

Internal dynamics and US hegemony: Oath Keepers anti-liberal narratives and symptoms of liberal international order crisis

Dinâmicas Internas e a hegemonia estadunidense: as narrativas anti-liberais dos Oath Keepers e os sintomas da crise da ordem liberal internacional

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INTRODUCTION

The debate on the demise of the Liberal International Order (LIO) and decline of US hegemony is reinforced each time the contradictions in the LIO become more salient. From Clinton's intervention in Kosovo without UN approval to Bush's intervention in Iraq based on unilateral action, these actions put under scrutiny the American legitimacy and the international order it helped to create. Coloring the hegemonic transition debate with these recent historical facts, Trump's first (2017-2021) and second (2025-present) administrations do not seem as outliers, but rather examples of a further intensification of the US decline process.

However, the current debate on the challenges to the LIO and hegemonic transition usually concentrates on the international level and US

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actions abroad. From new hegemonic aspirants to rogue states and non-state violent actors, the literature usually does not look within the core of the LIO Western countries to investigate the challenges to liberalism and US hegemony. Lake et al. (2021) pointed out that one of the most prescient realms and a still under-investigated one to understand the contours of the upcoming era is the domestic contradictions boiling over in Western liberal democratic states.

Analysis addressing the internal dynamics and US hegemony did appear, especially after the 2016 election. Norrloff (2018), for example, argues that rising income inequality, combined with education, race, and racism, explains support for the Republican candidate. Trump's electoral narrative misleadingly pointed out US financial and economic losses deriving from overcommitment to international allies and international regimes. For Norrloff (2018), the US benefits from such arrangements, but not all Americans do, since there is a widening gap in national income distribution. Similarly, Stokes (2018, 149) contends there is "a relationship between greater income inequality in the United States [...] and a weakening of support for key tenets of the LIO and America's hegemonic role."

Other analyses center on institutional politics. Paul Musgrave (2019, 451) points out that internal politics, especially political parties, "provide incentives for actors to undermine hegemony in order to reward their core constituencies or to distinguish their electoral brand from a rival party." Similarly, Kupchan and Trubowitz (2007) relate the support of liberal internationalism with domestic politics and identify the demise of bipartisan consensus as a source of the decline in the grand strategy marked by power and cooperation.

These studies made relevant contributions to illuminate the relations between domestic issues, US hegemony, and support to the LIO. However, they center on institutional politics, Trump's posture, or the causes of his victory in 2016, neglecting other actors who compose the LIO contestation movement. To understand the sources and mechanisms of LIO contestation in the United States, it is valuable to show empirically how the internal dynamics of LIO contestation go beyond Trump. In this regard, we understand that the rise of extreme-right movements, either in nationalist, populist, and authoritarian forms, questions the main pillars of liberal values and pushes for antiliberal policies. By analyzing one of such movements, we intend to contribute to better understanding the "unravelling of America's liberal identity as a principal cause of the less secure domestic foundations of the LIO." (Norrloff 2018, 78).

Building on this discussion, this article offers a twofold contribution. First, it advances a constructive intervention in the existing literature on

hegemony and the making of the LIO, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of how domestic factors can undermine both liberal values and the US hegemonic position. We argue that the US internal dynamics are not only sources of stability but, instead, can be regarded as uncertainty producers. We bring the neo-Gramscian debate on hegemony to emphasize the social relations that are imbued in the construction of every international order. As social relations are constitutive of international hegemony, nationally bounded movements warrant close examination — particularly those gaining traction in the US, amid the global rise of radical right narratives.

Second, we seek to contribute to the aforementioned debate by mapping out and analyzing the core antiliberal arguments defended by the Oath Keepers (OK), one of the biggest extreme-right militias in the US that has been considerably influential in organizing coordinated action such as the Capitol invasion, in 2021. With this research, we do not imply that the OK, specifically, or extreme-right militias, in general, cause the decline of US hegemony or the LIO. We consider them to be one of the elements of contestation and, therefore, regard them as a useful case to analyze the constitutive relations among domestic actors and the transformation of hegemonic orders.

Beyond its antiliberal practices, our specific interest in the case of the Oath Keepers is driven by two other factors. First, the group gained increased relevance during Trump's first term, with several members—including its leading founder, Stewart Rhodes—being investigated and convicted as part of the inquiries into the January 6 attacks on Capitol Hill.¹ Second, the group stands out for its paramilitary nature, explicitly seeking to recruit former members of the US armed and security forces to the organization. This composition adds complexity to the debate on civil-military relations and civilian control, which are often also considered essential pillars of liberal democratic institutions (The authors, forthcoming). Also, it exemplifies the initiatives of former officers to organize themselves by drawing from an anti-liberal narrative, which remounts to the 2010s, and presents social consequences today.

There are no official data on the Oath Keepers composition, however, a database from the group leaked by the journalist collective Distributed Denial of Secrets (DDoSecrets) shows that 38,000 individuals composed or financially contributed to the group since its creation in 2009 to 2021. Among these, an analysis by the Non-Governmental Organization Anti-Defamation League (ADL) found 373 individuals who currently serve as law enforcement personnel and more than 1,000 who previously served in law enforcement agencies. They also found 117 individuals who currently

serve in the military and estimate that “one in ten of the individuals in the database served in the military in some prior capacity.” (ADL 2022). Local and state elected officials — including three state senators — also were found in the database of Oath Keepers supporters (ADL 2022).

We proceed by undertaking a content analysis of the first year of this group’s blog, showing how its narrative questioned central pillars of the LIO, such as political liberalism and intergovernmental liberal structures. Apart from this introduction and the final remarks, the article is divided into three sections. In the first section, we present the debate on hegemony and global orders and how it pays attention mostly to international components over domestic ones when explaining the drivers of decline. In the second, we argue that the neo-Gramscian literature can contribute to the reflection on the relations between the internal contradictions and US global hegemony. In the third, we proceed with a content analysis of the first year of the OK’s blog to map out the group’s discursive topography and main anti-liberal arguments.

THEORIES OF HEGEMONY AND GLOBAL ORDER

The IR literature on hegemony and its expression on the formation of a global order is vast and multifaceted. Broadly, it can be categorized into two dominant interpretative strands: liberal-internationalist and neo-Gramscian.² Liberal internationalists emphasize the role of US leadership in building a liberal international order that, although hierarchical, is rules-based and institutionally mediated rather than imperial. In this framework, hegemony is not the automatic outcome of material superiority, but rather the result of leadership, undergirded by liberal principles and institutional legitimacy (Ikenberry 2011). In this tradition, American-led world order is partially built around consent because the rules and institutions were a result of bargains and agreed-upon norms.

According to Ikenberry (2011), the American-led order mitigates its imperial character through three key features: (i) a system of rules and institutions, within which the hegemon operates; (ii) the provision of public goods and economic openness; (iii) institutionalized channels through which middle and subordinate powers can consult and exert influence. These benign aspects of American leadership — such as democracy, human rights, and multilateralism — are framed as essential to the legitimacy and durability of the order (Ikenberry 2011, 2).

Deudney and Ikenberry (1999) further connect the liberal characteristics of American domestic politics to the functioning of the LIO. They argue that the “[...] American polity [...] is particularly well prepared to

incorporate pressures and influences from liberal societies outside itself.” (Deudney and Ikenberry 1999, 185). The pluralistic and decentralized characteristics of the American state thus render its hegemony more permeable and less coercive. Moreover, the exceptionalist debate over US hegemony and the LIO emphasizes the internal characteristics of American politics to either defend the active US engagement in exporting these values or to present the American experience as an example to be followed (Mead 2002).

Similarly, Kupchan and Trubowitz (2007) argue that the liberal international order is a product of both domestic and international factors, sustained historically by a bipartisan consensus. For Kupchan (2014), the norms composing international orders are rooted in domestic values, with diversity being regarded as a central aspect of US hegemony.

[America’s] rejection of social hierarchy at home has been reflected in its effort to promote more egalitarian social orders in the periphery. America’s multiculturalism and democratizing creed have contributed to its universalizing and transformational ambition abroad (Kupchan 2014, p. 251).

In sum, liberal-internationalist accounts provide a holistic conception of hegemony by connecting world order construction with US internal political dynamics. They incorporate relational and ideational variables and stress the cooperative dimensions of US leadership. Nevertheless, they often relegate domestic contradictions to the margins of analysis. In explaining hegemonic transitions, liberal theorists tend to treat the internal components primarily as a source of strength — rarely acknowledging how internal social conflicts, inequalities, or exclusionary practices might erode hegemonic legitimacy and sustainability.

Challenges to the LIO are typically attributed to revisionist powers or antiliberal US leaders rather than grounded in the structural contradictions of American society and its dismissal of liberal values (Ikenberry 2018; Ikenberry and Nexon 2019; Kupchan 2014). Ikenberry (2018, 8) maintains that liberal internationalism is resilient and “run[s] deep in world politics”, suggesting that LIO can weather moments of crisis. Similarly, Lake (2002, 138) argues economic openness aligns with state interests and is reinforced by international regimes, suggesting “international liberalism is likely to endure”.

However, Cooley and Nexon (2020) challenge this optimism. They argue that a hegemonic transition is already in progress, accelerated by illiberal transnational movements and the Trump presidency, which revealed fissures in both domestic liberal grand narrative and global leadership.

Numerous scholars have also underscored Trump's presidency as a symptom or catalyst of hegemonic erosion (Boyle 2020; Posen 2018; Stokes 2018). Yet, even in this literature, the profound contradictions present in the organization of American society and the sociopolitical contradictions embedded in liberalism itself — such as its coexistence with racial, gendered, and class hierarchies — remain underexplored. (Parmar 2018). As Parmar (2018) notes, the accounts on LIO often abstract from or downplay these tensions, hence failing to consider anti-liberal social movements.

To address this analytical gap and better understand the domestic realm as both a source of strength and/or weakness to the liberal values, the LIO it purports, and hence the American hegemony, this article turns to a neo-gramscian perspective in the next section. This theoretical perspective offers a compelling alternative by dissolving the domestic/international dichotomy and incorporating both social and ideational components.

UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL ROOTS OF INTERNATIONAL HEGEMONY

The neo-Gramscian analysis opens paths to analyze those contradictions and offers a critical counterpoint to the liberal internationalist view of US hegemony's benign aspects. Drawing from Gramsci's conceptualization of power, neo-Gramscian scholars define hegemony as a combination of coercion and consent, involving not just the threat or use of force, but also moral leadership. In their view, structure (productive relations) and superstructure (ideological dissemination of the dominant classes) are in a dialectical interaction (Arrighi 1990; Cox 1983; Gill and Law 1989; Murphy 1998). Hegemony, therefore, corresponds to a specific and more consensual kind of supremacy exercised by social classes "involving its moral and intellectual leadership over allies" and other social groups (Gill 2008, p. xxii).

A central tenet is the hegemon's capacity to universalize its national interests. Arrighi (1990) argues that a global hegemony depends on the ability of a state to "claim with credibility" that its power projection is beneficial to the international system, mitigating a situation of 'systemic chaos' in which the tensions among and within states are preponderant. He explains that even if that statement is always partially deceitful, it also necessitates elements of truth.

Similarly, Cox (1983) states that for the dominant classes of a particular state to become globally hegemonic, they have to create a world order which is universal in its conception, an order that other states' elites view

as attending, at least partially, to their interests. In this view, world orders emerge from a dynamic interplay between ideas, institutions, and material capabilities (Cox 1981, 1983; Gill and Law 1989), and reflect the values and interests of the hegemon's ruling class, reproduced via transnational connections with dominant groups from other states.

Importantly, neo-Gramscian theorists reject the domestic/international divide. For Cox (1983, p. 61), "a world hegemony is thus in its beginning an outward expansion of the internal (national) hegemony established by a dominant social class". As Gramsci (2007) and Cox (1983) argue, transformations in world order are often driven by shifts in domestic social relations within the leading states. World orders are not only present in the relations among states, but they are also related to a global civil society (Cox 1983; Gill 2008; Murphy 1998). Culture, institutions, and technology originating in the hegemonic state are exported and adopted as models, particularly by the elites of peripheral states (Cox 1983).

In this light, US hegemony is closely tied to the construction of the LIO, which is grounded in multilateralism, free trade, and political liberalism. Since the 1990s, democracy promotion has served to legitimize US leadership by reinforcing the image of the liberal system as morally superior, thereby aligning international governance with the interests of the US dominant classes (Robinson 1996).

However, this order is neither neutral nor universally beneficial. It facilitates the global predominance of dominant social forces and their mode of production, reproducing exploitation and social hierarchies — such as those based on race, class, and gender (Parmar 2018). As Gill (2008, p.22) argues, the capitalist social order is inherently contradictory, and when the contradictions become visible, they can spark transformative political mobilizations.

In times of crisis, or *interregnum*, the contradictions become more apparent. According to Babic (2020), Gramsci understood crisis as a historical process, which could continue for decades, and was marked by instability and uncertainty, originating in the maturation of the "contradictions or tensions in the old, dying social order" (Babic 2020, 771; Gramsci 2007). Since world hegemony is grounded in the internal hegemony of the dominant social forces, when the latter faces difficulties, its external face may also become less convincing. When dominant classes lose consensus and rely solely on coercion, an "authority crisis" emerges (Gramsci 1999). Gramsci (1999) describes this moment as one in which "the old is dying and the new cannot be born", creating space for "morbid symptoms" to proliferate.

Stahl (2019, 343) identifies the post-2008 period as one of such *interregnum*, marked by: (i) the absence of a stable consensus; (ii) competing economic strategies; (iii) institutional continuity but decreased effectiveness of key institutions; (iv) and realignment of social forces. Babic (2020) adds that these morbid symptoms manifest internally — through political violence, mass discontent, and extremism — and externally, through the rise of leaders who delegitimize institutions and undermine liberal values (Babic 2020, p. 773).

Moreover, in the US and elsewhere, those contradictions are related, at least partially, to the growing inequality and the decline in social well-being, outcomes of neoliberal policies initiated in the 1980s (Gill 1995; 2008). The 2008 financial crisis intensified these pressures, enabling the rise of anti-establishment forces. This was evident in the Republican Party’s co-optation by Trump and the protagonist role exercised by Bernie Sanders at the Democratic Party (Stahl 2019). Additionally, the growing prominence of radical-right militias exemplifies a rejection of liberal values and the cultivation of open violence, illustrating these morbid symptoms.

These developments suggest the domestic erosion of US liberal values may undermine its international hegemony. Moreover, the political strategies of far-right leaders are explicitly aimed at constructing a counter-hegemony, electing the imagined “transnational managerial class” as an enemy to be fought. In the view of Abrahamsen et al (2024), since the second half of the 20th century, far-right thinkers have strategically appropriated Gramsci’s ideas on the relevance of culture for hegemony to their own reactionary political ends. Therefore, they understand intellectual, cultural, and grassroots political mobilization as necessary conditions for electoral victories. Being one of the most prominent extreme-right militias with a national reach, the OK is a case of social and political mobilization that illustrates the existence of a political strategy based on long-term processes.

To further explore how domestic dynamics relate to hegemonic decline, the next section examines the first year of the OK’s blog. The group’s discursive topography is an illustration of a current debate in the US and presents how their anti-liberal narratives challenge the projection of American leadership as a source of global order and democratic legitimacy.

PRESSURES FROM WITHIN: THE OATH KEEPERS AND THE CONTESTATION OF LIO'S PILLARS

The Oath Keepers were founded in 2009 by Stewart Rhodes, a former US Army paratrooper, to rally individuals who pledged an oath to defend the US Constitution as members of the military or security forces. Before launching the OK, Rhodes became known for his anti-government positions, especially after 9/11. His criticisms targeted what he saw as abuses of executive power under the Bush administration, portraying the armed and security forces as the rightful guardians of the Constitution. In 2016, Rhodes and the OK supported Trump's first election and were allegedly involved in the Capitol Hill attacks under the Biden administration. Investigating radical-right militias, and specifically the OK, offers insights into US internal contradictions and helps illuminate domestic pressures undermining American hegemony and the legitimacy of the LIO.

The OK exemplifies a specific type of private militia, distinguishable from other right-wing organizations by two main features: their hierarchical, militaristic structure and the promotion of violence as their preferred means for political action. Contemporary militias draw inspiration from the proto-military formations of the American War of Independence, which remained responsible for the country's defense until the emergence of a professionalized military in the late 19th century.

Contemporary militia echoes the volunteerism symbolized by the "citizen-soldier" — the loyal, brave, and "common" citizens willing to sacrifice their lives to defend the nation's freedoms and security from perceived threats, both foreign and domestic. However, a key difference between the "new" and the "old" militia lies in the fact that historical militias were state-sanctioned, whereas contemporary militias are private, extralegal entities.

According to Crothers (2019), the resurgence of US militias began in the 1990s and accelerated during the transition from Bush to Obama administrations, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis — a context closely linked to the emergence of an "authority crisis" (Gramsci 1999). One of the motivations behind this "militia re-birth" was the rise of the Tea Party, a far-right political party that gained political traction during the 2008 presidential elections, most notably through the nomination of Sarah Palin as John McCain's vice-presidential running mate. Another relevant reason was the internet: social media became the most prominent recruitment channel for paramilitary organizations; this relevance became especially clear during the 2020 elections and the Covid-19 pandemic (Thompson-Deveaux and Smith 2020).

In this light, the Oath Keepers are part of a broader conservative movement in the US that challenges liberalism. While the 2008 financial crisis marked a key inflection point, these ideas were already embedded in American political discourse. The group exemplifies a paleoconservative critique of global liberal managerialism, viewed as technocratic authoritarianism imposed by a globalist elite (Drolet and Williams 2019; 2020). Unlike traditional conservatism, which defends institution preservation, or neoconservatism, which advances an interventionist vision of a liberal order, paleoconservatism rejects liberal modernity and universalism. It promotes traditional Western (especially Christian) values, national sovereignty, cultural homogeneity, strict immigration controls, and economic protectionism (Drolet and Williams 2019; 2020). As an American expression of a radical conservatism, it engages in a “Gramscianism of the right” strategy — a long-term cultural and intellectual struggle against liberal hegemony (Drolet and Williams 2018; Abrahamsen et al. 2020; 2024). In our view, the OK’ discourse and political activity constitute a granular manifestation of this strategy and its counter-hegemonic project.

Although they share many characteristics with other militia organizations, the Oath Keepers stand out for their targeted recruitment of US military and law enforcement veterans. This strategy and the group’s activities raise critical questions not only about the resilience of the institutions underpinning the liberal international order, but also about the foundations of liberal democracy at the domestic level — particularly the mechanisms of civilian oversight and control over the armed and security forces.

For this study, we selected all the OK blog posts made in 2009, its first year of existence. Our analysis illustrates how this erosion process was conceived long before Trump through an antiliberal rereading of American politics and foreign policy. In total, we analyzed 139 blog posts and identified a narrative that challenges key political and institutional principles of the LIO, although it does not directly contest its economic pillars.

Our investigation was conducted in an inductive manner, following a four-step procedure. First, an exploratory reading of all blog posts was conducted to identify the main arguments opposing liberal values. Second, these arguments were categorized into five groups: (i) institutional distrust and conceptions of democracy; (ii) confrontational politics; (iii) use of force; (iv) nationalism combined with sectarianism; and (v) historical revisionism. Third, all posts were systematically coded using these categories, resulting in two hundred and twenty-six coded segments.³ Finally, a content analysis was conducted using MAXQDA software to map term

Table 1
Code distribution in the *corpus*

Codes	N. blog post	% blog post
Institutional distrust and conceptions of democracy	72	52
Confrontational politics	54	39
Historical divisionism	15	11
Rule of law x Use of force	12	9
Pluralism x Nationalism/sectarianism	10	7

As we present the argumentative topography of the OK discourses, we show how the group challenges the liberal foundations of American hegemony and the LIO. As displayed in Figure 2, the most recurrent argument in OK discursive topography is a sense of institutional distrust and a specific interpretation of US democracy.

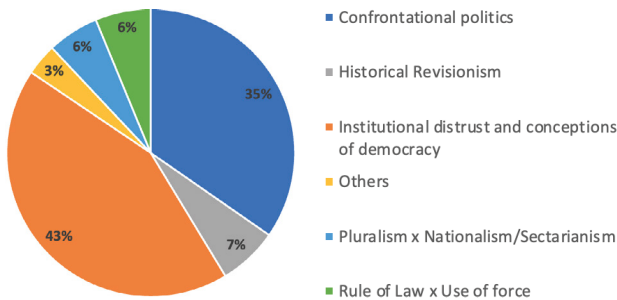


Figure 2 — Code Frequency.

With this code, our objective is not merely to identify arguments against a government or the government in general, but to capture OK’s distrust of liberal institutional frameworks, foreign and/or domestic. This skepticism reflects a broader critique of liberalism, particularly the tension between democracy and republicanism. The code “institutional distrust” complements “confrontational politics” and shows a different angle of OK’s narrative, revealing a shared narrative that locates legitimate power in the people, especially the ones that pledged an oath to the Constitution, who should act to overrule institutional frameworks when they impose universal liberal values. As Table 2 shows, the most recurrent intersection⁴ is between these two codes.

Table 2
Code Intersection

Codes	Confrontational politics	Historical divisionism	Institutional distrust and conceptions of democracy	Nationalism andsectarianism	Use of force
Confrontational politics	—	8	46	6	17
Historical divisionism	8	—	20	3	0
Institutional distrust and conceptions of democracy	46	20	—	4	9
Nationalism/sectarianism	6	3	4	—	2
Use of force	17	0	9	2	—

In their move to manifest wariness over the current American institutional apparatus, the OK evoke a traditional discussion on republic *versus* democracy, asserting that the US “is a Constitutional Republic, not a democracy, not an oligarchy, and certainly not a dictatorship” (Oath Keepers 2009f). The group’s narrative rests on three key claims. First, the idea of heritage with the Constitution being the nation’s foundational authority instead “of this ridiculous mob-rule garbage (democracy) which is only face paint on a sow” (Oath Keepers 2009p). Second, the argument that all the individuals that encompass the country’s security apparatus — either security/peace or armed forces — pledged an oath

to defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic [... not] the President, the Congress or the Supreme Court. It said the Constitution because it is th[e] greatest of political documents which enshrines the freedom that was America” and “not [...] the politicians”. (Oath Keepers 2009m).

And third, the emphasis on what should be seen as the “body and soul” of the country: its people. Hence,

the Nation is not the government [...] is the sovereign citizens who are legally here, and thus “sovereign” according to our Constitution and the National Charter, The Declaration of Independence. (Oath Keepers 2009j).

And these people made a social contract not with a government or the general idea of a democratic government, but “between themselves [and] our Constitution” (Oath Keepers 2009j).

In this view, the Constitution, Declaration of Independence, and Bill of Rights are the only legitimate institutions. This forms the basis of OK’s identity and sense of purpose: they are “not [a] militia movement, per se, it’s a declaration of dedication to support and defend the supreme law of our land: the US Constitution from all enemies both foreign and domestic”; they are “a group of patriotic men and women seeking to remind fellow citizens of their profound obligations to God and country” (Oath Keepers 2009o). Their foundational text, the manifesto “Orders We Will Not Obey”, written by Rhodes, presents a call for action and accuses the federal government — especially the executive — of issuing unconstitutional orders, contributing to the “obscene growth of federal power and to the absurdly totalitarian claimed powers of the Executive” (Oath Keepers 2009q), thereby weakening the autonomy of the states and, consequently, of their citizens.

Here, the narrative not only presents what/who the problem is for the country but also why there is a problem. The growth of federal power is equated with a “classic communist conquest” (Oath Keepers 2009w), “a socialist form of government” (Oath Keepers 2009t), a “Fascist/Communist tyranny” (Oath Keepers 2009m), a “4th Reich” (Oath Keepers 2009i), a “socialist police state” (Oath Keepers 2009aa). The ones responsible for this situation are the “modern political and legal elites”(Oath Keepers 2009h) because, as put by Rhodes:

[...] they don't believe in inalienable, natural rights that are ours by virtue of “nature and nature's God.” Instead, they share the view of Karl Marx, that such “rights” are merely artificial political/legal constructs, that man is just an infinitely malleable animal (to be shaped by social engineers), with no inherit rights whatsoever, and your only “rights” are whatever society wants to “give” you” [...] Since your rights are “gifts” from government [...] it is never legitimate for a people to rebel [...] Without natural rights there is no right to revolt, which is precisely why these elites think it totally illegitimate for you to have effective means of resistance. (Oath Keepers 2009m).

Although the institutional distrust and concern with a perceived overpowering government and its political elite are mainly directed at the US government, it expands beyond the domestic realm, encompassing international institutions and their connection with the US. The group identifies the existence of a “global government” formed by “devious men [that] conspired against humanity and more particularly against the American people [...]”. They have eroded our national sovereignty, through the League of Nations, United Nations, World Bank, IMF, etc., with the intent of establishing a world-wide kingdom for themselves” (Oath Keepers 2009a). This “new world order” is not merely coming from outside the US but it is constructed with the help of national political elites, as the American government “is also involved in all manner of collusion with the United Nations in treaties which erode our national and individual sovereignty” (Oath Keepers 2009a) generating “the total destruction of our Republic” and “limit[ing] a parents right to teach their children religion, [...] morals, discipline [...]” (Oath Keepers 2009a). Although the use of force is directed to the American government and its political elites, the problem is also located in the international realm because “the ‘enemy’ we face is a globalist elite [...] be they in Washington, London, Ottawa or elsewhere!” (Oath Keepers 2009v).

This worldview challenges one important aspect of the LIO: the (inter) national system of rules, institutions, and agreed-upon norms. From

a Gramscian lens, where social relations are the foundation of international ones, OK's domestic critique has wider implications. First, because they target international institutions sponsored by the US in the LIO creation. Second, because they dispute the diffusion of democracy and liberal norms, along with the US commitment to promoting them abroad. Third, US international leadership is rooted in domestic hegemony of dominant social forces — whose ideas and values have been projected globally — and these are now contested by the OK's narrative.

The second most recurrent OK's argument, the code “confrontational politics”, captures the “us *versus* them” discursive strategy, which operates on two levels. First, a vertical division between elite *versus* masses, as the government and its representatives are seen as apart from the society; second, a horizontal divide within the people between those aware and willing to act and those unaware and (still) not willing to act, in which the latter are still part of the national community but has not yet been touched by the concerns and anguish of a perceived overpowering government.

In the vertical division, the people is a general category made of individuals “born with natural rights that come from nature and nature's God, not from government” (Oath Keepers 2009r), while the government “have no inherent or intrinsic powers — only those granted by the people. When governments claim powers never granted, such government is illegitimate” (Oath Keepers 2009r). This narrative frames the government not merely as flawed, but as an existential enemy, contributing to a sense of urgency. The country is perceived to be in “grave danger” with “[a] storm [...] coming soon” because of the “evil threat that the elitists in our US Govt. pose to our Constitution, our Rights, our Freedoms, and our National and State Sovereignty” (Oath Keepers 2009i). Laws regulating hate speech, racial/gender/social discrimination, or gun control are viewed as “immoral violations of the natural rights of the people”(Oath Keepers 2009q) made by a “shadow government” that “stands ready [to] suppress public dissent over government policy” (Oath Keepers 2009z).

This enemy is also presented as no different from the ones the American armed forces have dealt with on foreign soil. If the terrorist groups that attacked the World Trade Center targeted those buildings to destroy the American sense of democracy, liberty, and way of life, so do the elites that constitute the US government. In this sense, the American people have “enemies on both sides of the border who are prepared and actively engaged in destroying the U[SA], both physically and economically” (Oath Keepers 2009s). As the group manifests the presence of “an enemy among us”, the confrontational politics is singled out as a necessary measure to unmask and defeat it.

The predominance of “institutional distrust” and “confrontational politics”, along with their intersection, illustrates an authority crisis in American politics. The OK’s narrative symbolizes a detachment from an apparent consensus on the mechanisms of electoral legitimacy, legislative reform, and international cooperation. Analyzing their “anti-globalist” stance fused with the identification of an internationally connected internal enemy, one could argue that it implicitly extends this logic of enmity to international political elites. Thus, their opposition to US “dominant classes” might be read as a wholesale critique of the ideological apparatus sustaining LIO and the American hegemony.

The horizontal divide becomes explicit when considering OK’s membership — only armed and security forces — who view themselves as uniquely entitled to act against this perceived enemy, not only because they are the ones touched by the clarity to recognize the “tyranny and oppression” that is unfolding in the US, but also because they have appropriate combat training. The “mission of Oath Keepers is to vastly increase their numbers” as they are in a “battle for the hearts and minds of our own troops” and need to “reach, teach, and inspire our brothers in arms [...] to fulfill their oaths and stand as guardians of the Republic” (Oath Keepers 2009r). Additionally, the OK also seeks to create awareness and does not discard the contribution of the common citizen and the possibility to “prepare [them] with medical, communications, and other info to be assets to their communities and themselves in times of strife” (Oath Keepers 2009k).

The confrontational politics connect to our third code: the use of force. Here, we stress two recurrent themes in OK’s narrative: the strong defense of the Second Amendment and the right to bear arms, and the necessity of armed resistance against a perceived authoritarian government. Because democratic institutions are regarded as being used to advance a tyrant government, violence is the only way to guarantee the rights of the people, hence the rejection of all other means of rule of law instead of the aforementioned original republican documents.

According to the group, the US hope against tyranny “lies within the ranks of [the] military and law enforcement personnel”(Oath Keepers 2009y) as “government can only impose its will on this country with its military, police, and national guard on its side. If we all stood together, like we did when we swore our oath’s this could not stand” (Oath Keepers 2009l). The security/military forces’ opposition is not merely rhetorical. The OK defends the use of violence as a “remedy [...] to set them [the government] right as to the facts, pardon and pacify them” because “what signify a few lives lost in a century or two? The tree of liberty must be

refreshed from time to time, with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure” (Oath Keepers 2009d).

Although the military/security forces are those prepared to use force, the legitimation of such force, in the OK narrative, derives from “the people” as interpreted through their reading of the American Constitution. By emphasizing that their oath was to the Constitution rather than the government, they argue that any order deemed unconstitutional should be rebuffed, and any government issuing such orders must be opposed, not necessarily through legal mechanisms. When this code is analyzed alongside “institutional distrust” and “confrontational politics,” it becomes evident why conventional means for contesting the government are dismissed. Resorting to the rule of law means going through the institutional channels that are, in their view, controlled by a corrupt political elite. As stressed by one OK, “you better listen up Politicians, you [...] are flirting with death. The Constitution has given me the legal right to do whatever I must do to defend it against all who would tamper with its original meaning and intent, and I will” (Oath Keepers 2009u). Within this framework, the defense of the right to bear arms and the Second Amendment is evident. For them, “an armed man is a citizen, a disarmed man is a subject to be ruled” (Oath Keepers 2009c).

In the arguments coded as ‘confrontational politics’, the divisions the OK constructs within American society are not only between people *versus* government, but also between the aware and unaware. However, not all American residents are perceived as citizens in which the real legitimate power resides. This introduces another category to the discursive topography presented so far: nationalism combined with sectarianism. This code reveals how the OK constructs pejorative divisions along the domestic realm, identifying the rightful citizens and those deemed outside the national body — immigrants or even Americans, but Muslim-Americans, who may be subjected to a different legal and criminal treatment than Christian-Americans. Nativism emerges when the OK advocates for the rights of a narrowly defined group of Americans, presenting them as the true national community based on cultural, racial, and religious lines.

One interesting example appears in a post by Rhodes criticizing the legal category of “enemy combatant” introduced in the War on Terror. When criticizing the detention of Yaser Hamdi, a former Muslim-American citizen, Rhodes affirmed that “the Court did not rule that only Muslim-Americans can be detained indefinitely by the military and tried by tribunal” but that “there [was] no legal distinction between Muslim and Christian” (Oath Keepers 2009x). If an American citizen is a “God-fearing, Christian, flag waving, patriotic “real American” living here in

the US does not matter a hoot to the Supreme Court majority [...]” (Oath Keepers 2009x). This post reflects a broader sentiment within the group that traditional markers of national identity are being disregarded by political elites.

This exclusionary logic is reinforced by more explicit calls for the removal of those who are perceived as threats to constitutional values. As one supporter states, “anyone that goes against the Constitution and what it represents should have their citizenship revoked and shown to the nearest border”, suggesting that disloyalty to their interpretation of the Constitution justifies expulsion or exile to regimes “where such freedoms do not exist” (Oath Keepers 2009ab)

Although this code is one of the least mobilized in our analytical *corpus* (see Figure 1), it reveals a deeper current of exclusionary nationalism. Besides the division along religious lines, some OK appeal to a ‘blood and soil’ conception of citizenship. Illegal immigrants are excluded from “the people”, and national belonging is defined by aspects of ancestry: “the blood of your ancestors” and “the blood of warriors from a once great Nation” (Oath Keepers 2009b) serves as criteria for circumscribing the US political community.

These sectarian and nativist arguments challenge the idea of America as an open, democratic, diverse, and multicultural society — a vision long presented as a global model. If US hegemony and its place in the LIO rest not only on the export of liberal values but also on embodying those values domestically, then the social divisions and hierarchies defended by the OK undermine that exceptionalist image. Moreover, if the liberal characteristics of American domestic politics are a feature of LIO, their contestation to the point of rupturing them might either force a transformation of the order to accommodate the new ideology or result in hegemonic decline.

The logic of ancestry connects nativism with the historical revisionism often mobilized by the OK — our fifth code. This code expresses how the OK invokes specific interpretations of US history to justify its arguments. References to the Constitution as an all-encompassing document that needs to be defended are used to construct an essentialist understanding of American values.

The American Revolution is central to this narrative. The OK believes a second revolution is imminent as “the final spark of Revolution was an attempt to disarm the people during martial law, which was an act of war against the people”, there is a sense that “the parallels to our time are obvious and ominous” (Oath Keepers 2009b). In this historical revisionism, the Second Amendment is put in the context of the American Revolution,

defending the existence of “well-regulated militia[s]”, not as National Guard units but as “EVERY adult citizen who is not a conscientious objector. EVERY citizen should be armed to defend the Republic” (Oath Keepers 2009e). Citing the Battle of Lexington and Concord, one post asserts that what precipitated them was “government troops [that] were sent to seize the CIVILIAN militia’s arms, which were not mere hunting rifles, but included ARTILLERY” (Oath Keepers 2009e). The second amendment is thus presented as a consequence of those battles as “these events were fresh in the minds of the founders of our nation when they wrote [it]” (Oath Keepers 2009e). According to this interpretation, the “civilian militia” “necessary to the security of a free state [...] because standing armies are a threat to peace”, reinforcing the claim that “it is clear that it was the intention of our founders that the US Military would NEVER be more powerful than the CIVILIAN militia” (Oath Keepers 2009e).

The founding fathers are similarly subjected to historical revisionism, described as “Godly men who sought for instruction and guidance from God above to lead this Great nation” (Oath Keepers 2009g). The OK presents them as custodians of a pristine constitutional vision, referring to a time when the “American Republic” functioned as “originally written in the Constitution” (Oath Keepers 2009n). This historical image legitimizes calls to restore “our Liberties” and get “the government downsized to what was intended by our founding fathers” (Oath Keepers 2009n). Historical revisionism, like the use of force, reinforces the OK’s portrayal of a crisis of authority — the detachment between the people and their political representatives. Their arguments construct current politicians as illegitimate leaders who corrupted the Constitution’s original meaning and defend coercive action to change the political status quo.

Following Gramsci, power involves both coercion and consensus, with hegemony grounded in a more consensual kind of supremacy. The hegemon needs to portray its national interest as universal and its leadership as either beneficial or the lesser evil. By contesting liberal values, the foundation of US hegemonic consensus, the OK narratives reveal fractures in the ideological structure that legitimizes American power both at home and abroad. What may have seemed peripheral in 2009, when the OK was created, has, with hindsight, been seen to be part of a build-up process that culminated in the two Trump presidencies and the Capitol invasion. These developments beg a reassessment of the US capacity and willingness to exercise its leadership. Plus, the construction of a different consensus — one based on anti-liberal values or a mix between liberal and anti-liberal ones — might dismantle the LIO, American hegemony, or both.

FINAL REMARKS

In this article, we argued that US internal contradictions are a relevant factor to explain power decline and hegemonic transition, manifested in the LIO crisis. In this sense, liberal values and US internal order are not only sources of US hegemony and features of the LIO. They can also be regarded as uncertainty producers and a source of their decline. Applying a neo-Gramscian understanding of hegemony, we have argued that US international leadership has its roots in the ideational apparatus constructed by the dominant social forces internally and expanded globally. The construction of US international hegemonic consensus rests on liberalism and democracy, which compose the US “power of example.” However, the internal consensus around such values is weakening, which may affect US international hegemony.

The contemporary weakening in the consensus can be traced back to 2008, when there was a strengthening of radical-right groups that promote anti-liberal narratives, such as private militias, following the financial crisis. The Oath Keepers’ discursive topography, along with its first year of existence in 2009, was used as an example of a nationally engaged group that explicitly questions at least two pillars of US hegemony and the LIO: political liberalism and the intergovernmental liberal structures.

The only current pillar that was not clearly challenged was economic liberalism. Although the international economic institutions are considered to be part of the globalist attack on American tradition, free trade was not perceived as a problem *per se*. This is a relevant and interesting phenomenon that may be explored in further research; however, understanding why the economy is not at the forefront of the OK narrative is beyond the scope of this article. Moreover, expanding the research on the OK and extreme-right social mobilization is also relevant to understand their views on specific themes of global governance, such as human and minority rights, education, and public health, among others. Also of consequence is understanding how they impact civil-military relations and democratic governance in the US context.

Stepping back in time was relevant to show how anti-liberal narratives precede Trump, and have roots in processes of social mobilization that comprise a political strategy based on the long-term. Building from more than a decade of political articulation, the OK are immersed in some of the relevant events of recent years, especially the Capitol Hill invasion in 2021. The paper is a first effort to explore the relations between US hegemony and internal anti-liberal narratives, exploring the role of anti-liberal social movements.

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NOTAS

1. As one of the first acts of his second presidency, in 2025, Donald Trump granted pardons to individuals convicted for their involvement in the 2021 attacks, including Rhodes.
2. By neo-Gramscian, we mean studies that, drawing from an inspiration on Gramsci's propositions on hegemony in a national context, translate the discussion to the international realm. Robert Cox, Stephen Gill, and William Robinson are representative of this tradition.
3. All coded segments are available for consultation in supplementary material.
4. The intersections refer to excerpts from the OK blog posts in which the content fits into more than one code. Such intersections are relevant for illustrating the articulations between codes in the OK's argumentative construction.

INTERNAL DYNAMICS AND US HEGEMONY: OATH KEEPERS ANTI-LIBERAL NARRATIVES AND SYMPTOMS OF LIBERAL INTERNATIONAL ORDER CRISIS

ABSTRACT

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 rekindled the debates about US hegemony and the future of the liberal international order (LIO). However, numerous analyses on the topic overlook the connection between US internal dynamics and global hegemony. When internal dynamics are considered, theoretical considerations tend to focus on positive aspects of the American political system and pay less attention to internal contradictions, loss of consensus, and anti-liberal narratives. Although Trump's first presidency intensified such domestic contradictions and inequalities, extreme-right militia narratives, such as the Oath Keepers (OK), already existed. To exemplify these internal contradictions, we analyze the first year of the OK's blog and show how its members' narrative challenges central pillars of LIO. Founded by former armed and security forces officers, and maintaining a paramilitary organization, the OK case shows the existence of a long-term mobilization of extreme-right actors oriented to the use of violence. The article is divided into three sections: first, we present the debate on hegemony and how it is centered mostly on international components; then we focus on the neo-gramscian concept of hegemony and how it contributes to bringing the domestic realm and its social forces to the fore; and lastly, we analyze the OK's narrative.

Keywords: US; Liberal International Order; Hegemony; Extreme-Right Militias; Oath Keepers.

RESUMO

A primeira eleição de Donald Trump em 2016 reacendeu os debates sobre a hegemonia dos Estados Unidos e o futuro da ordem internacional liberal (OIL). No entanto, inúmeras análises sobre o tema negligenciam a conexão entre as dinâmicas internas dos EUA e a hegemonia global. Quando essas dinâmicas internas são consideradas, as reflexões teóricas tendem a se concentrar nos aspectos positivos do sistema político americano, com menor atenção às suas contradições internas, à perda de consenso e às narrativas antiliberais. Embora o primeiro mandato de Trump tenha intensificado tais contradições e desigualdades domésticas, narrativas de milícias de extrema direita, como as dos Oath Keepers (OK), já existiam anteriormente. Para exemplificar essas contradições internas, analisamos o primeiro ano do blog dos OK e mostramos como a narrativa de seus membros desafia pilares centrais da OIL. Fundados por ex-integrantes das forças armadas e de segurança, e mantendo uma organização paramilitar, o caso dos OK demonstra a existência de uma mobilização de longo prazo de atores de extrema direita orientados para o uso da violência. O artigo está dividido em três seções: primeiro, apresentamos o debate sobre hegemonia e como ele se concentra majoritariamente em componentes internacionais; em seguida, focamos no conceito neogramsciano de hegemonia e em como ele contribui para trazer o âmbito doméstico e suas forças sociais para o centro da análise; e, por fim, analisamos a narrativa dos OK.

Palavras-chave: EUA; Ordem Internacional Liberal; Hegemonia; Milícias de Extrema Direita; Oath Keepers.

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