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Trump's Fragile Counter-Hegemony: Elite Fractions, Knowledge Networks, and Passive Revolution in Neo-Gramscian Perspective

Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive neo-Gramscian analysis of Donald Trump's political project—"Trumpism"—as it enters the second year of its second term in power. It integrates Antonio Gramsci's key concepts of hegemony, historic bloc, passive revolution, and the morbid symptoms of interregnum with Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman's propaganda model outlined in *Manufacturing Consent*. Central to the analysis is Bastiaan van Apeldoorn, Jasa Veselinovic, and Naná de Graaff's framework of contending fractions within the transnational capitalist class, which explains the shift in US grand strategy from post-Cold War "Open Door Globalism" to a form of economic nationalism. This is supplemented by the author's own research on enduring elite knowledge networks—comprising major philanthropic foundations, think tanks, and policy-planning bodies—that have historically constructed and sustained American hegemonic consent across the twentieth century and beyond. Trumpism emerges as a partial rupture within the neoliberal historic bloc, propelled by domestically oriented capitalist fractions, yet fundamentally constrained by persistent transnationalist knowledge networks. Ultimately, it constitutes a classic passive revolution: surface-level nationalist transformation that modernises capitalist rule while preventing genuine subaltern ascendancy. Paralleling this dynamic on the left, socialist-leaning Democrats such as Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC), and recently elected New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani seek to incorporate anti-establishment dissent into the Democratic Party's institutional structures—a similarly risky form of passive revolution that threatens either to neutralise radical potential and reinforce the neoliberal order, or fears losing control altogether. By early 2026, accelerating crises—including partial releases of Jeffrey Epstein-related files, fierce intra-bloc disputes over H-1B visas exposing fractional antagonisms, massive nationwide "No Kings" protests, illegal military intervention in Venezuela and full-scale war on Iran—combined with persistently low presidential approval ratings, reveal the morbid symptoms of an interregnum, creating openings for more authentic counter-hegemonic possibilities.

Introduction

In March 2026, as Donald Trump embarks on his second year of office in a second, non-consecutive presidential term, the phenomenon known as "Trumpism" stands at a critical juncture. The 2024 election delivered Trump an expanded base among working-class voters, with notable shifts among Latino men (reaching near-majority support in several key states) and younger Black men disillusioned with Democratic economic performance. Yet, contemporaneous polling from reputable sources such as Pew Research Center and Gallup places his overall approval ratings stubbornly in the mid-30s to low-40s range, with disapproval on economic management particularly acute—often exceeding 60 per cent. Recent polling for Politico indicates increased levels of disapproval on the economy, holding Trump responsible for the 'affordability' crisis. Even so, the hard core MAGA base remains solidly behind Trump. This simultaneous

resilience and fragility characterises not only Trumpism but the broader crisis of the American neoliberal order.

A neo-Gramscian perspective offers powerful tools for dissecting these developments. Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony emphasises how ruling classes secure consent not primarily through coercion but by shaping "common sense" through civil society institutions. The post-Second World War neoliberal historic bloc—essentially bipartisan in character—has sustained its dominance partly through the propaganda filters identified by Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman: concentrated media ownership, advertising dependence, reliance on official sources, disciplinary "flak," and dominant ideological framing.

To this foundation, the article adds Apeldoorn, Veselinovic, and deGraaff's critical political economy approach, which maps contending fractions within the transnational capitalist class using social network analysis. Their work demonstrates how post-Cold War US grand strategy pursued "Open Door" globalism—securing open markets and investment regimes worldwide—under the leadership of transnationalist elites densely connected to bodies like the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), Trilateral Commission, and Bilderberg Group. Trump's administrations, by contrast, exhibit relative disconnection from these networks and stronger ties to domestically oriented fractions, explaining the turn toward economic nationalism.

Supplementing this, the author's own research on elite knowledge networks—particularly the role of major philanthropic foundations such as Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller in building transnational alliances of intellectuals, policymakers, and local elites—reveals how hegemonic ideas are diffused and anchored over the long term. These networks do not merely reflect power; they actively produce consent for US-led order, even during periods of turbulence, by incorporating potential challengers and marginalising radicals.

In neo-Gramscian international political economy, the "neoliberal historic bloc" refers to the coalition of social forces that secured hegemonic consent for the neoliberal reconfiguration of capitalism from the late 1970s onward, particularly in the United States and its allied advanced capitalist states. An historic bloc is a unity of infrastructure and superstructure binding dominant classes with subaltern groups through ideological and material concessions. From the 1970s the neoliberal bloc achieved dominance by presenting market liberalisation, financialisation, and globalisation as universal "common sense."

Its core leading forces comprise the transnationalist fractions of the capitalist class:

- Finance capital: Major Wall Street banks, investment firms, hedge funds, and private equity (e.g., Goldman Sachs, JPMorgan Chase, BlackRock).
- Transnational corporations: Multinational firms with globally integrated production chains (e.g., Apple, General Electric, pharmaceutical giants, tech platforms like Google and Microsoft).
- High-tech and knowledge-intensive sectors: Silicon Valley firms benefiting from intellectual property regimes and global data flows.

- Energy and extractive multinationals: Particularly those oriented toward global markets rather than purely domestic protection.

These fractions are deeply embedded in transnational policy-planning networks including the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), Trilateral Commission, Bilderberg Group, World Economic Forum, major philanthropic foundations (Ford, Rockefeller, Gates, Soros) funding think tanks, university programmes, and NGOs that naturalise neoliberal globalisation. Policy think tanks include Brookings, Center for American Progress (progressive wing), Heritage Foundation (conservative wing, adapted to neoliberal economics). Those organisations are in turn immersed in an international organisational architecture including the IMF, World Bank, WTO, OECD—promoting structural adjustment and trade liberalisation.

In the US, the bloc found expression in both major parties, including via the Democratic Party’s “Third Way” centrism under Clinton, Obama, and Biden—combining social liberalism with market fundamentalism. To perfect the anti-popular cocktail, the Republican Party provided supply-side economics and deregulation under Reagan, Bush, and pre-Trump factions.

But to secure broader consent, the bloc incorporated the professional-managerial middle classes, and segments of organised labour, especially in public-sector and skilled unions that accepted productivity deals and triangulation (e.g., AFL-CIO leadership under certain periods). The construction of consumer-citizens was essential, presenting them with cheap imported goods, credit expansion, and the illusion of shareholder democracy.

Southern elites - i.e. local ruling classes in the Global South looking to integrate more fully into the liberal order were effectively co-opted through debt regimes and export-oriented development. The defeat of the demands of the Third World for a New International Economic Order paved the way for globalising the neoliberal order.

The historic bloc’s key characteristics include a transnational orientation that prioritises global market access (“Open Door”) over national protectionism. Its flexibility means it adapts to crises by incorporating moderate critics (e.g., post-2008 financial regulation tweaks, Obama-era stimulus). And its Ideological cohesion presents globalisation as inevitable progress, marginalising alternatives through propaganda filters (Chomsky/Herman).

However, the bloc’s crisis since 2008—exposed by financial meltdown, rising inequality, and China’s challenge—opened space for rival projects, notably Trumpism’s domestically oriented fractional challenge. Yet enduring transnational networks continue to constrain full rupture, illustrating the resilience of neoliberal hegemony even in decay.

Finally, Gramsci’s concept of passive revolution is pivotal: a process whereby ruling classes modernise their strategies by absorbing subaltern energies and demands, thereby preventing revolutionary transformation while preserving core structures of

domination. This lens illuminates both Trumpism and the parallel incorporation of left dissent within the Democratic Party.

The Neo-Gramscian Theoretical Framework: Fractions, Knowledge Networks, and the Dynamics of Passive Revolution

Gramsci's hegemony is achieved when a historic bloc—a coalition of social forces led by a dominant class or fraction—presents its particular interests as universal, embedding them in civil society's institutions and practices. In the US context, the neoliberal bloc manufactured consent for financialisation, deindustrialisation, and imperial adventures through Chomsky and Herman's five filters, which systematically bound public debate within elite parameters and marginalised systemic critiques.

Van Apeldoorn, Veselinovic, and de Graaff advance this analysis by disaggregating the capitalist class into fractions with distinct interests and network embeddings. The transnationalist fraction—tied to globally integrated production chains and policy-planning bodies—championed Open Door globalism from the Clinton era through Obama, securing consent for globalisation via dense interconnections in organisations like the CFR. Empirical network studies show administrations in this period appointing personnel with high centrality in these transnational nodes.

Trump's elite networks, however, display marked peripheralisation from traditional transnationalist bodies and stronger linkages to domestically oriented capital: real estate developers, fossil fuel interests, and certain tech segments exhibiting nationalist orientations (most prominently Elon Musk's enterprises, benefiting from government contracts and deregulation). This fractional reconfiguration drives the pivot to neo-mercantilist policies—tariffs, "America First" rhetoric, selective decoupling from China—while retaining core imperialist commitments, such as confrontation with perceived peer competitors.

The author's analysis of elite knowledge networks complements this by highlighting non-corporate mechanisms of hegemonic reproduction. Major philanthropic foundations have historically funded think tanks, universities, and international exchanges to cultivate organic intellectuals aligned with American leadership. These networks—spanning the Ford Foundation's global area studies programmes, Carnegie's endowment of peace institutes, and Rockefeller's support for population and development agendas—diffuse liberal-internationalist "common sense," incorporating moderate critics while isolating radicals. Even under Trump, these structures persist, exerting gravitational pull toward continuity and constraining full nationalist rupture.

Trumpism, however, is now embedded in a more durable ecosystem of foundations and think tanks, and its public intellectuals, such as Michael Anton.

<https://thewire.in/world/magas-intellectuals-kirk-anton-and-the-forging-of-trumps-america-first-empire>. The MAGA think tank network – comprising the America First Policy Institute (AFPI), Heritage Foundation, Center for Renewing America (CRA), Conservative Partnership Institute (CPI), and others – functions as a counter-

establishment. It is a parallel intellectual infrastructure designed to supplant the liberal internationalist consensus that has dominated American policymaking since the mid-20th century. These institutions are not peripheral; they are central to the Trump administration's second-term agenda, providing policy blueprints, personnel pipelines, and ideological coherence. <https://thewire.in/world/maga-think-tanks-aim-to-perpetuate-a-trumpism-beyond-trump>

Passive revolution emerges as the key mechanism bridging the various elements – Chomsky's manufacturing consent, Apeldoorn et al's corporate networks and Parmar's elite knowledge networks.. When hegemonic legitimacy erodes, ruling fractions may concede surface reforms or rhetorical shifts to absorb discontent, modernising domination without ceding structural power. Both Trumpism and Democratic left-wing incorporation exemplify this dangerous strategy.

Articulating "Obvious Truths": Exploiting the Structural Crisis of Neoliberal Legitimacy

Trumpism's counter-hegemonic appeal begins with voicing "obvious truths" that neoliberal common sense had suppressed. His invocation of "American carnage" captures the material reality of deindustrialisation, stagnant real wages for the bottom 50 per cent since the 1970s, opioid devastation in heartland communities, and grotesque inequality. Abroad, denunciations of "stupid" or "endless" wars highlight the trillions expended on post-9/11 interventions with negligible benefits for ordinary Americans and catastrophic regional consequences.

Van Apeldoorn, Veselinovic, and de Graaff locate these grievances in the organic crisis of Open Door globalism: the 2008 financial meltdown exposed financialisation's fragility, while China's rise challenged unipolar assumptions. The Obama administration's partial responses—modest re-shoring, prolonged military engagements, corporate bailouts, austerity for the masses, and continued corporate-friendly trade deals—failed to restore legitimacy, creating ideological space for a rival fractional project.

Elite knowledge networks, historically central to legitimating globalism (through funded scholarship portraying globalisation as inevitable progress), faced credibility strains, enabling Trump's war of position to resonate with subaltern groups previously marginalised by propaganda filters.

Parallel grievances fuel dissent on the left: corporate capture of politics, ecological devastation, racialised inequality, and imperial overreach. Figures like Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Zohran Mamdani (whose upset November 2025 mayoral victory in New York City marked a high-water mark for democratic socialists) articulate these truths within Democratic frameworks, criticising party elites for subservience to Wall Street and the military-industrial complex.

Passive Revolution in Action: Economic Nationalism, Left Incorporation, and the Subordination of Labour to Capital

Trumpism, however, stops at articulation. Its “solutions” constitute passive revolution: nationalist modernisation serving capital. The 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act added nearly \$2 trillion to the deficit while directing the overwhelming share of benefits to corporations and high earners. Tariffs on imports raised costs for consumers and downstream industries, contributing to job losses in agriculture and manufacturing supply chains. Immigration restrictions appealed to nativist sentiments but disregarded immigrant labour’s role in addressing shortages.

Van Apeldoorn, Veselinovic, and deGraaff interpret this as neo-mercantilism favouring domestically oriented fractions against global competition, while elite knowledge networks—through think tank reports and foundation-funded dialogues—promote selective incorporation of nationalist elements into a revised globalist framework (evident in bipartisan China hawkishness).

On the Democratic side, incorporation of left dissent mirrors this passive revolution dynamic, albeit with progressive veneer. Sanders’ 2016 and 2020 campaigns mobilised millions around class-based critiques, yet ultimately endorsed Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden, channelling insurgent energy into establishment defence. Ocasio-Cortez and the “Squad” wield influence in Congress, advancing symbolic resolutions and committee pressure, but operate within party discipline. Mamdani’s mayoral platform—free public transport, aggressive rent freezes, universal childcare—represents tangible gains, yet his transition appointments (including retention of a police commissioner responsible for repressive policing of pro-Palestine protests and ICE raids, and collaboration with police unions) and nuanced positioning on foreign policy illustrate accommodation to institutional constraints. <https://thewire.in/world/mamdani-marjorie-taylor-green-machiavellian-moment-maga-revolt-epstein>

Transnationalist fractions and knowledge networks facilitate this dilution: foundation grants to progressive think tanks (e.g., Roosevelt Institute, Center for American Progress) reframe radical demands as technocratic reforms; media filters amplify “pragmatic” voices while marginalising anti-capitalist or anti-imperialist purists. The risk is profound: anti-establishment energies are absorbed, legitimating the Democratic wing of the neoliberal bloc while demobilising extra-parliamentary organising, potentially fostering cynicism that authoritarians exploit.

Extraordinary Fabrications: Manufacturing Alternate Realities and Ideological Concessions

Trump complements policy deception with extraordinary lies: claims of presiding over “the greatest economy in history” (largely inheriting Obama-era trends until COVID disruption); “building the wall” (predominantly replacing existing barriers); “draining the swamp” (while appointing lobbyists and enabling familial enrichment). These fabrications, amplified by sympathetic media ecosystems bypassing traditional filters, sustain an alternate reality where evidence of failure is dismissed as elite conspiracy.

Left incorporation involves subtler concessions: translating structural critiques into electoral “progressivism,” downplaying US imperialism’s role in global inequality, or

framing solutions as state-managed capitalism rather than democratic control of production.

Composition and Class Character of the Contending Historic Blocs

Trump's historic bloc remains hybrid and contradictory. Leading fractions are domestically oriented segments of transnational capital—fossil fuels, real estate, and tech nationalists (Musk's constellation). Allied are petite bourgeois elements attracted to deregulation, and a subaltern base of primarily non-college-educated workers: still predominantly white (over 80 per cent in 2024), older, male, rural/exurban, with evangelical affinities, yet increasingly diversified racially through Latino and modest Black gains.

Van Apeldoorn, Veselinovic, and deGraaff's network mapping underscores appointees' isolation from transnationalist bodies, enabling temporary cohesion around nativist common sense. Persistent transnational knowledge networks, however, exert countervailing pressure toward continuity.

The Democratic incorporation project targets overlapping but distinct subaltern layers—younger, more diverse, urban, college-educated progressives alongside unionised workers—channelling discontent into electoral mobilisation and policy incrementalism, thereby fragmenting potential unified counter-hegemony across class and racial lines.

Crises of Late 2025: Accelerating Fractures and Morbid Symptoms of Interregnum

By December 2025, contradictions have erupted dramatically, revealing interregnum's morbid symptoms.

Partial Department of Justice releases of Epstein-related documents (October–December, heavily redacted with notable withholdings) resurfaced Trump's associations—flight logs, financial ties—undermining his anti-elite narrative and alienating segments viewing elite exploitation as core betrayal.

The H-1B visa controversy exposed raw fractional antagonisms: Trump's alignment with Musk and tech oligarchs favouring expanded skilled immigration (coupled with administrative fee increases) provoked furious backlash from MAGA hardliners including Marjorie Taylor Greene, Steve Bannon, and Laura Loomer. Accusations of prioritising Silicon Valley capital over domestic labour highlighted the bloc's core tension, with proposed restrictive legislation gaining unexpected Republican support. <https://thewire.in/world/a-shutdown-snap-cuts-and-the-rising-tide-of-anti-trump-resistance>

Mass “No Kings” protests—triggered by the Supreme Court's presidential immunity ruling—mobilised millions in June and October across hundreds of cities. Organised by broad coalitions and amplified through decentralised social platforms bypassing corporate filters, they framed Trump as aspiring autocrat rather than populist outsider.

The “No Kings” movement, a grassroots uprising against Donald Trump’s authoritarian ascent, invokes the spirit of 1776 to defend democracy while deliberately rejecting its oppressive baggage. Through a Gramscian lens, this movement represents a counter-hegemonic struggle, selectively reclaiming the progressive democratic elements of 1776 to challenge Trump’s monarchical ambitions and forge a more inclusive democratic “common sense.”

On the left, incorporation strains manifested: Sanders’ enduring influence through endorsements, Ocasio-Cortez’s national profile amid 2028 speculation, and Mamdani’s progressive appointments contrasted with policy dilutions, party pressures on contentious issues like Gaza, and internal ethics scrutiny—illustrating the perils of channelling dissent without structural power. A few weeks ago Trump was threatening to withhold all federal funds from New York if its voters elected the “100 % Communist lunatic”, with some calling for his deportation. Mamdani, for his part, had described Trump as a “despot” and “fascist”. Yet there they were on November 21, smiling for the cameras, with the president declaring that “Zohran and I are going to make New York great again – together”. The about-face is less evidence of ideological flexibility than a deliberate distraction. By extending an olive branch to a progressive bogeyman, Trump shifts the media frame from internal haemorrhage to bipartisan deal-making.

Presidential approval hovers at 36–41 per cent, with economic disapproval dominating narratives. New polling, according to Politico, “shows many Americans have begun to blame President Donald Trump for the high costs they’re feeling across virtually every part of their lives — and it’s shifting politics. Almost half — 46 percent — say the cost of living in the U.S. is the worst they can ever remember it being, a view held by 37 percent of 2024 Trump voters. Americans also say that the affordability crisis is Trump’s responsibility, with 46 percent saying it is his economy now and his administration is responsible for the costs they struggle with.” <https://www.politico.com/news/2025/12/04/poll-americans-trump-voters-affordability-crisis-00674747>.

The Iran war—escalating from illegal US-Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, missile sites, and command centres starting February 28, 2026—has significantly undermined Trumpian hegemony, exposing its contradictions and accelerating the erosion of American primacy. Trump's second term reveals not ‘isolationist’ restraint but a hyper-nationalist, coercive pivot that masks bipartisan continuity in pursuing US dominance. The strikes, framed as defensive against an “imminent threat,” turbocharge imperial overreach. What was sold as “America First” rejection of forever wars (post-Iraq/Afghanistan) unravels into unilateral force projection, alienating even elements of Trump's MAGA base. Domestic anti-war protests, surge across the US, fracturing elite consensus and revealing hegemony's reliance on coercion over consent.

Trump's ego-driven escalation—precision strikes escalating to broader attacks, including civilian casualties—provokes resignations (e.g., National Counterterrorism Center director Joe Kent refusing to back a non-imminent-threat war) and spikes oil prices via Strait of Hormuz disruptions. This threatens Russian/Chinese interests, drawing multipolar rivals deeper into West Asia and hastening hegemonic decline. This is structural continuity: “America First” recasts primacy in nationalist terms but

sustains force-based hegemony, eroding legitimacy amid global multipolarity and domestic dissent.

Overall, the Iran conflict symbolizes Trumpism's imperial core—overreliance on military spectacle amid eroding consent—further exposing US power's fragility in a contested world order.

Conclusion: Beyond Passive Revolution—Toward Genuine Counter-Hegemony?

Trumpism and Democratic left incorporation both exemplify passive revolutions amid organic crisis: neoliberal hegemony decays, yet rival projects modernise domination rather than transcend it. Van Apeldoorn et al highlight significant fractional reconfiguration; elite knowledge networks ensure underlying continuity.

The left's incorporation strategy carries particular danger: by neutralising radical energies and legitimating capitalist democracy's facade during authoritarian ascent, it risks demobilisation and despair.

Yet interregnum crises open ideological space. Chomsky warns decaying systems breed authoritarianism; Gramsci reminds us that morbid symptoms signal potential for subaltern organic intellectuals to forge authentic counter-hegemony—renovating common sense toward equitable distribution, democratic economic planning, genuine internationalism, and peace.

Whether movements like “No Kings” or analogous forces can transcend both nationalist passive revolution and reformist incorporation remains the pivotal question for American politics—and, given US power, for global order. For observers in India and the Global South, decoding these dynamics is essential to navigating contemporary US imperialism's evolving forms in an era of systemic crisis and emerging multiplexity. <https://thewire.in/books/a-searing-indictment-of-western-racism-and-colonialism>.

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