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Introduction: The lessons of the 1980s

The 1980s clearly ended with a bang and not a whimper. 1989 saw the dramatic collapse of Marxism-Leninism, both as a form of governance and as an ideological system and pole of political attraction. For the great majority of persons, the suddenness of the collapse (or even the very fact of a collapse at all) came as a surprise. For very many, the surprise was happy, signalling the triumph of liberty over despotism. For others, it was dismaying, signalling the end of illusions and the tempering (if not the disappearance) of revolutionary optimism.

The analyses that have been immediately forthcoming to explain these events have tended to suffer from being too episodic or event-oriented (*événementiel*, to use Braudel's distinction among three kinds of historical time), and insufficiently structural or cyclical (*conjoncturel*). Even big events, and 1989 was indeed a big event, cannot be understood intelligently if one analyzes them primarily in their own immediate context. If we try this, we tend not only to misread the events but, more importantly, to derive false lessons from them. This is what I fear is happening now: we are passing through a period (let us hope it is short) of drawing hasty and quite distorted implications from the events of 1989.

False conclusions are being drawn in the (ex-)Communist world, where the magic of the market is supplanting the magic of planning, whereas the market will by and large be no more efficacious an instrument of economic welfare for these states than had been planning, since the primary economic difficulties

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of these states derived (and derive) not from their internal economic mechanisms but from their structural location in the capitalist world-economy.

False conclusions are being drawn in the Western world, where the collapse of Leninism is being interpreted as the triumph of Wilsonian liberalism whereas, in fact, 1989 represents the demise not of Leninism alone but of both ends of the great ideological antinomy of the twentieth century, the Wilsonian versus the Leninist eschatologies. What we have been witnessing in eastern Europe has been far less the discovery of the spirit of 1776 or that of 1789 than the aftershock of 1968.

False conclusions are being drawn in the Third World, where the collapse of Leninism is being interpreted by many as a decisive weakening of these countries in their struggle against the economic domination of the North whereas, in fact, Soviet rhetoric of the past forty-five years had been of only marginal utility in the struggle of the countries of the Third World, and the weakness of their current position derives primarily from the continuing functioning of the capitalist world-economy, secondarily from the inefficacy of their strategies of "national development," and only tertiarily from the present inability (and unwillingness) of the USSR to sustain them. To accuse Gorbachev of "revisionism" is as event-oriented and irrelevant as to see Lech Walesa as Tom Paine.

This book is a collection of essays written in the 1980s. The most recent (chapter 6) was written in September 1989. Thus all were written before the most dramatic of the events in Eastern Europe (the collapse of the regimes in the German Democratic Republic, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and Romania). Since the essays of Part I concern geopolitics, it may seem like a risky or dubious proposition to republish them. Yet, it is precisely because of the "end of the Communisms" that I have put together this collection – to argue that this is not a sudden unanticipated dramatic event but part of a larger process, the primary element of which is in fact, and not at all paradoxically, the end of the era of US hegemony in the world-system. Although many commentators have been hailing 1989 as the beginning of the Pax Americana, the thesis of this book is that, quite the contrary, it marks the end of the Pax Americana. The Cold War was the Pax Americana! The Cold War is over; thus the Pax Americana has now ended.

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There are three basic vectors which need to be analyzed in order for us to make sense of the events of 1989. The first is the cyclical pattern of hegemonies within the modern world-system. The second is the blossoming between 1789 and 1968 of the ideological veneer(s) of the capitalist world-economy. And the third is the deep uncertainties of evolution, or how transitions from one historical system to another really occur. The description of each vector is a very large subject, and all I can do in this introduction is draw a vast and broad canvas, in the hope that it will enable the reader to pull together the detail that is found in the succeeding essays in this book (as well as elsewhere in my writings).

One of the basic structures of the capitalist world-economy is the cyclical rise and decline of "hegemonies" within the world-system. I have previously analyzed how I believe this structure operates.[1] The story of the third of the hegemonies, that of the United States, may best be started in 1873, the beginning of the so-called "Great Depression" of the nineteenth century, the moment after which one could say the era of British hegemony was over. Of course, Great Britain was still quite powerful, indeed still the most powerful and most wealthy country in the world-system. But it was no longer hegemonic. Its economic edge had disappeared. As of then, it faced the increasingly successful competition of both Germany and the United States, who became rivals for the succession. Great Britain was finding even French economic competition a renewed problem.

The geopolitical consequences were quite profound and quite immediate. Europe (or extended Europe, to include within this term both Russia and the United States) moved from a situation in which British political will was preeminent to one in which there was a revived balance of power, a situation of acute great-power rivalry, and an uncertain reshuffling of alliances. For about a half-century, this rivalry was to display itself primarily in the "extra-European" world, the peripheral and semiperipheral zones of the world-economy: the "scramble" for colonies in Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Ocean; the dismantlement

[1] See my "The Three Instances of Hegemony in the History of the Capitalist World-Economy," chapter 4 of *The Politics of the World-Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 37–46.

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of the Ottoman and Chinese empires; the military interventions in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. And it would be an incident in Sarajevo, a part of the periphery that intruded onto the European continent itself, which triggered the start of the First World War as the culmination of this interstate rivalry.

It was not, however, 1914 that was the symbolic year, but 1917. 1917 marked the October Revolution in Russia, to be sure – the coming-to-power by insurrection of the Bolsheviks. 1917 also marked, however, the entry of the United States into the war, the acknowledgment that the fundamental issue was not at all the fate of remote Balkan peoples, but the competition between the US and Germany to control the world-system in the next era.

Germany, of course, lost the First World War. But just as France refused to acknowledge its world-systemic defeat by Great Britain in 1763 and insisted on one further round of battle (which we would have from 1792 to 1815),[2] so Germany refused to acknowledge its world-systemic defeat in 1918 and insisted on another round of battle (which we would have from 1939 to 1945).

If we compare the last round of the US–German struggle of the long twentieth century with the last round of the British–French struggle of the long eighteenth century, there was one striking geopolitical similarity and one striking geocultural difference. All three hegemonic battles in the history of the modern world-system have been between sea powers and land powers. All three have been won by the sea powers, but each needed the crucial help of land forces of a continental power. Great Britain needed Russia's aid in the last round in order to defeat France, and the US needed the same Russia's aid in the last round to defeat Germany.

But here appears the geocultural divergence. France had a revolution in 1789, and this fact was of enormous geopolitical assistance to France in the last round. When French troops crossed European frontiers (under the Convention, the Directory, and the Empire) they came, at least at first, as triumphant

[2] For an analysis of the Franco-British struggle of 1792 to 1815, and the role therein of the French Revolution, see my *The Modern World-System*, III: *The Second Era of Great Expansion of the Capitalist World-Economy, 1730–1840s*. San Diego: Academic Press, 1989, ch. II, 55–126.

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harbingers of a universalizing ideal. They incarnated the "revolution" against the *ancien régime*.

Germany did not have a similar universalizing revolution before its last round. It almost did. The world "expected" it. The Russian Bolsheviks counted on it. But that revolution did not happen. Perhaps the Spartakists tried too soon. Perhaps they should have waited until 1933. By 1933, however, the Spartakists were out of the game, and the only revolution Germany could have was one that was anti-universalist in spirit. When German troops subsequently crossed frontiers (with the exception of Austria), they were not hailed, even at the beginning, as revolutionary heroes but rather as agents of darkness. This geocultural difference – the fact that it was Russia and not Germany which, after 1917, incarnated a universalizing ideal – led to a very curious and ambivalent geopolitical situation.

1917 was a turning-point in one further way. It was the moment of entry onto the world scene of the two great ideologues of the twentieth century – Woodrow Wilson and Nikolai Lenin. Wilson propagated Americanism, or the offer to "make the world safe for democracy." Lenin propagated Communism, or the offer to put the working class in power everywhere as the universal class. At the time, and right up to 1989, these two projects were presented as alternative and antagonistic ideologies. Yet they had more in common than either camp has been wont to admit. They shared the heritage of the Enlightenment, and the belief that humanity could rationally and consciously construct the good society. They shared the belief that the state was a key instrument of this construction as the locus of rational, conscious, collective decision-making. They shared a secular vision of the future. And, for the peripheral peoples of the world, they shared the ideal of the "self-determination of nations," nations that were all to be "equal." Finally they were both eschatologies. They shared this view that history was moving inevitably and ever more rapidly in the direction of their universalizing ideals which, in the end, they said, would exclude no one.

Of course, we need not exaggerate. There were many differences between "Americanism" and "Communism," and the texts on both sides have explained these at length. Furthermore, in practice as well as theory there were differences too. But were

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their protagonists enemies? There was the rub, and the dilemma of the fact that it was Russia, and not Germany, which incarnated Leninism. For the geopolitical reality was that, in 1917 (and until 1945), the primary geopolitical antagonist of the United States remained Germany and, in 1917 (and until 1945), the United States would need the support of the Russian army to win its "Thirty Years' War." Hence, the US dilemma: how to conduct its Cold War with the USSR (begun in 1917, and not 1945, as André Fontaine reminds us[3]) while simultaneously fighting (or preparing to fight) a real war with Germany. And hence the complementary Soviet dilemma: how to pursue "revolutionary" Leninism, while defending itself against the more immediate danger of German military expansion. The USSR needed the US as much as the US needed the USSR for military reasons. Furthermore, the USSR retained the US as a technological model, if not as a model of economic organization. (Thus, Lenin's motto: "Communism equals Soviets plus electricity.")

It was the genius of Roosevelt and of Stalin to have found the formula, for good or ill, that would permit this collaboration of symbiotically linked presumed ideological enemies. The formula is what we have popularly called Yalta – not the particular formal agreements that were reached there, but the spirit that informed them, and from which, it should be underlined, Churchill did not dissent. Indeed Churchill's Fulton, Missouri speech in 1946 in which he coined the phrase, the "iron curtain," was not the denunciation of Yalta but its formal consecration.

In the grand construction of US hegemony after 1945, there were two military pillars. One was the erection of NATO which ensured that the US had the necessary military strength to pursue its political and economic objectives. The second was the arrangement with the USSR that ensured that this military force would never be needed in the one arena where war could not be won (even if it would not be lost) – nuclear war in Europe.

The enormous public attention that has been focused on the military components of this Cold War stalemate has masked the crucial politico-economic deal that underlay the European equilibrium of 1945–89. What the US offered the USSR and what the

[3] See André Fontaine, *Histoire de la guerre froide*, 2 vols. Paris: Fayard, 1969, 1971.

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USSR was happy to accept was the creation of a Soviet *chasse gardée* in Eastern Europe, within which the USSR could set the political, economic, and cultural rules, provided that the USSR remained within those boundaries.

The advantages to both sides of this deal were very great; otherwise, it would never have been kept. For the USSR there were three principal gains. First, it permitted the USSR to exploit this zone economically, taking massive "war reparations" from it. Secondly, it offered the USSR a military shield against a resurgent Germany (which need derived essentially from a misreading, but a psychologically comprehensible one, of post-1945 geopolitical realities). Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly in the long run, it permitted the USSR to hold back (even suppress) revolutionary socialist tendencies in Eastern Europe, in Western Europe, and in the rest of the world. This latter effort was more successful in Europe (east and west) than elsewhere. But it was seen as crucial to the Soviet system, as Stalin had constructed it, that the USSR retain the monopoly of Communist discourse, and that no "adventurous" revolutions in the Third World undo the carefully constructed equilibrium with the US.

This makes clear the interest of the US in the arrangement. The USSR was in effect the subimperial power of the US for eastern Europe, and a quite efficient one at that. The 1948 purges eliminated any independent, "leftist" elements which were still around. Nor did this exhaust US advantage. The Soviet bloc was "unneeded" for the immediate economic expansion of the world-economy. The US had all it could handle with the economic "reconstruction" of western Europe and Japan. Hence, it was quite happy to be relieved for the moment of disbursive obligations to the Soviet bloc, knowing that it would be no problem later to pull the zone back into the commodity chains of the world-economy.

The final plus for the US was the replica of the final advantage to the USSR. Each ideological discourse sustained the other, and neither was plausible without the other. The Cold War permitted each side, in the name of Americanism and Leninism, to keep tight order in their camps, to clean house as they saw fit, and to reorient the mentalities of the future generations.

The US–USSR arrangement worked to the extent that US

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hegemony in the world-system was relatively uncontested. But, of course, hegemonies breed their own undoing. The ways in which this took place is amply discussed in the essays that follow. The two main factors were the developing economic strength of Western Europe and Japan which turned them into economic competitors of the US and led to their increasing political independence; and the unwillingness of a number of Third World countries to accept the fate assigned to them by Yalta, which led to revolutions in China, Vietnam, Algeria, and elsewhere.

How these increasing difficulties led to the worldwide revolution of 1968 is also discussed in detail: the double role of 1968 as revolution against US hegemony and as rejection of the "Old Left"; its worldwide organizational suppression; its long-term success in undermining the ideological premises of the Old Left; and its continuing underground current of subversion of the world order.

The ways in which the US sought to slow down the consequences of its economic decline by utilizing the institutions of hegemony it had built – first via the low posture of the Nixon–Ford–Carter years, then via the machismo of the Reagan years – is also discussed, as are the reasons why neither tactic could do more than slow down the pace of decline.

Finally, when US power was sufficiently eroded, the USSR had no choice but to enter into the dangerous waters of Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost*, in the hopes that the USSR role as a great power (or at least Russia's role) could survive the wreckage of the Pax Americana.

Finally, in these essays, I argue the probable course of world geopolitical realignments in the coming world economic expansion of the first part of the twenty-first century.

In a sense, this whole discussion of the course of the US hegemonic era is dealing merely with a cyclical rhythm of the modern world-system. The events of 1989 need to be put as well into the context of the secular trends of the system and the structural limits of its linear curves.

The principal consequence for the capitalist world-economy of the French Revolution as a world-historical event was the cultural maturing of a value-system that would be most consonant with the

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endless accumulation of capital. The events of 1789–1815 transformed the prevailing political consciousnesses, imposing upon the general mentality the notion of the normality of change, and the expectability of continuous evolution of the political mechanisms of the system. It was in response to this new *Weltanschauung* that the nineteenth century saw the emergence of the three ideologies of the modern world-system – conservatism, liberalism, and socialism – and the concurrent institutionalization of the modes of translating these ideologies into empirical reality, that is, the historical social sciences.[4]

In the struggle of the three ideologies against each other, which in political practice often resulted in alliances of two of them against the third, the lines that distinguished their positions were very unsure. The three positions were far from fixed. They were tonalities rather than dogmas, largely preferences about the speed and extent of social change and the role therein of the state. No two social analysts expressed these ideological positions in precisely the same way. If there were three tonalities, there were myriad specific philosophical stances.[5]

An analysis of the evolution of the three ideological expressions reveals that after 1848 and until 1968, liberalism emerged as the clearly dominant ideology. It was dominant in a very simple sense: both conservatism and socialism increasingly defined themselves in liberal categories, such that there seemed no longer a place for pure liberalism at the very moment that liberalism could at no point be put aside. After 1848, one could argue, there were in practice only two ideologies: conservative liberalism versus socialist liberalism, with Marxism increasingly being absorbed by the liberal attractor, first in its Bernstein version, then in its Kautsky version, and finally in its Leninist version.

Liberalism had two strengths. It reflected the fundamental trend of the system – endless expansion, continuous adaptation of form but permanent reproduction of substance, along with the prospect of universal participation in the good society, however

[4] For a discussion of these nineteenth-century developments, see my "The French Revolution as a World-Historical Event," *Social Research*, LVI, 1, Spring 1989, 33–52.

[5] For a more developed explication of this argument, see my "Trois idéologies ou une seule? Le problématique de la modernité," in E. Balibar and I. Wallerstein, eds., *Les Trois idéologies* (forthcoming).

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unequal it still was. This strength is well known, but a second strength is less frequently acknowledged. Indeed it is often denied. Liberalism is the only ideology that permits the long-term reinforcement of the state structures, the strategic underpinning of a functioning capitalist world-economy. Conservatism and socialism appeal beyond the state to a "society" which finds its expression in other institutions. Liberalism, precisely because it is individualistic and contractual, finds the ultimate resolution of conflicts in state decisions, the state alone being presumed to have no "interests" of its own but to be the vector of the majority compromise and consensus.

The state as arbiter is the strongest possible role for the state. That is why liberalism is reformist, and why reformism is state-enhancing. Liberalism legitimates the state whereas conservatism and socialism undermine it philosophically. But since the state-system is essential to the functioning of the capitalist world-economy, neither conservatism nor socialism could prevail within the capitalist world-economy in their pure form. They had to take the form of a blend: either conservative liberalism or socialist liberalism.

The great change of 1917 was not in this ideological antinomy, but in the fact that what we now call the North–South issue moved to the center of the stage for the first time. And it is this issue that accounts for the twentieth-century transposition of the late nineteenth-century antinomy into the form of Americanism versus Leninism. It was the peripheral zones of the world-economy that were the objects of Wilsonian "self-determination" and the countries that were to be made "safe for democracy." The Russian Revolution in turn occurred in the state that was the most "backward" of industrial Europe but, simultaneously, in fact the most "advanced" of the non-core states. If in 1917 Lenin still used a European workerist discourse, by the time of the Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku in 1920, it was clear that Leninism had become the expression of socialist liberalism for the South – still called the East in 1920[6].

It is this intimate collusion of the Wilsonian and Leninist versions of universalizing liberalism that accounted for the ease

[6] The clearest theoretical appreciation of this was in the writings of M. Sultan-Galiev. See "The Social Revolution and the East," *Review*, VI, 1, Summer 1982, 3–11.

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