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Contesting or Creating Hegemony?
A critique of the London Water Research Group considering academic hegemony and traps in social justice research

In the late 1990s, a group of graduate researchers based at King's College London and the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London deepened understandings of water security, development, and conflict. From their collaborative work, the London Water Research Group (LWRG) emerged. The faculty involved in the LWRG are experts in the areas of water security, water management and economics, water and food trade, land use, the water/food/energy nexus, and transboundary water conflict and cooperation. They are also passionate about issues of global justice and equitable environmental resource distribution, and they see their Europe-based academic research as a means for promoting environmental justice.

This paper will consider the extent to which the London Water Research Group has lived up to its potential and intent. It will begin with a discussion of the role of academic research in challenging hegemony and creating social change. It will then consider some of the common "traps" academia may fall into when trying to inform social justice, with particular attention to jargon, self-referencing, and hegemonic concepts, borrowing from discourse, framing, and confirmation bias theory. Finally, specific ways in which the LWRG has succeeded or failed in contesting hegemony will be addressed. It is argued that academic research does have a major role to play in furthering social justice but that all researchers and scholarly institutions – including the London Water Research Group – must be vigilant in not merely avoiding traps but actively working against hegemonic tendencies.

Social Justice Research: Using Academia to Challenge Hegemony?

The "Ivory Tower" of academia and the "groundwork" of activism may seem strange bedfellows, but there is little doubt they do sleep together. Academia has long been used as a forum for attempting to inform social change and critique the status quo…even whilst it has also been used to reproduce and legitimise that same status quo. In 1958, Ginsberg made a strong case for our ability to consciously steer social change through our knowledge of it. And so enters the role of academia, the public intellectual (Said, 1993), and the reason research on social justice issues needs to be both encouraged and evaluated.

Academia intersects with social change in a number of ways. Academia and academic institutions have the capacity to teach social change, build allies, and create accountability; some believe they also have the duty (Ring, 1999; Nickels, Rowland, and Fadase, 2011). Research may actively promote certain forms of social change through activism in the academy or inform social change through its work on change, political movements, and advocacy.

Research also has the power to help – or hinder – the voices of the marginalised. "It is the practice of advocacy that determines the theory, and not vice versa. If advocacy is not rooted in grassroots realities and is practised only at the macro level, the voice of the marginalised is increasingly likely to be appropriated by professional elites" (Samuel, 2007). If academics do not purposefully engage with the voices of the marginalised, or if advocacy fails to do so, theory is yet another avenue through which the most vulnerable are made more vulnerable.

In most academic institutions of today, to write about marginalized groups is to risk not being taken seriously professionally (Pimpare, 2012). But there are increasing arguments from multiple scholars that activist scholarship does not only have the capacity to change the

world, but also to improve the quality of research itself (Pimpare, 2012). Of course, "Combining scholarship and activism offers no automatic guarantee of either better scholarship or better activism" (George Lipsitz in Hale, 2008: 91). Social science research focused on activist groups, marginalised communities, or hegemonic institutions, groups, and actions should not – cannot – be excused from rigid methodologies and focused, thoughtful theory. Otherwise, it loses its value to both the academy and those it intends to assist.

In addition to concerns about what is studied, scholars must think about *how* we communicate our work and to *whom* (Subašić, Reynolds, Reicher, and Klandermans, 2012). Activist scholars must publish research that is of use, even if only rhetorically. Such scholarship may help build a "script of liberation" (Hale, 2008: 9). And while it may not be popular, or considered "good", "objective" research practice to make your political leanings explicit, failing to make an explicit choice about your participation as a researcher is making an implicit choice – and that implicit choice is one in favour of the status quo (Subašić, Reynolds, Reicher, and Klandermans, 2012). Navigating both the importance of building strong, sound bases of knowledge and the duty to take a stand when situations are unjust is not easy or intuitive. Nor is it encouraged or assisted in most academic institutions of today. But it must be, if we are serious about the practical utility of research.

Garonna and Triacca note that, more often than not, "Social change catches us unprepared and confused" (1999). But this is not inevitable. Instead, it is quite likely the symptom of our unlikelihood to take social change and advocacy research seriously Garonna and Triacca suggest better engagement with statistical scholarship in order to help rectify our lack of awareness and inform future social science (1999); engaging in inter-disciplinary work and

escaping the average social scientist's fear of the quantitative will help to make social justice research more robust and likely to be of use.

Academic may well play a role in informing activism, shaping social change, and contesting malign hegemonies. But it has the nickname "Ivory Tower", the stereotype of inaccessibility, and the image of an Old Boys' Club for a reason: Academia may just as well advise the powerful elite, support the status quo, and uphold negative forms of hegemony. And it may not do so intentionally. Several "traps" may hinder the potential for research to fully harness its potential as a force for social justice.

Academic Traps in Social Justice Research

Professional academics are in a unique position of privilege that can provide them the flexibility to challenge institutions and hierarchies; however, they are also part of an institution and in a hierarchy themselves. As hard as we try, we are subject to biases and our own worldviews: Research created by humans cannot ever be entirely objective. Researchers hoping to use their work to promote social justice may be subject to three particular traps common to academia: jargon, self-referencing, and hegemonic concepts.

Do You Hear What I Hear?: The Jargon Trap

Most academic disciplines and sub-groups have their own vocabularies. The existence, but not necessarily the meaning, of these specialised lexicons are well known to the public: The lawyer's *mens rea, habeas corpus, ex aequo et bono*; the doctor's DDX, ventral, dorsalis; the statistician's coefficient, parameter, p-value.

These terminologies exist for a reason. They are intended to facilitate better communication about specialised knowledge or circumstances. In-group terms can further scholarship and

allow for cross-context comparisons. Latin legal, medical, and biological terms are used for precision – something you want whilst dealing with court cases, surgeries, and medical advances! In other sciences and the humanities, jargon can be used to convey complicated theories succinctly, address very particular details, and signal awareness of certain issues. At the same time, the distinct jargon and technical connotations of phrases used by academic groups begin to create divisions and exclusionism. The utility of developing and using such jargon must be weighed against concerns of becoming entirely elite. Scientists have long been criticised for not communicating well with the public. Part of this issue arises from this jargon trap: Specialised vocabularies of Latin and technical terminology become so well ingrained for those scientists who have a certain education they forget others do not share their lexicon. For social justice researchers in the social sciences, this can be just as much an issue. We must guard against speaking and theorising about issues of desperate importance to individuals and groups of people in language they cannot – and, given the hierarchical nature of education in our world, perhaps are not *allowed* to – understand. (For more on jargon in academia, see Torgerson, 2006; Schecher, 1995; Eaton and Lowie, 1943; Walton, 1952; Corder, 1991).

"The Professor Talks to Himself"[1]: The Self-Referential Trap

The majority of academics, regardless of discipline, cite themselves at some point in their careers. Journal articles refer to data collected and published elsewhere; chapters collate a multitude of conclusions from prior publications; monographs expand on theories previously mentioned.

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[1] Title of Eaton and Lowie's 1943 piece on jargon, highlighting the interplay between these traps.

Good theoretical work generally requires this expansion and revision of ideas. Predicating academic writing on previous work helps ideas evolve, reach new audiences, and respond to critiques.

Along with the issue of jargon, self-referencing has a place in scholarship and can assist in producing better and more nuanced knowledge. But researchers and authors do need to be cautious about the extent to which they are pulling from their own and known colleagues' work versus engaging with new ideas and communities. This should be a mutually beneficial process: Grappling with other scholars' work improves the original research and expands the reach of both researchers' efforts.

Are You Thinking What I'm Thinking?: The Hegemonic Concept Trap

In 1974, Lukes suggested a three-tiered typology of power. The most obvious form is *material power*. This first dimension includes economic and military power as well as technological capacity. The second dimension, *bargaining power*, revolves around the ability to control the "rules of the game" (Zeitoun and Warner, 2006: 442): influencing the agenda and determining what is and is not on the negotiating table. The third dimension of power is the most difficult to concretely grasp, and also probably the most difficult to counteract. Through *ideational power*, people, groups, and states influence ideas and assumptions – not merely their own, but also others'. The third dimension is the capacity to create, uphold, and destroy narratives, perceptions, and knowledge.

The idea of 'hegemonic concepts' posits that certain *concepts* become hegemonic in their own right: Particular forms, understandings, and framings of issues are dominant discourses that have a power of their own through soft power. Certain concepts – ideas, ways of seeing the world, and topics – become trendy and popular at different times.

Hegemonic concepts are perhaps one of the biggest poisons to properly original research. Researchers' thinking become bound by these dominant discourses and framings. This trap is created and perpetuated, in part, by the jargon and self-referential traps: Specialised language and in-group discussions often address – or create – these hegemonic concepts and make them even more ingrained. The interplay of these three traps are well theorised in complementary social science and psychology literature around discourse theory, framing theory, and confirmation bias.

'Discourses' refer to the systems through which people give meaning to and make sense of the world (Runhaar et al., 2010: 340). Discourse theory posits that language (including our specialised jargons) does not merely reflect but also reproduces and shapes the ways in which topics and events are understood and reacted to. Through 'framing', certain discourses become dominant in sectors or groups of actors; these frames strongly influence not only the ways in which we talk about issues, but also the way we classify and understand 'facts', how events can best be influenced, and which actions we should take. These frames are also referred to in literature as 'lenses', 'schemes', and 'models', among others (Downey and Brief, 1986: Kolkman et al., 2007: Schön and Rein, 1994: Rein and Schön, 1996: Shmueli et al., 2006: and Kaufman and Smith, 1999).

'Framing' has much in common with 'confirmation bias', a theory arising from social psychology. Confirmation bias was first considered by P.C. Wason in a 1960 paper. Wason demonstrated how individuals frequently fail to attempt to disprove hypotheses and assumptions, instead only seeking evidence that confirms them. In doing so, people come to firmly believe 'facts' that are 'half-truths' at best and sometimes blatantly false. Since Wason's experiments in the lab, confirmation bias has been explored in a multitude of sectors. In multiple contexts, people are shown to latch onto evidence that confirms what they already think they know while dismissing material that challenges their beliefs. While

confirmation bias is difficult to prove and has been used in so many disciplines and sectors that it is not always well defined (e.g., perhaps 'confirmation bias*es*' is a more appropriate term) (Koslowski and Maqueda, 1993), it can be a powerful tool for questioning the extent to which people's minds and assumptions are easily changed. Confirmation bias and discourse theory have strong overlaps. People impose their assumptions on new information, amplifying components that 'fit' their 'frame' and downplaying or disregarding elements that do not. This happens in daily life, media, and policy, as well as all stages of the academic process – funding, interest creation, evidence seeking, and publication (Torgerson, 2006; McMillan and White, 1993).

Hegemonic concepts become dominant discourses that are often upheld by jargons and reproduced by self-referencing. In their work, social justice researchers are subject to confirmation bias, prone to over-focusing on data and findings that support their assumptions. The process of engaging with others' frames and rethinking your own is referred to by Runhaal et al. and others as "frame reflection" and may involve "reframing" (2010). It is possible – and increasingly popular – to facilitate the process of reframing between stakeholder groups in various projects, from corporate investment to development projects. But reframing is not an easy or quick task. It often involves dismantling fundamental assumptions about the way the world works. In spite of the difficulties, sessions in which various stakeholders dialogue around their frames and hear about others' can be useful in creating empathy and understanding and, perhaps, even reformulating policies and actions. Beyond facilitated meetings, major events can also create "windows of opportunities" for reframing dominant discourses. Rein and Schön refer to these moments as "exogenous events" (1996: 100; see also Runhaal et al., 2010: 340). When an event occurs that garners a great deal of attention, it can serve to question a dominant discourse. Or it can serve to

reinforce it. How events are perceived, discussed, and responded to are impacted by which frames are held by which actors and how much power they have.

Frames and discourses are not inherently bad. They allow us to make sense of our world. But uncritically embracing hegemonic concepts, and failing to question those concepts by seeking new evidence and more information, can result in serious errors that have very direct and serious impacts on others and on us. Social justice academics have a serious role to play in challenging malignant hegemonic concepts. The danger lies in becoming subject to those same concepts – or falling prey to or creating others.

The London Water Research Group: Contesting or Creating Hegemony?

There is no doubt in my mind that the academics involved in the London Water Research Group are deeply committed to social justice. But nor is there any doubt in my mind that they, like all other researchers – and myself! – are subject to the traps discussed above. This section will consider where and how the LWRG has fallen prey particularly hard to these traps.

In their paper first introducing the Analytical Framework of Hydro-Hegemony, Zeitoun and Warner asserted that "Writing on hegemony and on water conflict analysis in general tends to be the political science of the winners" (2006: 438). But has the work of the London Water Research Group become just this – the political science of the winners – even as it has meant to shed light on those most disadvantaged by power and politics? Have the ideas of the LWRG become hegemonic concepts, inaccessible to others – and to the people most affected?

Constrained Thinking and Scope: Hydro-Hegemonic Concepts

Water, as much as any other topic, is subject to conceptual hegemons, dominant discourses around what water is and means and how humans should interact with. Assumptions about

how water resources should be governed, conventional approaches to policy decisions, and

mainstream techniques in research limit our ability and likelihood to creatively challenge

hegemony over water.

Some water-based hegemonic concepts include:

- the <u>classic hydro cycle's</u> almost sole focus on biophysical processes, which neglects

  the ways that humans "move" water globally through politics and economics and

  ignoring water's cultural and religious significance;

- the fourth Dublin Principle assertion of water as an <u>economic good</u> and its influence

  on policy decisions and government practices;

- <u>Integrated Water Resources Management</u> (IWRM) as a policy frame; and

- the <u>default to surface 'blue' water</u> over 'green' and other kinds of water, preferencing

  research on visible forms of water over aquifers, soil moistures, and clouds.

The above hegemonic concepts are at the base of incredibly dominant discourses, and make

very little sense in many situations…but they still govern them. A subsistence farmer facing

the Merowe dam in northern Sudan is not aided by the United States Geologic Survey's

temperate, mountainous portrayal of the hydro cycle. And yet that is the model she – and the

engineers designing and policymakers overseeing the dam's construction – has been given.

These hydro-hegemonic concepts are the result of historical emphasis in research and policy.

This emphasis may be the result of less advanced hydrologic knowledge of water, lesser

obviousness, and/or vested political interests. Once a particular understanding of water takes

hold, it is found on the walls of water and agriculture ministries, it is taught in grammar

school textbooks. It becomes 'common sense', basic shared cultural knowledge. And

thinking outside of or beyond it becomes almost impossible. Alternative approaches to water

knowledge and science will have a hard time gaining mainstream acceptance as they become

counter-hegemonic. Even scholars who wish to tackle hegemonic ideas in water may be limited by those very ideas, constrained by the paradigms that define what water is and is not. A 'counter-hegemonic concept' that has come out of the LWRG faculty might be found in Tony Allan's 'virtual water', which has slowly become more mainstream. But it does not directly challenge many hegemonic concepts, and it isn't fully integrated in water policy and science: We do not have a hydro cycle that portrays virtual water well; the focus in virtual water theory on food trade reinforces the idea of water as an economic resource; agriculture is often considered part of IWRM; and blue water still has more attention in research as a whole.

The work of the London Water Research Group is constrained by four main hegemonic concepts: a focus on river basins, state-centric analysis, the negativity of hegemony, and hegemony itself.

Perhaps the most obvious hegemonic concept found in the LWRG's work lies in the original Framework of Hydro-Hegemony, which focuses on *blue* water conflict in shared *river basins*. Mark Zeitoun was originally trained as a civil and environmental engineer, and his early thinking quite clearly buys the United States Geologic Survey's textbook hook, line, and sinker. Water engineers and policymakers – and social scientists – focus on is the obviously visible blue water in river basins; the original Framework of Hydro-Hegemony is no different. The LWRG's first six International Workshops on Hydro-Hegemony, too, primarily included attention to state actions in river basins. The discourse of hydro-hegemony, which has the potential to go so far in focusing on power and politics in transboundary water interactions, completely failed at the outset to go past the traditional focus on what water 'is', what kinds of water we should be concerned about, and which groups face water-based conflicts. Liquid sources in transboundary divisions are far from the

only water type and context in which issues of power and hegemony come to bear on access and justice.

Hydro-hegemony might be used to examine distribution of and access to water for indigenous communities, gender and racial/ethnic, or religious minorities, and refugee populations. While many of the world's major river basins cross geopolitical borders, conflict and contention over their water resources do not – at all – occur solely between state actors. Though the power analyses originally adapted for the Analytical Framework of Hydro-Hegemony are focused on states, issues of power and privilege also dictate communities' access to river basin resources beyond and within states. This critique continues to be valid for the majority of international relations scholarship (indeed, state-centrism is written into the discipline's name). It is not a great surprise that hydro-hegemonic analysis, borrowing as it does from IR, is framed by those same biases. But if the Framework and LWRG are truly to push boundaries and consider alternatives, greater attention must be paid to non-state actors (groups, populations, organisations, and individuals) at sub-state and transnational levels.

'Virtual water' refers to the water required to produce commodities (e.g., the water evapotranspirated during agricultural production). Through 'virtual water trade', countries might trade 'water' by importing and exporting goods requiring water for production rather than actual water. Since Tony Allan first suggested the concept, debates have arisen about whether virtual water trade improves or harms food and water security and is beneficial to all parties. Food trade and other virtual water transactions are subject to the political and power concerns found in any other interaction; the motivations behind and lingering effects of various virtual water trading relationships must therefore be considered.

Some researchers and practitioners have begun to expand the Framework to consider whether hydro-hegemony might be a useful concept in these other contexts (Sojamo, 2012; Greco,

2012; Farnum, 2013; Keulertz, 2012; among others) – and are slowly gaining prominence in the work of the London Water Research Group and their International Workshops on Hydro-Hegemony.

A group reflection on "Hegemony and Social Change" by prominent international relations theorists points out that scholarship tends to focus on hegemony when it's gone awry: That is, we have research on bad leaders and uses of hegemonic power, but not much on positive case studies (Chase-Dunn, Taylor, Arrighi, Cox, Overbeek, Gills, Frank, Modelski, and Wilkinson, 1994). The Framework of Hydro-Hegemony has most often been applied in scholarship to 'ugly cooperation', where there is a clear hegemon and that hegemon is not using its power in a just way (Zeitoun and Mirumachi, 2008; Zeitoun, Mirumachi, and Warner, 2011; Zeitoun and Allan, 2008; Cascão, 2008; Saleh, 2008; Turton and Funke, 2008; Wegerich, 2008). Judged on the vocalised and under-breath complainst about -hegemony" witnessed at international water fora, "Hydro-hegemony" seems to have a generally negative connotation and is assumed to be a bad thing. But this is not necessarily the case. Certain forms of hydro-hegemony might result in positive leadership creating shared control over water resources. And whilst Zeitoun and Warner recognise this in their original presentation of the Framework, they do not go on to exemplify positive forms in any great detail or in future publications. There is a clear call for social justice academics to 'speak truth to power' and point out injustices. But never seeking out positive case studies or analysing effective actions means that the LWRG is not generating actionable alternatives or profiling best practices. The Framework of Hydro-Hegemony would be a more effective analytical tool and the work of the London Water Research Group more effective and far-reaching if they were applied more often to contexts of positive instances of transboundwary water interaction, just uses of hegemony, and/or where there is not a clear, dominant hegemon.

Even "hegemony" itself may be becoming a hegemonic concept: Chase-Dunn, Taylor, Arrighi, Cox, Overbeek, Gills, Frank, Modelski, and Wilkinson question whether 'hegemony' is becoming one of those common academic words that is thrown around too much, used to refer to too many things without clear definition or focus (1994). Gaventa points out that 'power', as much as social 'change' or 'hegemony', is not a static or absolute idea: People view power, and power holders, in very different ways (2006). We want to consider the transformation of power itself, not only the way we can change society through power's influence (Hoffman, 2013). When considering our own work, it is important to remember that the vast majority of us explore sociocultural contexts that have existed for much longer than our current state system and hegemonic world order have – 'power' and 'hegemony' have not always been or meant the same thing (Chase-Dunn, Taylor, Arrighi, Cox, Overbeek, Gills, Frank, Modelski, and Wilkinson, 1994). We must also consider that we are living in a time when issues like 'power' and 'hegemony' are becoming buzzwords – and may well be dominant framings themselves.

The London Water Research Group has created an identity for itself around *challenging* thinking. But ironically, this itself has become mainstream: It is sexy to criticise power and politics. The LWRG's challenge to the assumption that power does not matter in transboundary water politics has become hegemonic. This new hegemonic trend may be limiting the creation and formation of other alternatives and possibilities for action.

Talking to Themselves: Jargon, Self-Referencing, and Accessibility

Beyond the concern of what the London Water Research Group talks about is who it talks *to*. Pieces on hydro-hegemony are often filled with power and politics jargon, throwing around sentences such as "Political processes outside the water sector configure basin-wide hydro-political relations in a form ranging from the benefits derived from cooperation under

hegemonic leadership to the inequitable aspects of domination" (Zeitoun and Warner, 200: 435) – perfectly readable to those of us in water-based social sciences, but likely daunting to your average chemist or economist…to say nothing of the non-academics on the losing side of those potential "inequitable aspects of domination". The London Water Research Group does not talk in the same language as the populations displaced by dams, the Palestinians stripped of water rights, or the Peruvians whose water the British population is 'eating' via asparagus imports – the very groups the LWRG studies and generally intends to advocate for. The International Workshops on Hydro-Hegemony, held semiannually, do attract a new group of people each year…but the speakers are generally close colleagues of the faculty making up the London Water Research group, and many (though not all) of the 'new' faces in the audience are students of those same faculty. Certainly one could not find a farmer, corporate businessperson, or non-elite indigenous activist in the room. And while new ideas may be welcome in the room, the majority of the conversation is dominated, and the agenda framed, by the same core group of people each year. The primary space in which the Framework of Hydro-Hegemony itself is discussed, applied, and reconsidered is one heavily subject to hegemonic relations.

It may not be far from the truth to call the LWRG an impenetrable and incomprehensible – though happy – backslapping academic clique. The LWRG cross-cites each other's work regularly; the Framework of Hydro-Hegemony is no different, with papers expanding and using it regularly created by various subgroups of the LWRG but recurrently referring to the rest of the LWRG work. It is not a sin to cite yourself and your friends, of course…but when almost every one of the authors in a paper's bibliography are personally known by the author, some ideas are clearly missing.

It is important to note that the work of the LWRG is being cited by others: The ideas are not remaining entirely in a vacuum. They attract students and researchers from many countries

and varied disciplinary backgrounds. In that regard, the LWRG is doing well and avoiding the fate of many other labs and academic cliques. However, it could do more, particularly in engaging non-academics in water-based hegemonic situations not only as its topic of study but also in the process of creating and discussing its results. The London Water Research Group has to learn to talk not only to each other and interested students but to the farmers, and the anti-dam activists, and the corporate businesspeople, and the political elite: the powerful, and the powerless. Perhaps in doing so, it can help them talk to each other – really talk, on more even footing – about the many ways that water shapes our world.

Conclusion

There is an irony, of course, in writing a jargon-filled, academic essay to critique these same practices. There is certainly a danger that this paper – and certainly this author – will fall into the same traps warned against within it…or that critiquing scholarship based on discourse analysis and framing comes with its own traps. Lingering issues about what is meant by "change", the role of time, and the impacts and results of academic research remain. But the above is meant to be a challenging and introspective piece, purposefully offering questions rather than solutions. To claim to have the solutions would be beyond presumptuous. I hope, however, that identifying some of these issues can be a helpful first step in addressing them.

Why study change? Perhaps, above all, in order to help shape it (Scholte, 1993). But we must do so constantly questioning and critiquing ourselves, seeking to work against our own tendencies to be hegemons as we find what seem to be good ideas and running with them. I believe the London Water Research Group, in spite of its many current flaws and missteps, is capable of and willing to rise to this challenge.

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