Hegemony’s Dirty Tricks: 
Explaining counter-globalization’s weakness in times of neoliberal crisis

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Abstract

Before the backdrop of the international financial and sovereign debt crisis, this article revisits the development of the counter-globalization movements in the global North over the past thirteen years. How can we explain that the systemic failures of the current order are not being met by a broad ideological formation posing a serious challenge to the neoliberal hegemony in international politics and political economy? Why have the mass protests at summit meetings and democratic deliberation experiments at social forums not prepared the ground for such an ideological formation? Drawing on (neo-)Gramscian concepts, this paper argues that the counter-globalization movements’ “war of maneuver” has not been complemented by an adequate “war of position”. Counter-hegemonic dissent articulated broadly on the streets has not translated into counter-hegemonic capacity. Not focusing on movement-internal reasons, this article highlights the role played by the strength of the opponent in preventing such movement success. Our analysis sheds light on three important macro-contextual factors: (a) the difficulties created for establishing counter-hegemony in international politics when hegemonic powers insulate themselves from critique; (b) the co-optation of critical discourse that is achieved by bending critique into a new legitimation strategy for neoliberal measures; (c) the de-politicization of power relations by current international security discourses and policies. Together, these macro-contextual factors help explain how neoliberal forces successfully prevent counter-globalization movements from moving from “war of maneuver” to “war of position” and becoming counter-hegemonic, even in times of neoliberal crisis.

Keywords: global justice, counter-globalization, alter-globalization, anti-globaliation, social movements, protest, neoliberalism, hegemony, crisis, counter-hegemony, Gramsci
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1. Introduction

At the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle, the so-called “anti-globalization movement” had its media coming out party (Klein 2004). A wave of summit protests followed (Scholl 2012; Starr et al. 2011; Pleyers 2010; della Porta et al. 2006). However, transnational activists soon realized that in order to turn the “anti” into “alter-” or “counter-globalization” movements, they had to come up with alternative practices.¹ In 2001, the first World Social Forum was held in Porto Alegre. Since then, this gathering has been repeated on an annual, later bi-annual basis, and found imitation on regional, national and local levels (della Porta 2009; Sen et al. 2004; Smith 2004; Fisher & Ponniah 2003). Although the social forums employed an open-space methodology (Conway 2004; Wright 2005; Ponniah 2008) and explicitly rejected a single global social movement agenda, the outline of a counter-globalization consensus became gradually more visible (Freyberg-Inan 2006).

The counter-globalization movements generally oppose neoliberal theory and policy agendas,² emphasizing instead the principles of diversity, (participatory) democratic governance of politics and the economy, economic sovereignty, anti-consumerism, and ecology. Key demands are a more equitable redistribution of wealth and power, greater citizen autonomy and more participatory democracy, better representation and more influence of ordinary citizens and poorer countries at the transnational level, limits to the influence of market values and private power, and the protection and nurturing of public spaces and commons. The values of equity, solidarity, democracy, self-determination and autonomy are key values in the movements that shape a normative consensus across the striking diversity of participating organizations, groups, and individuals (Freyberg-Inan 2006).

This counter-globalization consensus was also, at least in parts, supported by a number of well-known economists and businesspeople, such as Joseph Stiglitz or George Soros, who publicly critized neoliberal ideas and policies, but also came up with concrete alternative proposals.³ However, as Stephen (2011: 212) observes, before the outbreak of the global financial crisis, counter-globalization movements had not established “a coalition of social forces capable of mounting an ideological attack and forging a transnational intellectual-moral bloc.” Neoliberalism had not been driven into a visible legitimation crisis.

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¹ We prefer the term ‘counter-globalization movements’, because it stresses the oppositional character of the alternative practices and emphasizes the multiplicity of the movement(s).
² We define neoliberalism with Peters (2001: 14, vii; see also Chopra 2003) on the theoretical level as a selective reworking of the tenets of classical economics and political economy which preserves the idea that the free market is an essential prerequisite for a free society and assumes that all social behavior can generally be understood in terms of the human attributes “rationality, individuality, and self-interest.” It is based on a definition of freedom as the individual’s freedom from state interference as well as freedom for the market and contains strong opposition to the idea of the welfare or protectionist state (Peters 2001: 14–15). Inasmuch as neoliberal thinking is unreflective, does not seriously engage with critiques and alternatives, and is politically engaged to bolster its proponents’ discursive and institutional power, it operates as an ideology (Harvey 2007). As will be re-emphasized below, the agents of neoliberal globalization are diverse and operate at all levels of governance. Key for international governance are inter alia the WTO, IMF and G8 and most of their most powerful member states, on whom the below discussion will consequently also focus.
³ These interventions can be seen as part of a “war of position” and first steps towards the construction of a counter-hegemonic project; see below. Other economists like the late James Tobin or Dani Rodrik have, if unwittingly, lent credibility to movement arguments.
When in 2008 the evidence of a global financial crisis became overwhelming, the counter-globalization movements failed to provide a strategic response. Although the crisis seemed to confirm many of the economic critiques articulated in the ten years before, the movements seemed to be largely absent as a political force. Even though the Occupy and anti-austerity protests that erupted in the context of the crisis overlapped in critique, agenda and personnel with the broader counter-globalization struggle, the latter protests have also not enabled the empowerment of that broader struggle or the institutionalization of any of its key demands. The apparent inability of the counter-globalization movements to capitalize on an obvious crisis of its antagonist, neoliberalism, presents a major puzzle to the study of contestation in international politics. How can it be explained that the systemic failures of the current economic and financial system are in fact not being met by a broad counter-hegemonic formation posing a serious challenge to the neoliberal hegemony in international politics?

Our definition of what might count as “success” (or “failure”) of the movements is complicated by the activists’ understandings of their own roles. We might distinguish two versions of success, each of which can legitimately be interpreted as a political gain for the counter-globalization movements. More obviously, political success consists in high or increasing popular support for the movements and their respective demands; Gamson (1990) would call this “acceptance”. This includes support by activists but also support in the media, which affects electoral behavior and other forms of political participation more broadly. Ultimately this is of course expected to have implications for the content of policy or the structural arrangement of governance, shifting either to fall more closely into line with movement demands; Gamson would call this “new advantages”. Less obviously, the movements may be considered successful irrespective of policy outcome inasmuch as (at least partially) as a result of their existence ordinary citizens become more strongly involved in a deliberative process, at the end of which stands the making of policy; Kriesi et. al. (1995: 207 ff.) would call this “procedural influence”. Our puzzle is, reformulated, that we can observe neither version of success in the context of the current crisis.

There have been several attempts to explain these failures in terms of movement-internal factors. Stephen (2009), for example, points at the problems of the diverse actors involved in the World Social Forum in formulating a common master-frame. Gibson (2008) argues that counterglobalization movements never really constituted a global multitude, above all because persisting and structural inequalities within counter-globalization spaces preclude ethical identification with marginalised people. Similarly, Worth and Buckley (2009) contend that the World Social Forum is more exclusive than inclusive and entertains rather than counters neoliberal hegemony. Touching upon another movement-internal factor, Scholl (2012) shows how tactical innovation of summit protesters has slowed down. Summit protests increasingly fail to create major tactical dilemmas for authorities and to project a political contestation of global hegemony. While these would all be relevant parts of a complete explanation of the movements’ lack of success, macro-contextual factors outside of counterglobalization-movements deserve more systematic attention than they have received in the literature so far. Consequently, we focus on this latter category of explanations here.

Drawing on (neo-)Gramscian concepts, we argue that counter-globalization movements’ counter-hegemonic dissent, articulated broadly on the streets in a “war of manoeuvre” has not translated into a counter-hegemonic formation through an effective “war of position.” We show that this can be explained in good part by the strength of the movements’ opponents, the driving forces behind the international neoliberal regime which form the macro-context of the movement’s development: key intergovernmental institutions, governments of powerful states, and other actors associated with the neoliberal hegemony. The explanation we offer consists of three components:
First, we argue that the strength of the movements’ opponents is increased by a general insulation of power from critique, which is most visible at the inter-and supra-national level. By deliberating outside the public eye and physically isolated from ideational contenders, yet with very visible results, intergovernmental organizations such as the IMF, World Bank, the G8, and so far also the G20 give both symbolic and material expression to the neoliberal hegemony in international politics and help to recreate it.

Second, hegemonic global forces, at all levels of governance, have successfully incorporated and co-opted the power of critique, bending it into a new legitimation strategy for further neoliberal measures. As a result, at the time of writing, government leaders in the North follow the neoliberal advice of IMF and World Bank for tackling the fall-out of financial crisis (a case of fighting like with like).

Third, we show how the strength of the opponents is corroborated by a general depoliticization of power relations through current international security discourses and policies. By including dissent in the categories of “risk”, “threat”, and even “terrorism” through processes which can be efficiently summed up under the heading “securitization”, the critiques raised by counter-globalization movements are both depoliticized and delegitimated for a wider public.

Taken together, these three trends help explain the current weakness of counter-globalization forces in international politics. Our analysis of the movements’ struggle below is based on more than a decade of research and active involvement by both authors in various events, mobilizations, networks, and discussions of counter-globalization movements with a focus on the European context. Summit protests (Scholl 2012, Starr et al. 2011) and social forum processes as well as the movement organization ATTAC (Birchfield and Freyberg-Inan 2004, 2005, 2009) have had our special attention.

It is important for us to stress at the outset that our analysis of the movements’ failure to capitalize on neoliberal crisis by moving into a “war of position” by no means implies that the movements’ many activities have been misguided or affected no positive change. The social forum process as well as many movement components operating on the ground, e.g. as localization movements, solidarity economy initiatives, participatory budgeting projects, or projects to reclaim public space, do express movement values, contribute to the movements’ goals, and can help prepare the ground for larger-scale institutional change (Smith 2008; Della Porta et al. 2006; Starr 2001, 2005; Wuthnow 1998). However, this does not take away the fact that the movements are up against a set of hegemonic forces which have stifled their capacity to fight an effective war of position outside localized contexts. As will become clear in the analysis below, next to regulatory frameworks that buttress neoliberal power structures and policies (Skilair 1997), corporate media play a significant role in reinforcing neoliberal hegemony. Not only do they structurally underreport on the critique and actions of counter-globalization (and other social) movements (Herman & Chomsky 1988), they also actively defend neoliberal ideas and policies and discredit the movements’ actions (Pleysers 2010; Juris 2005). Moreover, global hegemonic elites fully exploit their privileged access to corporate media outlets and, for example, devise clever media campaigns around summit meetings. Counter-globalization activists have responded by creating their own independent online media outlets (Kidd 2003). However, the increasing concentration of the corporate media sector has made it difficult to counter corporate control on information.

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4 We note that some scholars and activists reject the idea of counter-hegemony as a way forward for counter-globalization movements. Day (2005), for example, argues that the strategy of counter-hegemony is surpassed by the prefigurative practices of counter-globalization activists engaging in the creation of self-organised and local alternatives. In his study of counter-globalization networks in Barcelona, Juris (2008) also shows how activists usefully shifted their focus from international mobilizations to local organizing and community work. Our analysis of the failure to construct a counter-hegemonic bloc does not presuppose that all actors involved in counter-globalization movements actually strive (or should strive) to do so.

5 On the role of international law see also Rajagopal (2006, 2003).
In the next section, we provide the conceptual underpinnings of our analysis by elaborating on the concepts of hegemony and counter-hegemony, “war of manoeuvre” and “war of position”, and the theoretical field from which they are drawn. In each of the three sections that follow we apply this conceptual framework to lay out our three explanations for the weakness of counter-globalization critique in times of financial crisis: in brief, insulation, co-optation, and securitization.

2. Hegemony and counter-hegemony in international politics: a conceptual framework

Hegemony has become a buzzword in certain strands of IR and IPE scholarship. However, the revival of this Gramscian concept during the 1960s and 70s has shifted its theoretical underpinnings in a way that has afterwards rarely been questioned. Gramsci (1971) conceptualized a form of power that connects the state to civil society and relies on a combination of force and consent. He used the term “hegemony” to refer to this form of power and its embodiment in myriad political, cultural, and social practices. Cultural hegemony in particular is defined as a strategy of the ruling class to perpetuate domination through consensus instead of force. In capitalist societies, the bourgeoisie persuades subordinated classes to internalize its values and interests through cultural hegemony and to conceive of them as general interest. Dominant groups in this way present their rule as legitimate.

There have been several important research paths that have diverged from Gramsci’s original ideas. One has been inspired by constructivist and post-structuralist approaches and led away from Gramsci’s merging of ideational and material power in the concept of hegemony to a near-exclusive emphasis on discursive power. Criticizing this tendency early on, Susan Strange (1988) re-emphasized the material bases of hegemony. A focus on discursive power, as is, for example, common in the Copenhagen School literature on “securitization” (Buzan et al. 1998), tends to downplay the significance of material power. However, for the struggle of the counter-globalization movements, the material power of hegemonic actors, e.g. to spend large amounts of money to meet in isolation or to have protesters (preemptively) arrested, has been crucial. For our purposes it is important to remember that the Gramscian concept of hegemony merges the material and ideational components of power, makes them inseparable, and reveals their interdependence.

Another path has been more strongly influenced by structuralism and tended to reduce the analysis of hegemonic power relations to identifying and studying the position of the hegemon in the system and the challenges its faces. This tendency is for, example, apparent in world systems analysis. According to Immanuel Wallerstein (2002: 357), “hegemony” means more than mere leadership but less than outright empire. Hegemonic power, in his definition, is executed by a state “able to impose its set of rules on the interstate system, and thereby create temporarily a new political order.” Given the methodological nationalism present in much IR scholarship, the hegemon is regularly conceptualized as a (single) country. Scholarship then often focuses on the perpetuation or possible decline of the current hegemon, the United States, and the possible rise of a next, e.g. China (see Arrighi 2005). A combination of military and economic domination is considered key for the perpetuation of hegemony in this literature.

Our approach offers a more complex and more traditionally Gramscian understanding of hegemony as produced by an assemblage of nationally based as well as inter- and transnational, public and private actors, and as inherently comprising both material and ideational (cultural) aspects of power (see also Cox with Sinclair 1996: 151; Klein 2007). By the same token, the construction of counter-hegemony also does not depend on a single privileged agent, but rather on a multiplicity of actors (Laclau and Mouffe 1984).
For many, the emergence of the counter-globalization movements precisely raised the hope that such a multiplicity of actors was taking shape. Stephen Gill (2000), for example, in an essay on the Seattle protests, made allusions to Gramsci’s “Modern Prince” and suggested that the protests and social movements we were witnessing at the time may well be its twenty-first-century expression. He argued: “A new ‘postmodern Prince’ may prove to be the most effective political form for giving coherence to an open-ended, plural, inclusive, and flexible form of politics and thus create alternatives to neoliberal globalization” and a “global and universal politics of radical reconstruction” (2000: 140, 131).

Two other famous champions of the diversity of counter-globalization movements are Hardt and Negri (2004), who also stress the multiplicity of actors and demands coming together under this umbrella. However, whereas the past decade has shown that this multitude can from time to time effectively disrupt the production of neoliberal hegemony (e.g. through summit protests or the defeat of the Free Trade Area of the Americas or the Multilateral Agreement on Investment), movement activists, sympathizers, and analysts remain equally vague about how it could move from here to the construction of counter-hegemony.

Recently, a number of scholars have wondered whether radical change is possible without strategic capacity and critically investigated the current obstacles to pursuing such a project (Stephen 2009; Worth and Buckley 2009; Gibson 2008; Sanbonmatsu 2004). This seems a promising turn for the study of hegemony and counter-hegemony in international politics. Pursuing this turn and following Gramsci’s conceptualization of hegemonic power, we scrutinize some key material and ideational obstacles to the development of counter-hegemony to neoliberal international politics. In the following paragraphs we move to define the key concepts in our analytical framework and show how they may be translated into an analysis of contemporary transnational capitalism and its contestation.

Gramsci’s work turned our attention to the complex of institutions that connect state and economy and to the way in which consent is organized (such as through political parties, schools, churches and other organizations of civil society). For Gramsci, civil society was the terrain upon which power relations or “relations of force” came to be established in capitalist societies, and thus it was also within civil society that opposition (counter-hegemony) would need to be constructed.

If the concept of hegemony can be understood as the means by which the state or “ruling class” secures its leadership through some combination of consent and coercion, then counter-hegemony designates the strategies for working for change within the present hegemonic system (i.e. the capitalist mode of production and bourgeois polity). Gramsci argued that counter-hegemonic forces should call into question the forms of power (both ideational and material) that perpetuate marginalization by slowly building foundations for an alternative system of state-society relations, a process he described as a “war of position” (Gramsci 1971: 229–39, 242–3). As a Marxist, Gramsci believed that leadership of this counter-hegemonic struggle lay with the proletariat, but his vision called for alliances to be built that brought in all of the “subordinate classes.”

Gramsci’s theoretical view of power, understood in terms of hegemony and counter-hegemony as a struggle for societal control, is connected to a model of political action through the concept of “historic blocs”. Gramsci understood historic blocs as the stable, institutionalized relationships between socio-economic structure and the superstructural realm of ideology, ideas, and politics and pointed out that “the complex, contradictory and discordant ensemble of the superstructures is the reflection of the ensemble of the social relations of production” (Gramsci 1971: 366). He held that historic blocs are contingent on

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6 In Gramsci’s prison writings and meditations on Machiavelli’s Prince he conceptualized the newly emerging Italian Communist party in terms of its potential to function as the ‘Modern Prince’ by offering a fundamentally different vision of society and politics and a force for creating counter-hegemonic solidarity against the Fascist regime.
the existence of a hegemonic social class that dominates society. While Gramsci certainly saw individual actors and groups as constrained by political and economic conditions, he dismissed materialist reductionism and depicted historic blocs as more than mere alliances of class interests. He also pointed out that dominant structures are not monolithic and that an understanding of mass conformity and adherence to the status quo must be sought in both the base and superstructure – the social institutions and consciousness of human actors.

Important for our purposes is the distinction Gramsci made, inspired by reflections on the Western front in WW II, between two not mutually exclusive strategies to oppose hegemony: “war of manoeuvre” and “war of position”. A “war of manoeuvre” aims to physically overwhelm the coercive apparatus of the state. We might translate this into contemporary situations when counter-globalization protesters try to erect barricades and shut down summit meetings. Gramsci argues that the success of such a strategy of physical confrontation depends on the nature of the hegemony confronted and especially on how well it is anchored in civil society. Generally speaking, where the capitalist class has secured the consent of large sectors of the working class and where political systems are relatively open, i.e. in modern liberal democracies, direct confrontation will likely not threaten the dominant groups, because their credibility and authority is firmly rooted in civil society. As Buttigieg (2005:41) notes, “civil society [...], far from being a threat to political society in a liberal democracy, reinforces it—this is the fundamental meaning of hegemony.” In such contexts, the only viable possibility for counter-hegemony according to Gramsci is a “war of position,” which essentially seeks to change the dominant culture. For Gramsci, culture is vitally important for political struggle because it shapes people’s “ability to imagine how [the world] might be changed, and whether they see such changes as feasible or desirable” (Crehan, 2002: 71). Cox (with Sinclair 1996: 128-9) then usefully describes the “war of position” as process which "slowly builds up the strength of the social foundations of a new state" by "creating alternative institutions and alternative intellectual resources within existing society."

Thus, we might argue that the extent to which neoliberalism is hegemonic in contemporary international politics derives from the combination of the structural and material power of capital and the expanding ideological hold and institutionalization of neoliberalism as a set of ideas and discourses. Counter-globalization forces placing direct pressure on neoliberal states and international institutions such as the IMF can destabilize the neoliberal historic bloc, but such efforts are likely to be successful, at least in the global North, only to the extent to which they are complemented with a “war of position” that involves the building up of broad alliances in civil society that support genuine organizational and political alternatives.

There have certainly been attempts in the counter-globalization movements to engage in “war of position” – the alternative organizational politics of the ATTAC movement (Birchfield & Freyberg-Inan 2005, 2004) and the format of the social forums (Conway 2004; Wright 2005) are but two important examples in the global North, but we argue that the movements’ ability to engage successfully in a broader “war of position” with the neoliberal hegemony is curtailed by three important moves of the neoliberal regime. We term them insulation, co-optation, and securitization and will outline each of them in turn below.

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7 In Cox’s (1986) application of this concept at the international level, historic blocs are constituted by the social relations of production and specific forms of state and world order, with Pax Americana as a prime example. Mark Rupert (1995: 29) adds that “the construction of an historic bloc is a precondition for the exercise of hegemony [...] and entails a reconstruction for state-society relations through organically related processes of political, economic and cultural change.” The Bretton Woods system, for example, was hegemonic in the sense that it reflected a balance of material and ideological power aided and abetted by the classic compromise between labor and capital. In a similar way, the “Washington Consensus” (Harvey 2007; Chomsky 1999) can be seen as the hegemonic economic doctrine of neoliberalism sparking liberalization, privatization, and deregulation measures throughout the past decades.
3. Insulation of power from critique: Keeping the critics at bay

In preparation for the G8 summit in Germany in June 2007, the road leading to the venue Heiligendamm was closed to traffic, and an enormous fence was built around the little Baltic Sea resort. The fence was some 12 kilometers (7.5 miles) long, 2.5 meters (8 feet) tall, stabilized by 4,800 concrete slabs that each weighed 900 kilogram (almost 2,000 pounds), and crowned by four rows of barbed wire, which were, in turn, covered in thick rolls of razor-wire. Monitored by cameras and motion detectors, the fence cost around 12.5 million Euro (19.6 million USD). It surrounded the so-called security “zone II”, which could be accessed via two checkpoints only by residents of the area, employees of the conference hotel, and delivery personnel, all of whom had to be personally registered and carrying special identification.

While the fence ostensibly guarded those meeting behind it, in addition it was itself guarded by an elaborate system of restrictions constructed around it. Securing the area around Heiligendamm included declaring the surrounding maritime waters off limits, as well as partially closing off airspace. Even freedom of movement within the Schengen area – then still an important symbol of European union - was temporarily restricted, as during the summit border controls were re-established at Germany’s internal Schengen borders. To keep all these elaborate security arrangements in place some 18,000 policemen and 1,100 soldiers were on duty.

For the media a press center was especially created in the harbour of Kühlungsborn, four kilometers to the west of the summit venue. It was intended to provide space for four to five thousand journalists, who had to ask for an official accreditation to obtain access (twenty journalists were refused on the basis of recommendations by the federal criminal police department). In this way, even journalists were isolated from both protesters and the summit.

To complement the physical security preparations, the freedom to assemble was suspended in a corridor of several hundred meters around the fence for the period of one week. These and other restrictions on the freedom to assemble led to a series of court battles between activists and the police, all revolving around the question just how close to the summit participants the critics of neoliberal globalization would be allowed to bring the expression of their views.

While we have opened with the 2007 G8 summit as an example, the intention is not to single out Germany for critique. The elaborate fencing off of Heiligendamm rather serves as an illustration of a more general trend: Physical means of separation, limitation of access, and restriction of movement have been developed as the answer to tactical innovation by protesters and the increasing media attention they received (at least for a while). Since the successful blockades of the WTO ministerial meeting in Seattle in 1999, the use of perimeter fences by authorities has been progressively extended. For the 2000 IMF/WB protests in Prague, barriers were deployed in order to prevent protesters from reaching the conference center, but they proved insufficient. The 2001 FTAA protests in Quebec were marked by the erection of an impressive 6.1 km long fence throughout the city centre. A few months later, at the 2001 G8, protesters were confronted with a 5-meter-high fence construction in the city centre of Genoa. In 2003, summit meetings in Europe shifted to remote rural locations, isolating counter-globalization movements from direct contact with the populations of large cities. In the following years, chosen locations were often difficult for potential protesters to access, and had no clearly articulated activist culture in the region.

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8 The empirical information on the 2001 G8 summit is summarized from Scholl 2012.
9 Hosting the summit cost German federal, state, and local governments around 100 million Euro at a time of massive welfare state cut-backs.
Fences and red zones, more and more elaborate and technologized systems for physical separation, came to exemplify the isolation and exclusivity of summit meetings of global hegemonic forces. As Monty Schädel, one of the German G8 protest organizers, remarked: The fence “is symbolic for the insulation of those having a meeting in there. They lock themselves up and create a zone in which they can do what they want” (in Biermann 2007, own translation). Authorities attempt to control space in such a way that spatial mobility and access to the actual elite meeting are restricted, and therefore the visibility of counter-hegemonic dissent is reduced (Scholl 2012; Fernandez 2008).

Our argument here is that physical insulation aids ideational insulation. Global hegemonic forces benefit from space that is effectively isolated from and purged of dissent. The fences around summit meetings and the security measures surrounding them both symbolize and materialize the insulation of critique from hegemonic power in the service of social control. The rationale behind this insulation may sound compelling: Space needs to be provided for the international coordination of policy, and it needs to be protected from disruption, so that the highest representatives of the citizens of the participating states may carry out their roles in global governance.

The problem is that this insulation simultaneously prevents the pluralization and democratization of global governance from below, of which the protesters seek to be agents. The combination of the obvious influence of the gathered elites and their lack of democratic accountability makes them an appropriate target of democratic critique. Insulation makes it possible for the gathered elites to ignore critique – of both the process and the content of their policy-making – and go about their business, while it simultaneously reduces the visibility of critique and protest to the wider public. This has a negative effect on the movements’ capacities to fight a “war of position”, which would require greater visibility of both their critique and of its targets.

4. Co-optation of counter-globalization critique

In order to explain the exclusion of radical forces by a coalition of moderate parties in Italy in the 1920s, Gramsci introduced the term *trasformismo* to capture a specific elite strategy aiming at the neutralization and domestication of radical proposals for societal change (Cox 1993). This provides a useful conceptual lens for looking at a second factor accounting for counterglobalization’s weakness in times of economic crisis.

After a long period of relatively uncontested decision-making of the global elite far removed from public attention, intergovernmental organizations such as the G8 were confronted with the visibility created through the contestation of their meetings and decisions in the streets. Global elites, as we have seen, took measures to control and reduce this visibility. At the same time, they also started to use the visibility that remained to shed a positive light on their own policies and to re-legitimize their meetings (Hudig & Dowling 2010; Dowling 2010). Instead of rejecting critique, which would have required engagement, they either ignored it or attempted to co-opt it, by integrating it selectively in “their” space of global hegemony and separating this space clearly from the non-institutional contestation taking place on the streets.

Co-optation has turned out to be a powerful tactic for containing counter-hegemonic critique, as it makes it more difficult to articulate dissent outside of a “permitted” and institutionalized space. Hardt and Negri (2000: 35) have stressed the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in this process, accusing them of contributing to what they call “just wars without arms”. As Gramsci had much previously pointed out, civil society is part and parcel of a historic bloc, and this is the case also in the neoliberal and globalized version of capitalism. By selectively tying civil society representatives into the policy-making
process, the neoliberal hegemony is not weakened, but on the contrary strengthens itself by expanding the consensual dimension of its power. Counter-hegemonic elements in civil society are thereby further marginalized.

At the 2005 G8 in Scotland, the British Prime Minister Tony Blair took the summit as a chance to project an image of himself and his government as alleviators of global poverty, and therefore as allies of the protesters, who should support him in turning the G8 into a benevolent global force. The coalition Make Poverty History, mainly composed of big (transnational) nongovernmental organisations, supported Blair’s position and organized a mass rally in order to welcome the delegates and remind them of their “duties”. Projecting the idea that the G8 presidents would take into account the proposals of the next generation, the British government organised a “Junior 8” summit. Accompanied by the Live8 concerts of the pop stars Bono and Bob Geldof and scientists, such as Jeffrey Sachs, promoting “poverty alleviation”, Blair could present the outcomes – partial debt relief for some of the poorest developing countries – as a success. Attempts to make a counter-hegemonic position visible in the media failed (Hudig & Dowling 2010). As one activist puts it: “The Gleneagles summit was the most politically legitimised, ideologically uncontested gathering in [the] grubby little history” of G8 summits (Hewson 2005: 136).

German authorities by 2007 had clearly learnt from these British co-optation tactics. Angela Merkel’s right-hand man Bernd Pfaffenbach when preparing the 2007 G8 negotiations organised several meetings with non-governmental organizations, projecting a “G8 dialogue with civil society”, above all concerning the issue of climate change, which came to join the goal of poverty alleviation given popular preoccupation with the issue. Claiming that the G8 would work toward a more equitable distribution of economic growth and welfare, Pfaffenbach argued that “[o]ur policy agenda provides very few opportunities for non-governmental organisations to criticise us.”

Applying their ideational power, e.g. through the corporate media, authorities can deflect the anti-systemic aspects of counter-globalization critique and transform the antagonistic relation between global neoliberal rulers and parts of the counter-globalization movements into a relation of symbiosis. Co-optation re-legitimizes existing neoliberal institutions, first, by instrumentalizing protesters’ contestation to present an image of openness and pluralism. Second, it divides protesters into “good” ones (willing to cooperate with the criticized institutions and to compromise) and “bad” ones (impossible to incorporate into existing consultation mechanisms). Summit meetings (and the institutions that meet at them) are in this way presented as the only legitimate space for discussing whatever critique reaches the media, while critique that is expressed “only” in the streets, outside these institutions and their networks, is largely kept out of the media spotlight and thoroughly delegitimized. In this manner, co-optation also facilitates the criminalization of more radical alternatives, which will be further discussed in the next section.

5. Depoliticization of critique through securitization

The fence as symbolic materialization of the separation of power from critique is just one aspect of a broad strategic and tactical repertoire which authorities have developed in the past decades to control and contain counter-globalization protest (Scholl 2012; Starr et. al. 2011). These tactical adaptations are accompanied by a broader shift in international politics which has been termed “securitization”. As first conceptualized by the theorists of the Copenhagen School, securitization is a discursive process of successfully “speaking security” (Buzan et al. 1998; Waever 2000). A securitizing agent engages in a speech act using dramatic invocation

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to declare an issue to be an existential threat to a referent object (traditionally the state). The agent thereby cites exceptional urgency and a need to move beyond the “normal politics” of liberal democracy, which involve adherence to liberal political values and an open political process (Buzan 2006). The issue becomes both framed in security terms and politicized, so that extraordinary measures seem justified to address it (Balzacq and Carrera 2006; Huysmans 2006; Buzan et al. 1998). Securitization thus lifts an issue above normal politics “with an urgency and ‘necessity’ that often has anti-democratic effects” (Bagge Lautsen and Waever 2000: 708).

As a discursive regime, securitization has been much enhanced since September 11; as a transnational trend it has shaped manifold institutional realities, inter alia in the field of anti-terrorist legislation. Here, “preemption” as a new paradigm of social control demands the identification of possible future risks and threats and their reduction through proactive measures (e.g. Heller et al. 2012). The resulting legislation has significantly expanded definitions of terrorism, affects our conceptions of security, risk, and threats, and provides a large extent of discretion to executive power. The “enemy” can potentially be anywhere, and being at war (with no end in sight) makes it easy to justify exceptional interventions. War, as in the “war on terror”, now includes what were previously considered “internal affairs” or “public order” concerns. The 13 June 2002 European Council Framework Decision on combating terrorism (Document 2002/475/JHA), is a case in point, defining terrorist acts as acts that

given their nature or context, may seriously damage a country or an international organisation where committed to the aim of: seriously intimidating a population; or unduly compelling a Government or international organisation to perform or abstain from performing any act; or seriously destabilising or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organisation.

Counter-globalization protesters use disruptive tactics in order to articulate their critique of (the isolation of) global rulers; hence, summit protesters are by this definition (potential) terrorists.

Ironically, anti-terrorist legislation suspending civil liberties is routinely justified with the urgency of defending the liberal-democratic order itself. Constitutional democratic rights are suspended in defense of constitutional democracy (Ignatieff 2004). When the democratic order can be presented as threatened, exceptional interventions that themselves might be seen to threaten that very order are made to seem justified, revealing what Freyberg-Inan (2009) has termed the “dilemma of liberal self-defense.”

There are ample illustrations in the recent history of counter-globalization protest of how a state of emergency is installed pre-emptively in order to channel dissent and incapacitate protest actions. While at the time they were clearly illegal, as relevant laws had not been suspended, the Italian police measures in Genoa in 2001 were justified in retrospect by invoking a state of emergency. The conclusions adopted at a special meeting of the EU Justice and Home Affairs Council on July 13th 2001 present summit protesters as the “enemy within”. At the 2005 G8 protests in Gleneagles, the Scottish police could randomly stop and search protesters by applying an existing regulation, section 60 of the Criminal and Public Order Act (originally designed to prevent football-related disturbances). The 2000 Terrorism Act installed by the UK government in response to 9/11 was applied to prolong the possible period of arrest without trial. At the 2007 G8 protests in Germany, a Allgemeinverfügung (General Directive) issued by the temporary special police department Kavala temporarily prohibited protest in a radius of several kilometers around the 12km long fence. In this way,
the police could also prohibit a major rally that had already been registered for the second day of the summit.

The state of exception enacted by these sorts of legal measures is supported by international cooperation through intergovernmental agencies directed at research, exchange of expertise, and advice on “security” concerns. Key examples are the Coordinating National Research Programs on Security during Major Events (EU-SEC), the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), and the International Permanent Observatory on Security during Major Events (IPO). It is also supported through increasing cooperation between national police forces (as well as Europol and Interpol) and secret services. As early as the 2000 IMF/WB summit in Prague, the US Federal Bureau of Investigations assisted the Czech police. One of the first visitors to the freshly created Kavala department was the head of the police operations for the 2005 G8 summit in Gleneagles George Powrie, who later became head of IPO. To speed up the international information exchange for the 2007 G8 in Germany, a temporary international liaison officers center was established (Komitee Grundrechte 2007: 113). Moreover, in 2010 a network of police infiltrators was uncovered which had operated internationally to monitor the networks of the counter-globalization movements (Monroy 2011).

The securitization of dissent and the associated, internationally coordinated practices of governments, police, and intergovernmental agencies have had major consequences for counter-globalization movements. The tangible repression taking place during counter-globalization protests may not even be the worst. Likely still more problematic for democratic political culture is the general depoliticizing effect of securitization on critique and dissent. Since they are so easily pushed into the categories of posing a “risk, a “threat”, or even constituting “terrorism”, counter-globalization movements have a difficult time articulating their critiques as a political matter. Securitization can thus be seen as the final puzzle piece in containing counter-globalization movements. After insulating power from critique and internalizing (relatively insignificant) aspects of the critique into the (insulated) institutionalized hegemonic space, the remaining critics, by declaring them a “security threat”, are de-legitimized by criminalization.

6. Conclusions

In this article we have investigated why counter-hegemonic dissent to neoliberal globalization, articulated broadly on the streets since 1999 and lived in manifold alternative projects, has not translated into counter-hegemonic capacity, even now, at a time of crisis, when important problems of neoliberal governance (should) have become obvious even in the global North. Why has counter-globalization protest not been more successful in this crisis? While acknowledging that there are likely other factors at work as well, we have here focused on macro-contextual factors related to strategic strengths of the neoliberal regime to explain this failure of a counter-hegemonic project against neoliberalism.

We have first re-conceptualized the puzzle using a Gramscian analytical framework by suggesting that the counter-globalization movements’ “war of manoeuvre” has not translated into an effective “war of position” beyond local contexts. We have then suggested that this failure has to do with three moves made by the movements’ opponents which co-constitute the neoliberal hegemonic regime: First, they have succeeded in large part to insulate themselves from critique by literally barring its entry into policy deliberative space. Second, they have selectively incorporated and thereby co-opted moderate elements of the critique. Third, they have locked out and criminalized more radical critique through a wider-reaching process of securitization, which poses problems for the future of our democracies that go far beyond the focus of this paper. These strategies of containment of dissent are hardly unique to
the case at hand – they may even be conceptualized as elements of a standard repertoire of state control. What is important here is that together they help solve the puzzle at hand: the persistence of neoliberal hegemony in spite of its increasingly visible failures and the presence of active resistance.

Given the failure of counter-globalization critique to engage in effective counter-hegemony, we are today not living in a “post-neoliberal” but rather still in the same old neoliberal age. The co-optation of counter-globalization critique has even facilitated the re-legitimation of the international architecture of neoliberal globalization in the course of the recent financial (and broader economic) crisis. Instead of having to admit failure, global hegemonic forces present themselves as problem solvers. The IMF and other IFI’s, instead of following an often predicted course of demise, have in the crisis risen to posts at the center of a host of stringent and very clearly neoliberal austerity and economic reorganization measures, even inside the EU (Overbeek and van Apeldoorn 2012; Freyberg-Inan 2011).

On the other hand, we have witnessed the emergence of Occupy and other counter-austerity movements in response to the economic crisis which overlap with counter-globalization movements as regards their critiques, agendas, and participants. These latest movements have even benefited from relatively positive media coverage, and have met with considerable sympathy among broader populations. This may have helped to continue to prepare the ground for possible future challenges to neoliberal hegemony. However, at the time of writing Occupy is ebbing and the media have withdrawn attention from ongoing anti-austerity protests. It is not clear that these latest additions to broader counter-globalization struggles have increased the movements’ capacity to fight a “war of position”.

However, there are important lessons we can draw to improve the movements’ capacity to engage in counter-hegemonic struggle. First, a “war of position” cannot simply focus on official meetings of global hegemonic forces. Their power to insulate themselves has made summit meetings difficult settings for staging disruptive actions and political contestation. Moreover, beyond summit meetings as sporadic executive interventions in transnational governance, there is a complex web of institutions in place that administers neoliberal policy on a daily basis and strongly affects possibilities for its reform. Protest should target key elements of this bureaucracy, as was done, e.g., by the Blockupy action against the European Central Bank in response to its role in forcing austerity policies in Europe. The second lesson concerns the danger of cooptation. Transnational civil society needs to construct alternative spaces outside of the (inter)governmental sphere and express its independence in collective actions that go beyond an appeal to (inter)governmental organizations. Achieving broader societal acceptance of counter-hegemonic ideas is more important than being accepted by (inter)governmental elites. Finally, ongoing securitization and repression of large mobilizations, as we have seen again in the case of Occupy, ask for new strategies to protect social movements as active players that can co-shape the democratization of world politics. We need to think up ways to protect social movements, their spaces for democratic deliberation, and their interventions against criminalization and repression.

None of these are easy tasks to accomplish. However, as Gramsci has taught us, by definition, the odds of counter-hegemony will always be bad, the obstacles it faces apparently insurmountable. By definition also, it is imperative.
References

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