

BEYOND CYCLES OF HEGEMONY:
ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND MILITARY FACTORS

W. L. Goldfrank
Sociology
University of California-Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA. 95064
wally@cats.ucsc.edu
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As we survey the changing world on the eve of the 21st century, scholars confront empirical puzzles and interpretive uncertainties. Those of us who identify with worldwide social and political movements seeking more democracy, more equality, more justice, and more rationality find ourselves at once free and daunted. We are free, finally, from the albatross of repressive party-states calling themselves "socialist," from the illusion that social-democratic welfare states are trending toward perfection, from the myth that national development in the Third World is closing the gap. And we are daunted by the double task of (1) reconstructing a strategy of global transformation and (2) making a viable movement out of the multiple oppositional fragments scattered about the global landscape.

This paper attempts to confront some puzzles and interpret some uncertainties about the future. If it thereby contributes to understanding our responsibilities and political opportunities, so much the better. Using familiar world-system concepts and findings, I sketch visions of the short-run, the medium-run, and the long-run, after first rehearsing the basic premises from which this interpretation follows.

The modern world-system is a capitalist world-economy today encompassing virtually the entire

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globe, although as a system its 16th-century original scope was limited territorially to parts of Europe and the Americas. Historically changing, it is nonetheless a system, a structured totality whose parts both complement and affect one another. We call it a world-economy because its commodity chains link disparate peoples and cultures via the market, unlike a world-empire, which links cultures via a

political/administrative apparatus. We call it capitalist because accumulation is its driving force, because labor is thereby commodified, and because competition and class struggle are its hallmarks, competition and struggle that occur across as well as within state boundaries. We understand this division into classes to cross-cut a division into zones, some with great

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wealth, sophisticated and diversified production, and strong states (the core), some with little wealth, low-wage production, and weak states (the periphery), and some in between on these dimensions (the semi-periphery). Via unequal exchange, plunder, capital flight, and labor migration, surplus moves from periphery to core as it does in the production process from labor to capital. Over historical time the site of producing particular commodities may shift from one to another zone (as, say, iron and steel have recently been shifting from the core to the semi-periphery, or textiles from the semi-periphery to the periphery). And particular states may move from one zone to another (as South Korea and Taiwan have recently advanced from periphery to semi-periphery, or Finland, since World War II, from semi-periphery to the core). But the massive fact about the modern

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world-system to date is its reproduced stability, as capitalist commodification has penetrated more and more of the globe and proletarianized more and more of its inhabitants, and as the interstate mix of diplomacy and war has contained and reprogrammed rebellious oppositional movements.

Further, we understand this modern world-system to move at once cyclically and via secular trends. The cycles are economic and political. Economically, the world economy undergoes 50- to 60-year-long waves of expansion and contraction, growth and crisis (or A and B phases), increasingly yet still imperfectly synchronized in their various national manifestations. The global polity experiences much longer hegemonic cycles with four phases, which

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we may call ascent through conflict, supremacy, decline, and condominium. The secular trends are familiar to students of modernity: commodification (including labor), mechanization, bureaucratization, geographical expansion. But we understand these trends to be constitutive of--rather than external to -- the system, and we understand their limits -- which some scholars think are very close to being reached -- to presage a crisis from which a new politico-economic mode of global social organization will emerge.

Geographic expansion provides cheaper resources and

new proletarians to the world-economy. It is reaching its limits in the present with intensifying exploitation of the

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Arctic, the tropics, and the temperate woodlands. The last remaining areas of hunting/gathering and subsistence cultivation now find themselves incorporated into national development programs and/or opened to exploitation by multinational enterprises. We should not be surprised by the burgeoning resistance movements of indigenous peoples, sometimes called the fourth world, for they are classic Polanyi-ish responses to the intrusion of the market. Seabed mining offers perhaps another direction for expansion, but costs are high and returns, to this date anyway, are negligible. Outer space remains a fantasy. Hence we should not be surprised by the growing emphases on recycling materials and on renewable energy sources, precisely because the territorial limits of capitalist expansion are so clearly on the short- to medium-term horizon.

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Proletarianization is the second crisis-relieving process, and its limits are clearly further off. High birth rates combined with declining death rates in much of the Third World mean that millions of new potential proletarians are entering the world each year--and will for a long time to come even as birth rates decline, given the age structure of the current global population, which will reach six billion before the end of this century. Much of this population continues to have substantial access to household-controlled land to meet part of its basic needs, though often precariously, to be sure. In so advanced a semi-peripheral country as Russia it is striking how important private plots of land are to the food supply of urban families. Commodification of

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household production itself--so-called "women's work"--has begun in earnest only in the core zones, so we may expect large increases in the spread of packaged and convenience foods, commodified child care, and other household technologies.

Redistribution of global income and hence purchasing power is another mechanism of recovery. It may be currently occurring through the democratizing (or redemocratizing) movements that have gripped our imaginations over the past decade, in Mexico and the Southern Cone of South America, in South Africa, in Israel/Palestine, in East-Central Europe and Russia, in South Korea and Taiwan. There seems to have been a recent recognition on the part of the bankers and economic policy-makers at the summit of the

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world economy that debt renegotiations were necessary, that the northward capital transfers of the 1980s were part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Many once ensnared in the debt trap have become "emerging markets," sites of increasing investment. But if via restiveness or alliances some of the larger semi-peripheral countries and/or the peripheral giants China and India achieve significant global redistribution, say during the B-phase of the next long cycle, this will mean a substantial shift in the world balance of forces. Such a shift, in turn, would alter the conditions under which subsequent long waves would unfold.

Mechanization, the continued application of science to revolutionizing the production process, is

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theoretically limitless. It cheapens the cost of production, and it may soon be liberated from the constraints of non-renewable resources. It presents the potentiality, however, of liberating so many humans from drudgery that entertainment and consumerism may well fail to dull their political aspirations.

Given this angle of vision, one can characterize the present moment as a baseline for projecting the future. Leaving to the side some of the controversial and borderline cases, the contemporary core includes the U.S.A. and Canada, most of Western Europe, and Japan. These countries are relatively wealthy and relatively democratic, specializing in high-technology products such as computers, aerospace, and machine tools, producing abundant food, experiencing

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shrinkage in industrial employment and growth of the so-called service sector (much of which is, of course, part of the production process). Attendant class recomposition has weakened the political base of the long-standing social-democratic left in most of this zone. The contemporary semiperiphery includes most of Eastern Europe and Russia, at least the more industrial countries of Latin America (Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Chile), South Africa, Turkey, parts of the Middle East, and the East Asian NICs. These countries feature heavy intermediate industrial production (iron and steel,

petrochemicals, auto), diminishing state control of the economy, large debt burdens, and most of the democratization wave of the last decade. Their working classes are increasing in social power, but where statist protectionism

has been dominant they face especially difficult policy dilemmas. The contemporary periphery includes the poorer countries of Latin America and the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and China. Most of the world's two billion peasants live in the periphery, and with their compatriots who are no longer peasants they produce an array of raw materials and simple manufactures (textiles, assembly). They live for the most part under authoritarian regimes and face the stark alternatives of exclusion from the world economy (as rulers in Myanmar and Kampuchea chose for a time) or superexploitation within it.

In the contemporary period, under the auspices of transnational corporations and international

agencies, the formal organization of the world is catching up with its long-term structure. Almost half of all international trade now takes place within corporations rather than between legally autonomous enterprises, and it is not unusual for corporations to design goods and produce the machine tools to make them in the core, manufacture them in the semi-periphery, and sell and service them everywhere, including the periphery. The much ballyhooed "internationalization of capital" is more an internationalization of organization than of capital itself. On the other hand, transnational sub-contracting has grown rapidly as well. As for regulation and management, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the United Nations are taking on increasing responsibility for regulating the system, and with Amnesty International we even have a sort of global civil liberties union to go along with

countless IGOs and NGOs in every institutional area.

In terms of the cycles and trends outlined above, where do we stand? Economically, the world is approaching the end of a long wave that included the great post-war boom of the 1950s and 60s and the slowdown of the 1970s and 80s. As with previous booms, the post-war rising tide had floated many boats, giving rise to now-nostalgic beliefs: that the core countries had solved the problem of crises by fiscal and monetary fine tuning, that the so-called socialist countries would catch up (remember Khrushchev's "We will bury you?" or the once-fashionable idea that the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. would soon "converge?"), that the periphery should be called "developing nations" in "the springtime of freedom." The downturn of the 1970s and 80s has been quite another story, however. Too much

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emphasis has been given to the exceptional successes during this B-phase, for example, of Japan and the East Asian NICs, which greatly resemble the advances in Germany and some of its eastern neighbors during the depressed last quarter of the nineteenth century. The other side of this coin during the past twenty years is elsewhere and opposite: twelve consecutive years of African impoverishment, the Sahelian and Sudanese famines, massacres in Rwanda and Bosnia, the collapse of living standards in Eastern Europe and most of Latin America--leading to the recent reappearance of cholera, desperation in the Philippines, disaster in Bangladesh; nor should we neglect the slowing or cessation of real wage increments in parts of the core, accompanied in the U.S. by a regressive redistribution of income via inflation, mergers and acquisitions, junk bonds, tax policies, benefit cuts, and savings and loan scams.

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Further, as is characteristic of B-phases, new product lines have been prepared for widespread marketing when the world-economy turns the corner toward accelerated growth. The most important of these appear to be microprocessing, genetic engineering, robotics, and alternative energy technologies. Over the cries of environmentalists, geographic expansion into the last underexploited territories is well underway, in the Amazon and other tropical woodlands, in the Arctic, and if only the Japanese would help, in Siberia. In terms of the political cycle, we approach the end of U.S. hegemony and witness its transmutation into trilateral condominium. The political maneuvering

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that surrounded the Gulf massacre speaks volumes, with its confused mix of old-time U.S. unilateralism plus hat-in-hand begging and UN resolutions and authorizations (Maki & Goldfrank, 1995). The State Department inclined toward the new multilateralism, the Defense Department toward the old unilateralism. The president wavered, one foot in each era. Unilateralism predominated, but with a heavy ideological emphasis on the coalition, the alliance, the UN. So if for the moment the U.S. has a near-monopoly on tactical military might, this seems less the expression of a robust hegemony than a specialized function within a condominium of core powers, the 9-1-1 of the world-system ("9-1-1" is

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the telephone code for police emergencies in the U.S.). Perhaps because of memories of German and Japanese expansionist and racist militarism in World War II, this

possibly lucrative specialization will likely persist for some time. But with the possible exception of the Caribbean basin, unilateralism is finished as hegemony wanes.

Many speak of the end of the Cold War, as if the basic geopolitical frame of the entire postwar period had been the so-called superpower conflict. The Cold War, an "imaginary war" in Mary Kaldor's phrase (1981), had many consequences, including the build-up of huge military industrial sectors in the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. and the somewhat halting and reluctant Soviet support for oppositional movements and regimes around the globe. But as the

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Chinese saw perhaps the earliest and most clearly, the Cold War was rather more collusive than competitive, serving to enable the vastly unequal superpowers to control for a time their respective allies and clients. Immanuel Wallerstein (1991) goes so far as to describe the U.S.S.R. from Yalta to Malta as a sub-imperial partner of the United States, with considerable logic and evidence. Not pseudo-strengthening by Reagan, but the continued relative weakening of the U.S. vis-a-vis Western Europe and Japan convinced Gorbachev that the only chance for Russia to avoid falling further behind was to disinvest in militarism and empire and to redeploy resources toward the more advanced sectors of the world-economy. Though at present his successors' prospects look iffy, the raw materials, workers, and customers of Russia are too important to the world-economy, and the threat

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of destabilizing disruption in that zone too great to world politics for the core powers to allow a collapse into total chaos. In any case, the Cold War was part of the stable framework of U.S. hegemony; Saddam Hussein would never have dared to invade Kuwait under its rules.

Implicit in this synopsis of the present is my vision of the short-run, the next decade or so. After one or two more recessionary dips in the next few years, the accumulation process will accelerate as the world-economy enters a new long wave. The leading sectors, which will return outside profits to investors in Japan, Western Europe, and the U.S., will be the high-technology processes mentioned above. Semi-peripheral competition for

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intermediate industrial production will intensify, and rebellious labor movements in democratized

settings may well chase some of it to the periphery. The trend toward multinational corporate decomposition of production processes will gather momentum, making "national" development or "national" industrialization even more chimerical than they are today--except, perhaps, in a much longer time frame, for very large countries like Brazil, India, and China. Those semi-peripheral countries with a firm grasp on particular export niches--I think here of Taiwan and Chile--will fare better than others. Much of the periphery will suffer new exploitation, much a disdainful exclusion punctuated by binges of charity.

In world politics, the transition to condominium will go forward, with West European unification, a strengthening of OECD coordination, and a thickening of other international institutions.

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With the formation of free trade zones, the apparent tendency will be toward three vertical geographic blocs, one led by Japan, one by Western Europe, one by the U.S. In the U.S. it would not be a surprise to see the beginnings of a party realignment, with more conservative Democrats defecting to the Republicans (who will continue to win most presidential elections and now control Congress), and a social democratization of the Democratic Party itself.

This would mean progressive losses in the short term, but the possibility of significant gains in the medium term. One can understand this period in U.S. politics as quite clearly analogous to that of Great Britain's hegemonic decline, during which time the Liberal Party faded

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and the Labor Party replaced it as the principal opponent of enduring Conservatism (Goldfrank 1983). Meanwhile, the educational system will continue to bifurcate, with the gulf between professional/technical specialists (Robert Reich's [1991] "symbolic analysts") and production or service workers growing wider. These changes increase the likelihood of xenophobic right-wing populism's recrudescence.

If we shift our attention further ahead, to the middle-run 50-60 years of the new long wave, prediction becomes more difficult. Most probably, before much of the 21st century has elapsed, the three current core zones of the world-system will have formed two competing blocs. The U.S. and Japan will together dominate the first, including in their orbit the Americas and the

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Pacific. A politically unified Europe--just how unified and how inclusive remain to be seen--will dominate the other, reaching out to the east and south. India would appear to be the surest candidate for contestation between the two blocs, perhaps also southern Africa. But this tendency toward bipolar bloc formation and rivalry will be dampened by a continuing trend toward a high level of organizational integration among at least the core states at the corporate, the governmental, and the associational levels (quite likely including labor).

Meanwhile, significant new proletarianization in the semi-periphery and periphery will lead to the reinvigoration of oppositional movements, as will the further degradation of nature (still the direct source of much peasant and semi-proletarian livelihood) and

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increased exploitation of women. New challenges to Enlightenment rationality and utilitarian philosophies of progress--neither of which has realized its promises of "development"--may make Khomeini's Iran look like a Sunday school picnic, while regional wars among ambitious semi-peripheral states armed with 21st-century weapons (nuclear trickle-down?) could make the last decade in the Persian Gulf seem a mere curtain-raiser.

But the continuation of the historical system's pattern of hegemonic cycles is called into question by the irreversible trend toward larger-scale organization. Pressures toward world state formation will come from core middle strata fearing disruption or environmental disaster, from semi-peripheral syndicalism after

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the OPEC model, and from Third World workers demanding global redistribution. In the absence of such redistribution, we are highly likely to see massive migratory movements toward the core, another source of increasing potential for reactionary movements of ethnic and racial chauvinism.

What of the longer run, beyond the horizons of the long wave that will take us to the middle of the next century? Since capitalism is an historical system, it will eventually, some day, come to an end (for an earlier version of this view, see Goldfrank (1987)). The secular trends that have nourished it will reach their limits. In the past, many opponents of capitalism have seen its impending end in one or another of the crises that we now understand to be part of its normal cyclical operation. So it behooves us to look at the limits

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of the crisis-relieving processes. While it is conceivable to me that those limits will be reached during the next long wave, it is more likely that two or even three such cycles will occur. So by the year 2100, or 2150, commodification will lack new targets. The middle strata of the world-economy will have acceded, via bureaucratization, to greater power vis-a-vis the capitalist class, by then concentrated in a finite number of giant global corporations. The rising costs of redistribution to, and the policing of the workers of the world will help persuade the far-sighted among the elites that a change of system is in the cards.

Let me suggest four possible long-run futures:

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destruction, fascism, social democracy, and socialism. Number one, destruction, could come about quickly, via nuclear incineration, or slowly, via irreversible damage to the biosphere. In spite of occasional scares (Cuba, Berlin), nuclear war between major powers was less likely during the Cold War arrangement than it will be for some time into the future, perhaps until a hegemonic succession after the next few decades, if there is one. The gravest window of danger will occur when condominium gives way to active rivalry. Previous hegemonic successions have in fact occurred in part through system-wide wars, first in the 17th century (the 30 Years War), then at the turn of the 19th century (the Napoleonic Wars), and then in the first half of this century (World Wars I & II).

Although regional conflicts could certainly escalate into global war, five factors militate against repetition of this

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aspect of world-system cycles. First, the example of pre-WWI Sarajevo is much on the minds of foreign and military policy makers in the core: they may talk Munich, but they think Sarajevo. Humans do learn from history, sometimes. Second, the knowledge that nuclear first use will most probably lead to a holocaust must have a sobering effect on would-be aggressors; it is one thing to risk losing a war and quite another to commit virtual suicide in the process. Third, the increased interpenetration of the various core zones by transnational corporations and banks based in each of them has extended the peace interest within the world capitalist class. Fourth, the political influence of middle and working classes has grown, further contributing to the peace interest, as the European resistance to the Reagan build-up foreshadows. And, finally, the increasing density

of international organization makes it more likely that global proto-state-formation will soften the rough edges of inter-core rivalry. On the other hand, those who see a rosy future on the basis of the growth of international civil society would do well to recognize that the majority of transnational connections among individuals involve citizens of the core countries and the most advanced semi-peripheries. Hence core wars become less likely, but the likelihood of challenges from below are not diminished.

Destruction of the biosphere would be slower than a holocaust but no less deadly to the human prospect. For centuries, capitalists--and one must emphatically not exclude the self-proclaimed former state-socialist elites from this characterization--have ravaged

particular environments in the pursuit of profit and power. Often, they have pushed peasants to do the same via increasingly desperate searches for arable land. Particular localized environments can be abandoned, perhaps cleaned up or regenerated, although too much cumulation here could spell disaster. More threatening, however, is that in recent years capitalist growth on a global scale has begun to have clearly discernible effects on the ozone layer and the climate, effects which may or may not be checked in time to prevent irreversible, perhaps fatal damage.

Scientific ignorance and the possibility of passing quantity-into-quality thresholds make this prospect even more frightening than that of any but the most general nuclear

war. Capitalists and policy makers are belatedly becoming conscious of this danger to the goose that lays their golden eggs, and popular movements (generically, the Greens) are reinforcing the point. It is not accidental that transnational environmental activism has provided considerable inspiration to the proponents of the "global civil society" thesis (e.g., Lipschutz 1992). International regulation, of pollution as well as armaments, is thus on the agenda and can only increase the pressure toward global state formation.

As a second alternative long-run future, global fascism would seem as much a caricatured exaggeration of the capitalist world-system as its transformation into a new kind of politico-economic totality. Or,

perhaps, it might be understood as a regression to

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world-empire, with a central administrative caste -- males, no doubt, but probably not all white -- redistributing world surplus to its specialists in violence, circuses, and disinformation. The core/periphery division of labor would resemble internal colonialism on a world scale. Confiscation and expropriation for reasons of state would attenuate property relations. Labor would be controlled through corporatist inclusion, police repression, perhaps even eugenics and/or extermination. Two scenarios, not mutually exclusive, suggest themselves as leading to this outcome: the aftermath of a devastating but not life-extinguishing global war, or the reaction to a failed insurgency originating among peripheral and semi-peripheral states or movements. In this light, the Gulf massacre makes for eerie projections; if the USA had

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nothing against the Iraqi people, only its rulers, why did it kill tens of thousands of them and expose still more to the miseries of epidemic disease, poverty, and homelessness while leaving the upper echelons of the military caste in place? In a global fascist system, preserving "Western," "Christian," or "scientific" "civilization" could serve as the rallying cry uniting elite and mass.

Global social democracy or welfare state (future number three) and global socialism (number four) are greatly to be preferred. Achieving the former would make the latter more likely, though there will always be some who would take the classic line, "the worse the better," i.e., the more unsatisfactory the present becomes, the greater the chances that left-wing insurgency will gather adherents and

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carry the day. Redistribution downward in both class and zonal terms would be the hallmark of both such systems. In a global social democratic future, merit-based technocracy with progressive taxes and transfer payments would soften the hard edges of the core/periphery chasm, and world citizenship rights would gradually erode some advantages of the privileged. The political base of this global order would be along the lines of Nicaragua's Sandinista revolutionary coalition and its international supporters: progressive capitalists, petty producer populists, workers, and social democrats in the core, nationalists in the semi-periphery. This alignment would be vulnerable to a militarist and racist right-wing unless it

broadened its base by incorporating more semi-peripheral and peripheral workers in an

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effective reallocation of power and wealth. Not impossibly, a tipping point might occur in that reallocation process, such that a socialist world government appears on the horizon. Such a formation would entail democratically accountable investment planning, democratically controlled enterprises, local democracy, and gender equality as well. Headquarters functions would be redistributed geographically. Utopian visions of reducing or even eliminating mental/manual and town/country divisions would at least become conceivable. The global social base for such a politics is primarily among the largest, the youngest, and today the weakest strata in the world-system, the proletarians, semi-proletarians, and peasantry of the Third World.

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Even to imply that these strata might become politically proactive on a global scale is to recognize how far we are from such a future. For if once upon a time the strategic visions of Lenin or Mao looked toward uniting them, along with the workers of the core and the national bourgeoisie of the periphery in a grand revolutionary anti-imperialist alliance, the reality of the 20th century has been more nearly the opposite. The capitalists of the core, alarmed by the Russian revolution and other upheavals of that time, and while settling their differences through the bloody travail of depression and war, constructed a quite opposite alliance indeed. Citizenship for a substantial portion of core workers was translated into the benefits of the (partly racialized) welfare state, a share in the gains from productivity increases, pension fund capitalism, opportunity for higher education, perhaps some share in at least the psychic income of

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world superiority. Political independence and contingent membership in the global bourgeoisie constituted the deal for the bourgeois nationalists of the periphery, including, finally, those who came to power as socialists; this deal includes the right to own property in Miami, London, Zurich, Tokyo; the right to send one's children to Oxbridge, the Sorbonne, the Ivy League; the right to vacation in Rome, Monaco, and Gstaad; the right, as a Chilean professional told me proudly, to enjoy all the appurtenances of a world-class life style with the bonus of abundant and deferential household servants. This alliance of core and peripheral capitalists, plus a sizable if shrinking

segment of the core working class, was the U.S. answer to Bolshevism, contesting which was the alliance's primary rationale. No longer does the seizure of state power in the separate countries seem a viable strategy for the

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now-fragmented left. Bolshevism is finished, but for desperate remnants claiming a Marxist-Leninist-(Maoist) heritage in Peru, Kampuchea, perhaps the Philippines. However, it would be a grave error to suppose with the "end of history" school that because Leninism is spent as a political force, new, redefined, oppositional social movements, in part inspired by Marxism's enduring legacy, will not arise and join together under new ideological banners, with new strategies and tactics for reducing the inequalities and injustices that inhere in world capitalism as it reproduces and transforms itself.

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