

Imperial Hegemony and the Nobel Peace Prize
A Gramscian Constructivist Analysis

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Introduction

Careful analysis of global commentary generated by the 2009 Peace Prize awarded to Barack Obama, reveals that the Nobel Committee is an important actor in international politics. Nevertheless, such commentary fails to reveal both, the role played by the committee in International Relations, and the historical foundations underpinning such a role. In order to address these two critical issues, this article aims; first, to study the Nobel Peace Prize through a constructivist lens rested on both a social ontology and a social epistemology (Fierke 2007, 182); and second, to apply Antonio Gramsci's understanding of hegemony, as a theoretical tool useful for explaining the actions of the Committee.

The main premise of constructivist thought is that international relations are a social construction, "in so far as their shape and form is imbued with social values, norms, and assumptions" (Fierke 2007, 168). Actors involved in international relations cannot be separated from the context of normative meaning, which shapes who they are and the possibilities available to them" (Fierke 2007, 170). In this sense, the Nobel committee is a product of its cultural environment, giving meaning to reality through "historically-produced and culturally-bound knowledge" (Barnett, 163). Since the social construction of reality that the Nobel committee helps to project, shapes what is viewed as legitimate peaceful action in international relations, its is important to understand its origins.

In addition, Gramsci claims, “that every culture has its speculative and religious moment, which coincides with the period of complete hegemony of the social group of which it is the expression”. He also suggests that this event often “coincides exactly with the moment in which the real hegemony disintegrates at the base”. In order to react against this molecular disintegration, Gramsci argues that the dominant group perfects its system of thought as dogma, which then quickly becomes a transcendental ‘faith’. He also observes, that “every so-called decadent epoch (in which a disintegration of the old world takes place) is characterized by a refined and highly ‘speculative’ form of thought” (Gramsci 2005, 370). Following Gramscian analysis, the article will argue that the Nobel committee is an actor in international relations participating in the perfection of the hegemonic system of thought as dogma. It will also show how in the present epoch a refined and highly ‘speculative’ form of thought characterizes Western society.

The article is divided into three sections. Section one, *Setting the Scene*, presents a snapshot of the global commentary generated by the 2009 Peace Prize. The commentary includes official statements by the committee, and comments by political leaders, opposition parties, congressmen, the Catholic Church, journalists, academics, and satirical films.

Section two, *Revisiting the Empire, the Nobel and Obama*, contextualizes the existence of a 500 year old Western Empire, through the work of James Tully and Richard Falk. The former presenting the empire’s historical trajectory, and the latter, offering an understanding of the Western Empire’s present formation. The section then moves on to explain the historical trajectory of Alfred Nobel and the Nobel Peace Prize by placing them within the context of Western empire and shifting imperial hegemony.

Section three, *Organic intellectuals, passive revolution and the Condottiere*, draws from Gramsci's political analysis, to explain the role played by the Nobel committee in supporting Western imperial expansion through its support to American hegemony. The section also presents Obama as Gramsci's *Condottiere* (term he borrowed from Machiavelli), through the journalistic work of John Pilger and Chris Hedges. Understanding 'brand' Obama is useful in order to contextualize the actions of the Nobel committee.

The article concludes by summarizing how the Nobel committee members play the role of organic intellectuals "directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong" (Gramsci 2005, 3). In effect, the members play the role of deputies for the dominant group, "exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony" (Gramsci 2005, 12). Their mandate is clearly to equate imperial war with the quest for global peace.

Setting the Scene

On October 9th 2009, Thorbjorn Jagland, Chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee announced that the Nobel Peace Prize for 2009 would be awarded to the President of the United States, Barack Obama. The reasons for this choice according to Jagland, were "his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples" and his "vision of and work for a world without nuclear weapons". From the Committee's perspective, "multilateral diplomacy has regained a central position, with emphasis on the role that the United Nations and other international institutions can play". The statement finished pointing to the fact that "only very rarely

has a person to the same extent as Obama captured the world's attention and given its people hope for a better future”¹. Following the announcement, Geir Lundestad, Secretary of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, emphasized that President Barack Obama had created “a new climate in international politics which closely fulfils the statues of Alfred Nobel's will”².

Soon after the announcement was made, reactions to the news came from political leaders around the world. President Sarkozy of France stated that the Nobel Committee had recognised Obama’s “determined commitment to human rights, justice and the promotion of peace in the world ”³. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, said he hoped that this decision would serve as an additional incentive “to create a new climate in international politics and promote initiatives that are fundamentally important for global security”⁴. German Chancellor Angela Merkel emphasized “Obama has set a new tone in the world”⁵. The Prime Minister of Spain, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero claimed the prize offered “a stimulus and support” for the U.S. president to achieve “victories for peace”⁶. Greek Prime Minister, George Papandreou, issued a statement calling the award

¹ *Announcement of the Nobel Peace Prize by Thorbjørn Jagland, Chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee*, (09/10/2009). Available online:

http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2009/press.html

² *Interview with Geir Lundestad, Secretary of the Norwegian Nobel Committee* (09/10/2009). Available online: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2009/announcement.html

³ The Times of India (09/10/2009). *Obama Nobel marks US return to world's 'hearts': Sarkozy*. Available online: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/europe/Obama-Nobel-marks-US-return-to-worlds-hearts-Sarkozy-/articleshow/5106874.cms>

⁴ The Moscow Times (12/10/2009). *Medvedev Hopes Obama's Nobel Will Aid Ties*. Available online: <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/387179.html>

⁵ The Epoch Times (12/10/2009). *Obama's Nobel Peace Prize, the World Reacts*. Available online: <http://www.theepochtimes.com/n2/content/view/23747/>

⁶ Latin American Herald Tribune (12/10/2009). *Obama's Nobel Prize Brings Surprise, Hope, Criticism*. Available online: <http://www.laht.com/article.asp?CategoryId=12395&ArticleId=345466>

a "fair recognition of the contribution of the [U.S. President] in the sacred cause of peace"⁷

In addition to official statements made by political leaders, the award also generated responses from opposition parties around the world, US political figures, and the Vatican. Spokesman for the Vatican, Father Federico Lombardi, said the Holy See greeted the news with appreciation "in light of the commitment shown by the president to promote peace". Russia's Liberal Democratic Party leader, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, "sent a letter to the White House asking the U.S. President to return the Prize, believing the decision to be an act of provocation". The leader of the Russian Communist Party, Gennady Zyuganov, said that the prize is "an advance of sorts and shows Europe's desire to support the U.S. president in a time when his ratings at home are starting to fall"⁸. US Congressman Ron Paul, stated that it was "ironic because the application [for the prize] had to be in by February first, 11 days after being in office, and he had already given orders and extended bombings in Pakistan where some civilians were killed." He added that the real goal of giving the prize was "not peace, but internationalism and world government"⁹. Finally, former US Ambassador to the United Nations, John Bolton, said that this was the first "Post-American president" and that the prize carried the following message from European elites; "these are the Americans we like"¹⁰.

Journalistic reaction to the award was also heated and extensive. The German *Sueddeutsche* newspaper, called it "messiah-mania", while *The Spiegel* argued that

⁷ Same source footnote 5.

⁸ Same source footnote 5.

⁹ *Video Statement by Congressman Ron Paul on the Obama peace prize*. Available online: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FbcDk-bNoc8&feature=player_embedded#

¹⁰ Fox Business (09/10/2009) *Bolton on Obama Winning Peace Prize*. Available online: <http://www.foxbusiness.com/search-results/m/26871777/bolton-on-obama-winning-peace-prize.htm>

Obama has not brought change, and has “only made things worse, for example in Afghanistan, Iran, and the Middle-East”¹¹. Journalist Robert Fisk, from the *The Independent* in London, was more extensive with his criticism. In regards to Obama, he said: “He put pressure on the Palestinian leader to throw away the opportunity of international scrutiny of UN Judge Goldstone's damning indictment of Israeli war crimes in Gaza;” he broke “his pre-election promise to call the 1915 Armenian massacres by Ottoman Turkey a genocide;” and he even announced that “Pakistan was now America's war.” According to Fisk, the Peace Prize amounted to “achievements he has not yet achieved and for dreams that will turn into nightmares”¹².

Professor Noam Chomsky, in an article titled *War, Peace, and Obama's Nobel*, published on November 5th, pointed to a Nonpartisan budget and security monitors report in *Government Executive*. The report emphasized how the "administration's request for \$538 billion for the Defence Department in fiscal 2010 and its stated intention to maintain a high level of funding in the coming years put the president on track to spend more on defence, in real dollars, than any other president has in one term of office since World War II”. Chomsky then referred to the “additional \$130 billion the administration is requesting to fund the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan next year, with even more war spending slated for future years”¹³. Howard Zinn, writing in *The Guardian*, explained how he was shocked by the thought that “a president carrying on two wars would be given a peace prize”. Then he recalled, “that Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt, and

¹¹ Same source footnote 5.

¹² The Independent (11/10/2009) *Robert Fisk: Obama, man of peace? No, just a Nobel prize of a mistake*. Available online: <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-obama-man-of-peace-no-just-a-nobel-prize-of-a-mistake-1800928.html>

¹³ Chomsky, N. (05/11/2009) *War, Peace, and Obama's Nobel*, In These Times. Available online: <http://www.chomsky.info/articles/20091105.htm>

Henry Kissinger had all received Nobel peace prizes”. Zinn added, that the Nobel committee is famous for “ignoring blatant violations of world peace”¹⁴.

Despite the fact that global political figures and experts in international relations from around the globe commented on the event, nobody was able to capture its irony more clearly than the satirical film posted on YouTube, *Hitler Reacts to Barak Obama Winning the Nobel Peace Prize*¹⁵. In the film, Hitler is hiding in his bunker, and his generals inform him of the fact that Obama has won the Peace Prize. His response is: “I killed more people just for peace... let me attack more countries so that I can be awarded the peace prize”.

Thorbjorn Jagland – a first-time member of the Nobel Committee, who once served as Prime Minister of Norway, and now heads the Council of Europe¹⁶ – responded to criticisms on the decision, by making the following statement: “If you are not able to make a courageous decision, you cannot help move the world in the right direction”¹⁷. Siv Jensen, leader of Norway’s opposition Progress Party, following this statement called on Jagland to step down from the Nobel committee chairmanship. Jensen claimed, that running the Council of Europe while choosing the Peace Prize winner constitutes a conflict of interests¹⁸.

¹⁴ Zinn, H. (10/10/2009) *War and peace prizes*, The Guardian. Available online: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2009/oct/09/nobel-peace-prize-war-obama>

¹⁵ Satire: *Hitler Reacts to Barak Obama Winning the Nobel Peace Prize*. Available online: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zNf6_ivPk4&feature=player_embedded

¹⁶ The Council of Europe, based in Strasbourg (France) has 47 member countries. Founded on 5 May 1949 by 10 countries, the Council of Europe seeks to develop throughout Europe common and democratic principles based on the European Convention on Human Rights and other reference texts on the protection of individuals.

¹⁷ The Wall Street Journal (19/10/2009) *Norwegian Draws Fire over Nobel Choice: Peace-prize Committee Chief Jagland Defends Controversial Decision to Pick Barack Obama for This Year's Award*. Available online: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB125590187458592925.html>

¹⁸ Same source footnote 17.

Revisiting the Empire, the Nobel and Obama

There are *three steps*, which must be taken in order to understand the context of normative meaning, which shapes the Nobel committee as an actor in international relations. The *first step* is to explain the relationships of power that have dominated the western society of which the Nobel committee is a member. The *second step*, is to present the Western Empire's present hegemonic reality, and the *third step*, is to explain the historical trajectory of Alfred Nobel and the Nobel Peace Prize by placing them within the context of Western empire and shifting imperial hegemony.

In regards to the *first step*, beginning in the 20th century a view of international politics developed, which claimed that the world was structured as a system of formally independent and equal nation states, existing within a system of international law and a structure of economic development universal in form. This view plagued the academic literature to replace the worldview of competing empires. According to James Tully¹⁹, this picture "of a system of states became so dominant in the 20th century that it was projected back by academics to 1648. As if a system of states developed in 1648, thus eliminating imperialism from history from 1648 to 1914". Nevertheless, Tully argues that this is not the case; enough historical work has been carried out which demonstrates that there are three main phases of Western imperialism dating back to 1492, and which clearly expose the historically layered character of its contemporary form. Understanding these layers exposes some of the historically-produced and culturally-bound relationships of power which shape the role of the Nobel committee.

¹⁹ Tully, J. (20/01/2005) "The Persistence of Empire," in *Politics in the Age of Empire Symposium*, University of Victoria Political Science Department.

According to Tully, these 500 years of Western imperialism are characterized by the spread of violence and inequality; from 1492 to 1914 through a long period of western colonial expansion, from 1914 to the 1970s through an epoch of decolonization in which imperial hegemony begun to shift from the European powers to the United States, and finally, through the post-colonial period of today, in which the aftermath of the Second World War and the Cold War consolidated United States imperial hegemony. Tully also emphasizes that in its present form, imperialism is not about colonization, but rather about military intervention and economic dependency through what academics describe as informal imperial rule. This informal rule is characterized by three defining features: “Limited self-determination of nation states” open to free trade from the United States and its allies; “unilateral or multilateral use of force on non-European states”; and “governance through a league, or coalition including the United Nations, Economic agencies, international business law, and property rights to the world’s resources”.

In regards to the *second step*, presenting the Western Empire’s present hegemonic reality, the work of Richard Falk is very useful. In a recent keynote address to the National Lawyers Guild²⁰, Falk aligned with Tully’s description of informal imperial rule. For Falk, in the 21st century – the era of post-colonial rule – imperial hegemony is carried out through counterinsurgency warfare to control the political direction of different countries. Through ‘Pax Americana’ relative liberal peace in the Western world is achieved, yet, United States hegemony is in decline; “the dollar is declining and acceptability of the United States in the world is being questioned.” The current state of

²⁰ Richard Falk Princeton Emeritus professor of International Law, UN Human Rights Rapporteur Palestinian occupied Territories. October 15, 2009 *National Lawyers Guild, Law for the People 2009 Convention*. Available online: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u226azn7d68&feature=player_embedded

affairs described by Falk, aligns with the views of some of the worlds leading financial investors, such as George Soros, who recently speculated in regards to the current financial crisis, that “the new world order that will eventually emerge will not be dominated by the United States... China may be able to take its place to some extent”²¹.

Following this line of analysis, Falk claims that reproducing the actions of previous declining empires, the United States continues to build its military capacity, currently constituting 700-1000 military bases in 60 different countries, with navies in every ocean, and a push towards the dominance of space. This last point being of crucial relevance to the Obama Peace Prize, since the day the award was announced, NASA bombed the moon raising “serious questions involving space weaponry”²². Falk’s main argument is that what we are witnessing with the Obama presidency is the exchange of wars from Iraq to Afghanistan/Pakistan – a differentiation between war of choice and war of necessity, which allows imperial expansion to continue. In addition, Falk concludes that it “seems Orwellian to give a prize to a political leader who is escalating an unlawful war, threatening Iran militarily, and neglecting the humanitarian catastrophe that is befallen on the Palestinian people”. To Falk the prize is a blatant expression of militarism, awarded by the Europeans “for the change in imperial style from Bush’s unilateralism to a more multilateral approach”.

In regards to the *third step*, explaining the historical trajectory of Alfred Nobel and the Nobel Peace Prize by placing them within the context of Western empire and shifting imperial hegemony, it is important to note that Alfred Nobel's father was a

²¹ China View (31/10/2009) *Soros: China will emerge as winner from current economic turmoil*. Available online: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-10/31/content_12363369.htm

²² Forbes Magazine (13/10/2009) *Bombing The Moon*. Available online: <http://www.forbes.com/2009/10/12/nasa-bombing-the-moon-opinions-contributors-kenneth-anderson-glenn-harlan-reynolds.html>

prosperous munitions manufacturer in Russia, whose naval mines were instrumental in defending St. Petersburg during the Crimean War²³. Following the end of the war, the family business went bankrupt, but in 1863 Alfred Nobel “succeeded in detonating nitroglycerin from a distance with a gunpowder charge, and two years later he patented the mercury fulminate detonator – a crucial component for the development of high explosives²⁴”. Soon after, Nobel established factories in Hamburg and Stockholm, and then New York and California. In 1866 he invented dynamite, and supported by his patents, “within ten years 16 explosives producing factories had been founded in 14 countries with Nobel as shareholder or co-owner”²⁵. Years later, the Nobel Dynamite Trust Company became the first international holding company in the world. In 1871 in regards imperialism and his dynamite he wrote: “England is a jewel worth the rest of the world. A dynamite company there would have the entire Empire as its market”²⁶.

During the last decade of his life, Nobel ventured into different weapons technologies such as rockets and cannons, and in 1891 he wrote the following to his friend countess Bertha von Suttner²⁷: “Perhaps my factories will put an end to war sooner than your congresses: on the day that two army corps can mutually annihilate each other

²³ (October 1853–February 1856), war fought mainly on the Crimean Peninsula between the Russians and the British, French, and Ottoman Turkish, with support, from January 1855, by the army of Sardinia-Piedmont. The war arose from the conflict of great powers in the Middle East and was more directly caused by Russian demands to exercise protection over the Orthodox subjects of the Ottoman sultan. Another major factor was the dispute between Russia and France over the privileges of the Russian Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches in the holy places in Palestine. Source: *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Available online: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/143040/Crimean-War>

²⁴ NNDB, *Alfred Nobel*. Available online: <http://www.nndb.com/people/753/000024681/>

²⁵ Lundström, R. *The Nobel Dynamite Companies*. Available online: http://nobelprize.org/alfred_nobel/industrial/articles/lundstrom/index.html

²⁶ Same source footnote 25.

²⁷ Countess Bertha von Suttner was a driving force in the international peace movement which developed in Europe during the latter part of the 19th century, and she tried energetically to get Nobel to engage himself in this activity, but with limited success. Same source footnote 25.

in a second, all civilised nations will surely recoil with horror and disband their troops”²⁸. By his death in December 1896, he was the wealthiest man in Sweden and one of the wealthiest people in the world, owning several companies that dominated the explosives industry²⁹.

The foundations for the Nobel Peace Prize were set in Alfred Nobel’s will, written in 1895. The Nobel Foundation is a private institution established in 1900, and the prize has been awarded since 1901. According to the will, the Peace Prize is to be awarded to “those who during the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind... Who shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses”³⁰. In accordance with the will, the prize is awarded by a Norwegian Nobel Committee, which is appointed by the Storting (the Norwegian Parliament). Its composition must reflect the relative strengths of the political parties in the Storting. Every year on December 10th – the day on which Alfred Nobel died in 1896 –, the Chairman of the Nobel Committee awards the Peace Prize. The ceremony takes place in the Oslo City Hall and the Norwegian King and members of Government are present at the event³¹.

Barack Obama is the fourth US President to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The others are Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and Jimmy Carter. When

²⁸ Tägil, S. *War and Peace in the Thinking of Alfred Nobel*. Available online: http://nobelprize.org/alfred_nobel/biographical/articles/tagil/index.html

²⁹ Same source footnote 28.

³⁰ Smith, A. (09/10/2007) *Time for Hope*. Available online: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2009/speedread.html

³¹ Tønnesson, Ø. (01/12/1999) *The Norwegian Nobel Committee*. Available online: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/articles/committee/index.html

Roosevelt was awarded the prize in 1906, The New York Times commented: “a broad smile illuminated the face of the globe when the prize was awarded ... to the most warlike citizen of these United States”³². Norwegian and Swedish commentators claimed that the committee chairman thought Norway “needed a large, friendly neighbour – even if he is far away”. Committee adviser, and later committee member and Norwegian foreign minister, Halvdan Koht concluded that this was the case³³. Years later, in 2001, following the September 11th Al-Qaeda attack on United States soil, this friendship between Norway and the United States was once again emphasized. Addressing the Norwegian Parliament, Defence Minister Bjørn Tore Godal stated the following: “The United States is Norway’s most important ally³⁴”. In addition, Thorbjorn Jagland – then Norwegian Foreign Minister – underscored “[his] government’s full and unequivocal support for the United States.³⁵” Jagland is currently the chairman of the Committee that awarded Obama the Nobel Peace Prize.

Organic intellectuals, passive revolution and the Condottiere

According to Gramsci, there comes a time in every social formation, when a prolonged crisis occurs which reveals the incurable structural contradictions of the system. At this point, the political forces make every effort to overcome the contradictions, but nevertheless struggle to conserve the existing structure (Gramsci 2005, 178). This constitutes “the crisis of the ruling class’s hegemony” (Gramsci 210).

³² Øyvind Tønnesson (29/06/2000) *Controversies and Criticisms*. Available online: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/articles/controversies/index.html

³³ Same source footnote 31.

³⁴ World Socialist Website (04/10/2001) *Scandinavian governments support Bush’s war against terrorism*. Available online: <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/oct2001/scan-o04.shtml>

³⁵ News of Norway (issue 3, 2001) *Norway fully behind the U.S. and NATO*. Available online: <http://www.norway.org/ARCHIVE/News/archive/2001/200103nato/>

When this moment is reached, “the theoretical truth that every class has a single party is demonstrated... by the fact that various groupings, each of which had up till then presented [themselves] as ‘independent’ [parties], come together to form a united bloc” (Gramsci 2005, 157). In order to reabsorb the control that is slipping from its grasp, the traditional ruling class “which has numerous trained cadres, changes men and programmes” with greater speed than is achieved by the subordinate classes, allowing the ruling class to retain power – at least for the time being (Gramsci 2005, 211). This is what Gramsci refers to as ‘passive revolution;’ an action that due to the unity of the ruling class and its determination, is able to absorb its opposition and create “ a period of expectation and hope, which reinforces the hegemonic system and the forces of military and civil coercion at the disposal of the traditional ruling classes” (Gramsci 2005, 120).

There are two key elements necessary in order for the ruling classes to achieve a successful ‘passive revolution’, one, is the presence of a group or an individual, that can successfully capture the imagination of the masses. The other is a cadre of intellectuals who support the endeavour. In regards to the first element, Gramsci draws from his interpretation of Machiavelli’s *Prince*. Addressing the second element, he develops his concept of the ‘organic intellectual’. Of Machiavelli, Gramsci writes: “[he] gave imaginative and artistic form to his conception by embodying the doctrinal, rational element in the person of a *condottiere*, who represents plastically and ‘anthropomorphically’ the symbol of the ‘collective will’” (Gramsci 2005, 125). This *condottiere* exemplifies “a political ideology expressed neither in the form of a cold utopia nor as learned theorising, but rather by creation of concrete phantasy which acts on a dispersed and shattered people to arouse and organise its collective will” (Gramsci

2005, 1126). Only under a situation of great and imminent danger can a concrete individual incarnate mythically the role of the *condottiere*. It is in fact this great danger, which “fans passion and fanaticism suddenly to a white heat, and annihilates the critical sense and the corrosive irony which are able to destroy the ‘charismatic’ character of the condottiere” (Gramsci 2005, 129).

In regards to the organic intellectual, Gramsci argues, that every social group existing within the world of economic production creates “organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give homogeneity and awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields” (Gramsci 2005, 5). These intellectuals, are the “dominant group’s ‘deputies’ exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony” (Gramsci 2005, 12) – operating a multitude of initiatives and activities which form the apparatus of hegemony of the elites. At the moment of extreme crisis – the beginning of the passive revolution – the mode of being of these intellectuals can no longer consist in eloquence, but must instead become active in practical life, “as constructor, organiser, ‘permanent persuader’ and not just a simple orator” (Gramsci 2005, 10).

Gramsci’s work is of use in order to understand Obama as a *condottiere* directing the passive revolution with the support of organic intellectuals – such as the Nobel committee members. Without a doubt, the person who best captures this reality is John Pilger. In a recent lecture on *the rise of Barack Obama and the silencing of the left*³⁶, he describes Obama as “the myth that is America’s last taboo”. According to Pilger,

³⁶ Pilger, J. (07/05/2009) *The rise of Barack Obama and the silencing of the left*. Socialism 2009 Building a New Left for a New Era. San Francisco. Available online: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXL998q7skI&feature=player_embedded

Obama's most consistent theme has never been change but power. Drawing from Edward Bernays³⁷ concept of 'invisible government,' Pilger argues that the power of form (branding and image making) has won over the power of substance and truth. Presented as a post-modern man with no political baggage, Obama is a marketing dream. "Like Calvin Klein or Benetton, he is a brand that promises something special - something exciting, almost risqué, as if he might be a radical, as if he might enact change. He makes people feel good". Pilger refers to an article in the San Francisco Chronicle, in which columnist Mark Morford writes: "Spiritually advanced people regard the new president as 'a Lightworker'... who can help usher in a new way of being on the planet"³⁸. Pilger responds to the article, by asking these "spiritually advanced people" to tell that to the Afghan children "whose family has been blown away by Obama's bombs", or to the Pakistani children whose families are "among the 700 civilians killed by Obama's drones", or to tell it to "a child in the carnage of Gaza caused by American smart weapons, which... were re-supplied to Israel for use in the slaughter only after the Obama team let it be known it would not object"³⁹.

The lecture proceeds by mentioning Obama's brief period in the senate, "in which he voted to continue the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, he voted for the Patriot Act... and supported the death penalty". Pilger finishes with Obama's Prague promise of a world free of nuclear weapons, by reminding his audience of the fact that the United States "is

³⁷ American pioneer in the field of public relations who used the ideas of his uncle Sigmund Freud, to manipulate public opinion using the subconscious.

³⁸ San Francisco Chronicle (06/06/2008) *Is Obama an enlightened being? Spiritual wise ones say: This sure ain't no ordinary politician. You buying it?* Available online: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/g/a/2008/06/06/notes060608.DTL#ixzz0WmsApjPz>

³⁹ For the information on Gaza, Pilger is quoting Seymour Hersh in The New Yorker (06/04/2009) *Syria Calling: The Obama Administration's chance to engage in a Middle East peace.* Available online: http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/04/06/090406fa_fact_hersh#ixzz0Wmw8jjVN

building new tactical nuclear weapons designed to blur the distinction between nuclear and conventional war”. American journalist Chris Hedges summarizes the presidency in alignment with Pilger, with the following phrase: “President Obama does one thing and Brand Obama gets you to believe another. This is the essence of successful advertising”⁴⁰.

Concluding remarks

On April 2007 while still a senator, Obama addressed the Chicago Council of Global Affairs. In his speech he emphasized that the United States must lead the world “by building a 21st century military to ensure the security of our people and advance the security of *all people*”⁴¹. A little over two years later, on the eve of his Nobel Peace Prize announcement, Obama “assembled his war council in the White House Basement to talk about Afghanistan”⁴². One month after, in his Fort Hood speech – following the shootings by Army Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan –, Obama said in regards to the fallen soldiers: “We press ahead in pursuit of the peace that guided their service”⁴³.

On July 29th 2008, columnist Richard Cohen of the Washington Post made the following statement regarding Obama: “[He] is a near-perfect political package. I'm still not sure, though, what's in it”⁴⁴. Perhaps in 2008, there was room for doubt about who Obama was, but following his silence regarding Gaza and the bombings in Pakistan soon

⁴⁰ Pacific Free Press (05/05/2009) *Chris Hedges: Buying Brand Obama*. Available online: <http://www.pacificfreepress.com/news/1/4109-brand-obama.html>

⁴¹ Cato Institute, *Christopher Preble: Barack Obama's American Exceptionalism*. Available online: http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=8380

⁴² WCCO (09/10/2009) *Obama Convenes War Council On Eve Of Peace Prize*. Available online: <http://wcco.com/national/president.obama.nobel.2.1239456.html>

⁴³ Chicago Sun Times (10/11/2009) *Remarks by the President at Memorial Service at Fort Hood*. Available online: http://blogs.suntimes.com/sweet/2009/11/obama_fort_hood_speech_transcr.html

⁴⁴ Washington Post (29/08/2009) *Obama the Unknown*. Available online: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/07/28/AR2008072802464.html>

after his inauguration, there was no longer any room for doubt. Obama is a war-mongering president who expands militarism but does it with a smile for the cameras. One can understand the common citizen in the West being fooled by 'brand' Obama, but it is unimaginable that the Nobel committee, which is constituted by highly informed Norwegian politicians, would base their decisions on media sound bites. It is clear that the Nobel committee awarded Obama the Peace Prize, because it aligns with the vision of multilateral Western imperial expansion made possible by United States hegemony in international politics.

By examining the Nobel Peace Prize through a constructivist lens and injecting into the analysis Gramsci's understanding of hegemony, this article has sought to expose the role played by the Nobel committee in International Relations, and the historical foundations underpinning such a role. Throughout the article, the historically-produced and culturally-bound knowledge which determines the committee's actions has been presented. Through this process, it has become apparent that the committee members play an active role as organic intellectuals directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong. By granting Obama the Nobel Peace Prize, the committee was carrying out its mandate of equating imperial war with the quest for global peace.

The amount of global commentary generated by the award serves as testimony to the important role played by the Nobel committee in international relations. Tully's description of the historical trajectory of western imperialism, together with his analysis of current informal imperial rule, helps to explain the importance of current American hegemony for European interests. Falk's analysis into the Obama presidency is useful in order to understand the present state of Western imperialism, and to equate the 2009

Nobel Peace Prize with blatant militarism and European support for multilateral imperial expansion. In addition, the history of Alfred Nobel and the structure and trajectory of the Peace Prize, clearly reveals Nobel as a contributor and profiteer of Western imperial expansion. His postmortem donation of the Nobel Peace Prize, is clearly exposed in the article as a contribution designed to support the social hegemonic structures of the ruling elites.

The use of Gramsci's analysis to theorize about Obama as a condottiere, and the Nobel committee as organic intellectuals and deputies of the dominant class offers a useful lens through which to understand the 2009 award. Pilger's explanations on how the power of form has won over the power of substance and truth is useful in bringing Gramsci's political thought into the contemporary world. His emphasis on the Afghan, Pakistani and Palestinian children being killed by 'Obama's bombs', serves as a sober reminder of the separation between Obama the President and Obama the brand.

It has become apparent throughout the article – as it is equally apparent from reading the day's headlines of any major newspaper in the world –, that United States hegemony is currently disintegrating. The United States – like 1930s Germany – has become the most indebted nation in the planet, and subsequently the European continent is experiencing a similar fate. Selected by the Norwegian parliament, the Nobel committee in alignment with the statement made by Norwegian Defence Minister Bjørn Tore Godal in 2001 - "The United States is Norway's most important ally" – has awarded Obama the Nobel Peace Prize, as a hegemonic move designed to rationalize the continual military expansion of the United States. The move is a reaction against the molecular disintegration of United States hegemony at the base.

The role of the condottiere according to Gramsci, is to exemplify a “concrete phantasy which acts on a dispersed and shattered people to arouse and organise its collective will” (Gramsci 2005, 125). During the official announcement of the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize, the Nobel committee stated that the reason for their choice was the fact that “only very rarely has a person to the same extent as Obama captured the world's attention and given its people hope for a better future”⁴⁵. This statement contrasted with the reality of Obama’s actions, clearly exposed the Nobel committee members as organic intellectuals and deputies of the ruling elites supporting the rise of the condottiere. As the passive revolution continues to unfold, the dominant group’s thought has become dogma and transcendental faith. As a consequence, today in the Western world, one can safely use the slogan “war is peace” (Orwell 1950, 16) without much critical opposition.

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⁴⁵ *Announcement of the Nobel Peace Prize by Thorbjørn Jagland, Chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee*, (09/10/2009). Available online:
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