

PRAXIS, SHMAXIS: COMMENTARY ON WAGAR

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What are the controversies here? Wagar makes one main point and several subsidiary ones. The main point is that a world party will/should be the principal organizational vehicle for the long-run victory of democratic socialism in a global commonwealth. The subsidiary points are (1) that the array of (multi-) cultures will/should give way to (or at least not preclude) agreement on the basic values of the Western Enlightenment; (2) that currently existing anti-systemic movements may be opposed to this or that aspect of contemporary

[Page 1]

Journal of World-Systems Research

social organization but are not really very anti-systemic, because they do not challenge the world-economy or the interstate system; (3) that the world will most probably pass through a prolonged and chaotic time of troubles (possibly including such horrors as environmental catastrophe, widespread nuclear war, or global North-South war) before the integrated, peaceful, egalitarian Utopia arrives; and (4) that world-system theory implies something like the world party as its complementary praxis. The implication is that world-system adepts should unburden themselves of illusory hopes in today's motley semi-relevant movements and set about the task of party formation. To me, not much of this makes sense, representing rather an awkward global analogy with what voluntarist Marxist political doctrine was taken to mean at the national level.

Let me comment on Wagar's points from the bottom of my list backwards. World party or movements? Sometimes Wagar seems to be saying that overcoming the multi-stateness of the world-system is the main goal, sometimes a socialist world-system. It is perfectly plausible that the elites of the capitalist world-economy will themselves come very close to achieving a single global polity in the interests of

effective economic regulation, and/or biospheric preservation, and/or efficient repression (e.g., one way to control borders is to eliminate them). In thus creating a global polity, elites would nudge the world toward global social democracy if not socialism, but in the face of multiple and critical problems, it might well be a step that elites find

[Page 2]

Journal of World-Systems Research

worth taking.

As they say about old age, it's preferable to the alternative. In any case, why should we do the elites' work for them?

Is chaos/war necessary or likely? To some degree, envisioned by Wagar and agreed to in oral commentary by Arrighi and Wallerstein, again I'm not so sure. "Two, three, many Vietnams" was an anti-systemic slogan of the 'sixties; the sages at the ASA seemed to be predicting "two, three, many Somalias, Bosnias, Iraqs, Rwandas, Chechnyas, etc.," replete with deplorable miseries and potential spillovers and throngs of refugees. Perhaps. But perhaps not, at least perhaps not with dire consequences except for the luckless victims. Brush fires can be extinguished, and so can forest fires, especially if they're in the peripheral and semi-peripheral zones. More menacing: if one reasons from previous cycles of hegemony, one would predict that after U.S. hegemony is utterly defunct (say, in fifteen to twenty-five years) and the fabric of condominium the U.S. is weaving frays, a period of intense rivalry and conflict would ensue, leading to "core" wars similar to the Thirty Years War, the Napoleonic Wars, and World Wars I & II. While this sort of cyclical repetition is surely possible, so is its transcendence, its sublation into modes of redividing the world less harmful to our collective health (or our children's). I have elaborated some of the reasons this more tepid outcome might occur in a prior publication in this forum (Goldfrank 1995). Clearly, one of the strongest trends of the present moment is the thickening of

[Page 3]

Journal of World-Systems Research

international organization, IGO and NGO, official and informal, corporate and professional. This trend, along with the "no-winners" nature of nuclear war, makes nation-state-based core wars a less likely feature of future hegemonic cycles than of past ones. By no means

impossible, but not foreordained, either. As for generalized North-South war, again, it is not impossible, but let's not forget the discovery of the semi-periphery.

Is the "family of anti-systemic movements" really anti-systemic? Probably not so much as Wallerstein would like it to be, but probably more than Wagar thinks. Let's be clear about this: we are in a period in which the century-plus of Marxism as world movement and set of world parties has ended, and the new overarching vision has barely begun to be enunciated. Earth-destroying, militaristic, patriarchal, racially-inflected capitalism continues to generate mind-numbing inequalities and dangers to human livelihood. The movements that we have, mostly local or national, mostly single-issue, keep alive in important and often dramatic ways the rational and egalitarian alternatives to this world-system we are stuck with for at least the medium run. It is out of their sometimes conflictful visions that an oppositional ideology for the 21st century will emerge. If that vision turns out to be more
to go to meetings three times a day?

What about Enlightenment versus multiculturalism? Is there really so great an opposition as Wagar posits? From Montaigne and Pascal to Dostoyevsky and Unamuno, "Caucasian males" have done their share to balance, within Western culture, rationalist control-freakism

[Page 4]

Journal of World-Systems Research

with intuition, passion, localism, and respect for difference. In other words, DWEM culture is not the monolith it is often caricatured as being. Perhaps more importantly for the political future of the world, the principal bearers of that culture have proved remarkably adept and flexible both at accomodating cultural difference (why, at McDonald's in Maine you can even get a McLobster!) and at instructing non-Western elites in the mystical virtues of liberalism. The current defensive/assertive postures of today's fractionated communities are not etched in stone, and we can reasonably expect more coalitions and more cooperation among culturally distinctive subordinated groups than we see today. In addition, we can reasonably expect that as it becomes more global, "Western" culture itself will incorporate subthemes drawn from other civilizational traditions, as it has with African music, Asian religion, and pagan sensuality.

Finally, do we need a world party to arrive at global socialism? As claimed above, such a party does not seem to be a necessary vehicle for overcoming the multi-stateness of the capitalist world-economy: the elites will manage this on their own, with a little help from international civil society. Once that

has been accomplished, it's not clear to me that a "revolutionary" party along the lines of past Socialist or Communist parties would be worth the trouble. Perhaps it will turn out to be better simply to demand more and more justice and more and more equality without entering formal political competition, all the while voting,

[Page 5]

Journal of World-Systems Research

lobbying, demonstrating, disrupting, in the interests of equalization and livelihood protection. Do we really want to be in the business of constructing counter-bureaucracies when we might be able to get the existing ones to do the right thing?

One of Wagar's contributions, then, is to have formulated clearly the party path to world socialism. (Maybe he's a party animal? I don't know him personally.) I have argued that the party path is probably not necessary for "worldness" and possibly not useful for socialism. Since Wagar sets the date for founding the World Party in 2035, neither of us is likely to face a decision about joining it, and in the meantime we should all get back to the business at hand.

REFERENCE

Goldfrank, Walter L. 1995. "[Beyond cycles of hegemony: Economic, social, and military factors.](http://jwsr.ucr.edu/)" *Journal of World-Systems Research* 1, 8. <http://jwsr.ucr.edu/>

[Page 6]

Journal of World-Systems Research