CONTEMPORARY SEMIPERIPHERAL DEVELOPMENT:
THE REGIMES AND THE MOVEMENTS

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Abstract: This paper discusses the potential for rising national regimes, coalitions of national states and transnational social movements to transform the global capitalist system into a more humane and democratic human society within the next fifty years. The discussion uses an evolutionary and world historical approach to the problem of contemporary transformation and reproduction. The issue of subimperialism and the transformational potential of semiperipheral polities is discussed. Several possible future scenarios are considered with regard to the role that rising semiperipheral regimes and transnational social movements might play.

The evolutionary world-systems perspective uses comparisons across different kinds of world-systems and an evolutionary perspective on the modern world-system since the 13th century to comprehend the nature of the current world-historical period and the probabilities of different sorts of reorganization that could occur within the next several decades. It not only focuses on the forest rather than the trees. It also compares different kinds of “forests” to one another and studies how they have expanded and receded over long periods of time. This paper focuses mainly on the question of how contemporary “semiperipheral development” – the potential for contemporary national polities in the semiperiphery, alliances of these with one another, and transnational social movements that are mainly based in them -- might either reproduce the existing institutions and structures of the capitalist world-economy or transform the global system into a qualitatively different, more egalitarian world society. In order to intelligently comprehend the possibilities for the next several decades we need to compare the current world historical situation with earlier conjunctures that were somewhat similar, but also importantly different. Sorting out the differences as well as the similarities is a crucial task for these purposes.

Of relevance to the task undertaken here is recent research on semiperipheral development, studies of global inequality, competing conceptualizations of the semiperiphery, studies of the emergence of progressive regimes and anti-systemic movements since the 1980s, studies of emerging networks of transnational social movements, processes of contemporary global party formation and comparisons with earlier periods of world revolution.

The Evolutionary World-Systems Perspective

Hall and Chase-Dunn (2006) have modified the concepts developed by the scholars of the modern world-system to construct a theoretical perspective for comparing the modern system with earlier regional world-systems. The main idea is that sociocultural evolution can only be explained if polities are seen to have been in important interaction with each other since the Paleolithic. Hall and Chase-Dunn propose a general model of the causes of the evolution of technology and hierarchy within polities and in linked systems of polities (world-systems). The most important idea that comes out of this theoretical perspective is that transformational changes tend to be brought about by the actions of individuals and organizations within polities that are semiperipheral relative to the other polities in the same system. This is known as the hypothesis of semiperipheral development.
As regional world-systems became spatially larger and the polities within them grew and became more internally hierarchical, interpolity relations also became more hierarchical because new means of extracting resources from distant peoples were invented. Thus core/periphery hierarchies emerged as some societies developed effective methods for transforming pillage into exploitation. Semiperipherality is the position of some of the polities in a core/periphery hierarchy. Some of the polities that were located in semiperipheral positions were the agents that formed larger chiefdoms, states and empires by means of conquest (semiperipheral marcher polities), and some specialized trading states in semiperipheral locations between the tributary empires promoted production for exchange in the regions in which they operated. So both the spatial and demographic scale of political organization and the spatial scale of trade networks were expanded by semiperipheral polities, eventually leading to the global system in which we now live.

The modern world-system came into being when a formerly peripheral and then semiperipheral region (Europe) developed an internal core of capitalist states that were eventually able to dominate the polities of all the other regions of the Earth. This Europe-centered system was the first one in which capitalism became the predominant mode of accumulation, though semiperipheral capitalist city-states had existed since the Bronze Age in the spaces between the tributary empires. The Europe-centered system expanded in a series of waves of colonization and incorporation (See Figure 1). Commodification in Europe expanded, evolved and deepened in waves since the 13th century, which is why historians disagree about when capitalism became the predominant mode. Since the 15th century the modern system has seen four periods of hegemony in which leadership in the development of capitalism was taken to new levels. The first such period was led by a coalition between Genoese finance capitalists and the Portuguese crown (Arrighi 1994). After that the hegemons have been single nation-states: the Dutch in 17th century, the British in the 19th century and the United States in the 20th century (Wallerstein 1984). Europe itself, and all four of the modern hegemons, were former semiperipheries that first rose to core status and then to hegemony.
In between these periods of hegemony were periods of hegemonic rivalry in which several contenders strove for global power. The core of the modern world-system has remained multicentric, meaning that a number of sovereign states ally and compete with one another. Earlier regional world-systems sometimes experienced a period of core-wide empire in which a single empire became so large that there were no serious contenders for predominance. This did not happen in the modern world-system until the United States became the single super-power following the demise of the Soviet Union in 1989.

The sequence of hegemonies can be understood as the evolution of global governance in the modern system. The interstate system as institutionalized at the Treaty of Westphalia in 1644 is still a fundamental institutional structure of the polity of the modern system. The system of theoretically sovereign states was expanded to include the peripheral regions in two large waves of decolonization (see Figure 1), eventually resulting in a situation in which the whole modern system became composed of sovereign national states. East Asia was incorporated into this system in the 19th century, though aspects of the earlier East Asian tribute-trade state system were not completely obliterated by that incorporation (Hamashita 2003).

Each of the hegemonies was larger as a proportion of the whole system than the earlier one had been. And each developed the institutions of economic and political-military control by which it led the larger system such that capitalism increasingly deepened its penetration of all the areas of the Earth. And after the Napoleonic Wars in which Britain finally defeated its main competitor, France, global political institutions began to emerge over the tops of the international system of national states. The first proto-world-government was the Concert of Europe, a fragile flower that wilted when its main proponents, Britain and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, disagreed about how to handle the world revolution of 1848. The Concert was followed by the League of Nations and then by the United Nations and the Bretton Woods international financial institutions (The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and eventually the World Trade Organization).

The political globalization evident in the trajectory of global governance evolved because the powers that be were in heavy contention with one another for geopolitical power and for economic resources, but also because resistance emerged within the polities of the core and in the regions of the non-core. The series of hegemonies, waves of colonial expansion and decolonization and the emergence of a proto-world-state occurred as the global elites contended with one another in a context in which they had to contain resistance from below. We have already mentioned the waves of decolonization. Other important forces of resistance were slave revolts, the labor movement, the extension of citizenship to men of no property, the women’s movement, and other associated rebellions and social movements.

These movements affected the evolution of global governance in part because the rebellions often clustered together in time, forming what have been called “world revolutions” (Arrighi,
The Protestant Reformation in Europe was an early instance that played a huge role in the rise of the Dutch hegemony. The French Revolution of 1789 was linked in time with the American and Haitian revolts. The 1848 rebellion in Europe was both synchronous with the Taiping Rebellion in China and was linked with it by the diffusion of ideas, as it was also linked with the emergent Christian Sects in the United States. 1917 was the year of the Bolsheviks in Russia, but also the Chinese Nationalist revolt, the Mexican revolution, the Arab Revolt and the General Strike in Seattle led by the Industrial Workers of the World in the United States. 1968 was a revolt of students in the U.S., Europe, Latin America and Red Guards in China. 1989 was mainly in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, but important lessons about the value of civil rights beyond justification for capitalist democracy were learned by an emergent global civil society. The current world revolution of 20xx (Chase-Dunn and Niemeyer 2009) is an important context for the questions about semiperipheral development that are the main topic of this paper.

The big idea here is that the evolution of capitalism and of global governance is importantly a response to resistance and rebellions from below. This has been true in the past and is likely to continue to be true in the future. Boswell and Chase-Dunn (2000) contend that capitalism and socialism have dialectically interacted with one another in a positive feedback loop similar to a spiral. Labor and socialist movements were obviously a reaction to capitalist industrialization, but also the U.S. hegemony and the post-World War II global institutions were importantly spurred on by the World Revolution of 1917 and the waves of decolonization.

Core/Periphery Hierarchy and Semiperipheral Development

As implied above, core/periphery hierarchies are not, by definition, a characteristic of all world-systems in the evolutionary world-systems perspective. Rather institutionalized domination and exploitation of some polities by others emerged with the invention of institutions and organizations that allowed some polities to exploit and dominate distant other polities. Core/periphery hierarchies have emerged. The nature of core/periphery interactions has changed with the invention and development of military technologies, military organization, communications and transportation technologies and economic and religious institutions that conceptualize and regulate competitive and cooperative relations among polities.

The notion of the “semiperiphery” is a relational concept. Semiperipheral polities are in the middle of a core/periphery hierarchy, but what that means depends on the nature of existing organizations and institutions and the forms of interaction that exist within a particular world-
system. Semiperipheral marcher chiefdoms are necessarily somewhat different from semiperipheral marcher states and semiperipheral modern nation-states. The evolutionary world-systems perspective points to the similarities as the basis for the claim that studying whole world-systems is necessary in order to explain socio-cultural evolution. But this does not tell us what semiperipherality is in any particular world-system. For that we have to know the nature of those institutions that regulate interactions in the particular system. And successfully playing the game of upward mobility that involves challenging the core powers, moving up in the system and sometimes transforming the very nature of the whole system, is an even more complicated matter involving innovation and the implementation of new technologies, ideologies and forms of organization.

Our study of large expansions of the territorial sizes of empires (Ahmed et al. 2013) shows that over half these empire upsweeps in five world regions since the Bronze Age were the result of conquest but semiperipheral marcher states. These upsweeps are the historical events that account for the long-run trend toward larger polity sizes. Semiperipheral development does not explain them all, but it explains enough of them to substantiate the claim that world-systems must be compared in order to explain major long-term trends in sociocultural evolution.

Figure 2: A core/periphery hierarchy

Some observers have claimed that the world is now flat because of globalization. But studies of global inequalities do not find a strong trend toward a flatter world. Even with the rapid economic growth of China and India in the past few decades, the global stratification system has not become significantly more equal (Bornschier 2010). The large international differences in levels of development and income that emerged during the industrial revolution in the 19th century continue to be an important feature of the global stratification system. Others have claimed that globalization
and “the peripheralization of the core” evident in the migration of industrial production to semiperipheral countries has eliminated the core/periphery hierarchy. Deindustrialization of the core and the process of financialization have had important impacts on the structure of core/periphery relations, but it is surely an exaggeration to contend that the core/periphery hierarchy has disappeared. Certainly U.S. economic hegemony is in decline and there are newly arising challengers from the semiperiphery. But recent upward and downward mobility has not appreciably reduced the overall magnitude of inequalities in the world-system.

The proponents of a global stage of capitalism have often focused on an allegedly recent emergence of a transnational capitalist class. William Carroll’s (2010) research on transnational interlocking directorates and political networks have changed over the past several decades to link wealthy and powerful families in Europe with those in North America and Japan. Though a few individuals from semiperipheral countries have managed to join the club, it remains mainly the province of big property owners from core countries. William Robinson (2008) has also focused attention on how the conditions of workers and peasants have been transformed by capitalist globalization, and he contends that a global class structure is emerging that will have consequences for the future of class relations and world politics.

The concepts of a transnational capitalist class and the further transnationalization of workers and peasants are important ideas, and they may also be usefully employed to examine relations among elites and masses in earlier centuries as well. There has always been a world-system-wide class structure. Immanuel Wallerstein (1974) analyzed the class structure of the Europe-centered world-system of the long sixteenth century. Samir Amin (1980) explicitly studied the global class structure before globalization became an important focus of study. In the centuries before the most recent wave of globalization there have been several important efforts by both capitalists and workers to coordinate their actions internationally. The global class system remains importantly impacted by the global North/South stratification system despite greater awareness of global interaction and the strengthening of transnational social movements.

Semiperipheral development has sometimes, but not always, led to the attaining of core status and hegemony in a core/periphery hierarchy and at other times it has only contributed to the development and spreading of new forms of interaction that eventually led to systemic transformation. The successful semiperipheral marcher states that produced large empires by means of conquest were often also innovators and implementers of new “techniques of power” that made larger systems more sustainable. The semiperipheral capitalist city-states that accumulated wealth by means of production and trade diffused commodity production to wide regions, providing incentives for subsistence producers to also produce a surplus, and inventing writing and accounting systems and forms of property and organization that sometimes diffused to the commercializing tributary empires to which they were semiperipheral. What will be the systemic consequences of the actions and developments of contemporary semiperipheral peoples?

**Classes and Core/Periphery Hierarchies**

Chase-Dunn and Hall (1995) have noted that the relationship between the class structures of core and peripheral polities have changed with the emergence of a predominantly capitalist world-system. In tributary world-systems, in which accumulation was primarily based on the use of state power to extract taxes and tribute, core polities tended to be more internally stratified than non-core
polities were. The centers of agrarian empires were large capital cities in which a small elite dominated and exploited a large mass of workers and peasant farmers. Non-core societies tended to have less inequality because their settlements were smaller and their class relations were less stratified. Those in the periphery had chiefdoms organized around kinship. Semiperipheral polities had a recently emerged ruling class that was still not that different from the non-elite families. This relatively lessor degree of inequality in non-core polities facilitated group solidarity (asabiyyah) and was an important reason why semiperipheral marcher states were able to conquer older core states that had greater inequality and less solidarity (Chase-Dunn and Anderson 2005).

With the emergent predominance of capitalism the relationship between core/periphery relations and class structure changed. Now core polities tended to have less inequality because a large middle class developed, producing a diamond-shaped class structure ♦. Non-core polities tended to have more inequality because a small elite dominates and exploits a large mass of poor peasants and poor urban residents, producing a pyramid-shaped class structure ▲. This stabilizes the system to some extent because now core powers have greater internal stability than non-core powers. But semiperipheral development continues because economic development is uneven. The relationship between class structure and the core/periphery hierarchy continues to be important. Now the core/periphery hierarchy crosscuts the class structures within polities. In the core a relative harmony of classes is based on having a larger middle class and on the ability of core elites to reward subalterns with the returns to imperialism. In the periphery class conflict is also undercut by the core/periphery hierarchy to some extent, because some elites side with the masses against colonialism and neo-colonialism. But in the modern semiperiphery class conflict is not suppressed by the core/periphery hierarchy. On the contrary, class conflict is exacerbated because some elites have both the opportunity and the motive to adopt policies such as economic nationalism that are intended to move up the food chain of the global economy, while other elite factions prefer the status quo. Movements supported by workers and peasants can more often find allies among the elites. This explains why antisystemic movements were able to attain state power in semiperipheral Russia and China in the 20th century (Chase-Dunn 1998, Chapter 11).

The Contemporary Core/Periphery Hierarchy

The social science literature on measuring the relative positions of national societies in the larger core/periphery hierarchy continues to be contentious. Is there really a single dimension that captures most of important distinctions between national societies with regard to economic, political, military and cultural power, or is the core/periphery hierarchy multidimensional, and if so what are the most important dimensions?3 Arrighi and Drangel (1986) argued that the semiperiphery is a discrete economic stratum that is separated by empirical gaps from core and peripheral zones. But another way to look at the core/periphery hierarchy is as a multidimensional set of power structures, including economic, political and military power the forms a continuous hierarchy that is reproduced, but that also contains occasional instances of upward and downward mobility? If this is the case, the labels of core, periphery and semiperiphery are just convenient signifiers of relative overall position rather than truly discrete categories. If semiperipherality is just a rough container for those that are rather more in the middle of a continuous distribution of

3 Radice (2009) provides a thorough review of the disputes about the conceptualization of the semiperiphery in the modern world-system.
positions, are there important different ways to be semiperipheral and might these be related to how a national society or the movements that are based in these national societies behave in world politics? I contend that the question of cutting points between allegedly discrete core, peripheral and semiperipheral zones is largely a matter of convenience in what is, in the long run, a continuous set of distributions. In order to produce a map that shows where the semiperipheral countries are it is necessary to adopt cutting points but it is not necessary to claim that there are empirically discrete positions within the global hierarchy.

Jeffrey Kentor’s (2000, 2005) quantitative measure of the position of national societies in the world-system remains the best continuous measure because it includes GNP per capita, military capability, and economic dominance/dependence (Kentor 2008). I have trichotomized Kentor’s continuous indicator of world-system position into core, periphery and semiperipheral categories in order to do research and to produce the kind of map shown in Figure 3 below. The core category is nearly equivalent to the World Bank’s “high income” classification, and is what most people mean by the term “Global North.” The “Global South” is divided into two categories: the semiperiphery and the periphery. The semiperiphery includes large countries (e.g. Indonesia, Mexico, Brazil, India, China) and smaller countries with middle levels of GNP per capita (e.g. Taiwan, South Korea, South Africa, Israel, etc.).

Figure 3: The global hierarchy of national societies: core, semiperiphery and periphery in 2000 (Source of data: Kentor 2008)

Figure 3 depicts the global hierarchy of national societies divided into the three world-system zones. The core countries are in dark black, the peripheral countries are gray, and the semiperipheral countries in the middle of the global hierarchy are in crosshatch. Several terms have been used in recent popular and social science literatures that are approximately equivalent to what we mean by the semiperiphery: Newly Industrializing Countries (NICs), “emerging markets,” and most recently BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). In Figure 3 it is visually obvious that North America and Europe are mostly core, Latin America is mostly semiperipheral, Africa is mostly peripheral and Asia is a mix of the three zones.
As we have said above, the evolutionary world-systems perspective contends that semiperipheral regions have been unusually fertile sources of innovations and have implemented social organizational forms that transformed the scale and logic of world-systems. The hypothesis of semiperipheral development implies that attention should be paid to events and developments within the semiperiphery, especially the emergence of social movements and the emergence of national regimes.

The World Social Forum process is conceptually global in extent, but its entry upon the world stage as an instrument of the New Global Left has come primarily from semiperipheral Brazil and India. The “Pink Tide” process in Latin America, led by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, has been constituted by the emergence of reformist and antisystemic national regimes in fourteen out of twenty-three Latin American countries since the Cuban Revolution (Chase-Dunn and Morosin 2013). We want to pay special attention to these kinds of phenomena and to their interaction with one another because of the hypothesis of semiperipheral development.

Wallerstein’s development of the concept of the semiperiphery has often implied that the main function of having a stratum in the middle is to somewhat depolarize the larger system analogously to a large middle class within a national society (e.g Wallerstein 1976). This functionalist tendency has been elaborated in the notion of “subimperialism” originally developed by Ruy Mauro Marini (1972) and more recent discussed by Patrick Bond (2013) in his analysis of the BRICS. This approach focusses on the aspects of semiperipheral polities that tend to reinforce and reproduce the global structures of power. Bond’s study of post-apartheid South Africa’s “talk left, walk right” penchant is convincing. But he may underestimate the extent to which the emergent BRICS coalition is counter-hegemonic. The discussion of the need for an alternative to the U.S. dollar in the global economy and the proposal for a new development bank for the Global South have had an unsettling effect on the powers-that-be in Washington and New York even if Bond makes little of these challenges. The potentially transformationist slant on semiperipherality presented as part of the evolutionary world-systems approach above is a very different. The reality is probably that some aspects of semiperipheral polities, and their very existence, tend to help reproduce global inequalities, while other aspects truly challenge the powers that be and hold the potential for constructing a more egalitarian world society. Bond is certainly right that the transnational social movements need to push the BRICS to more effectively address the fundamental problems of ecological crisis, global inequality and global democracy.

The Challengers: Counter-hegemonic, reformist and anti-systemic

There are several kinds of significant contemporary challengers to the powers-that-be in the world-system. The question of reproduction vs. transformation requires understanding the different kinds of challengers. Here we follow Jackie Smith and Dawn Weist (2012) in distinguishing between counter-hegemonic movements, regimes and coalitions that opposed U.S. hegemony but are not politically progressive (Iran, North Korea, Al Qaeda and the possibly the BRICS). 4[4]

4[4] “Counter-hegemonic movements are those oriented toward challenging the leadership of the dominant state actor in the world-system, which since the mid-twentieth century has been the United States” (Smith and Weist 2012).
Among regimes, movements and coalitions that are progressive we distinguish between those that are reformists and those that antisystemic. Our study of Latin American regimes (Chase-Dunn and Morosin 2013) makes a distinction between reformist regimes that have adopted socially progressive policies or taken anti-neoliberal international positions and antisystemic regimes such as the members of ALBA, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America. Smith and Wiest (2012:10) define antisystemic as follows: “Antisystemic movements” include a diverse “family of movements” working to advance greater democracy and equality (Arrighi, Hopkins and Wallerstein 1989). According to Wallerstein, “to be antisystemic is to argue that neither liberty nor equality is possible under the existing system and that both are possible only in a transformed world” (1990:36).

Thus we have three categories for organizing a discussion of challengers: counter-hegemonic, reformist and anti-systemic. Some of the challengers to global neoliberalism and the hegemony of the United States are not progressive. Thus the New Global Left must distinguish between its allies and those political actors that are deemed to not be progressive. And among the latter there may be some that can be worked with on a tactical basis or convinced to pursue more progressive goals.

International geopolitics is a game that state regimes need to play. The logic of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” is hard to escape when one is in charge of national defense. This is the main factor behind the phenomenon of “strange bedfellows,” as when Hugo Chavez pals around with Iran’s Mahmoud Ahmadinejad or Syria’s Bashar al-Assad.

Regarding the hypothesis of semiperipheral development and the Pink Tide phenomenon in Latin America, we found that both semiperipheral and peripheral countries were equally likely to have moved toward either reformist or anti-systemic regime forms in the last few decades. But when we examine the timing of these moves we find that it was the semiperipheral countries that were the most likely to have initiated these changes (Chase-Dunn and Morosin 2013: Tables 2-4). Latin America as a whole has had more of these progressive challenging regimes because there has been a regional propinquity effect, and because it Latin American the non-core “backyard” of the global hegemon (the United States). Latin America is has a larger proportion of semiperipheral countries than do other world regions.

It should also be noted that the spread of the trappings of electoral democracy to the non-core has provided opportunities for progressive movements to peacefully attain power in local and national state organizations. Salvador Allende’s election in Chile was an example that was followed by the more recent electoral victories of populists of various kinds in Latin America. The imposition of draconian structural adjustment programs in Latin America in the 1980s and the rise neoliberal politicians who attacked labor unions and subsidies for the urban poor led to a reaction in many countries in which populist politicians were able to mobilize support from the expanded informal sector workers in the megacities, leading in many cases to the emergence of reformist and anti-systemic national regimes. The establishment of relatively institutionalized electoral processes in most Latin American countries has led the World Social Forum to proscribe individuals who represent political groups that advocate armed struggle from attending the WSF meeting as
representatives of those groups. But all this should not lead us to suppose that violence and military power are no longer important in politics. The fate of Allende and of the presidencies of Jean Bertrand Aristide in Haiti remind us that death squads, the military, and foreign intervention remain as powerful factors.

The relationship between the progressive national regimes and the progressive transnational social movements has been contentious. Despite strong support from the Brazilian Workers Party and the Lula regime in Brazil, the charter of the World Social Forum does not allow people to attend the meetings as formal representatives of states. When Chavez and Lula tried to make appearances at WSF meetings large numbers of movement activists protested. The horizontalists, autonomists and anarchists activists tend to see those who hold state power as the enemy even if they claim to be progressives. In some cases exceptions are made, as when autonomists from Europe have provided support for Evo Morales’s presidency in Bolivia (e.g. López and Iglesias Turrión, 2006).

The World Social Forum (WSF) process has itself been a complicated dance toward global party formation and the construction of a new global United or Popular Front (Amin 2007; Chase-Dunn and Reese 2007). Its charter prohibits the WSF itself from adopting a program or policy stances. The WSF is supposed to be an arena for the grass roots movements to use to organize themselves and make alliances with one another. In practice this has led to competition among the movements and NGOs for hegemony within a hoped for emergent New Global Left. Studies of attendees at global World Social Forum meetings in Porto Alegre, Brazil and Nairobi, Kenya reveal a multicentric network of overlapping movements, in which four or five more central movements connect all the rest with one another (Chase-Dunn and Kaneshiro (2009). Up until 2011 the World Social Forum process had little participation from the Middle East. The Arab Spring revolts got the attention of activists, and in March of 2013 the World Social Forum will be held in Tunis. The connection of the Arab Spring revolts and continuing political contestation in Egypt with global neoliberalism and austerity has been obscured by the struggle for national democracy within the Middle Eastern countries and the rise of Islamist parties. But this larger connection is becoming more visible with the emergence of anti-austerity movements in Greece, Spain (2nd–tier core powers) and the United States, and the visibility of a Black Bloc in Egypt (Levine 2013).

The Next Three Futures: the movements and the regimes

Elsewhere Kirk Lawrence and I have discussed three broad possible scenarios that depict in general terms what might happen in the several decades (Chase-Dunn and Lawrence 2011; Lawrence 2012). We imagine the possibility of another round of U.S. hegemony in which the United States reindustrializes based on its comparative advantages in new lead high technology industries and provides global order that accommodates rising powers and challenging social movements. We conclude that this scenario is unlikely to come about because of the continuing political stalemate within the U.S. and growing resistance to U.S. unilateral use of military power.


We also contemplate the possible emergence of a democratic world government that would coordinate collectively rational responses to population pressure, global climate change and ecological degradation, global inequality and rivalries among national states and transnational social movements. We see this as a possible outcome that might be brought about if progressive transnational social movements could form a powerful coalition and could work with progressive national regimes in the Global South to democratize global governance and to organize a legitimate authority with the capacity to help resolve the great crises of the 21st century.

And we also contemplate “collapse” in which continuing U.S. hegemonic decline, rising challenges from the BRICS, a contentious multilateralism, conflictive action by both progressive and regressive transnational social movements lead to high levels of conflict that prevent coordinated responses to the emergent crises. This scenario could be much like what happened in the first half of the 20th century, or it could be worse because of the potential for huge destruction caused by more lethal weapons and because of the more globalized extent of ecological degradation. This is probably the most likely scenario. But the other paths are not yet completely impossible.

Both a new stage of capitalism and a qualitative systemic transformation to some form of socialism are possible within the next several decades, but a new systemic cycle of capitalism is more likely. The progressive evolution of global governance has occurred in the past when enlightened conservatives implemented the demands of an earlier world revolution in order to reduce the pressures from below that are brought to bear in a current world revolution. The most likely outcome of the current conjuncture is probably global Keynesianism in which enlightened conservatives in the global elite form a more legitimate and democratic set of global governance institutions to deal with the problems of the 21st century. If U.S. hegemonic decline is slow, as it has been up to now, and if financial and ecological crises are spread out in time and conflicts between ethnic groups and nations are also spread out, then the enlightened conservatives will have a chance to produce a reformed world order that is still capitalist but that meets the current challenges at least partially. But if the perfect storm of calamities should all come together in a short period of time (a single decade) the progressive movements and the progressive non-core regimes will have a chance to radically change the mode of accumulation to a form of global socialism.

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