

INTO THE STACKS ARTICLE RELAUNCH: “POWER AND CONNECTION”

Thinking with Paul Kramer’s “Power and Connection”

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I am delighted to have an opportunity to reflect on Paul Kramer’s rich and highly influential “Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World.” Since its publication in 2011, “Power and Connection” has been a cornerstone of my graduate U.S. in the World classes and has been invoked in every graduate qualifying exam. The essay has had a direct and indirect influence on the wave of innovative scholarship that has been produced in the past decade. I first want to note some of the essay’s important interventions. Then, rather than attempting to extend or update Kramer’s extensive historiographical review, I want to think with “Power and Connection” by taking up two of Kramer’s suggestions and discussions. First, I take up his suggestion to think about imperial power through a Gramscian frame of domination and consent, arguing that the concept of hegemonic struggle is critical for thinking about power within empires and shifts in global imperial formations. Second, I engage Kramer’s discussion of the relationship between imperial and transnational histories, arguing that scholars need to consider transnationalism as a highly specific and contingent political formation, as well as an analytic category and sometimes actors’ category.

Kramer’s “Power and Connection” has been profoundly important to my graduate students as well as to my own scholarship. For historians writing “crossed histories,” which strive not to reinstate America at the center, Kramer’s essay remains indispensable for thinking about some of the ongoing and vexing debates in the field. Kramer’s lucid reflections on empire as a category of analysis, rather than an entity—something to think with rather than about—invited investigations not simply of the complexities, but of the staggering varieties of U.S. imperial formations, a variety obscured by any insistence on a strict definition of empire. Thus liberated from the “is it or isn’t it” debate, important scholarship of the past decade analyzing how empire is functioning has vindicated Kramer’s claim that far more is to be gained by thinking of the imperial as a way of seeing rather than arguing for or against the existence of a U.S. empire.

Instead of the exceptionalist thinking that results from debating empire as a noun, “Power and Connection” encourages us to think about the U.S. alongside other empires. The United States emerged at the crossroads of multiple imperial formations and competitions, and it has never stood outside of shifting imperial dynamics. For Kramer, nation-states and empires are not antithetical, and we can usefully regard the United States as a nation-based empire. At its core, “Power and Connection” presents an elegant and compelling call for crossed histories that link historiographies as well as histories, urging scholars of U.S. projects to employ non-exceptionalist categories not typically employed in U.S. history. By drawing consistent attention to the ways exceptionalist categories have shaped U.S. scholarship, Kramer brilliantly shows how focusing instead on power, connection, and comparison make imperial history an indispensable tool not just for historians of the U.S. in the world, but for all historians of the U.S. Kramer’s road map to “crossed histories” sharpens our analytic tools for many different kinds of inquiries.

Kramer's essay remains profoundly important for interrogating historians' categories of analysis. Kramer identified a set of binaries that have repeatedly arisen in the literature along with the uncritical adoption by historians of historical actors' terms, categories, and frameworks that have become reified as analytic categories. Binaries effectively dissected by Kramer include those between informal and formal empire and the domestic and the foreign. "Ideally," Kramer argues, "an imperial analytic will allow scholars to see the very terms 'domestic' and 'foreign' as actors' categories forged in struggles over space, sovereignty, and binary making" (1357). The lucidity of Kramer's call for rigorous historicizing of these categories, paying attention to the ways in which such dichotomies as domestic and foreign are constructed, and his cautions against adopting the actors' categories of state power as an analytic with which to understand power, constitute a key contribution of the essay.

Turning to thinking with "Power and Connection" about hegemony, I consider the notion of hegemony to extend Kramer's discussion about the relationship between coercive and noncoercive forms of empire. To my mind, the concept of hegemony—as hegemonic struggle—is indispensable because it allows us to account for the outsized ambition and hubris of U.S. actors and U.S. power, as well as the limits of that power. As seen in a recent H-Diplo discussion of Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall's "Recentring the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations," debates about the reach, character, and limits of U.S. power remain among the most contentious in the field.¹ In "Power and Connection," Kramer worries that some have reduced U.S. empire to coercion and misread totalizing blueprints for reality. At the same time, he rightly identifies specious invocations of "hegemony" to characterize U.S. power in the world, with hegemony serving as a euphemism that advances an exceptionalist alternative to U.S. empire (1381–1382).

Kramer suggests that historians would do well to take up Gramscian inquiries into domination and consent in order to rescue hegemony from such exceptionalist uses. Extending Kramer's caution against viewing empire as a fixed category, I consider hegemony not as a fixed state, in which a global order is defined by a hegemon, but as a project. Following Ernesto Laclau's discussion of Gramsci, hegemony is usefully understood not as a simple, forceful domination by elites, nor a simple imposition of power, but as a process of making new political identities that involve "linking particular interests with wider, more universal claims. The process through which this occurs is called hegemonic struggle."²

Hegemonic struggle, like the imperial—as a way of producing power relations—needs to be examined as a series of projects that vie for control in historically contingent circumstances. We need to consider hegemony not as an achieved state or a description of global order as a "done deal," but as an analytic that privileges and illuminates struggles over power. The notion of hegemony offers a lens to understand power as it is contested. Hegemony might instead be viewed not as an outcome, but as the forward looking goal of the struggles and contests over what empire is displacing, and the challenges to imperial power formations.

Thinking along with Kramer's caution against reifying actors' categories, attention to hegemonic projects can, in fact, help us critique the actors' categories, especially those that disavow empire. One imperative in investigating hegemonic struggles is to reject the dichotomy between political economy and culture, a dichotomy replicated in Joseph's Nye's distinction between "soft power" and "hard power." With much of what has been described as soft power imbricated within U.S. domination of global resources, hard and soft power are not the diametrical opposites they are routinely made out to be. Like other actors' category dichotomies, they are

¹Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall. "Recentring the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations," *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 38–55; H-Diplo Roundtable XXI-42, May 25, 2020, <https://hdiplo.org/to/RT21-42>.

²Lynn Worshom and Gary A. Olson, "Hegemony and the Future of Democracy: Ernesto Laclau's Political Philosophy," *JAC* 19, no. 1 (1999): 4.

historically constructed in the service of American exceptionalism, and unravel as analytic categories.

The advantage of thinking with hegemonic projects as an analytic is that the notion of projects inherently emphasizes process, interrogating new constructions of global order, and acknowledging the necessarily incomplete and contested nature of power. The conception of hegemonic projects necessitates attention to multiple facets of the exercise of U.S. and power. As both project and process, hegemony, like empire, is never complete. The notion of a hegemonic project does not imply unfettered power, nor control. It requires an investigation, not an assumption, about the scope of that power or how it is exercised. Hence, it is a frame that can account for collaboration in cases where U.S. power is limited, projects in which the United States has distinct interests but is not in control; but it can also account for extreme power imbalance where the United States has an outsized impact that can be horrifically destructive of lives, environments, and societies.

Imperial and/or hegemonic projects inherently face constraints and limits, and this frame of inquiry directs our attention to contestation, collaboration, and relational power dynamics. It is then a question for historical inquiry as to which particular dynamics come to the fore, and whether or not those constraints are overcome. The notion of an imperial project or a hegemonic project discourages what Kramer rightly critiques as the “illusory association of empire with absolute power.”

Investigating hegemonic struggle reveals how power is operating and where imperial projects are incomplete, drawing attention to the vulnerabilities, collaborations, and implosions of imperial projects. Working with the concept of hegemonic projects asks that historians examine power as it is being made, contested, consolidated, or unmade. There is no theoretical answer to the question of the balance of coercion and consent in an imperial formation. This must be investigated. An investigation of hegemonic struggles does not risk assuming absolute power, but it also does not downplay violence and coercion. These investigations can take in the extraordinary size, variety, and contradictions of the U.S. imperial toolkit, revealing the contours of a U.S. empire that worked through legitimation, negotiation collaboration, and diplomacy, as well as coercion.

Focusing on struggles over hegemonic projects is the only way to understand shifts in imperial power formations, and this can help identify the different modes of U.S. exceptionalism across different imperial formations. To draw in a brief example from my recent work, in the post-1989 world, the shift from the age of three worlds to a global order defined by U.S. unipolarity—that is, where the United States had outsized power to set the terms on which others acted—required a massive reshuffling, a rearticulation of the discursive and material practices by which the United States understood and projected its own particular interests as universal.

In addition to the ideological/political work attempting to naturalize neoliberalism, consolidating a new hegemonic bloc with the United States at the helm of unipolar order necessitated a rearticulation of American exceptionalism in the face of robust calls for a multipolar and demilitarized world. U.S. unipolar hegemony was a highly self-conscious political project. Clearly articulated in what came to be known as the Wolfowitz doctrine, leaked to the press in February 1992 and stating that no counterhegemonic challenge to U.S. political and economic dominance can be allowed to emerge in the former Soviet sphere, U.S. officials acted to promote a unipolar world undergirded by U.S.-led militarism. After a Cold War era structured around competition between blocs over which form of society could best deliver the good life to the masses, establishing a new hegemonic bloc based on restructuring and privatizing social goods in terms of market efficiency and profit was an enormous ideological undertaking. And an examination of those projects reveals the vulnerabilities and implosions of these hegemonic projects as well as their massive footprints. Most importantly, the contours can only be grasped through relational histories that consider U.S. projects through non-U.S. historiographies, histories, and perspectives.³

³Penny M. Von Eschen, *Paradoxes of Nostalgia: Cold War Triumphalism and Global Disorder since 1989* (Durham, NC, 2022).

To take up a second thread of Kramer's discussion, I want to think with Kramer's contention that transnational histories have been separated from imperial histories, a separation replicating the binary of agency (transnational) and structure (empire) (1382). I certainly agree that one does not want to construct simple dichotomies of agency and structure. But the claim that transnational histories have been written separately from imperial history risks overlooking a rich literature on Black transnationalism and anti-imperialism. Indeed, from W. E. B. DuBois's first essays in the *Crisis* in 1910, he was writing imperial as well as transnational histories. DuBois was a keen observer and critic of overlapping, reinforcing, and/or colliding imperial and nation-state trajectories. In terms of more recent scholarship, while studies of transnational abolitionism, antilynching, or anti-colonial projects may not explicitly announce the scholarship as a study of imperialism, this does not imply that the scholarship has not been deeply attuned to shifting imperial and nation-state structures and the relationship between the two. These histories are at once imperial, trans-imperial, and transnational. Doing crossed histories requires putting historiographies in conversation where they may not have been previously—articulating connections others may not have seen as well as calling for new connections.

And while a study of collective projects and oppositional projects will necessarily emphasize agency, this by no means implies that such scholarship employs simplistic senses of structure and agency. To be sure, transnational projects often developed precisely because of aspirations or grievances that could not be resolved with a nation-state or imperial structure. Whether examining collaborations with imperial projects or those who engaged in oppositional struggle with imperial/hegemonic projects, scholars can also think with the anti-imperial, without replicating actors' categories. While one does not want to uncritically echo actors' categories, we need to take very seriously the perceptions and critiques of historical actors who confronted imperial projects as they displaced, modified, or ran rough-shod over democratic (small-d) projects.

Finally, thinking with Kramer's "Power and Connection" calls for crossed histories, I note that much of the writing on transnationalism has focused on analytic and methodological questions. Certainly, transnationalism can serve as an important analytic lens, illuminating dynamics that are obscured if one takes the nation-state as the center of inquiry. But transnationalism (s) is also a specific and contingent political, material, and ideological formation. And one should not conflate the two. For example, the universalizing claims of both the Wilsonian and Leninist projects, in the era of the dissolution of empires and emergence of nation-states, set up very specific tensions and contradictions that invited transnational projects and allegiances. These histories are at once imperial and transnational. Through the era of U.S.–Soviet competition, transnational projects were triangulated with the dominant structure of nation and empires on the one hand and the universalizing projects of the superpowers on the other. Transnational projects became not just visible but pivotal in the mid-twentieth century because these projects laid bare and mediated between the core contradictions and tensions of the crossed histories of multiple imperial projects and nation-states. Cold War transnational projects generated sites for political negotiation and leverage in conditions of extraordinarily unequal power relations amidst war, shifting empires, and decolonization. And shifting our lens to different sets of transnational actors (for example, U.S. based evangelicals, corporate, cultural producers) will reveal very different dynamics.

Hence, the "transnational" has functioned both as an analytic, actors' category and highly specific and contingent political formation. It is the historian's task, then, to unpack the constructions and collisions of both transnational, national, and imperial formations and actors, asking in crossed histories, when does the nation-state matter, and how and when does it reinforce, challenge, collide, or work in tandem with imperial projects? For historians, these are empirical questions, underlining the importance of Kramer's call to historicize imperial space in crossed histories.