



## Theorising the Interregnum: The Semi-Core Challenge to Western Hegemony, Technical Workers and the Shaping of a 'New World Order'

**Stephen Wilkinson**

University of Buckingham

[stephen.wilkinson@buckingham.ac.uk](mailto:stephen.wilkinson@buckingham.ac.uk)

### Abstract

*This article examines the current geopolitical and economic interregnum through the lens of World-Systems theory, focusing on what Ege Demirel (2024) identifies as the emergence of a “semi-core,” represented most prominently by China and Russia. Drawing on recent philosophical work by Zygmunt Bauman, empirical evidence from China's 'Global Community of Shared Future' white paper and Putin's 2024 Valdai address, alongside theoretical insights from contemporary Chinese Marxism, it argues that the semi-core's challenge to Western hegemony creates unique conditions for systemic transformation.*

*Particular attention is given to the role of technical workers, whose strategic position at the intersection of competing infrastructural systems and alternative visions of global order makes them potentially crucial actors in determining the outcome of the current interregnum. By examining the philosophical foundations of Chinese Marxism—particularly its dialectical approach rooted in the yin-yang principle—the article reveals that the semi-core challenge represents not merely alternative policies but an alternative epistemology that fundamentally differs from Western either/or logic.*

*Drawing on research by Muldoon, Graham, and Cant (2024) on the hidden labor supporting AI systems and the geopolitical competition over digital infrastructure, the article demonstrates how technical workers' potential for progressive transformation lies not just in their strategic importance and specialized knowledge but in their ability to build solidarity across the broader ecosystem of AI labor while between otherwise incommensurable philosophical and infrastructural systems.*

**Keywords:** Interregnum, Semi-core, Technical Workers, Artificial Intelligence, World Systems Theory, Hegemony, Digital Infrastructure, China, Russia, Global South, Chinese Marxism, Dialectics



**Pitt** | Open  
Library  
Publishing

New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.

This journal is published by [Pitt Open Library Publishing](https://open.library.pitt.edu/).

Writing in 1994, an Argentine academic, Atilio Boron, presciently observed that the United States' days as world hegemon were already over (Boron 1994).<sup>1</sup> His article was ridiculed at the time but with hindsight his observation can be seen as marking the beginning of what Gramsci termed an "interregnum"—a period when "the old is dying and the new cannot be born" (Gramsci 1971:276). Three decades later, as the Ukraine misadventure, the destabilisation of the Middle East and the chaotic second term of Donald Trump attest, this interregnum continues to generate, in Gramsci's terms, "morbid symptoms," yet despite the seeming steps towards catastrophe, within it lie possibilities for progressive transformation powerfully illustrated by two recent interventions from the emerging Eurasian powers: China's 2023 white paper on 'A Global Community of Shared Future' (MFA PRC 2023) and Putin's November 2024 Valdai Address (Putin 2024). Both articulate a comprehensive alternative to Western hegemony.

This article draws on philosophical and sociological research about the current situation and argues that the emergence of what Demirel (2024) terms the "semi-core"—represented by Russia and China—creates unique conditions for systemic transformation, in which technical workers, operating at the intersection of competing infrastructural systems and alternative visions of global order, could play a crucial role in determining whether this interregnum leads to new, more repressive forms of capitalist hegemony, a more democratic, possibly socialist world system, or continuing crisis and anarchy.

The article analyzes primary documents from China (2023 white paper) and Russia (2024 Valdai address) alongside theoretical work by Demirel, Bauman, and recent scholarship on Chinese Marxism to examine how the semi-core articulates alternatives to Western hegemony. It particularly focuses on these documents' vision of international order and their relationship to technical workers' potential role in systemic transformation due to their importance in the development of automated production processes powered by AI. Crucially, it also examines how Chinese Marxism's philosophical distinctiveness—particularly its dialectical approach rooted in

---

<sup>1</sup> It might be objected that recent events, particularly the Trump administration's unpunished exercise of coercive power against Venezuela, Cuba, and Iran in 2026, suggest that US hegemony remains intact. I find this reading unconvincing. As Wallerstein (1979) and Arrighi (1994) both recognise, hegemony rests on consent as much as coercion; the resort to unilateral military force and economic punishment in the absence of allied support is precisely the mark of a hegemon in decline. I would argue the refusal of key allies to join the 2003 invasion of Iraq marked a turning point, and the pattern has since deepened. The United States can no longer sustain its NATO commitment to Ukraine, its violent reassertion of dominance in the Greater Caribbean has alienated rather than disciplined regional actors, and the BRICS states, including the targeted Iran, have continued to develop alternative financial and diplomatic architectures despite US pressure. A hegemon that must coerce where it once led, and that retreats into its own hemisphere while claiming global reach, is exhibiting the symptoms of decline that Boron, Wallerstein, and Arrighi all describe.

traditional Chinese thought—shapes the semi-core's alternative vision in ways that Western Marxist frameworks may struggle to comprehend.

### **The End of Western Hegemony and the Rise of the Semi-Core**

Within World-Systems Analysis, both Wallerstein (1979) and Arrighi (1994) identify the structural roots of US hegemonic decline in the 1970s. For Wallerstein, the post-war golden age of US dominance contains the seeds of its own erosion: as European and Japanese competitors recovered and the costs of hegemonic maintenance mounted, the material basis of US supremacy began to contract. Arrighi's analysis of hegemonic cycles traced a recurring pattern in which a shift from productive to speculative capital signals the "autumn" of hegemony — precisely the financialization that has characterized the US economy from the 1970s onwards. Boron's (1994) observation that US hegemony is already effectively over thus confirms what these theorists anticipated: that the apparent "unipolar moment" following Soviet collapse was a final flare rather than a genuine renewal. Like Wallerstein and Arrighi, Boron recognizes that hegemony demands more than military might — it requires ideological leadership, institutional capacity, and above all productive economic supremacy — and that on all three counts the US position has been eroding for decades.

The transition Boron identifies has since deepened through three interconnected developments. First, the massive export of US manufacturing capacity — particularly to China — has fundamentally hollowed out the productive base that underwrote post-war hegemony. Second, and paradoxically, the rise of US corporations to dominance in information technology and AI — through companies like Microsoft, Apple, Google, Meta and Amazon — creates an *appearance* of continued economic supremacy that masks this underlying erosion. Third, the outsourcing of labor-intensive AI data training to peripheral countries has embedded new forms of neocolonial extraction into the very infrastructure of the emerging digital economy. Together, these developments have not simply weakened US hegemony but transformed the structural conditions under which any future hegemonic order must be built.

This transformation of global production relations suggests something more fundamental than a simple shift in manufacturing and value adding capacity. Demirel's (2024) recent theorization helps explain why the current interregnum is uniquely transformative. Unlike traditional semi-peripheral states that act as "buffer zones" stabilizing the world system, Russia and China represent what Demirel terms the "semi-core"—states that combine core characteristics (military power, technological capacity, institutional autonomy) with an alternative vision of global order. The emergence of this "semi-core" is both a symptom and accelerant of the systemic crisis, creating what Demirel describes as an "anomaly" in the world system that could lead to

three possible outcomes: "a China centred (or China centred backed by Russia) capitalist world-system, a socialist world-system, or an anarchic world-system" (Demirel 2024:388).

This theoretical framework helps explain why the current situation represents more than just another hegemonic transition. In World Systems theory terms, it reflects a core-periphery strategy that has ultimately backfired. While the US and other core countries retain control over data centers, R&D, software development, and patents, they increasingly rely on peripheral countries for actual production and the extraction of value from labor through post-colonial and neocolonial relationships of exploitation. Data centers represent crucial infrastructure, as Muldoon, Graham, and Cant (2024) document, a single hyperscale facility can use as much power as 80,000 American households. This concentration of infrastructure creates what they term an "extraction machine" which intensifies value extraction while concentrating power in the hands of those who own and control the infrastructure.

China has now successfully broken out of this dependent relationship through a systematic strategy of technological learning, domestic innovation, and state-directed development. As Breslin (2011) argues, China's approach is best understood as a neo-Listian developmental state — following the same logic of strategic industrial protection, managed integration into the global economy, and state-directed investment in productive and mental capital that enabled Germany, the United States, and East Asian developmental states to challenge dominant powers before it. Far from being a novel deviation from the norm, China has consciously deployed tools that Western powers themselves used before they became champions of free trade. At the international level, the Belt and Road Initiative extends this strategy, building alternative infrastructure corridors across Asia, Africa and Europe that create trading networks outside US-controlled sea lanes and financial systems. As Muldoon et al. (2024) document, the result is a digital and physical infrastructure that now genuinely rivals the West's, transforming China from a dependent manufacturer of Western-designed products into an autonomous center of technological innovation and standard-setting.

This transformation is explicitly recognized by the semi-core leadership. In his 2024 Valdai address, Putin articulates this shift: "The former world arrangement is irreversibly passing away... It is a clash of the very principles that will underlay the relations of countries and peoples at the next historical stage" (Putin 2024). This is not merely rhetoric—it reflects what Demirel identifies as the semi-core's fundamental challenge to existing global institutions.

The 2008 financial crisis marked a crucial turning point. China recognized its dangerous dependence on US markets, while the US confronted its vulnerability due to massive debt holdings by China. This mutual recognition of systemic risk accelerated China's determination to develop alternative international institutions and markets, to carve a path independent of the 'West' and to

reshape the global order. On the other hand, the event marked the beginning of what has become a US posture of antagonism toward China.

China's response has gone beyond solely defensive measures. Through BRICS, China has systematically worked to create alternatives to dollar hegemony, developing new payment systems, currency swap arrangements, and trading mechanisms that bypass Western financial control. Two institutions are particularly significant in this regard. The New Development Bank (NDB), established by BRICS members in 2015, provides development financing outside the conditionalities of the World Bank, offering an institutional alternative to Western-dominated development finance (Chin 2023). The Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA), also established in 2015, provides a mutual financial safety net outside the International Monetary Fund, reducing member states' vulnerability to the kind of financial pressure the US has historically deployed to enforce compliance with its economic preferences (Chin 2023). Most strikingly, the mBridge project — a blockchain-based cross-border payment platform developed collaboratively by the central banks of China, Hong Kong, Thailand and the UAE — represents a direct institutional challenge to the SWIFT payment system through which the US has historically exercised financial coercive power, most dramatically illustrated by Russia's exclusion from SWIFT following its invasion of Ukraine (Baker 2024). Russia has further accelerated this process by promoting transactions in its own and trading partners' currencies, demonstrating that the Western financial system can be partially circumvented even under extreme pressure. The recent expansion of BRICS to include associations with other major Global South economies marks another decisive shift in the global financial architecture, indicating both the declining power of US financial warfare capabilities and growing confidence in these alternative arrangements.

The dynamic nature of these alignments was demonstrated in November 2024, when China reached out to the EU following Trump's re-election. The *South China Morning Post* reported that the Chinese foreign ministry's deputy head in charge of European affairs, Cao Lei, said Trump's victory may indicate "the turning point of [our] times" and that he urged Brussels and Beijing to improve ties: "No one wants to return to the law of the jungle, no one wants to go back to the era of confrontation and the Cold War, and no one wants to return to unilateral hegemony. This is the backdrop that China-EU relations are facing," he said" (Wu 2024). This diplomatic pivot illustrates how the semi-core is actively working to reshape global relationships during this interregnum period. The fact that the US under Trump seems to have rejected this overture by trying to exert military dominance in key strategic areas such as the Greater Caribbean and the Middle East appears in this context as an act of desperation by a dying empire.

### Alternative Visions of Global Order: The Philosophical Foundations

Along with the development of BRICS, China has proposed its vision of a "Shared Community of Mankind" (MFA PRC 2023). This blueprint represents more than diplomatic rhetoric—it articulates a comprehensive alternative to the US-led liberal international order rooted in fundamentally different philosophical foundations. Understanding the depth of this alternative requires examining how Chinese Marxism differs epistemologically from both Western and Soviet Marxism.

#### The Dialectical Distinction: "And" Versus "Or"

Recent scholarship on Chinese Marxism reveals that its distinctiveness lies not merely in adaptation to local conditions but in its integration with traditional Chinese dialectical thinking. To understand this distinctiveness, it is necessary first to appreciate how Western Marxism has approached the dialectic. Engels' codification of dialectical materialism in *Dialectics of Nature* established what he termed the three laws of dialectics — the unity and conflict of opposites, the transformation of quantity into quality, and the negation of the negation — a framework rooted in Hegelian either/or logic in which contradictions are ultimately resolved through the victory of one element over another. This tradition was deepened in Western Marxism by Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*, which grounded revolutionary consciousness in the Hegelian dialectic of subject and object moving toward resolution and totality. As Mahoney (2024) argues, this either/or framework — prefigured in the grammatical structures of Indo-European languages and codified philosophically in Aristotle's law of non-contradiction — fundamentally shapes how Western Marxism approaches contradiction and struggle, tending toward what Mahoney describes as "radical differentiation" and "zero-sum perspectives" in policy-making.

Chinese Marxism developed from fundamentally different premises. As Cheng and Yang (2025) demonstrate in their analysis of the Sinicization of Marxist theory, Mao's theoretical innovation was precisely to insist that "all existing things display the contradictory movement of the unity of opposites" — not as a temporary condition to be resolved through the victory of one side, but as the permanent and productive condition of reality itself. The yin-yang principle articulated by Laozi and embedded in the structure of Chinese characters from the Shang dynasty onwards represents a logic of complementary opposites that must be preserved in productive tension rather than resolved through the domination of one by the other. As Mahoney (2024) observes, when Mao was writing "On Contradiction" in 1937, he had just captured Chiang Kai-shek and instead of eliminating him, forced the Second United Front — this is **and-logic**, not **or-logic**, in direct political practice. Mao explicitly rejected Stalin's 1938 restatement of the three laws of dialectics, later declaring that only the unity of opposites constitutes the true dialectical law (Stalin 1938), with all others derivative. This was not merely theoretical abstraction: it explains

the peasant-worker alliance that defied orthodox Marxist theory, and later the simultaneous pursuit of cultural revolution domestically and opening to the United States internationally. Significantly, Mao reinforced this dialectical approach by returning to Laozi and Zhuangzi, integrating Daoist principles with Marxist method — what Xi Jinping later termed the "first integration" of Marxism with epistemological traditions native to China (Mahoney 2024). This integration was not opportunistic syncretism but reflected a recognition that the dialectical method could only function effectively in China if grounded in existing Chinese ways of understanding contradiction and change.

### **The "Shared Community" Vision As "And" Logic**

The vision of a "Shared Community of Mankind" represents this dialectical thinking applied to international relations. Where Western hegemony is premised on what the document critiques as "the idea that 'all strong countries will seek hegemony', the obsession with superior strength, and the zero-sum mentality" (MFA PRC 2023), China's alternative vision explicitly rejects these premises as expressions of the either/or logic. The white paper directly confronts "the law of the jungle and the winner-takes-all mindset," arguing instead for "inclusive development for the benefit of all" as the path forward—preserving rather than resolving the contradiction between different development paths and political systems.

This philosophical departure manifests in several key dimensions. First, while Western hegemony emphasizes military dominance and "absolute security" (an either/or formulation where one's security requires another's insecurity), the Chinese vision foregrounds interdependence, arguing that "all countries, adjacent or distant, large or small, developed or developing, are members of an emerging community of shared interests, responsibility, and destiny, whose wellbeing and security are interrelated" (MFA PRC 2023). This is not empty rhetoric but reflects the dialectical understanding that opposites must be preserved in productive tension rather than resolved through domination—security is not zero-sum but mutually constituted and interdependent.

Second, where Western approaches often prioritize market supremacy and unilateral advantage, the document critiques those who are "pushing for decoupling, severing and 'derisking' supply chains," instead emphasizing collective development and shared prosperity (MFA PRC 2023). This reflects the Chinese understanding that contradictions—including those between competing economic systems—can be managed through integration rather than resolution. The "socialist market economy" itself exemplifies this and logic, preserving the contradiction between plan and market rather than resolving it through dominance of one over the other.

Perhaps most significantly, the vision directly challenges the theoretical underpinning of Western hegemonic thought—that rising powers inevitably seek domination. The white paper

explicitly states that "there is no iron law that dictates that a rising power will inevitably seek hegemony," characterizing this assumption as "typical hegemonic thinking" grounded in past catastrophic conflicts and the either/or logic that structures Western thought (MFA PRC 2023). Instead, it presents an alternative model where development and national rejuvenation are pursued "through our own efforts, rather than invasion or expansion."

This rejection of hegemonic inevitability has deep roots in Chinese political tradition. Historical analysis reveals that Chinese statecraft developed recognition of natural limits—that overextension imperils the system itself. As Mahoney (2024) documents, the tribute state system, the decision to dismantle Admiral Zheng He's fleet despite naval supremacy in the 15th century, and the emphasis on creating buffer zones rather than direct conquest all reflect this understanding. The Chinese discovered through millennia of statecraft that "if it were to go beyond that limit, it would imperil the system itself," leading to recognition that "whoever controls the Tibetan plateau controls China" but also that expansion beyond natural limits creates unsustainable vulnerabilities (Mahoney 2024). While these historical precedents should not be romanticized or viewed as guaranteeing contemporary behavior, they do suggest a political culture that has historically viewed imperial expansion as systemically destabilizing rather than as evidence of strength.

These philosophical departures have concrete ontological expressions in the institutions China has helped construct. The voting structure of the New Development Bank is itself a direct institutional embodiment of *and* logic — unlike the IMF, where voting weight reflects economic size and thus entrenches core dominance, the NDB allocates equal shares among founding members regardless of the vast differences in their economic scale. This is not merely procedural but reflects a fundamentally different conception of international order: one in which the contradiction between large and small, developed and developing, is preserved in productive tension rather than resolved through the dominance of the larger. Similarly, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization demonstrates *and* logic at the level of geopolitical architecture — integrating states that are genuine rivals, most strikingly China and India, into a single cooperative framework without requiring them to resolve their contradictions or subordinate their interests to a hegemonic center. As Mahoney (2024) notes, this required China to actively demonstrate that it was not seeking hegemony, understanding that the institution could only function if the contradiction between its major members was preserved rather than eliminated. These institutional forms thus represent not merely alternative policies but an alternative ontology of international order — one structured through integration of difference rather than its resolution.

### **The Non-Portability of the Chinese System**

This philosophical framework also illuminates a crucial difference from both Western liberal democracy and Soviet communism. As Mahoney (2024) emphasizes, "the Chinese political system

is not portable" precisely because it depends on the integration of Marxist method with Chinese epistemological traditions. Xi Jinping's concept of the "two integrations" makes this explicit: Chinese Marxism works because it integrated first with China's specific material conditions and second with Chinese traditional ways of thinking (Mahoney 2024). Unlike Western universalism, which claims its political forms are applicable everywhere, or Soviet internationalism, which sought to export its model, Chinese Marxism explicitly recognizes that political systems must be culturally embedded rather than universally imposed.

This recognition represents a fundamental departure from Western hegemonic assumptions. As the white paper states, China has found "the solution to development without doing the things that the western countries did"—without imperialism, slavery, genocide, or the primitive accumulation financed by stealing people and resources (Mahoney 2024; MFA PRC 2023). This is not merely moral superiority but reflects the understanding that what works in one context cannot be mechanically transplanted to another—each society must find its own integration of universal principles (like Marxism) with local traditions and conditions.

### **Putin's "Polyphonic" Vision**

This philosophical rejection of hegemonic thinking is echoed in Putin's vision of a "polyphonic rather than polycentric" world order where "all voices are heard." At Valdai, he explicitly contrasts this with Western approaches: "Unlike our counterparts, Russia does not view Western civilisation as an adversary, nor does it pose the question of 'us or them'" (Putin 2024). This alignment between Chinese and Russian visions demonstrates what Demirel identifies as the semi-core's ability to articulate alternative principles for a new global order—principles rooted in **and-logic**, rather than **or-logic**.

### **Practical Manifestations**

The practical manifestation of this vision can be seen in China's approach to international development. Unlike the conditionalities of the Washington Consensus with its demands for privatization and deregulation (an either/or choice between market fundamentalism and exclusion), China's approach emphasizes infrastructure development, technological transfer, and state-led industrialization. The Belt and Road Initiative embodies this strategy, offering partner countries development assistance without political conditions while creating alternative economic corridors that bypass US-controlled sea lanes (Muldoon et al. 2024). This approach reflects the dialectical principle: rather than forcing conformity to a single model (the *either/or* approach), it seeks to preserve diversity while building interconnection (the *and* approach).

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization provides another example. Rather than forcing members to choose between China and Russia (*or-logic*), it integrates potential rivals—China,

Russia, and India—into a single framework that preserves their contradictions in productive tension. As Mahoney (2024) notes, this required China to "work hand-in-hand with Russia...to ensure that they weren't operating as a hegemon or an imperial power and then ultimately to further advance those efforts they had to bring India in as a major partner." The result is an institution that demonstrates "the actualization of avoiding imperialism and hegemony as a way of constructing greater security in Asia."

### **Theorizing the Interregnum**

This vision gains particular significance when understood through Demirel's (2024) concept of the "semi-core." As noted above, unlike traditional semi-peripheral states that help stabilize the existing order, the semi-core is actively working to create alternative institutions and norms that fundamentally challenge the existing hegemony. China and Russia's ability to create alternative financial institutions, trading networks, and development models means they can offer the Global South genuine alternatives to Western-dominated institutions in a way that previous challenger states could not. Their combination of material capabilities and alternative vision creates what Demirel argues is a *fundamental philosophical and practical departure from the Western-dominated international order* (Demirel 2024).

However, recognizing the philosophical distinctiveness of Chinese Marxism adds a crucial dimension to this analysis. The interregnum is not merely about competing power centers but about fundamentally different ways of conceptualizing order itself. Where Western hegemony has operated through *either/or-logic*—demanding that states choose between democracy or authoritarianism, market or planning, Western alignment or isolation—the semi-core's alternative operates through *and-logic*, that seeks to preserve productive tensions and multiple pathways. This represents not just different policies but different epistemologies—incommensurable ways of understanding how the world works and how change occurs.

The fundamental nature of this transformation requires us to understand it not just as a shift in power relations but as a period of systemic transition involving competing frameworks of thought. Here, the German philosopher Zygmunt Bauman's analysis of interregnum complements Demirel's insights. The current global transformation can be theoretically understood through these complementary frameworks. Where Bauman explains how "the extant legal frame of social order loses its grip and can hold no longer, whereas a new frame, made to the measure of newly emerged conditions responsible for making the old frame useless, is still at the designing stage" (Bauman 2012:50), Demirel (2024) helps us understand why this interregnum is uniquely transformative—it involves the emergence of a semi-core that combines material capabilities with an alternative epistemology rooted in different dialectical premises.

This theoretical synthesis, enriched by understanding of Chinese Marxism's philosophical foundations, helps us understand three crucial aspects of the current global transformation: the dissolution of traditional power structures, the crisis of institutional adequacy and uncertainty of transition.

### **The Dissolution of Traditional Power Structures**

Bauman's observation that "sovereignty is nowadays... unanchored and free-floating" (Bauman 2012:50) gains new significance when combined with Demirel's insight that the semi-core represents more than just another challenger to hegemony. As I have argued, unlike traditional semi-peripheral states that help reproduce core hegemony, Russia and China combine core characteristics (military power, technological capacity, institutional autonomy) with alternative visions of global order rooted in different philosophical foundations. Their emergence thus represents not just a power shift but a fundamental challenge to the epistemological assumptions underlying the world system itself.

As I have explained above, where Western policymaking tends toward "radical differentiation" and "zero-sum perspectives," Chinese policymaking operates through integration of opposites. This explains seemingly paradoxical policies like the "socialist market economy," "one country, two systems," and the simultaneous pursuit of opening to the West while maintaining party control.

### **The Crisis of Institutional Adequacy**

What Bauman identifies as the growing "institutional disparity" between global problems and local political tools is exacerbated by what Demirel describes as the semi-core's active creation of alternative institutions (Bauman 2012; Demirel 2024). Through mechanisms like BRICS, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the semi-core is not merely seeking inclusion in existing institutions but creating parallel structures that embody fundamentally different organizing principles.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization's integration of potential rivals (China, Russia, India) reflects the dialectical understanding that opposites can be preserved in productive tension rather than resolved through domination. As Mahoney (2024) notes, this required convincing "Russia and India that [China] is not seeking hegemony because firstly it understands that it can't exercise hegemony over Russia or India." This represents an attempt to create what Bauman calls the "positive globalization" of political representation, but in a form that breaks decisively with Western models and their underlying *either/or-logic* (Bauman 2012:53).

The contrast with Western institutional frameworks is stark. Where institutions like NATO, the IMF, and the World Bank have historically demanded conformity to Western norms and

subordination to US strategic interests (reflecting *or-logic*), institutions like the SCO and BRICS explicitly preserve diversity while building coordination (reflecting *and-logic*). Members are not required to adopt identical political systems or economic models but rather to coordinate on specific issues while maintaining their distinctive approaches.

### **The Uncertainty of Transition**

Bauman's insight that periods of interregnum are characterized by "chronic as well as unredeemable uncertainty" takes on new meaning when situated within the broader scholarly conversation on non-hegemonic periods (Bauman 2012:50). Babic (2020) argues that such periods must be understood as analytically distinct in their own right — not merely transitions between stable orders — characterized by deep structural roots, a corrosion of institutional legitimacy from within, and morbid symptoms that can neither be managed nor resolved into a viable alternative. Stahl (2019) adds that interregnum periods are defined not by the absence of ideological projects but by the presence of competing projects none of which can achieve sufficient consensus to become hegemonic — and that such periods of non-hegemony, far from being anomalies, can persist for decades. Combined with Demirel's analysis of possible outcomes and the recognition of philosophical incommensurability, this framework helps us understand why the current moment is qualitatively different from previous hegemonic transitions. The semi-core's emergence creates what Demirel identifies as three possible futures: a China-centered (or China-Russia centered) capitalist world system, a socialist world system, or an anarchic world system (Demirel 2024:388).

This uncertainty is qualitatively different from previous hegemonic transitions because it involves not just a change in leadership but potentially in the fundamental organizing principles of the world system itself. The question is not merely who will be hegemon but whether the next order will be structured through *either/or-logic* (requiring universal conformity to a single model) or through *and-logic* (preserving diversity while building interconnection). As Mahoney (2024, 2:10:21) argues, the Chinese political system is explicitly "not portable" — China has never fallen into what he terms "this idealist trap" of democratic universalism, the assumption that the Western model can simply be imposed on Afghanistan, Iraq, or elsewhere. China recognises that not only can its own system not rule others, but that others equally cannot simply copy the Chinese system.

This uncertainty extends to whether mutual comprehension between these incommensurable frameworks is even possible. Can societies structured through *either/or-logic* understand, let alone cooperate with, societies structured through *and-logic*? Or does philosophical incommensurability doom us to incomprehension and ultimately conflict? The answer to this question may determine which of Demirel's three outcomes emerges.

### Technical Workers At the Intersection

This synthesis suggests that technical workers' potential role in social transformation should be understood in a new light. Their strategic position at the intersection of global production networks and emerging alternative institutions means they could play a crucial role in determining which of Demirel's three possible outcomes emerges from the current interregnum. As Bauman helps us understand, this period of uncertainty creates openings for new forms of political agency, while Demirel's framework helps us see why technical workers' specialized knowledge, crucial importance to the new digital economy and their international connections make them potentially pivotal actors in either facilitating or resisting the emergence of new institutional frameworks and modes of global coordination (Bauman 2012; Demirel 2024).

Moreover, technical workers' exposure to different philosophical and organizational approaches—working within Western corporate structures while increasingly engaging with Chinese technological development—positions them uniquely to comprehend and potentially mediate between incommensurable worldviews. Unlike political leaders or ideologues committed to particular frameworks, technical workers engaged in concrete problem-solving may develop practical bridges between incompatible logics. They experience daily the differences between Western competitive winner-takes-all approaches and Chinese emphasis on parallel standards and long-term coordination. This experiential understanding, grounded in material practice rather than abstract theory, may prove crucial in navigating the philosophical incommensurability that characterizes the current interregnum.

The implications of this theoretical framework become clearer when we examine current developments in the global system. The rapid expansion of alternative financial institutions, for instance, reveals the semi-core's attempt to create entirely new frameworks of global coordination that embody what I have identified as a *fundamental philosophical departure* from Western models (Demirel 2024). These are not merely technical adjustments to existing systems but attempts to operationalize different organizing principles rooted in alternative dialectical frameworks.

A part of this contest is associated with the emergence of artificial intelligence and robotics. This emerging technological change creates new dynamics in this contest between emerging world systems. These technologies represent not merely technical advances but transformative forces reshaping class relations and production systems globally. As Marx anticipated in his "Fragment on Machines," the increasing automation of production through self-replicating systems will make traditional human labor increasingly obsolete while introducing new forms of proletarianized intellectual workers necessary in the production of AI (Marx 1973:692-710; Muldoon et al. 2024). However, unlike in Marx's time, this transformation is occurring in a world where both the development and deployment of these technologies is contested between rival centers of power operating from fundamentally different philosophical premises.

### **Technical Workers and Infrastructure in the New World Order**

The emergence of AI and automation has fundamentally reshaped class formation and labor relations globally. As Muldoon, Graham, and Cant (2024) demonstrate, rather than eliminating human labor, AI systems generate new forms of hidden work—from data annotators in the Global South to technicians maintaining vital infrastructure in the North. This creates what they term an "extraction machine" that reconfigures labor in ways that intensify value extraction while concentrating power in those who control these systems.

The implications for class formation are profound. We are witnessing not just the diminishing of traditional industrial labor but the emergence of two distinct groups: a technical engineering class essential to maintaining automated production systems, and a new intellectual proletariat employed in AI production. Their structural position varies significantly between core and periphery countries. In the capitalist West, technical workers occupy a contradictory position—privileged but alienated, essential to production but subordinated to corporate priorities. In peripheral countries, as Muldoon et al. (2024) document, they form a super-exploited proletariat with rising class consciousness.

This structural position gains particular significance in the context of semi-core competition and the philosophical incommensurability between Western and Chinese approaches. Technical workers operate at the intersection of competing infrastructural systems and incompatible organizing principles, from maintaining data centers in Iceland to developing AI systems in China. Their expertise enables them to either facilitate or resist the creation of alternative systems, while their experience often spans both Western and semi-core institutions. This places them in a potentially pivotal position to influence which institutional frameworks become dominant and, crucially, to understand and potentially mediate between fundamentally different ways of conceptualizing technological development and its social purposes.

### **Experiencing Different Dialectical Logics**

The dialectical difference has practical implications for how technical work is organized and understood, which technical workers experience directly. In Western contexts, technical development often proceeds through competitive winner-takes-all dynamics reflecting the *either/or-logic*—platforms must dominate or perish, standards must achieve universal adoption or fail, firms must maximize shareholder value or face replacement. The tech industry mantra of "move fast and break things" epitomizes this approach: rapid iteration toward a single optimal solution, with alternatives eliminated through market competition.

In Chinese contexts, while competition certainly exists, there is greater acceptance of parallel standards, hybrid systems, and long-term state coordination of ostensibly competing firms—reflecting the *and-logic* of preserving productive tensions. As Mahoney (2024) argues, Chinese policymaking operates through the combination of contradictions rather than their annihilation — it is through holding contradictions in productive tension that the dialectic operates, not through the victory of one contradiction over another. This manifests practically in Chinese tech ecosystems where multiple payment systems coexist (Alipay, WeChat Pay, UnionPay), multiple social media platforms serve different functions without one dominating, and state coordination enables competing firms to cooperate on infrastructure development.

Technical workers moving between these contexts gain experiential understanding of how different philosophical frameworks shape technological development itself. A software engineer who has worked in Silicon Valley's "move fast and break things" culture and then in a Chinese tech firm coordinating with state development plans experiences not just different management styles but fundamentally different logics of innovation and competition. This experiential knowledge—grounded in daily problem-solving rather than abstract theory—may enable forms of mediation between incommensurable frameworks that purely political or philosophical dialogue cannot achieve.

### **Strategic Position in Competing Systems**

Moreover, technical workers' strategic position extends beyond their individual mobility. As Muldoon et al. (2024) document, they are essential to the functioning of the global AI "extraction machine"—from the hyperscale data centers consuming enormous energy to the distributed networks of data annotation labor in the Global South. This infrastructure is increasingly contested terrain. China has built parallel infrastructure to rival Western systems, creating what Muldoon et al. describe as a return "to a much more antagonistic relationship between the United States and China where—much like in the Cold War—technology is seen as a marker of civilisational achievement, a method of developing advanced weaponry and a means to gain economic competitive advantage" (Muldoon et al. 2024:178).

Technical workers' collective power derives from this strategic position. The system cannot function without them, yet they increasingly work across the geopolitical divide, maintaining infrastructure for both Western and Chinese systems, developing algorithms that serve competing centers of power, and training AI systems using data from multiple contexts. This positions them to potentially facilitate cooperation, enforce incompatibility, or develop hybrid approaches that bridge philosophical differences through practical necessity.

### **Forms of Resistance and Organization**

Recent events demonstrate how this structural position can translate into effective resistance. The Google Maven case provides a crucial example. When 5,000 workers signed an open letter demanding Google withdraw from this military AI project, they demonstrated both their collective power and ability to connect technical expertise with broader ethical concerns. As one campaign leader noted, the action went beyond a single contract to raise fundamental questions about technology's social purpose (Muldoon et al. 2024:156). The campaign's success in forcing Google to abandon the contract showed how organized technical workers could effectively challenge the military-industrial complex.

A more recent and in some respects more consequential example emerged in February 2026, when Anthropic refused Pentagon demands to allow its AI model Claude to be used for fully autonomous weapons systems and domestic mass surveillance. When the Trump administration responded by banning all federal agencies from using Anthropic's products — designating the company a "supply chain risk" ordinarily reserved for foreign adversaries — the company held its position. CEO Dario Amodei stated that "we cannot in good conscience accede to their request," explicitly rejecting the binary choice the Pentagon demanded (NPR 2026; CNN 2026). Significantly, technical workers within Anthropic publicly aligned themselves with this stance, with alignment researcher Trenton Bricken writing that the episode demonstrated why "Anthropic's founding was a crucial fork in the timeline" (CNN 2026). Unlike the Maven case, where worker pressure forced corporate withdrawal, here corporate leadership held an ethical line with worker support — suggesting an evolving relationship between technical workers and institutional leadership around questions of military AI deployment. The competitive pressures are equally revealing: OpenAI and Google, facing the same choice, removed all restrictions on military use, demonstrating precisely the winner-takes-all logic of capitalism that makes sustained ethical resistance structurally difficult and requires broader class consciousness.

However, the forms of resistance and organization differ significantly between Western and Chinese contexts, reflecting not merely different political conditions but different philosophical frameworks. While Western technical workers engage in direct confrontation with corporate and state power—often framed through individual rights and ethical objections rooted in liberal principles—Chinese technical workers have developed distinctive forms of political consciousness.

### **Ruguanism and Dialectical Engagement**

As Yao (2024) documents, Chinese technical workers have created their own theoretical framework known as "Ruguanism" (入关学 or "Entry Theory") in online communities. This framework, finding strongest support among technical workers and STEM professionals on

platforms like Zhihu (知乎), reflects a uniquely Chinese understanding of power transitions that differs from Western theories of hegemonic change. Where Western frameworks often conceive of resistance as refusal or exit—opting out of complicity, withdrawing labor, or building alternative systems outside existing power structures—Chinese frameworks emphasize dialectical engagement: entering into contradictions to transform them from within.

This difference reflects the underlying dialectical distinction. Western resistance operating through *either/or-logic* tends toward binary choices: either comply with or refuse unjust demands, either work within the system or reject it entirely, either accept corporate priorities or organize against them. Chinese resistance operating through *and-logic* seeks to preserve the contradiction while shifting its terms: remain within the system while pushing its development in different directions, accept certain priorities while advocating for others, engage with state projects while contesting their specific implementations.

This is not merely tactical difference but reflects fundamentally different understandings of how change occurs. As Mahoney (2024) emphasizes, in Chinese dialectical thinking "the struggle is always an and...it's always an and," whereas in Western/Soviet thinking "Lenin's concept of the unity of opposites is always an *either/or* formation...there's always going to be an antagonism and...it's always going to be sort of a zero sum game." Chinese technical workers' political consciousness reflects this understanding—they see themselves as participating in and shaping a state-directed project of national development rather than opposing it wholesale.

### **Different Organizational Forms**

This variation in forms of resistance reflects broader systemic differences. In Western capitalism, workers remain in an alienated and antagonistic position vis-à-vis their employers and the state, with resistance typically taking oppositional forms: strikes, walkouts, petitions demanding corporate withdrawal from projects, or public denunciations. The Google Maven campaign exemplifies this approach—confrontational, public, framed through ethical refusal, and ultimately threatening corporate reputation and employee retention (Muldoon et al. 2024).

In China, technical workers are more integrated into a state-directed project of national development and technological advancement, with political consciousness oriented toward participating in and shaping that project rather than opposing it (Mahoney 2024; Muldoon et al. 2024). The case of Huawei is instructive here. As Feng and Li (2020) document in their analysis of Huawei's employee ownership structure, the company is owned collectively by approximately 90,000 employees — nearly half its total workforce and a majority of its key technologists — through an Employee Stock Ownership Plan that entitles shareholders to dividends and gives them a collective stake in the company's direction. This makes Huawei one of the largest worker-owned enterprises in the world, a fact that sits in productive tension with its simultaneous role as a state-

directed national champion. As Pearson, Rithmire and Tsai (2022) demonstrate, Huawei exemplifies Chinese party-state capitalism's characteristic blurring of the distinction between collective, private and state capital — the company has received substantial state financial support and explicitly advances national objectives in 5G infrastructure linked to China's technological sovereignty project, while Hawes (2020) shows how its ownership structure evolved through a series of adaptive mechanisms within China's broader state-corporate ecosystem rather than through simple top-down direction. The result is an institutional form that defies either/or categorization — neither purely private capitalist firm nor state-owned enterprise, neither conventional workers' cooperative nor instrument of state power, but a genuinely hybrid form that preserves these contradictions in productive tension. For Huawei's technical workers, this creates a qualitatively different relationship to their work than that experienced by their counterparts in Western firms: their technical expertise is understood not merely as labor sold to a corporate employer but as a contribution to both their own collective enterprise and to China's challenge to Western technological dominance — an *and* rather than an *or*.

As Mahoney (2024) explains, "class struggle as a tactic rhetorically and practically as a tactic for establishing and consolidating party rule" transformed after the Cultural Revolution into "elevating the class struggle to the international level." Contemporary Chinese technical workers understand themselves as participants in this international class struggle—contributing to China's technological development as a means of challenging Western hegemony and creating alternatives for the Global South. Their resistance takes the form of pushing for particular directions within this project rather than rejecting the project itself.

### Shared Strategic Position

However, both groups of technical workers also have respective strategic positions in relation to crucial infrastructure. As Muldoon et al. note, "We are returning to a much more antagonistic relationship between the United States and China where—much like in the Cold War—technology is seen as a marker of civilisational achievement, a method of developing advanced weaponry and a means to gain economic competitive advantage" (Muldoon et al. 2024:178). This creates a situation where technical workers in both contexts confront similar questions about the social purposes of their work, even if they frame these questions differently and pursue different forms of action.

Crucially, technical workers in both contexts are positioned to understand that these are not merely competing national projects but expressions of fundamentally different organizing principles. The question facing them is not simply which side to support but which dialectical logic—*either/or* or *and*—will structure the technological infrastructure of the emerging world system. A Western technical worker who has experienced Chinese tech ecosystems, or a Chinese

technical worker who has worked in Silicon Valley, possesses experiential knowledge of both logics that purely national political actors lack.

This experiential knowledge creates potential for what might be termed "practical mediation"—the development of hybrid approaches or mutual understanding through concrete problem-solving rather than abstract philosophical reconciliation. Technical workers collaborating across the geopolitical divide on specific projects (even as their governments and corporations compete) may discover ways of integrating different approaches that political or philosophical dialogue alone cannot achieve. They might develop technical standards that accommodate both winner-takes-all and parallel-systems approaches, or organizational forms that preserve productive tensions rather than forcing resolution.

### **Implications for Systemic Transformation**

The convergence of these dynamics—technical workers' strategic position, different forms of resistance rooted in incompatible philosophical frameworks, and the semi-core challenge to Western hegemony—creates unique possibilities for systemic transformation. Recent events demonstrate this potential. We have seen significant opposition within the technical-bureaucratic apparatus of the US state—from State Department resignations over Gaza policy to intelligence community leaks exposing deceptions about Ukraine (Luscombe 2024). These actions suggest growing awareness among technical workers that their skills and knowledge should not be deployed for maintaining failing hegemony through force.

The significance of these actions extends beyond their immediate impact. They demonstrate that technical workers are beginning to connect their specific positions to broader geopolitical struggles and to question the social purposes to which their expertise is directed. When State Department officials resign over Gaza or intelligence analysts leak documents about Ukraine, they are implicitly rejecting the *either/or* choice that hegemonic logic demands: either support all state actions or be branded disloyal. Instead, they assert an *and* position: loyal to the state's legitimate interests while refusing complicity in specific policies they judge unjust.

However, realizing this transformative potential requires overcoming significant challenges. Historical examples show how capital has successfully divided and co-opted strategically placed workers. Technical workers' potential for resistance cannot be taken for granted but must be actively developed through political organization and alliance-building. This requires connecting their specific grievances and powers to broader movements for social transformation.

### **Building Solidarity Across Philosophical Divides**

The key challenge becomes building solidarity across the broader ecosystem of AI labor while resisting both technocratic elitism and reactionary populism. As demonstrated by the wildcat strikes that spontaneously erupted across the Amazon global empire in 2022, workers remain essential to the functioning of the automated 'extraction machine' (Muldoon et al. 2024). This suggests that technical workers' potential for progressive transformation lies not just in their specialized knowledge but in their ability to build connections with the broader working class—warehouse workers, delivery drivers, data annotators, content moderators, and others whose labor sustains the AI systems that technical workers design and maintain.

However, building such solidarity across philosophical divides poses unique challenges. How do Western technical workers conceiving of resistance as oppositional refusal build common cause with Chinese technical workers conceiving of resistance as dialectical engagement? How do workers operating within *either/or-logic* collaborate with workers operating within *and-logic*? The experiential knowledge that technical workers gain from working across both systems may prove crucial here—not as synthesis or reconciliation of incompatible frameworks but as practical mediation enabling cooperation despite philosophical incommensurability.

This suggests a role for technical workers that extends beyond their immediate labor struggles. By virtue of their position spanning competing systems and incommensurable frameworks, they may facilitate mutual comprehension and practical cooperation that purely political dialogue cannot achieve. A technical worker who has experienced both Silicon Valley's winner-takes-all competition and Chinese tech ecosystems' parallel standards can explain to colleagues in each context how the other operates—not to convert them but to enable functional cooperation on specific projects despite different underlying logics.

### **Avoiding Technocratic Elitism**

At the same time, technical workers must resist the temptation toward technocratic elitism—the notion that their specialized knowledge grants them privileged insight into social questions or positions them as natural leaders of progressive movements. As Muldoon et al. (2024) document, the AI extraction machine depends on vast ecosystems of hidden labor, from data annotators in Kenya earning poverty wages to content moderators in the Philippines traumatized by exposure to violent imagery. Technical workers designing AI systems or maintaining infrastructure occupy privileged positions within this ecosystem, and their resistance will only contribute to progressive transformation if it connects to and supports the struggles of these more exploited workers.

This requires recognizing that different positions within the AI labor ecosystem generate different forms of consciousness and different potentials for resistance. The highly compensated engineer in Silicon Valley confronts different contradictions than the data annotator in Nairobi or

the content moderator in Manila. Building solidarity requires not assuming that technical workers' perspectives or priorities should dominate but rather listening to and amplifying the struggles of the most exploited workers in the ecosystem.

Moreover, as the philosophical analysis reveals, technical workers must avoid imposing either Western or Chinese frameworks as universal solutions. The recognition that Chinese Marxism works precisely because of its integration with Chinese epistemological traditions (Mahoney 2024) suggests that progressive transformation cannot proceed through mechanical application of any single model. Instead, it requires what might be termed "dialectical pluralism"—preserving multiple approaches to social transformation while building practical cooperation across difference.

### **Connecting to Environmental and Peace Movements**

The convergence of these trends—technological transformation, new class formation, declining Western hegemony, rising alternative centers operating from different philosophical premises—creates conditions for potential progressive change. Several factors support this possibility:

- Technical workers' strategic position in production and state systems
- Growing environmental consciousness that transcends traditional class boundaries
- Alternative centers of development and knowledge production operating from different organizing principles
- Popular rejection of militarism and colonial legacies
- New forms of information sharing and resistance through digital networks
- Technical workers' potential to mediate between incommensurable worldviews through practical engagement

The environmental dimension deserves particular emphasis. As climate change accelerates and its catastrophic impacts become undeniable, technical workers increasingly confront the contradiction between their expertise in developing potentially sustainable technologies and the actual deployment of these technologies in service of continued accumulation and environmental destruction. This creates opportunities for alliance between technical workers and environmental movements—both groups recognize that current systems are driving toward ecological collapse and that radical transformation is necessary.

Significantly, this environmental consciousness can bridge philosophical divides. Both Western and Chinese technical workers confront ecological crisis, both recognize that technological development must be redirected toward sustainability, and both understand that current power structures obstruct necessary changes. While they may conceptualize solutions differently (Western frameworks emphasizing systemic replacement, Chinese frameworks emphasizing dialectical transformation), they share recognition of the urgency and magnitude of

the challenge. This shared recognition may enable practical cooperation despite philosophical incommensurability.

Similarly, growing opposition to militarism and imperial violence creates opportunities for alliance across national and philosophical boundaries. As conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East demonstrate, the catastrophic human costs of great power competition and US efforts to maintain hegemony through force, technical workers in both Western and Chinese contexts confront questions about complicity. Chinese technical workers' framework of "Ruguanism" explicitly engages with questions of imperialism and China's role in challenging Western hegemony (Yao 2024), while Western technical workers increasingly question whether their expertise should serve military projects (as the Google Maven and Anthropic cases demonstrate) (Muldoon et al. 2024).

The key challenge becomes building bridges between these different forms of resistance—connecting technical workers' power with broader social movements, linking environmental consciousness to structural critique, facilitating understanding between fundamentally different dialectical frameworks, and creating institutional bases for alternative futures that preserve rather than resolve productive contradictions.

### **Conclusion: Beyond the Interregnum**

As Boron argued in 1994, the construction of a stable post-hegemonic order requires cooperation not just among great powers but between them and the Global South (Boron 1994:220). This article has argued that technical workers must play a crucial role in this transformation, not through any technological inevitability, but because their position in modern production systems gives them significant potential power if collectively organized and because their experience spanning incommensurable philosophical frameworks uniquely positions them to facilitate mutual comprehension without forcing false synthesis.

Understanding the philosophical distinctiveness of Chinese Marxism—its roots in yin-yang dialectics and the unity of opposites—reveals that the semi-core challenge represents more than alternative policies or institutions. It represents an alternative epistemology, a different way of conceptualizing order, contradiction, and progress (Mahoney 2024; Mao 1937). The *either/or*-logic that has structured Western hegemony—demanding universal conformity to a single model—is being challenged by an *and*-logic that seeks to preserve diversity and productive tension.

This suggests the possibility of finally realizing a viable form of socialism perhaps as it was envisaged by Marx and Engels—where advanced technology is collectively controlled and directed toward human development and social good, managed democratically by those who understand it but serving humanity (Marx 1973). However, the Chinese experience suggests this cannot be achieved through mechanical application of Western Marxist frameworks. It requires

recognizing that different cultural and philosophical traditions may offer distinct pathways toward similar emancipatory goals—that there may be multiple dialectical routes to socialism rather than a single universal path.

Thus, while the current interregnum produces many "morbid symptoms" (Gramsci 1971:276), it also creates openings for such a fundamental transformation toward a more sustainable and equitable world order. The question is whether this new order will force universal conformity through domination (either in Western or Chinese variants) or preserve genuine diversity through dialectical integration. As Demirel (2024) identifies, three outcomes remain possible: a China-centered capitalist world-system, a socialist world-system, or an anarchic world-system. The philosophical analysis suggests a fourth possibility: a genuinely pluralist world-system that preserves multiple dialectical frameworks in productive tension rather than resolving them through the dominance of either Western or Chinese models.

However, we must be clear-eyed about the challenges. Historical experience shows that ruling classes never surrender power without resistance, eventually violent. The strategic position of technical workers creates possibilities for limiting such violence, but realizing this potential requires overcoming significant obstacles. Capital has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to divide workers, co-opt resistance, and maintain control through a combination of coercion and consent. Moreover, philosophical incommensurability poses genuine challenges—building solidarity across Western and Chinese contexts requires more than good intentions when participants literally think through different dialectical logics.

The challenge of philosophical incommensurability should not be underestimated. As Mahoney's (2024) analysis reveals, the difference between *either/or-* and *and-logic* is not superficial but grounded in linguistic structures, millennia of philosophical development, and fundamentally different ways of understanding how change occurs. Western Marxists trained in Hegelian dialectics through the lens of Aristotelian logic may struggle to comprehend Chinese dialectics rooted in yin-yang thinking, just as Chinese Marxists may find Western insistence on resolving contradictions rather than preserving them mystifying. This is not merely cultural difference but epistemological incommensurability—different frameworks for making sense of the world that may not be mutually translatable.

Yet the practical necessity of cooperation in face of shared threats—ecological collapse, nuclear war, technological unemployment—may force development of working accommodations despite philosophical incomprehension. Technical workers engaged in concrete problem-solving may discover that they can coordinate effectively on specific projects even while operating from incompatible theoretical frameworks. This pragmatic cooperation, grounded in shared material interests rather than philosophical agreement, may prove more durable than attempts at theoretical synthesis or conversion.

The key becomes recognizing and acting upon these possibilities while resisting both technocratic elitism and reactionary populism. The challenge is to build coalitions between technical workers, environmental movements, peace activists, and others working toward systemic change across cultural and philosophical divides. This requires developing class consciousness among technical workers while connecting their specific grievances and powers to broader movements for social transformation. It also requires humility—recognizing that Western Marxists cannot simply export their frameworks to Chinese contexts, nor can Chinese approaches be mechanically transplanted westward. Instead, both must learn from each other while preserving their distinctive approaches, seeking practical cooperation rather than theoretical unity.

In a pessimistic embrace of the *or-logic*, Rosa Luxemburg posed the choice: "Socialism or Barbarism" (Luxemburg 1919) and our current moment makes this stark alternative newly apposite. As this article has explained, the depth of our current crisis is grave, but combined with the astounding new technological capabilities and a growing consciousness of shared human interests, there is nonetheless an unprecedented opportunity for progressive transformation. The emergence of the semi-core operating from alternative philosophical premises demonstrates that Western hegemonic logic is neither inevitable nor universal. The Chinese experience of raising 800 million people out of poverty while maintaining sovereignty and avoiding the "dark path" of imperialism, slavery, and genocide that characterized Western development (Mahoney 2024; Muldoon et al. 2024) shows that an alternative development path is possible. Yet these opportunities can only be realized through conscious organization and struggle that respects philosophical diversity while building practical solidarity.

Boron's early recognition that countries of the Global South must be "ready to assume these epoch-making challenges with imagination and responsibility" (Boron 1994:220) takes on new relevance in our current moment. The emergence of alternative centers of power and development, combined with the potential power of organized technical workers and growing global consciousness, creates possibilities for fundamental social transformation, not as an automatic process, but as a potential to be realized through collective human action that preserves rather than resolves productive contradictions.

The transformation of labor through AI systems creates both new forms of exploitation and new possibilities for resistance. Technical workers' strategic position at the intersection of competing infrastructural systems and incommensurable philosophical frameworks, combined with their potential to build solidarity with the broader ecosystem of AI labor, makes them potentially crucial actors in determining which of Demirel's three (or possibly four) possible outcomes emerges from the current interregnum (Demirel 2024). Their unique capacity to understand and mediate between *either/or-* and *and-logics* through concrete technical practice may

prove decisive in whether the post-hegemonic order preserves genuine diversity or imposes new uniformity.

The task before us, then, is to develop the organizational forms and political strategies that can unite technical workers' potential power with broader movements for social transformation while respecting philosophical differences and building practical bridges across incommensurable frameworks. Only through such conscious organization and struggle, grounded in material conditions but open to multiple dialectical pathways, can we hope to guide the current interregnum toward a progressive rather than catastrophic resolution. The choice may remain Luxemburg's: socialism *or* barbarism, but the pathway may be 'socialism *and* barbarism' at least for a while.

**About the Author:** Dr Stephen Wilkinson is senior lecturer in Politics and International Relations at the University of Buckingham, UK. He is Director of the International Institute for the Study of Cuba and the editor of its peer-reviewed journal *The International Journal of Cuban Studies*. [www.cubastudies.org](http://www.cubastudies.org)

**Acknowledgements:** Thanks to JWSR editors and the reviewers for their useful and important suggestions.

**Disclosure Statement:** Authors have no conflict of interests upon submission of the article to the journal.

## References

- Arrighi, Giovanni. 1994. *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times*. London: Verso.
- Babic, Milan. 2020. "Let's Talk about the Interregnum: Gramsci and the Crisis of the Liberal World Order." *International Affairs* 96(3):767–786.
- Baker, Alexander. 2024. "Can Central Bank Digital Currencies Replace SWIFT for Global Remittances and Trade?" SSRN Working Paper. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=5186429>
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2012. "Times of Interregnum." *Ethics & Global Politics* 5(1):49–56. [doi.org/10.3402/egp.v5i1.17200](https://doi.org/10.3402/egp.v5i1.17200)
- Boron, Atilio A. 1994. "Towards a Post-Hegemonic Age? The End of Pax Americana." *Security Dialogue* 25(2):211–221.
- Breslin, Shaun. 2011. "The 'China Model' and the Global Crisis: From Friedrich List to a Chinese Mode of Governance?" *International Affairs* 87(6):1323–1343.
- Cheng Enfu and Yang Jun. 2025. "China's 'Triple Revolution Theory' and Marxist Analysis." *Monthly Review* 77(1).
- Chin, Gregory T. 2023. "Geopolitics and the Making of the BRICS New Development Bank." *Review of International Political Economy* 30(2):207–230.
- CNN Business. 2026. "Anthropic Rejects Latest Pentagon Offer: 'We Cannot in Good Conscience Accede to Their Request.'" February 26. <https://www.cnn.com/2026/02/26/tech/anthropic-rejects-pentagon-offer>
- Demirel, Ege. 2024. "Anarchy in the World-System: The Emergence of the Semi-Core and the Phase of Interregnum." *Journal of World-Systems Research* 30(1):373–397.
- Engels, Frederick. 1883. *Dialectics of Nature*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Feng, Kaidong and Yin Li. 2020. "Employee Ownership and Industrial Innovation: Huawei in the U.S.-China Technology Rivalry." *China Review* 20(4).
- Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Hawes, Colin S. 2020. "Why is Huawei's Ownership So Strange? A Case Study of the Chinese Corporate and Socio-political Ecosystem." *Journal of Corporate Law Studies* 21(1).
- Luscombe, Richard. 2024. "US Intelligence Official Charged after Israel's Plan to Attack Iran Leaked." *The Guardian*, November 13.
- Lukács, Georg. 1923. *History and Class Consciousness*. London: Merlin Press.
- Luxemburg, Rosa. 1919. *The Crisis in the German Social-Democracy: (The "Junius" Pamphlet)*. New York: Socialist Publication Society.
- Mahoney, Josef Gregory. 2024. "Chinese Marxism." Interview with Daniel Tutt, *Emancipations* Podcast. <https://youtu.be/umtybQ089K0>

- Mao Zedong. 1937. "On Contradiction." Pp. 311–347 in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung, Vol. I*. Available at: [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1\\_17.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_17.htm)
- Marx, Karl. 1973. *Grundrisse*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- MFA PRC (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China). 2023. *A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions*. [https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202405/t20240530\\_11332291.html](https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyxw/202405/t20240530_11332291.html)
- Muldoon, James, Mark Graham, and Callum Cant. 2024. *Feeding the Machine: The Hidden Human Labour Powering AI*. London: Canongate.
- NPR. 2026. "OpenAI Announces Pentagon Deal after Trump Bans Anthropic." February 27. <https://www.npr.org/2026/02/27/nx-s1-5729118/trump-anthropic-pentagon-openai-ai-weapons-ban>
- Pearson, Margaret, Meg Rithmire, and Kellee S. Tsai. 2022. "China's Party-State Capitalism and International Backlash: From Interdependence to Insecurity." *International Security* 47(2):135–176.
- Putin, Vladimir. 2024. "Putin Spoke at a Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club. Full Text." Pravda, November 7.
- Stahl, Rune Møller. 2019. "Ruling the Interregnum: Politics and Ideology in Nonhegemonic Times." *Politics and Society* 47(3):333–360.
- Stalin, Joseph V. 1938. "Dialectical and Historical Materialism." Pp. 105–131 in *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course*. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House.
- Wallerstein, Immanuel. 1979. *The Capitalist World-Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wu, Wendy. 2024. "China, Europe Should 'Fix Rifts' or Risk Return to 'Law of Jungle' under Trump: Diplomat." *South China Morning Post*, November 11.
- Yao, Yunfan. 2024. "From 'Online Political Views' to 'Keyboard Politics': Ruguanism from a Rhetorical Perspective." *Eastphil Journal* 32:32–38.