to a universal clock" (p. 11). Instead – and this is the author's innovative theoretical claim – it is the result of internal political dynamics. It is the elite conflict over

the appropriation of resources that explains why the wealthiest and most powerful polities have often failed to attain or sustain dominance.

Right from the start, the author makes clear the political implications of the above argument. If the USA's decline is unstoppable, the question becomes the distribution of the burdens emanating from it. The political goal of the book then is to expose the fissures in and political vulnerabilities of the US elite and thus help the progressive forces from below to deflect the elite's attempts to saddle the working class with the decline-related costs. The book, which can be read as the culmination and a fusion of Lachmann's previous research projects, is distinguished by its clear structure and neat argumentation. Two theoretical chapters dealing with the literature on hegemonic decline and elites are followed by three historically-comparative chapters. The second part tackles the question of how the USA compares with previous hegemonies and how we can trace and explain its decline.

In the *longue duree* since 1492, Lachmann counts six empires that have dominated enough lands beyond its immediate region to vie for global economic or geopolitical dominance: Spain, France, Portugal, the Netherlands, Britain, and the USA. Each power's dominance was challenged continuously by rival geopolitical powers, competing foreign capitalists, the self-serving efforts of metropolitan elites, and the resistance from elites in subordinate

territories and non-elites at home (26). But only the latter three empires achieved hegemony (with their empires as its cornerstone). Lachmann defines hegemony as not merely having a quantitative or qualitative edge over competitors. Rather, its characteristic is its institutionalisation through networks of finance, trade, production, and geopolitical alliances. Thus, a polity is hegemonic only as long it can enforce a system of geopolitical and economic relations that advantage it over all other polities (p. 49). What distinguishes the three hegemonic polities from the non-hegemonic empires is the stability of relations among the elites (p. 53).

Since the elites are the main explanatory factor in Lachmann's more than five centuries-old story of capitalism, he offers a relatively broad, almost transhistorical definition. An elite is a "group of rulers who inhabit a distinct organisational apparatus with the capacity to appropriate resources from the non-elites" (p. 26). The interests each elite seeks to defend are grounded in their relations with the producing classes. Still, in exercising their power through institutions – a combination of economic, political, military, and ideological power – the elites guard and extend their power at the expense of rival elites. This, as well as Lachmann's assertion that the elite's capacity to pursue its interests derives from the structure of relations among various coexisting elites rather than the relations of production (that is,

exploitation), distinguishes his model from the more classically Marxist concept of the ruling class (Botomore, 2014) as well as some Weberian strains in historical sociology marked by technological or market determinism (Rutar, 2015). By containing "class relations" to the exclusive realm of exploitation and the extraction of surplus-value, Lachmann also distances himself from Marxist accounts, such as those of Political Marxists (Brenner, 1977) or scholars working with the concept of capital factions (van der Pijl, 1998). They similarly emphasised the open-ended and conflict-ridden nature of the 'interests of capital' but understood it in terms of horizontal class struggle, where 'the political' is significantly less autonomous vis-*vis* 'the economic' than is the case in Lachmann's book.

After defining the concept of elites, Lachmann lays out four factors, any of which can prevent a polity from achieving global hegemony; a high level of elite conflict in the metropole; a high level of colonial elite autonomy from the metropole; a unitary elite achieving dominance over and effectually eliminating all other elites in the metropole; and the lack of infrastructural capacity to control elites in conquered or dominated lands (p. 54). The Netherlands, Britain and the USA did not face any of these factors and achieved hegemony. But their contradictions eventually disrupted the stable elite relations and resulted in either heightened elite conflict or in elites' successful

autarkic take-over of the economy and the state which precluded reinvestments necessary to maintain the hegemony. The rest of the book's first part is dedicated to a convincing and historically rich account determining what precisely were the mechanisms and causal links in these processes in the cases of Spain, France and the two earlier hegemonies. However, limitations of space allow us only to discuss Lachmann's take on the most timely and perplexing case, the USA.

The USA differs from all of its predecessors in that it was not first an empire and then a hegemon, but was, after the Second World War, more already born a hegemon. A strong elite consensus and capitalist acquiescence to the 'Keynesian compromise' (with the persistent bashing of trade unions as an important caveat) lasted throughout the 1960s, after which a significant U-turn in the USA's economy and public policy took place (p. 251). There are many culprits appearing in explanations of what/who killed the post-war consensus and balanced the elite - from the economic decline in the 1970s to the new social movements on the left and subsequent rise of the Right. However, the impact of all these forces was only indirect. Specific policies and the uneven decline in state capacity in the decades following the 1970s can only be understood once we examine the new structure of elite relations (p. 262). The wave of mergers in the 1980s coupled with deregulation consolidated diverse economic

sectors and enabled the elite capture of government agencies and powers. The goal of this new configuration of elites, unrestrained by successfully subdued unions and other mass organisations, was not to formulate programmes and policies with a national reach. Instead, they seek to appropriate state resources and advance favourable policies, protecting them from competitors at home and abroad (p. 290). The outcome of this constellation of powers has been financialisation, financial cannibalisation of US economy benefiting no one but the elites. Although his explanation of financialisation and its origins is somewhat eclectic, Lachmann is right in concluding that "America's ability to exercise unilateral control over the global financial architecture is the one remaining pillar of US hegemony" (p. 420).

Immediately, this raises the question of the USA's armed forces, the most lavishly funded and generally recognised as the most powerful in the world. Here, the USA is submitted to a similarly rigorous sociological analysis as the previous hegemonies' armies have been. In perhaps the most valuable part of the book, Lachmann discounts the usual "resource power" approach of examining military might by counting the number of tanks and aircraft carriers and instead studies the generals as social actors with their specific interests (p. 310). He shows that the tight links (and often "revolving doors") between the top officers and the arms industry are pushing the former into committing

to unwinnable wars and demanding ever more cutting-edge technology which is useless in counterinsurgency wars (p. 352).

Lachmann refuses to toe the line so prevalent in “declinist” literature and therefore does not end his book with a “chapter of recommendations and hopes” (p. 431). Instead, he identifies three dimensions – again drawing parallels with the Netherlands and Great Britain – around which the shape of the USA’s decline and the distribution of its costs among social forces will play out. He argues that due to the weak organisational strength of the non-elites the USA – even in decline – is poised to continue the trends of growing inequality, shrinking social welfare, and counterproductive wars on the periphery. The sad irony is that the elites cannot escape the straitjacket of securing their reproduction. They cannot “override their particular interests and mobilise their power and resources behind policies that could sustain US geopolitical or economic

hegemony” (p. 461). This eminently readable book, full of provocations and insights, thus concludes on an ambiguous note. On one hand, Lachmann is pessimistic about the hopeless and directionless US elite. But he is an optimist in the sense that this does not launch him into moralising calls for elites’ refoundation as is usually the case with elitist scholars. Instead, he lays his (modest) hope on pressure (and organising) from below, the non-elites.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bottomore, Thomas Burton (2014): *Elite in družba*. Ljubljana: Studia humanitatis.
- Brenner, Robert (1977): *The Origins of Capitalist Development: A Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism*. *New Left Review* 104: 25–92
- Rutar, Tibor (2015): *Ahistorizem historične sociologije: Adam Smith in njegova zapuščina*. *Teorija in praksa* 52 (6): 1099–1118.
- Van der Pijl, Kees (1998): *Transnational Classes and International Relations*. London: Routledge.