

The Consent to Destroy: Imperial Melancholia and the Hegemony of Fragmentation

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Abstract

Across the world's most powerful states, millions actively embrace the destruction of the shared reality on which democratic life depends. Democracy does not simply collapse from without; it can be unmade from within through consent. This article introduces hegemonic fragmentation, an original concept revealing how declining empires manufacture consent for their own unraveling. Synthesizing Arendt's analysis of the common world with Hall's theory of hegemonic consent, I generate a novel framework to identify the culturally constructed consent for the dissolution of shared factuality, political space, and meaning, experienced not as loss but as freedom and belonging. Imperial melancholia, the refusal to mourn lost dominance, is the affective mechanism converting structural decline into the desire to destroy. Through conjunctural comparison of Trump's United States and Putin's Russia, I reveal authoritarian populism as a pathological sociological mechanism through which imperial decline is distorted into consent to destroy the common world.

Keywords

authoritarian populism, Hannah Arendt, Stuart Hall, imperial melancholia, hegemonic fragmentation

Introduction

In many of the world's most powerful states, millions of citizens now support political projects that erode the shared reality on which democratic life depends. A substantial body of scholarship has documented this phenomenon's empirical scale, tracing its roots in cultural backlash, status anxiety, and the erosion of institutional trust (Bartels 2023; Gidron and Hall 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Yet something in these accounts remains unexplained. Citizens do not simply tolerate misinformation or grudgingly accept political lies. They celebrate the demolition of common factuality, experience the fragmentation of shared truth as liberation, and treat the dissolution of the common world as a form of political empowerment. This situation cannot be reduced to a deception successfully imposed on unwitting subjects or to the manipulation of preexisting grievances by opportunistic elites (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Mounk 2018). Individuals are giving

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consent, actively constructed, for the destruction of the very conditions that make collective political life possible. Understanding how this consent is produced and why it takes particularly intense form in declining empires is the central sociological problem this article addresses.

This puzzle has been approached from two directions. Supply-side accounts examine how political elites construct and sustain authoritarian populist projects, focusing on democratic backsliding, party leaders, institutional incentives, and the performative repertoires through which figures such as Trump construct authority through transgression (Gaufman and Ganesh 2024; Skocpol 2025). Demand-side accounts examine the conditions under which citizens support such projects, including status threat, identity anxiety, economic insecurity, moral grievance, and affective polarization (Bliuc et al. 2015; Jardina 2019; Norris and Inglehart 2019). These perspectives illuminate crucial dimensions of the contemporary conjuncture. Yet less attention has been given to the cultural-political form through which authoritarian populism becomes desirable as a democratic option. This article addresses that gap. I argue that democratic order can be actively remade as a scene of loss, humiliation, and moral injury, where freedom is reimagined less as protection from domination than as permission to punish. I develop a cultural-hegemonic framework that connects elite projects and popular attachments by showing how their interaction produces consent for “worldlessness.”

Theoretical frameworks inherited from earlier periods seem inadequate to this challenge. Classical theories of totalitarianism, developed in the shadow of Nazism and Stalinism, emphasized terror, coercion, and the imposition of ideological conformity on atomized populations (Arendt 1951; Friedrich and Brzezinski 1956). Contemporary theories of authoritarianism have analyzed how hybrid regimes combine democratic procedures with illiberal governance, how populist leaders mobilize resentment against elites, to what extent societies remain hopeless under state or nonstate authoritarian forces, and how democratic institutions erode under sustained assault (Cayli 2012, 2018; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Comparative research shows that authoritarian populism draws on cultural anxieties and status loss as much as on economic grievance, and the construction of a bounded people always involves forms of racial or civilizational exclusion (Gidron and Hall 2017). Yet none of these perspectives fully grasp how authoritarian movements construct enthusiastic consent not for particular visions of social order but for the dissolution of shared reality itself. The puzzle is how populations come to desire the destruction of the common world and experience that destruction as freedom.

This article addresses that puzzle by synthesizing two theoretical approaches that have not been adequately brought into dialogue. From Arendt (1958), I draw the concept of the common world as the shared human artifact that makes politics possible and her analysis of how that world can be destroyed. From Hall (1988), I utilize the theory of hegemony as the cultural construction of consent, the process by which domination is secured through the production of common sense that makes particular arrangements appear natural and inevitable. Neither thinker fully theorized what we now confront. Arendt understood the destruction of the common world, but she saw consent as a precondition for totalitarianism rather than the ongoing mode of its operation. Hall examined hegemonic consent construction but theorized struggle over the content of shared meaning, not the destruction of shared meaning itself. Synthesizing these theories yields an original concept adequate to our moment, which I call the “hegemony of fragmentation.” The hegemony of fragmentation names the culturally constructed consent for the ongoing destruction of shared reality, factuality, and political space, where this destruction is experienced not as loss but as liberation.

My analysis focuses on two paradigmatic cases of what I term “imperial authoritarianism”: the United States under Donald Trump and Russia under Vladimir Putin. I chose these cases not because authoritarianism is confined to great powers but because the imperial dimension is central to understanding how the hegemony of fragmentation operates. Both states are declining empires, societies whose self-understanding is organized around a lost or threatened greatness

that demands restoration (Anderson 2013; Lieven 2004). In both, what Gilroy (2005) calls “imperial melancholia,” the pathological inability to mourn the loss of imperial dominance, provides the affective fuel for hegemonic fragmentation. The longing for a lost greatness that cannot be recovered drives both the destruction of the actually existing common world and its replacement with enclosed pseudo-worlds of resentment and grievance. These two imperial formations increasingly converge and mutually reinforce one another, raising the analytic stakes of their comparison to a global scale.

This article advances sociological theory through a synthetic generative move. I join two traditions at the point where each is insufficient and derive from that junction a concept, the hegemony of fragmentation, that neither tradition alone supports. The contribution is not additive but generative. The synthesis produces claims about consent, imperial decline, and the destruction of shared reality that Arendt’s (1958) framework cannot produce because she theorized consent as a precondition for totalitarianism, not its ongoing mode of operation, and that Hall’s (1988) framework cannot generate because he theorized hegemonic struggle over the content of shared meaning, so the destruction of its conditions was not a priority. The hegemony of fragmentation is therefore not the sum of these frameworks but their productive collision, a concept that occupies the theoretical space each leaves vacant and that once formulated, enables forms of comparative analysis that neither political science accounts of democratic backsliding nor cultural sociology accounts of status anxiety have achieved.

Arendt’s Common World And Its Destruction

At the center of Hannah Arendt’s (1958) political thought lies a distinctive concept of the world that differs markedly from the term’s everyday usage. The world is neither nature nor the physical environment that surrounds us. Rather, the world is the human artifice, the totality of things fabricated by human hands and the web of relationships woven through human action and speech (Arendt 1958). The world is what lies between us, relating us to one another by providing a common object of concern while simultaneously separating us by preserving our distinct perspectives. As Arendt (1958:52) writes, to live together in the world means that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it, relating and separating them.

This understanding of the world as a common in-between has several crucial implications for political life. First, the world is the condition of possibility for politics. Political action is not the strategic pursuit of predetermined interests but the capacity to appear among others, to disclose oneself through words and deeds, and to initiate something new in the presence of a plurality of perspectives (Arendt 1958; Canovan 1992; Villa 1996). Such action requires a shared space of appearance and a common stage on which actors can encounter one another. Without a common world, there can be no meaningful politics, only the administration of biological necessity or the clash of competing wills to power. Second, the common world depends on what Arendt (1978) calls “common sense,” understood not as good judgment but as the sense that fits us into a world shared with others (see also Beiner 1982). Common sense is the faculty that enables us to perceive the same world others perceive and to orient ourselves within shared coordinates of meaning. Common sense presupposes a baseline agreement, not on values or interpretations, but on what Arendt (1967) calls “factual truth,” the stubborn contingent facts that constitute our shared reality.

Third, the world possesses a durability that transcends individual human lives. Unlike biological life, which is consumed in its own metabolism, the world of human artifice can outlast its makers by providing continuity across generations and a context within which individual lives acquire meaning (Arendt 1958; Pitkin 1998). The world is what we inherit from those who came before and what we bequeath to those who will come after. It is the repository of our common

stories, the site of our shared institutions, and the medium through which past and future are connected. Finally, the world must be actively maintained. It is not a natural given but a constructed achievement that requires constant care, repair, and renewal. The world can decay through neglect, and it can be actively destroyed through violence or ideology. This vulnerability is central to Arendt's political thought for she witnessed in her own lifetime the catastrophic destruction of the common world by totalitarian regimes.

Arendt (1951) analyzed how the common world was destroyed under Nazi and Stalinist regimes. Totalitarianism, she argued, was not simply an extreme form of tyranny or dictatorship but a novel form of government that aimed at something unprecedented in political history: the transformation of human nature itself through the systematic destruction of human plurality and spontaneity. The concentration camp represented the most extreme manifestation of this project; it was a space of absolute worldlessness where all legal protections were suspended, all social bonds were dissolved, and all individual identity was erased. In the camps, everything was possible, not as a utopian promise but as a horrifying demonstration of what happens when the common world is annihilated.

Yet the destruction of the common world was not limited to the extreme space of the camp. Totalitarian regimes assaulted the common world at every level, replacing shared factuality with ideological pseudo-worlds that claimed to possess the key to history or nature. Ideology substituted the messy complexity of actual reality with a streamlined narrative in which everything made sense, in which there were no accidents, no contingencies, no facts that could not be explained by the iron laws of historical or natural necessity (Arendt 1951; Baehr 2010). Totalitarian ideology was not propaganda designed to deceive. It was a comprehensive worldview that offered total explanation, logical consistency, and emancipation from the burden of thinking for oneself. The assault on factual truth was central to this project. In her later reflections on lying in politics, Arendt (1967, 1972) argued that the modern political lie differs from traditional lying in its ambition. Traditional lies sought to conceal particular facts while leaving the fabric of factuality intact. Modern political lies aim at something more radical, seeking to destroy the very distinction between truth and falsehood, creating a condition in which facts become a matter of opinion and the common ground of shared reality dissolves.

Central to Arendt's analysis is her account of the preconditions that made populations vulnerable to totalitarian movements. Totalitarianists did not simply seize power and impose their will on unwilling subjects. These leaders mobilized masses who were prepared for the appeal of totalitarianism by specific conditions of modern life. Chief among these conditions was loneliness, which Arendt (1951) distinguished from both solitude and isolation. Solitude is the condition of being alone with oneself, the withdrawal from others that is necessary for thought and contemplation. Isolation is the political condition of being cut off from the public realm of action, the deprivation experienced under tyranny when citizens cannot act together (Rensmann 2023). Loneliness is more radical than either. As Arendt (1951:475) formulates it, loneliness is the experience of not belonging to the world at all, a radical and desperate position.

The lonely individual has lost not just the company of others but also the capacity to trust their own experience, to feel at home in a shared world of common meaning. The breakdown of class society, the dissolution of traditional communities, and the atomization produced by modern capitalism and bureaucracy created vast numbers of what Arendt (1951) called "superfluous people," individuals who had lost their place in the world and whose lives seemed to matter to no one, including themselves (see also Bauman 2004). These superfluous masses were not the poorest or most oppressed. They were often educated, middle-class people who had lost their social moorings. What distinguished them was their estrangement from the common world, their sense that ordinary reality was meaningless, and their consequent openness to movements that promised total explanation and absolute belonging. Arendt emphasized that these masses were not

simply deceived by totalitarian propaganda. They were obsessed by a desire to escape from reality and held every statement to be a lie anyhow, making them indifferent to deception (Arendt 1951:342, 382). The front generation of World War I veterans, who formed the core of early fascist movements, were completely absorbed by their desire to see the ruin of this whole world of fake security, fake culture, and fake life (Arendt 1951:328). This desire for destruction, this active embrace of the annihilation of the common world, is a crucial but often overlooked dimension of Arendt's analysis. It suggests that totalitarianism did not simply impose worldlessness on resistant populations but mobilized a desire for worldlessness that was already present, a longing to escape the burden of plurality, factuality, and common sense.

Gotzsche-Astrup's (2025) recent theorization of democratic truth-telling as a social practice offers a complementary perspective on the epistemic dimension of Arendt's analysis that sharpens the present framework's claims as he examines the practices through which democratic actors attempt to sustain those conditions against fragmentation. His concept of democratic alethurgies, forms of truth-disclosure oriented toward public accountability, illuminates what the hegemony of fragmentation targets and destroys. The hegemony of fragmentation dismantles the social practices and institutional conditions through which true beliefs can be distinguished from false ones, rendering democratic truth-telling difficult and structurally illegible within the enclosed pseudo-world.

Recent scholarship on Arendt has advanced this problem in especially useful ways. For example, Rensmann (2023) links populist crowds to the contemporary destruction of facts, tracing fascist resonance between Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism and current patterns of epistemic instability. Zerilli (2016, 2025) extends Arendt's theory of judgment to show what the destruction of common sense costs democratic life, especially in relation to truth and democracy. Tyner (2017), in turn, examines imagination in Arendtian politics by showing how pseudo-realities become collectively sustained. This article builds on that body of research by connecting the Arendtian relationship between worldlessness, judgment, and common sense to a more explicitly hegemonic account of how such worldlessness is constructed.

Yet for all the power of Arendt's analysis, there are limitations to its application with our present situation. Arendt theorized consent as a precondition for totalitarianism, a vulnerability produced by loneliness and atomization that made populations receptive to totalitarian movements. Once in power, however, totalitarian regimes ruled through terror. The concentration camp, the secret police, and the permanent purge were the instruments of totalitarian domination, not the ongoing construction of hegemonic consent. Moreover, Arendt's analysis predated developments that have transformed the conditions of worldlessness. Arendt could not have anticipated the rise of social media, algorithmic curation, and the platform capitalism that now enables the voluntary construction of enclosed epistemic environments on a mass scale (Sunstein 2017; Zuboff 2019). She could not have foreseen how the fragmentation of the common world might become not just the precondition for authoritarian rule but also its ongoing mode of operation, not something terror imposes but something consent constructs and actively maintains. To theorize this new configuration, we need to supplement Arendt's analysis with a theory of hegemonic consent-construction. For this, I turn to Stuart Hall.

Hall's Hegemony and Authoritarian Populism

Stuart Hall's appropriation and development of Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony provides essential resources for understanding how consent is culturally constructed. For Gramsci, writing from a fascist prison in the 1930s, the failure of revolutionary movements in Western Europe demanded explanation. Why had the working class not risen up against capitalism despite the evident contradictions of the system? The answer, Gramsci (1971) argued, lay in the realm of culture and ideology. The ruling class maintained its dominance through hegemony, not through

force alone, constructing a form of leadership that secured the active consent of subordinate classes by making the existing order appear natural, inevitable, and aligned with universal rather than particular interests (Anderson 1976; Femia 1981).

Hall developed this Gramscian framework in his analyses of British politics and culture from the 1970s onward. Hegemony, for Hall (1988), was not a static condition but an ongoing process of struggle over meaning. Hegemony was secured through the production of common sense, the taken-for-granted assumptions that structure everyday understanding and make particular arrangements seem simply the way things are (Hall 1988; Hall et al. 1978). Common sense, in this Gramscian usage, is not good judgment but sedimented ideology, the residue of past hegemonic victories that have become naturalized and their origins in struggle forgotten. Hegemonic projects work by articulating (i.e., linking together) disparate elements into apparently unified formations. Hall (1986) stressed there is no necessary correspondence between economic position and political identity. The elements that compose a political formation, such as class position, racial identity, gender, region, and religion, have no inherent unity. Their connection is a political achievement, the result of ideological work that constructs chains of equivalence linking diverse grievances and aspirations to a common project (Laclau 1977; Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

Hall's concept of authoritarian populism emerged from his analysis of Thatcherism in Britain, but its relevance extends well beyond that context. The puzzle Hall (1979, 1988) sought to explain was how a government pursuing policies that objectively harmed working-class interests could nonetheless win working-class support. The answer lay in Thatcher's ability to articulate a hegemonic project that connected diverse elements into a coherent formation. Anti-statism, nationalism, moral traditionalism, law-and-order politics, and racial anxiety were linked together with aspirations for individual advancement, home ownership, and freedom from bureaucratic interference. The resulting political formation presented authoritarian measures, such as expanded police powers, restrictions on trade unions, and attacks on local democracy, as popular demands from below.

Central to authoritarian populism was the construction of the people as a unified subject opposed to enemies above and below, against the elites who supposedly coddled criminals, parasites, and foreigners and against those criminal, parasitic, and foreign elements themselves (Hall 1988; Hall et al. 1978). The figure of the mugger in 1970s Britain, overwhelmingly racialized as Black, served as what Hall and his colleagues call a "condensation symbol," a point at which diverse anxieties about social change, economic decline, and cultural transformation could be focused and given a face. Moral panics about crime, immigration, and permissiveness provided the material for hegemonic construction, enabling Thatcher to present herself as defending ordinary people against threats the liberal establishment refused to acknowledge (Cohen 1972; Hall et al. 1978). Hall's analysis highlights the affective dimensions of hegemonic construction. Hegemony operates at the level of ideas and arguments, and it becomes effective through the mobilization of feeling and through the articulation of fears, resentments, and aspirations into political formations (Grossberg 1992). The success of authoritarian populism lay partly in its ability to give voice to experiences of loss, displacement, and disempowerment, even as it channeled those experiences toward ends that deepened rather than addressed their underlying causes.

Lizardo's (2017) work on personal culture in its declarative and nondeclarative modes offers a cognitive-cultural sociology grounding for Hall's account of common sense that the present framework requires. Hall's analysis of how hegemony works through taken-for-granted assumptions was primarily a sociological and historical account. Lizardo shows the psychological mechanism through which this operates. Hegemony reaches into the nondeclarative dimension of cultural schemas, the automatic, prereflective habits of attention and emotional response, that precede and condition deliberate political reasoning. The production of common sense is a cognitive achievement and installs fragmentation as a prereflective orientation toward the social world before it becomes a conscious political commitment. This matters for understanding the

hegemony of fragmentation because it explains why rational argumentation and fact-checking are so often ineffective against enclosed epistemic communities. By the time distrust of mainstream sources becomes a conscious political stance, hegemonic ideas have already consolidated as a nondeclarative cultural schema, resistant to deliberate revision.

Yet Hall's framework has limitations when applied to contemporary developments. Hall theorized hegemonic struggle as a contest over the content of shared meaning. Different political projects compete to define what the nation, the people, law and order, or common sense will mean. The terrain of this struggle is shared. Contending forces operate within a common field of meaning and seek to impose their particular definitions as universal. Yet Hall did not fully theorize what happens when hegemonic struggle targets shared meaning itself, when the project is not to win the battle over definitions but to destroy the common terrain upon which such battles are fought. The fragmentation of the common world into incommensurable epistemic territories, each with its own facts and truths, exceeds the framework of hegemonic struggle over meaning. It is struggle against meaning, a form of hegemony turned against itself. Furthermore, Hall's analysis does not fully address the imperial dimensions of authoritarian populism. Hall (1978) was acutely attentive to the racial formations of British politics and their connection to imperial history (see also Gilroy 1987), but the specific dynamics of declining imperial power as a driver of authoritarian hegemony require further elaboration. To develop a framework adequate to explore contemporary imperial authoritarianism, I propose a synthesis of Arendt and Hall that addresses the limitations of each.

The Hegemony of Fragmentation

Before specifying the framework, imperial authoritarianism requires definition. Imperial authoritarianism indicates authoritarian projects that emerge within imperial formations, whether ascendant, declining, or postimperial, and derive their content from the conditions and inheritances of empire. The term differs from authoritarian populism, which identifies the cultural-political form through which consent for authoritarian projects is constructed (Hall 1988), and from fascism, which points out a historically specific formation organized around national rebirth through purifying violence (Mann 2004; Paxton 2004). Imperial authoritarianism also differs from neo-imperialism, which concerns contemporary projects of expansion or reinsertion into international hierarchy. Imperial authoritarianism instead aims to build the domestic political configuration that appears when imperial projection reaches its limits, and it uses the methods developed for governing peripheries to manage metropolitan populations. In doing so, the perceived loss of imperial centrality becomes an organizing affect of political life. Imperial authoritarianism is therefore neither a synonym for aggressive foreign policy nor a nostalgia for empire but a distinct sociological object revolving around an authoritarian formation generated by imperial decline and hegemonically articulated against the common world.

The concept I propose, the hegemony of fragmentation, synthesizes Arendt's analysis of the common world and its destruction with Hall's theory of hegemonic consent-construction (Arendt 1958; Hall 1988). This framework identifies the culturally constructed consent for the ongoing destruction of shared reality, factuality, and political space, where this destruction is experienced not as loss but as liberation. From Arendt, I take the concept of the common world as the shared human artifice that makes politics possible, the understanding of factual truth as the ground of that common world, and the analysis of how worldlessness can become an object of desire for lonely, atomized populations seeking escape from the burden of reality. From Hall, I take the theory of hegemony as the cultural construction of consent through the production of common sense, the concept of articulation as the linking of disparate elements into political formations, and the attention to affect as a dimension of hegemonic work.

This synthesis addresses the limitations of each thinker to contextualize the current social and political changes. Arendt (1951) theorized consent as a precondition for totalitarianism, a vulnerability that totalitarian movements exploited but that totalitarian rule replaced with terror. The hegemony of fragmentation, by contrast, operates through the ongoing construction of consent. It does not exploit a preexisting desire for worldlessness but actively produces and reproduces that desire through cultural and ideological work. Worldlessness is not the precondition but the achievement. The hegemony of fragmentation invokes not the vulnerability but the goal, and it is achieved hegemonically rather than through terror alone. Hall (1988) theorized hegemonic struggle as a contest over the content of shared meaning within a common field. The hegemony of fragmentation targets that common field itself. It is not a struggle to define what truth, facts, or reality will mean but a struggle to destroy the conditions under which truth, facts, and reality can function as shared reference points. The hegemony of fragmentation constructs consent not for a particular interpretation of the common world but for the fragmentation of the common world into incommensurable epistemic territories.

What Makes Fragmentation Hegemonic

Before specifying the dimensions of hegemonic fragmentation, I must make three boundary conditions explicit as the framework's analytic purchase depends on them. To identify a project as hegemonic is not to claim it has incorporated an entire population but to identify a structured pattern of consent-construction operating alongside coercion and against resistance. In Hall's (1988; Hall et al. 1978) usage, hegemony is uneven, contested, and friable, never a completed accomplishment but a project whose work must be continuously redone. Fragmentation is no different. It requires coercive supplements where consent fails, substantial zones of nonincorporation persist in both cases, and counter-hegemonic resistance operates within the project, shaping what fragmentation can achieve. The framework therefore specifies a project of hegemonic fragmentation, not accomplished domination, and the case analyses attend to incorporation, coercion, and resistance as simultaneous dimensions of one conjuncture.

Fragmentation is experienced as freedom. The rejection of mainstream media, expert knowledge, and established institutions of factual verification is experienced as emancipation from elite control. "Fake news" and "don't trust the mainstream media" function as declarations of independence, assertions of autonomy against those who claim authority over truth. The enclosed epistemic community, whether organized around conspiracy theories or state-sponsored talking points, offers freedom from the cognitive burden of navigating a complex and contradictory information environment (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019). Fragmentation is also perceived as sovereignty. "We have our own truth" is an epistemic claim. More importantly, fragmentation also carries a political claim. The fragmented community asserts its right to determine reality for itself, free from external arbitration. This pseudo-sovereignty is deeply appealing to populations whose actual political agency has been hollowed out by neoliberal governance, technocratic management, and the overwhelming complexity of global systems over which they have no meaningful control (Brown 2015; Streeck 2016).

Fragmentation also functions as belonging. The enclosed epistemic community offers warmth, recognition, and solidarity that the cold abstractions of the common world seem to deny. Within the fragment, one is known, valued, and understood. The shared rejection of mainstream factuality bonds the community together more intensely than any positive content could (Hochschild 2016). Resentment of those outside the enclosure functions as the affective glue of fragmented belonging. Crucially, fragmentation is actively chosen. People curate their social media feeds, select their information sources, join online communities, and construct their epistemic environments through daily decisions. The infrastructure of fragmentation, including algorithmic recommendations, targeted advertising, and platform design, enables and encourages these choices, but

the choices remain choices (Pariser 2011; Sunstein 2017). This is what makes fragmentation hegemonic in Hall's (1988; Hall et al. 1978) sense rather than simply imposed. Consent is won through cultural and ideological work that makes fragmentation appear as common sense, as the reasonable response to a world of lies, manipulation, and elite betrayal.

Three Dimensions of the Hegemony of Fragmentation

The hegemony of fragmentation operates through three interlocking dimensions: (1) epistemic, (2) affective, and (3) political. The epistemic dimension involves the fragmentation of shared factuality, including the assault on institutions that produce and certify common facts, such as journalism, science, and expertise, and their replacement with alternative epistemic formations that provide complete, internally consistent pseudo-realities. Platform capitalism plays a crucial role in this context. Social media companies profit from engagement, and fragmentation drives engagement far more effectively than does consensus (Vaidhyathan 2018). Algorithmic recommendation systems optimize for division, steering users toward ever more extreme content and sealing them within echo chambers that confirm existing beliefs (Krotoszynski, Koltay, and Garden 2025; O'Neil 2016). This process leads to the dissolution of the common epistemic ground upon which misinformation can be identified and corrected.

Imperial melancholia transforms imperial loss into compensatory belonging. Gilroy (2004) conceptualizes postcolonial melancholia as a social pathology in which the loss of imperial greatness cannot be mourned so it produces defensive nationalism and racialized political fantasy. Boym's (2001) distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia clarifies the mechanism: Reflective nostalgia dwells on longing, whereas restorative nostalgia seeks to rebuild the lost home. Imperial melancholia resembles restorative nostalgia, but it is more politically combustible because it converts loss into grievance, grievance into entitlement, and entitlement into a mandate to recover a world imagined as stolen. This is why imperial melancholia cannot be reduced to ordinary nostalgia. Stoler's (2002) account of imperial debris shows that empire does not easily disappear; it remains active through ruins, institutions, habits, and political afterlives. In this sense, imperial melancholia is a political-affective formation that organizes the present around an unresolved imperial loss: It transforms memory into accusation and treats the existing world as an obstacle to restitution.

The political dimension involves the production of superfluous populations and pseudo-sovereignty. Fragmentation creates boundaries, distinguishing those inside from those outside. Those outside the fragment are rendered superfluous. Migrants, minorities, dissidents, and cosmopolitans are cast as not belonging to the enclosed people, and their very existence threatens its coherence. The production of superfluosity, which Arendt (1951) identified as central to totalitarianism, operates hegemonically in this context. Populations consent to designated others being rendered superfluous as the condition of their own enclosed belonging. The enclosed then experience a pseudo-sovereignty that compensates for their actual political dispossession. The strongman leader embodies this pseudo-sovereignty. His apparent freedom from constraint, his ability to violate norms, and his open contempt for the common world and its institutions are experienced vicariously by his followers as their own empowerment (McAdams 2020; Moffitt 2016). Followers experience his sovereignty as their own, his battles against the establishment as victories in which they themselves have prevailed.

The hegemony of fragmentation takes distinctive form in declining empires, and the imperial dimension explains both the intensity of the phenomenon and its most dangerous implications. Imperial nostalgia provides the content for hegemonic fragmentation: The lost greatness that must be restored, the enemies who stole it, and the traitors who enabled its theft provide the narrative material around which fragmented communities coalesce. Declining empires pursue fragmentation at two scales simultaneously. Domestically, they fragment their own societies into

Table 1. Three Dimensions of Hegemonic Fragmentation.

Dimension	Core Mechanism	Experiential Form	Imperial Genealogy
Epistemic	Assault on institutions of common fact production; replacement with internally consistent pseudo-realities; platform capitalism optimizes for division and seals populations within enclosed epistemic environments	Experienced as liberation from elite information control; rejection of mainstream factuality as a declaration of epistemic independence	Colonial disruption of indigenous knowledge systems; replacement with administrative epistemic monocultures that serve legibility over shared factuality
Affective	Mobilization of imperial melancholia; conversion of grief into grievance; enclosed communities of resentment provide warmth of shared rejection and compensatory belonging	Experienced as recognition, solidarity, and authentic community; shared contempt for outsiders functions as a more binding force than shared aspiration	Colonial nostalgia for imperial greatness; pathological attachment to lost dominance generates melancholic politics of restoration that cannot acknowledge its own impossibility
Political	Production of superfluous populations; pseudo-sovereignty through strongman identification; destruction of deliberative political space and common institutions	Experienced as popular empowerment; the leader's sovereignty is felt as the followers' own, his violations of norms as vicarious liberation from the constraints of the common world	Colonial designation of native populations as superfluous to the legitimate order; legal apparatus of exclusion renders violence against designated others as ungrievable

enclosed communities of resentment. Internationally, they assault the shared norms, institutions, and factual bases of international order (Kagan 2018). What Césaire (1955) called the “boomerang effect of colonialism,” the return of colonial violence and methods of domination to the metropole, here takes a new form. The fragmentation of colonized societies, their division into competing groups to facilitate imperial rule, returns as the fragmentation of the imperial heartland itself (Bhambra and Holmwood 2021).

Table 1 summarizes how these three dimensions interlock. The epistemic dimension destroys the shared factual world, the affective dimension provides emotional compensation for loss and dispossession, and the political dimension channels these dynamics into the production of enclosed peoples defined against superfluous others. Each dimension reinforces the others, creating a self-sustaining hegemonic formation in which populations actively consent to the destruction of the common world.

The Colonial Genealogy of Fragmentation

The hegemony of fragmentation is not a novel invention of contemporary authoritarianism. To treat it as such would be to repeat the epistemic error that postcolonial thinkers have long identified in Western social science, namely, the tendency to discover as new what the colonial archive has long documented. The fragmentation of colonized populations was among the most durable techniques of imperial governance. Divide and rule was a systematic method of epistemic, affective, and political control that remade colonized societies from within. Understanding

contemporary metropolitan fragmentation in light of this genealogy is not an exercise in analogy but a recognition of structural continuity.

Colonial administrations generated competing communal identities where none had previously existed or where they had hardened into political formations. In India, the census categories imposed by the British administration reified fluid religious and caste identities into bounded, antagonistic communities (Dirks 2001). In sub-Saharan Africa, ethnic classifications that served administrative convenience became the organizing principles of political life, generating the communal violence that colonial apologists later attributed to African primitivism (Mamdani 1996). In each case, the epistemic disruption came first. Colonial power dismantled existing systems of knowledge, replacing them with colonial classifications that served the administration's interest in a legible and divided population (Bhambra and Holmwood 2021; Go 2023). The affective consolidation of these new communities followed. Shared grievance, shared humiliation, and shared fantasies of lost wholeness bound colonized subjects into formations that recognized each other as threats rather than as fellow subjects of the same power. The political consequence was the production of populations rendered superfluous to one another, each claiming exclusive legitimacy and each defining the other as an obstacle to restoration.

Césaire (1955) showed how colonial violence and methods of domination returned to the metropole through the “boomerang effect.” Foucault (2003) developed this concept, showing how the techniques of biopower deployed against colonized populations returned to Europe in the form of fascism and racism, having been normalized through colonial practice and made available for deployment against European populations. The boomerang is not an occasional or accidental return but a structural feature of imperial governance. Empires export methods of domination. Those methods do not remain abroad. When imperial power contracts, the methods developed for governing the periphery become available for governing the metropole itself.

Magubane's (2004) comparative study of colonial constructions of Blackness in South Africa and Britain demonstrates how the conceptual apparatus of colonial race-thinking crossed the boundary of empire and shaped metropolitan social formations. The production of racialized superfluousness, the designation of populations as outside the bounded community of belonging, followed the same structural rational in Birmingham and in Johannesburg. Bhambra and Holmwood (2022) extended this analysis to show that the foundational categories of modern social theory, including the concepts of society, the state, and the citizen, were themselves shaped by the colonial encounter and carry within them the traces of colonial fragmentation. To theorize contemporary metropolitan fragmentation without its colonial genealogy is to misidentify what one is explaining.

The hegemony of fragmentation as observed in the United States and Russia is, in this light, not a departure from but a continuation of colonial methods that declining empires have long deployed against populations they no longer know how to govern. Domestic fragmentation during the rule of Trump reproduces the racial and civilizational hierarchies that organized U.S. imperial expansion abroad. The framing of migrants as invaders, of Muslims as civilizational threats, and of cosmopolitans as traitors to the bounded people replicates the colonial designation of native populations as superfluous to the legitimate order. Russian fragmentation reproduces the techniques that Tsarist and Soviet imperialism deployed against the peoples of Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Eastern Europe, now turned inward against dissidents, LGBTQ individuals, and Ukrainians who refuse to recognize themselves as part of the Russian world.

The imperial formation is not only the context of hegemonic fragmentation: It is its generative condition. Declining empires do not invent fragmentation. They inherit it from their own imperial practices and redirect it toward their own populations when the conditions that sustained external projection no longer obtain. The hegemony of fragmentation represents that activation. This genealogy also addresses a predictable objection. If the framework is restricted to the United States and Russia, both of which are predominantly white, Western, or Northern imperial formations, does it generalize? The colonial genealogy suggests it does, although differently. In

postcolonial states such as India, Turkey, and Brazil, the boomerang operates in a modified form. Colonial fragmentation was imposed from outside but has been internalized and reproduced by successor authoritarian formations, which now deploy against their own populations the methods colonial administrations once deployed against them. The framework requires only that the techniques of fragmentation have a colonial genealogy and that imperial formation, whether ascending or declining, constitutes the sociologically productive unit of analysis.

Platform Capitalism and the Material Basis of Epistemic Fragmentation

The epistemic dimension of hegemonic fragmentation requires a material basis, a set of communicative institutions and technical systems that produce and sustain enclosed epistemic environments at the scale of mass societies. Contemporary platform capitalism constitutes that material basis. The claim here goes beyond the observation that social media enables misinformation or that algorithmic curation creates filter bubbles. These observations are true but theoretically insufficient. What requires explanation is how platform design translates into political consent, how market incentives produce hegemonic effects, and how the voluntary construction of enclosed epistemic worlds comes to appear as common sense rather than as a form of self-imposed deprivation.

Platform companies profit from engagement. Engagement is maximized by the provision of shared factuality, outrage, confirmation, and the emotional intensification that comes from encountering content that reinforces existing beliefs and delegitimizes others' beliefs (Vaidhyanathan 2018; Zuboff 2019). Algorithmic recommendation systems do more than reflect user preferences. These systems actively produce preferences by steering users toward ever more extreme content, rewarding engagement with more of the same, and gradually sealing users within enclosed epistemic environments that provide all of one's informational needs. The consequence is not the result of any actor's deliberate intention to destroy the common world: It is the structural effect of incentive systems designed to maximize time on platform, which happens to mean maximizing the emotional intensity of content and therefore maximizing the fragmentation of shared factuality. Habermas (2022), in his reflections on the structural transformation of the digital public sphere, identified a shift in the conditions of political communication that is directly relevant here. What Habermas reads as a structural transformation, the present framework reads as a hegemonic achievement. The fragmented digital public sphere is not the unintended consequence of technical development. It is the material embodiment of hegemonic fragmentation, sustained by the profit logic of platform capitalism and experienced by those within each fragment as natural, rational, and freely chosen.

Lizardo's (2017) work on personal culture in its declarative and nondeclarative modes provides a cognitive-cultural account of how this process operates below the threshold of deliberate ideological commitment. Platform capitalism reaches into the nondeclarative dimension of cultural schemas, the automatic, prereflective habits of attention and emotional response, through the repeated micro-reinforcements of algorithmic curation. One does not choose to distrust mainstream media in the way one chooses a political position. The distrust is produced gradually, through the accumulation of encounters with content that positions mainstream sources as biased, corrupt, or complicit. By the time it becomes a conscious political stance, this distrust has already been consolidated as a nondeclarative cultural schema, resistant to deliberate revision and imperious to counterargument presented through the same channels that generated it.

The material basis of epistemic fragmentation differs between the U.S. and Russian cases in a way that is theoretically significant. In the United States, fragmentation emerged primarily from market dynamics, from the incentive structures of commercial platform capitalism, and was subsequently weaponized by political actors who recognized in it a new mode of mobilization. Fox News, Breitbart, and the broader right-wing media ecosystem did not create epistemic fragmentation from nothing. They colonized an epistemic environment that platform capitalism had

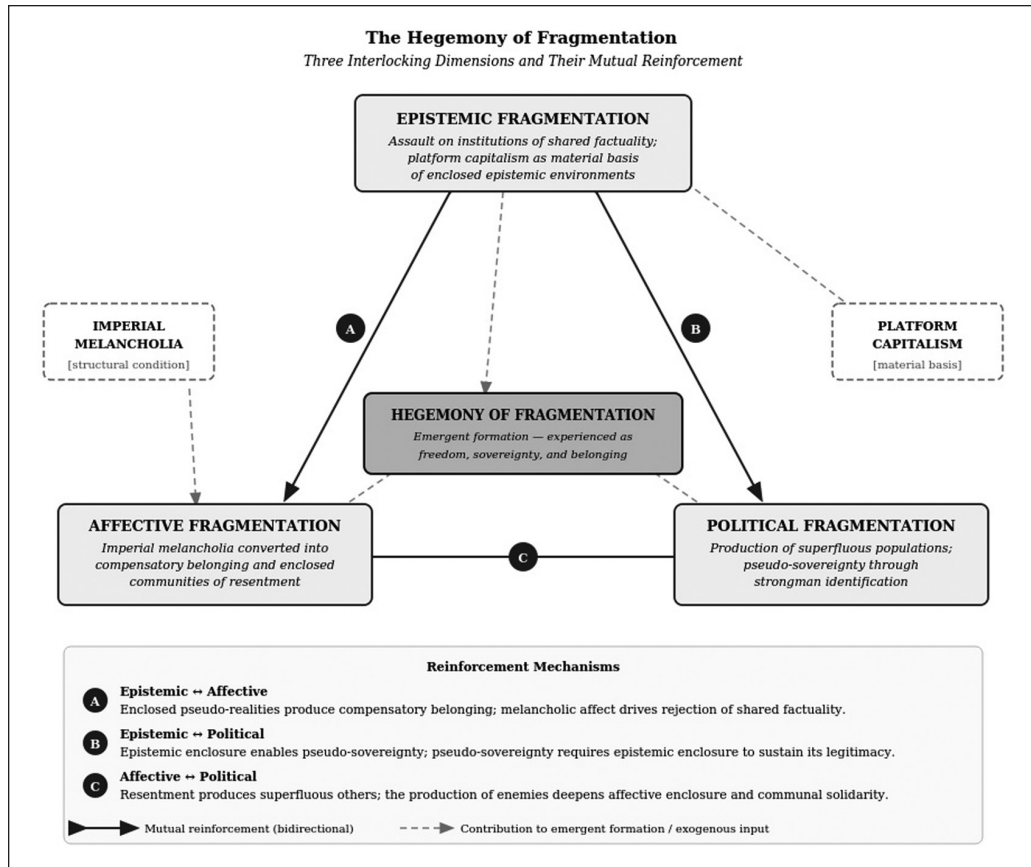


Figure 1. The hegemony of fragmentation.

already begun to fragment, providing it with political content and ideological direction (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018). In Russia, by contrast, epistemic fragmentation was deliberately constructed by state power from the outset, using the technical affordances of television and social media as instruments of a conscious strategy for the destruction of shared factuality (Pomerantsev 2014, 2023). The state did not wait for market fragmentation to occur. It produced fragmentation as a strategic goal, flooding the communicative environment with contradictory narratives so that shared factuality became not just unavailable but inconceivable.

This distinction matters for the theory because it suggests that hegemonic fragmentation can be produced through at least two distinct mechanisms: market-driven fragmentation that acquires hegemonic force through political articulation and state-driven fragmentation that mimics market platform logic while serving authoritarian ends. Fraser's (2022) account of cannibal capitalism captures a dimension of this that market-centered analyses miss. Platform capitalism enables fragmentation as a side effect of profit maximization, but it also cannibalizes the communicative conditions of democratic life, consuming the shared epistemic ground on which democratic deliberation depends and converting it into raw material for engagement metrics. The common world is not destroyed by platform capitalism as an incidental consequence but consumed by it as a structural necessity. Engagement requires conflict, conflict necessitates fragmentation, and with these instruments, fragmentation enables the destruction of the common ground on which meaningful disagreement could otherwise occur (see Figure 1 for a full demonstration of how the hegemony of fragmentation evolves).

The United States Under Trump

The hegemony of fragmentation emerged in the United States within a specific conjuncture defined by imperial decline, demographic transformation, and institutional delegitimation. The relative decline of U.S. hegemony, visible in failed wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; the rise of China as a peer competitor; and the 2008 financial crisis created conditions of imperial melancholia among populations whose self-understanding was bound up with U.S. dominance (Bacevich 2008). Demographic changes, particularly the approaching majority-minority status of the U.S. population, provoked existential anxiety among white Americans whose identity was organized around racial hierarchy (Jardina 2019). The financial crisis and its aftermath delegitimated the institutions of expertise, from economics to journalism, that had failed to predict the catastrophe or hold its perpetrators accountable (Tooze 2018). Into this conjuncture entered Donald Trump, not as the cause of fragmentation but as its articulator, the figure who connected disparate grievances into a hegemonic project.

It is important to highlight that the hegemony of fragmentation did not begin with Trump's escalator descent in 2015. The conjuncture that produced consent for the destruction of shared reality developed out of a long process, built over the better part of a century and now activated by conditions of imperial decline. McCarthyism in the 1950s established the template for an enclosed epistemic community organized around the conviction that mainstream institutions were captured by hidden enemies (Hofstadter 1965). The Goldwater movement of the 1960s, the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s, the militia and Patriot movements of the 1990s, the Christian Right and anti-abortion movements, the Tea Party of the post-2008 period, and the alt-right of the 2010s each contributed institutional and discursive resources to what would become the Trumpian formation (Belew 2018; Burke 2018; Kruse 2015; McGirr 2001; Neiwert 2017). The right-wing Evangelical infrastructure (Williams 2010), decades of conservative legal movement institution-building (Teles 2008), the conversion of cable news into an enclosed information ecosystem (Peck 2019), and the steady delegitimation of mainstream knowledge institutions, from the Powell memo onward (MacLean 2017), together composed the mechanism into which Trump's articulating performance could be inserted. Imperial melancholia did not arise from below in 2016: It was constructed across decades of right-wing cultural and institutional labor. Trump gave this imperial melancholia the political form that platform capitalism could amplify into governing power.

Contemporary scholarship on the far right helps situate the Trumpian formation within a broader analytic conversation. Müller (2016), Mudde (2019), Stanley (2018), Snyder (2017), Finchelstein (2017), Griffin (2018), and Renton (2019) have theorized the relationship between authoritarian populism, fascism, and democratic erosion in ways this framework engages selectively. Where these accounts illuminate the supply-side political projects and ideological lineages that produce contemporary authoritarianism, the hegemony of fragmentation specifies the cultural-political form in which those projects achieve consent. The framework is not a substitute for these analyses but a complement to them, identifying what makes contemporary authoritarianism distinctively hegemonic in its destruction of shared reality.

Hegemonic fragmentation under the first Trump administration was an ascending project, not a consolidated one. Its second iteration, beginning in January 2025, has operated under qualitatively different conditions. The institutional resistance of 2017 to 2021 was substantially reduced through years of judicial appointments, civil service capture, and the disciplining of Republican officeholders into proto-fascist alignment. Under the second Trump administration, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has conducted raids at a scale and with a public-spectacle character that the first did not approach (Deportation Data Project 2026). Federal pressure on universities, law firms, and individual political opponents, operationalized through executive orders targeting specific firms (Executive Orders 14237, 14246, 14250 of March 2025) and through Title VI funding reviews and accreditation pressure on universities (American

Association of University Professors 2025), has converted the soft coercive supplements that accompanied hegemonic fragmentation into harder forms of state-directed retaliation. The framework thus distinguishes two configurations: (1) an ascending hegemony of fragmentation, contested by surviving institutional resistance and operating largely through cultural and ideological work, and (2) a consolidating hegemony of fragmentation, in which coercion increasingly supplements consent construction as the project encounters the limits of what fragmented enclosure alone can achieve.

Epistemic Fragmentation

Trump's assault on shared factuality was systematic and sustained. "Fake news," initially a term for fabricated stories circulated on social media, was appropriated to designate any journalistic coverage unfavorable to Trump. The mainstream media became the enemy of the people, a phrase with totalitarian resonances that Arendt (1972) would have recognized immediately from her analysis of lying in politics. This is not rhetorical combat with political opponents alone. It is an assault on the institutions that produce and certify common facts. Trump and his allies constructed alternative epistemic formations that provided complete, internally consistent pseudo-realities. Fox News, talk radio, Breitbart, and social media networks formed an enclosed information ecosystem that could meet all the epistemic needs of those within it (Benkler et al. 2018). The big lie that the 2020 election was stolen represents the apotheosis of epistemic fragmentation. It was both a false claim about a particular event and an assertion that the shared factuality of democratic elections could no longer be trusted.

QAnon, the far-right conspiracy theory positing a secret war between Trump and a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles, represents epistemic fragmentation in its most extreme form (Rothschild 2021). QAnon is a collection of false beliefs and a comprehensive alternative reality, internally consistent within its own premises and capable of assimilating any evidence into its framework. However, its adherents do not experience themselves as deceived. They experience themselves as enlightened, as having penetrated the lies of the mainstream to access hidden truth. The events of January 6, 2021, can be understood in Arendtian terms as the violent defense of an enclosed pseudo-reality against the intrusion of common factuality. The certification of Biden's victory represented the common world asserting itself against fragmentation, the stubborn factual truth of the election outcome refusing to dissolve into pseudo-reality. The assault on the Capitol was an attempt to prevent that assertion by force, making January 6 both a political crisis and a theoretically exemplary moment in the sociology of worldlessness.

Affective Fragmentation

"Make America Great Again" (MAGA) distilled imperial melancholia into a slogan. The temporal structure of MAGA is backward-looking, oriented toward restoration rather than transformation (Gest 2016). But when was America great? The implied answers, whether the 1950s of stable manufacturing employment and secure white supremacy, the Reagan years of Cold War triumphalism, or the pre-NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) era of industrial dominance, are phantasmatic, purified of the contradictions and exclusions that marked the actual historical periods. The inability to specify the moment of greatness is not a weakness of the slogan but its strength. The phrase invokes a lost plenitude that never existed, a wholeness that was always already lost and thus can never be definitively shown to be unrecoverable.

Trump's rallies functioned as the spatial embodiment of fragmented belonging (Moffitt 2016; Sides et al., 2018). Within a rally, participants experienced intense identification, shared enemies, and the pleasures of transgression. Crowds chanted "Lock her up," demanding the

imprisonment of Hillary Clinton, and “Build the wall,” calling for a barrier along the U.S.–Mexico border (Cramer 2016). These chants performed the boundaries of the enclosed community, identifying those to be excluded and celebrating the collective power to exclude them, and in doing so, the truth lost its significance (Kakutani 2018).. The rally was a space of acclamation, the collective affirmation of a leader whose outrageousness confirmed his authenticity and his followers’ freedom from the constraints of the common world. Online communities extended these rallies into everyday life, providing continuous access to the enclosed space of belonging (Hochschild 2016). Social media feeds curated to exclude discordant information, comment sections where shared grievances could be rehearsed, and memes that circulated the affective content of MAGA all created what felt like a community, an us bound together by shared resentment of them.

Political Fragmentation

The production of superfluous populations was central to the Trump project. Migrants were paradigmatically rendered outside the enclosed people, described as animals, criminals, and an invasion (Bartels 2023; Cisneros 2008; Smith 2021). Family separation, children in cages, and deportation raids were transformed into spectacles of boundary-making that performed the power of the enclosed community to determine who belongs and who does not. The cruelty was constitutive. It demonstrated that those outside the enclosure had no claims, no rights, and no standing that the enclosed were bound to respect. The circle of superfluosity expanded to encompass Muslims, Black Americans, transgender people, journalists, scientists, and anyone designated an enemy of the people. Trump as sovereign embodied the pseudo-sovereignty of the fragmented. “I alone can fix it” was a claim about political agency in an age of fragmentation. Against the complexity of the common world, against the slow processes of democratic deliberation, and against the constraints of laws and norms, Trump offered the simplicity of personal will. His followers’ identification with him provided vicarious access to a sovereignty they otherwise lacked.

A final feature of the U.S. case requires explicit acknowledgment. Substantial portions of the U.S. population have not been incorporated into the hegemony of fragmentation and continue to resist its consolidation. Independent journalism, civil society organizations, mobilizing communities of color, immigrant rights movements, labor organizations, legal advocacy groups, and a sustained ecology of dissent operate as ongoing counter-hegemonic forces, with the April 2025 nationwide mobilizations and the June and October 2025 No Kings protests among the largest single-day demonstrations in U.S. history (Chenoweth et al. 2025). Hence, to analyze the project of hegemonic fragmentation is not to claim its success but to attempt to identify a structured pattern of consent construction whose ongoing contestation is part of what the framework theorizes.

Russia Under Putin

If U.S. fragmentation emerged from relative imperial decline, Russian fragmentation emerged from imperial collapse. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 cannot be reduced to a political transition because for many Russians, it was a civilizational catastrophe, what Putin called the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century (Gaidar 2007:x). This was not simply the loss of territory or geopolitical influence. It was the collapse of an entire world: The categories through which reality had been understood were suddenly delegitimated, and the social bonds and institutional structures that had organized collective life dissolved. The 1990s in Russia represented something close to Arendtian worldlessness on a mass scale, a condition of radical disorientation in which previous certainties dissolved and new ones failed to crystallize (Yurchak 2005). Putin emerged into this void, presenting himself as the restorer of order, dignity, and Russian greatness.

Epistemic Fragmentation

The Russian approach to epistemic fragmentation differs from the American approach in important respects. American fragmentation emerged largely from market dynamics and was only subsequently weaponized by political actors, whereas Russian fragmentation was deliberately constructed by state power from the outset (Pomerantsev 2014; Gel'man 2015). State control of television, the primary information source for most Russians, enabled the construction of an enclosed information environment far more comprehensive than anything achieved in the U.S. context (McGlynn 2023). Yet the Russian strategy did not simply impose a single lie and enforce conformity. As Pomerantsev (2014, 2023) has documented across two decades of observation, the Russian strategy floods the zone with multiple, often contradictory narratives that make it impossible to establish any shared factuality.

The war in Ukraine has intensified epistemic fragmentation within Russia to an extreme degree. The official designation “special military operation” rather than war, the claims of denazification and genocide against Russian speakers, and the denial of atrocities documented by international observers all aim to enclose Russians within a pseudo-reality radically disconnected from the factuality of what their state is doing (Kurowska and Reshetnikov 2018; Galeotti 2022). The criminalization of calling the war a war represents the legal enforcement of epistemic enclosure, the use of state power to maintain the boundaries of the pseudo-reality against intrusion by the common world. This intensification of fragmentation following the full-scale invasion of February 2022 offers a real-time test of the framework’s predictions. The hegemony of fragmentation is an ongoing project requiring continuous escalation as the gap between pseudo-reality and common factuality widens.

Affective Fragmentation

Russian imperial melancholia draws on multiple historical layers, from the Tsarist empire to the Soviet superpower, but its contemporary form centers on the experience of humiliation following the Soviet collapse (Etkind 2011; Gessen 2017). NATO expansion, color revolutions in former Soviet states, and Western criticism of Russian domestic politics are experienced as deliberate humiliation and disrespect for Russia’s rightful status as a great power. Krastev and Holmes (2019) show how the post-1989 sense of Eastern European and Russian inferiority, born of the enforced adoption of Western models, fueled this melancholic politics of resentment. The concept of *Russkiy mir*, or Russian world, articulates this melancholia into a civilizational project (Laruelle 2015). The proposition, with the collapse of the Soviets, is that Russia is not just another state but a distinct civilization, with its own values, its own truth, and its own way of being in the world (Robertson 2011). This civilizational enclosure extends wherever Russian speakers live, creating a basis for intervention in neighboring states under the guise of protecting Russians from cultural extinction. The Orthodox Church provides sacred legitimation for this enclosed Russian world, and the cult of the Great Patriotic War supplies its foundational narrative of sacrifice and redemption (Etkind 2013).

The Russian world articulated by Putinist hegemonic fragmentation is, by construction, an ethnically and culturally bounded community, and this boundedness has analytic consequences the proposed framework must acknowledge. Approximately one-fifth of Russian Federation citizens belong to ethnic minorities (Tatars, Bashkirs, Chechens, Sakha, Buryats, and many others), for whom the decline of the Russian imperium is not unambiguously a loss to be mourned but in many cases, an ambivalent or actively repudiated history of imperial subordination (Hirsch 2005). The disproportionate mobilization of these populations to fight in Ukraine, with fatality rates among Buryats and Tuvans several times higher than those of ethnic Russians (Bessudnov 2023;

Vyushkova and Sherkhonov 2023), has exposed the racialized hierarchy embedded in the Russian world, even as state narratives present a multinational unity. The hegemony of fragmentation in Russia operates against substantial internal differentiation as it incorporates ethnic Russian populations into a melancholic affect organized around the loss of imperial centrality while drawing on minority populations as instruments of imperial reconstruction without offering them the affective compensations the project promises to ethnic Russians.

Political Fragmentation

The production of superfluous populations has been central to the Putin project from the Chechen wars to the present. Chechens, LGBTQ individuals, political dissidents, and now Ukrainians have been rendered outside the enclosed Russian people, legitimate targets of violence whose elimination or subjugation is framed as defense of the Russian world (Smyth 2020). The war in Ukraine represents the most extreme expression of this logic, an attempt to eliminate an entire nation from the common world through violence, forced displacement, and the denial that Ukraine exists as a legitimate entity (Sasse 2023). The concept of sovereign democracy articulates the Russian rejection of the common world of international norms (Sakwa 2008). Russia aims to determine its own standards of legitimacy, its own definition of democracy, free from external arbitration. What the West calls authoritarianism is simply Russian democracy, different from Western democracy and not answerable to Western judgments.

Independent surveys conducted before and after the 2022 invasion show that opposition to the war is more widespread than overt expression suggests, and the apparent unanimity of the Russian world rests, in part, on the rational calculation by ordinary Russians that voicing dissent carries unacceptable costs (Volkov and Kolesnikov 2023). At the same time, it would be a mistake to reduce Russian fragmentation entirely to imposition. Survey data show substantial support for Putin and for the war, including affective investment in the Russian world that goes beyond the fear-driven conformity of totalitarianism (Frye 2021). The accurate account is therefore neither pure consent nor pure coercion but an unstable composite in which incorporation into hegemonic fragmentation, passive nonincorporation produced by repression, and active opposition coexist within the same population.

Reclaiming the Common

If hegemonic fragmentation is culturally constructed, it can be culturally contested. This claim is not simply optimistic. It follows from the theoretical logic of hegemony itself. What Gramsci (1971) established and Hall (1988) developed is that hegemony is never total, never permanent, and always reproduced through ongoing work that could, in principle, be otherwise directed. What has been articulated can be disarticulated and rearticulated (Hall 1986). The common sense that makes fragmentation appear as freedom can be challenged by counter-hegemonic projects that construct alternative forms of common sense, that make the shared world appear desirable rather than threatening, that offer belonging without requiring enemies. But theorizing counter-hegemony as possibility requires theorizing it as an asymmetric struggle. The material basis of fragmentation, including platform capitalism, state media monopolies, concentrated wealth, and the self-reinforcing dynamics of enclosed epistemic communities, furnishes those who pursue fragmentation with structural advantages that counter-hegemonic projects do not possess. This asymmetry is not a reason for resignation. It is a condition that any adequate theory of counter-hegemony must incorporate rather than paper over with rhetorical confidence.

Counter-hegemonic reclamation operates across the same three dimensions through which hegemonic fragmentation operates. Epistemic reclamation involves defending and rebuilding the institutions of common factuality, not because those institutions are without fault but because they remain committed to accountable truth-seeking in ways that enclosed pseudo-realities are not (Nichols 2017). This means more than fact-checking and debunking, which have proven insufficient against the affective power of fragmented belonging: It means addressing the structural conditions of distrust that make fragmentation appealing and that platform capitalism actively deepens. It requires demanding regulatory frameworks that reform the incentive structures of commercial platforms so that fragmentation is no longer the most profitable mode of communicative organization (Habermas 2022; Zuboff 2019). Gotzsche-Astrup's (2025) account of democratic truth-telling as a social practice, one that requires "democratic alethurgies," or forms of courageous and publicly accountable disclosure, points toward what epistemic reclamation might look like as a sustained social form rather than an occasional political gesture.

Affective reclamation involves the transformation of imperial melancholia into what Freud (1917) called mourning, the painful but ultimately liberating process of acknowledging loss, working through grief, and withdrawing attachment from what has been lost to reinvest in what remains and what might yet be built. For declining empires, this means confronting the actual history of empire rather than the phantasmatic greatness of nostalgic restoration. Butler's (2004, 2009) elaboration of grievability, the question of which lives are recognized as worth mourning and of the political work mourning can perform, offers a framework for thinking about affective reclamation that Arendt's and Hall's frameworks do not fully supply (Arendt 1951; Hall 1988). Counter-hegemonic politics must make its losses grievable, must name what fragmentation destroys and insist on the value of what it destroys, as an embraced political claim. The right-wing news consumption as a quasi-religious phenomenon illuminates the depth of the affective investment at stake (Mann and Winchester 2025). If fragmentation functions like religion, providing meaning, belonging, and transcendence, then affective reclamation cannot be only cognitive: It must offer forms of meaning and solidarity that are felt as compelling not simply argued as reasonable.

Political reclamation involves rebuilding the spaces of political appearance in which genuine action becomes possible. This means defending existing democratic institutions while acknowledging their limitations and working toward their transformation. It also means creating new spaces of collective action at scales where political agency remains meaningful, including local government, mutual aid networks, labor organizations, and grassroots coalitions (Sitrin and Azzellini 2014). Historical memory provides resources that political theory often neglects. The Solidarity movement in Poland, which built a cross-class counter-hegemonic coalition against the fragmentation produced by communist rule, offers an example of successful political reclamation whose lessons are instructive because the movement was both unexpected and ultimately effective (Ost 1990). The U.S. Civil Rights Movement transformed the theoretical and political understanding of collective action by generating new democratic imaginaries and organizational forms (Morris 1999).

None of these actions proceed without structural difficulty. The asymmetry between those who sustain fragmentation and those who seek reclamation is real and persistent. Authoritarian leaders command states, media organizations, surveillance systems, and concentrated economic power. Platform companies control the communicative conditions of democratic life and profit from their degradation. Counter-hegemonic movements typically possess none of these resources. The self-reinforcing dynamic of enclosure means that once populations are enclosed within pseudo-realities, attempts to break through the enclosure are experienced as attacks, confirming the need for further enclosure. Exhaustion is a structural condition of the struggle, not a personal failing of participants. Table 2 maps the strategies and conditions of counter-hegemonic reclama-

Table 2. Conditions of Counter-hegemonic Reclamation across Three Dimensions.

Dimension	Counter-hegemonic Practice	Historical Examples	Structural Obstacles
Epistemic reclamation	Rebuilding institutions of shared factuality; reforming platform incentive structures; cross-boundary media that reaches across epistemic lines; democratic truth-telling as sustained social practice	Postwar press reconstruction; truth and reconciliation commissions; public broadcasting as a shared epistemic institution	Platform economies structurally favor fragmentation; consolidated distrust resists rational counter-argument; state capture of media renders epistemic reclamation illegal.
Affective reclamation	Transforming melancholia into mourning; building forms of belonging that do not require enemies; confronting actual imperial history rather than nostalgic restoration; offering solidarity sentimentally at the collective level	National processes of working through the past; cross-class solidarity movements; postconflict reconciliation processes	Melancholia is psychically more comfortable than mourning; authoritarian leaders actively deepen melancholic affect; belonging through resentment is more immediately gratifying than belonging through solidarity.
Political reclamation	Rebuilding spaces of political appearance; defending democratic institutions while transforming them; coalition-building across fragmentation lines; local governance and mutual aid as democratic infrastructure	Multiclass counter-hegemonic coalitions; civil rights movements as construction of counter-public worlds; grassroots movements that preserve a horizon of the common beyond their defeat	Asymmetry of power between fragmentation infrastructure and counter-hegemonic movements; enclosed communities interpret outreach as attack; exhaustion is a structural condition of asymmetric struggle

tion across the three dimensions of fragmentation, making visible the pressure points each dimension offers and the structural obstacles each dimension presents.

Conclusions

Contemporary imperial authoritarianism pursues what I call the *hegemony of fragmentation*, the culturally constructed consent for the ongoing destruction of shared reality, factuality, and political space. This concept synthesizes Arendt's analysis of the common world and its destruction with Hall's theory of hegemonic consent construction (Arendt 1951, 1958; Hall 1988). The synthesis addresses the limitations of each. Arendt theorized consent as a precondition for totalitarianism rather than as its ongoing mode. Hall theorized hegemonic struggle over the content of shared meaning rather than struggle against the conditions of shared meaning itself. The hegemony of fragmentation names what neither fully theorized: the achieved desire for worldlessness, the consent for fragmentation experienced as liberation.

The sociological significance of the article operates at four levels. Theoretically, the hegemony of fragmentation advances comparative historical sociology in ways that neither political science accounts of democratic backsliding nor cultural sociology accounts of status anxiety have achieved. Where democratic backsliding approaches treat epistemic destruction as an instrument or by-product of authoritarian consolidation, this framework shows it to be the

primary site of hegemonic struggle, the terrain on which authoritarian populism is won or lost. Where status anxiety and cultural backlash approaches illuminate the social bases of authoritarian support, they leave unexplained why support takes the specific form of attachment to fragmentation rather than alternative ideological formations. The hegemony of fragmentation explains this by identifying imperial melancholia as the affective mechanism that converts structural loss into desire for worldlessness. The synthesis of Arendt (1958) and Hall (1988) thus yields a theoretical framework with original explanatory surplus over its components. As a contribution to postcolonial sociology, the analysis establishes that contemporary metropolitan fragmentation is not a novel phenomenon but the return of colonial techniques that declining empires developed for governing their peripheries and which they have now redirected toward their own populations. Magubane's (2004) comparative sociology of colonial race-thinking, Bhambra and Holmwood's (2022) account of colonialism and modern social theory, and Go's (2023) postcolonial sociologies provide the genealogical resources for this claim.

Methodologically, the article demonstrates the analytic power of conjunctural comparison across cases that are superficially dissimilar through hermeneutic theorizing (Anicker 2026). The United States and Russia differ profoundly in their institutional configurations, state–civil society relations, and modes of political mobilization. That the same structural logic of hegemonic fragmentation operates across both cases is not despite these differences but through them, which is what conjunctural analysis reveals and variable-centered approaches cannot. This is a methodological argument for the distinctiveness of comparative historical sociology as a mode of inquiry, identifying structural affinities that neither single-case depth nor large-N breadth can recover. Bhambra and Holmwood's (2022) connected sociologies offers a complementary methodological framework, insisting that cases be understood not as units bounded by their national containers but as sites within a shared global history of imperial and colonial relations. As a contribution to the discipline, the article establishes imperial formation as a productive theoretical unit of analysis, connecting the sociology of the state, the cultural sociology of hegemony, and the political sociology of authoritarianism within a single coherent framework.

The hegemony of fragmentation is a social achievement, which means it is neither natural nor permanent. Declining empires have always generated both the impulse toward worldlessness and the counter-movements that refused it. That this mechanism operates across cases as structurally distinct as the United States and Russia exposes authoritarian populism as something deeper than a peculiarity of national character. It is a pathological sociological response to imperial decline. In addition, its methods of destroying shared reality were not invented in the present but were rehearsed across centuries of colonial dismantling of the worlds that subject peoples had built, sustained, and been forced to surrender. Analyzing the United States under Trump and Russia under Putin as paradigmatic imperial formations, I have shown how both mobilize imperial melancholia to pursue hegemonic fragmentation at domestic and international scales. The epistemic, affective, and political dimensions of this fragmentation interlock and reinforce one another. Populations enclosed within pseudo-realities experience belonging and pseudo-sovereignty that compensate for their actual powerlessness, and those designated as outside are rendered superfluous. The convergence between U.S. and Russian fragmentation manifests structural affinities rooted in imperial decline and raises the stakes to the planetary level. The common world is not a luxury but a necessity. It is the condition of possibility for politics, truth, and addressing the planetary challenges that confront humanity in the twenty-first century. The hegemonic destruction of the common world is the distinctive danger of our time.

This article has several limitations that warrant acknowledgment. The focus on the United States and Russia, while analytically productive, leaves open the question of how the hegemony of fragmentation operates in other imperial and postimperial contexts. China, India, Turkey, and Brazil present distinct configurations that may confirm, complicate, or challenge the framework

developed here. I theorized counter-hegemonic possibilities, but the conditions under which reclamation succeeds or fails remain incompletely specified. Future research might pursue comparative analysis across a wider range of imperial formations to test the generalizability of the framework, study previous periods when common worlds were successfully rebuilt after periods of destruction to generate insights for the counter-hegemonic project, and examine the relationship between digital platform economies and the possibility of common factuality to connect the framework to the rapidly evolving empirical terrain.

Sociological theory can identify this pattern, trace its genealogy, and in doing so, convert what presents itself as fate into an object of critical knowledge. That conversion is not only academic. Named, the mechanism loses its appearance of inevitability. Shown to be constructed, it can be contested. Revealed as a choice that millions have been induced to make, it becomes a choice that can be otherwise made. The common world is not a philosophical abstraction. It is the only ground on which truth can be tested, power held accountable, and those rendered superfluous insist on their return. The common world is the only ground on which our planetary crises—the warming of the atmosphere, the exhaustion of the commons, the wars fragmentation has made thinkable again, the displacement of populations across borders that nationalist enclosure has made lethal—can be confronted. These are not problems that admit of imperial solutions or nationalist enclosures. They require exactly what the hegemony of fragmentation destroys, a shared world held in common on equal terms. Arendt understood that the world requires tending. Hall revealed that what has been hegemonically made can be hegemonically remade. Yet what remains is the harder work neither thinker could do for us, the collective, sustained, and unglamorous labor of building, for the first time and without imperialist guarantee, the conditions under which we might finally share a world.

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