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War and Peace Conjunctures, An Essay

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A Controversy between Lenin and Kautsky

In a sharp 1914 attack against Karl Kautsky, Vladimir Lenin, calling him the German “Marxist,” denied his ideas about the possibility of peaceful deals between democratic capitalist states. According to Kautsky, wars had become too costly as a means of solving opposite interests; thus, in the end, the democratic capitalist states could reach a collective deal to control the capitalist system. Kautsky wrote that “tendencies of capital expansion may be favored through peaceful democracy and not by violent imperialist methods” (Lenin, 1975). Further, wars between capitalist democracies would be replaced “by a common universal exploitation by financial capital united in an international scale” (Kautsky, 2008).

Kautsky’s statements followed the presentation of the same ideas in The Great Illusion, written in 1910 by Norman Angell, a British economist and Nobel Peace Prize winner of 1933. Norman Angell considered the advances of the global economic interdependence between the powerful states. Further, because the source of wealth related to international trade could not be controlled, war was becoming innocuous, without sense (Angell. 1910). For Lenin, imperialism and wars would be inevitable inside the capitalist system.

Actually the political divergences between Kautsky and Lenin were larger and not restricted to this issue of war and peace among capitalist states. Kautsky’s general ideas about the path of socialism were closer to those of Edouard Bernstein and Rosa Luxembourg, who also maintained sharp arguments with Lenin (Magnoli and Barbosa, 2011). Rosa Luxembourg considered the German Spartacus revolution an adventure, but took part in it and was murdered. Kautsky, who opposed the Spartacus revolution, was finally expelled from the Marxist establishment and labeled by his former colleagues the “renegade Kautsky.”

Leninists still maintain that wars are inevitable between the capitalist states. Some debate about over the causes of the two World Wars; others mention the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, while most Leninists omit the non-declared wars in Korea and between China and Vietnam which were started by non-capitalist countries (Fontes, 2010). However, one can reply that the First World War occurred when the influence of the aristocratic class on European governments was still very high and played a major role on the outbreak of the war.
About the Second World War, we can recall the appeasement policy of Chamberlain during the 1930s in face of violent Nazi aggressions; one can also point to the American attempts to stay out of the European war and to negotiate a deal with Japan. These policies expressed the search by the two leading democratic capitalist powers for peaceful solutions at that time. The recent wars in Iraq or Afghanistan cannot be considered as occurring between capitalist powers. They express more a resistance along the peripheries of traditional cultures to the world order imposed by the capitalist system.

Thus, the facts apparently lend credence to the statements expressed by Angell and sustained by Kautsky. However, one may concede that (1) since the end of the Second World War and until the 1990s, capitalists were engaged as a bloc in a confrontation with the USSR; (2) after the War, the US emerged with disproportionate strength relative to that of the other capitalist states combined; and (3) the existence of nuclear bombs created an enormous deterrent to war. At the beginning of the Cold War, Churchill pronounced famously that it is better to have built a divided world than have destroyed a united world. The atomic weapon plays a major role in removing chances of war between the leading world states. A danger lies in the case of atomic weapons falling into the hands of people who care more about life in Heaven than on the Earth.

Let us remember that a number of international institutions were created in the wake of the Second World War to sustain the cohesion of the capitalist states as a unified bloc. After the war, the Marshall Plan was offered in order to rebuild both the victims of the war and its perpetrators -- Germany, Italy and Japan. At the 1944 Bretton Woods conference, the International Monetary Fund and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, IBRD, were created. By 1947, the US held 34.25% of IBRD’s capital and, together with the UK, 48.3%. IBRD was the basis for the World Bank Group, composed of the World Bank and other financial agencies, such as the Agency for International Development, AID (Pereira, 2009).

Non-Marxist thinkers, since they do not rely upon the deterministic role of the economic base, generally do not have theories or questions about whether or not there can be a permanent state of war or peace. Freud, for instance, thought the fight between Eros and Thanatos was permanent since it involved human impulses; he argued, though, that education can reduce the strength of Thanatos (Freud, 2009).

The Cold War influenced Toynbee, who feared a third world war, making him pessimistic about mankind’s practices. He wrote that neither the United States nor the Soviet Union is suffering from economic deprivation. However, “they hardly enjoy freedom from mutual fear” and “The West and probably the entire human race depend on the disruption of that fateful succession of major wars whose basic pattern already points in a direction of breakdown and ‘suicide’” (Mason, 1958:54).
However, Toynbee maintained the hope that fear of the Atom Bomb, along with the work of international institutions, rising internationalist beliefs and the decline of violent ideological aggressive nationalism, could keep the peace. He believed in a long term solution provided by a government of the oecumene (Mason, 1958). He also believed that religion could lead the way to a more peaceful world. He never predicted the present rise of militant religious fundamentalism, which is beginning to erode previously firm nation states.

Henry Mason wrote that “Most authors appear to agree with Toynbee that war in the nuclear rocket age has become tantamount to suicide for human civilization.” For instance, he cited F. L. Schuman’s *The Commonwealth of Man*, 1953, which said that “war in the atomic age is obsolete, since no statesman can anticipate its course of consequences” (Mason, 1958:105).

**Determinant and Dominant Levels**

Contemporary Marxian theory defines the social structure as being constituted by a deterministic economic base and by diverse other levels of social systems, including practices or instances. In a given moment, one of these other systems, such as the cultural, the ideological, or the political, takes a dominant role in guiding social movement, but the economic level still acts as a deterministic force from below. One will say, for instance, that the economic crisis after the First World War was behind the growth of the fascist ideologies among Italian and German populations during the 1920s and 30s.

The dominant social level can be defined as a conjuncture. For instance, when Galileo, utilizing the telescope, discovered and stated that it is the Earth that moves around the sun, a new conjuncture was being established. And, because it was introducing a new conjuncture, it raised strong reaction from the Church that almost cost Galileo his life for heresy. The new conjuncture was characterized by giving an upper hand to science rather than religion in explaining the world, and if such truths could change, so could social structures.

By the 1930s in Europe, with the rise of Nazism, political ideology became a new conjuncture. Despite the appeasement policies of France and England, the Nazis’ aggressive policy led to the Second World War.

After the War, an ideological fight was used in the competition for hegemony between the former USSR and the US, in the *Cold War*. The Soviet Union represented nationalism and socialism; the US represented capitalism and democracy. These two ideologies came close to real conflict in 1962 during the Cuban Missile Crisis, a war only deterred by the threat of a mutually destructive nuclear war.
Since then, nuclear war has served as a strong deterrent, preventing war between the current major world powers. A concept of responsible states was created, referring to the first atomic powers and the world’s leading powers. Among the big current world powers, only Brazil does not possess nuclear military power. A danger of a proliferation of nuclear capacity was recognized, and following a succession of UN conferences, a treaty of nonproliferation was signed by the majority of its members. A danger lies in the use of nuclear power in local wars between minor powers, with the risk of major power involvement in such a war. Also, there is the danger of having such weapons fall into the hands of terrorists.

Although contention still existed between the US and the USSR, revelations about Stalinism, growing hostility in Central and East Europe against Soviet impositions, and the apparent economic decline of the USSR and its satellites culminated in 1991 with the dissolution of the former Soviet Union. Meanwhile, by the 1970s and 1980s, a new economic capitalist cycle started to operate and guide the process which would be called globalization.

While the Soviet Union was moving toward its demise, Communist China, on the contrary, was becoming a second superpower, replacing the former Soviet Union. However, instead of building once again an iron curtain or promoting political propaganda around the world, China became a main sustainer of the capitalist system and its globalization. Thus, China’s model further destroyed the former communist ideology of a common political system for the masses and the Leninist view of the class struggle. National economic growth became the new ideology.

The only exception to joining the capitalist global system appears nowadays in the Muslim world. In most Muslim countries, the strict observance of religion and very high birth rates has been maintained to a high degree. Secular Muslim regimes, with large presences of military personages in the governments, have failed to provide economic wealth for a fast growing population or address enormous inequalities of income; instead, they were more often involved in practices of corruption.

Since the end of the last century, religion has been used as a political weapon, an alliance of religion and authoritarian rule. Unlike the secular values of Western culture, these religious dictatorships have scorned what appears to them to be permissive regimes which allow forbidden behaviors (sexual equality and human rights). The ideological framework of this movement contains anti-Western and anti-globalization principles. However, the low rank of the Muslim states in the world hierarchy of power is not enough to give them a direct role of influencing the path of war or peace on a world scale. Regional military conflicts inside the Muslim world during recent decades have not permitted that world to directly oppose the leading world powers militarily.
The Economic Level Being Simultaneously a Determinant and Dominant Level

After the Cold War, a kind of hegemonic condominium was established between the US and the USSR, called “bipolarization.” Later, as the USSR dissolved, and globalization was being established, we reached a phase of the US becoming the world’s monopolar power based on its economic and military strengths.

As globalization with its flows of capital advanced, one saw a continuous growth in the periphery of the historic centers of capitalism. It gave place to the appearance of the developing countries. A prominent place was reached particularly by the emergence of countries with either continental size or population: Brazil, Russia, India and China, called the BRIC countries. Emphasis is put on China, for being now the second strongest economy and on its gross domestic product, still growing above 8% per year. In statistical terms, if the current pace is maintained, by 2030 China may surpass the US as the leading world economy.

The diffusion of economic growth among major world countries has pushed their governments to what John Friedmann once called competitive cooperation (Friedmann, 1999). Different from the former Soviet Union, Communist China appears today as a fundamental pillar of the world capitalist system. In Brazil, the anti-American ideological movement led by leftist parties, very strong during the 1990s, has declined as a government guided by a leftist party aims to occupy higher economic and political positions in the global system. The developing powers realized their economic advantages as they were becoming leading partners within the world economic system. Their confidence increased when the economic crisis of 2008 exposed a dominant role played by the developing countries in the efforts to reach a needed global solution.

On the other hand, the socio-cultural environment of globalization became characterized by the formation of “cognitive-cultural” societies (Scott, 2007). Every day, the media bombards the populations with sets of numbers related to the economic, financial, and social conditions of each country and of the world, to be consumed. More and more people relate their satisfaction with the management of the economy and public affairs by the private and governmental sectors.

The constant stream of comparisons contributes to a common effort of countries to solve the current crisis of the world capitalist system. The current crisis started in the US at the end of 2008, and spread quickly around the whole world. The reactions of the leading states of the capitalist system did present a picture very different from what happened during the 1930s. At that time, each state tried its particular solution, as did the US with the New Deal, or Germany with its rearmament and conquests. Now, one sees orchestrated international action to reverse the recession by states with extreme social and political differences, such as the US and China, or the UK and Brazil. A
group of the 20 most developed states, the G-20, meets regularly to reach coordinated economic measures.

The present economic crisis is more damaging inside the old historical capitalist centers than inside the BRIC countries. China still grows at an annual rate of 8% and is sharply increasing its military power. Therefore, one sees the development of the idea that one moves from a monopolar world, led by the US, to a multipolar world with a large equilibrium of forces. However, all these countries are reconsidering now that their fate, growth, is tied to the health of the entire capitalist system.

Thus, the present world conjuncture is favorable to the maintenance of peace among the major global powers.

**Hegel, Marx and Engels, and the State**

In Hegel’s view, at its end history will culminate in a universal state. For Marx and Engels, on the contrary, history will return to its beginnings, but at a higher level, with the establishment of societies that have neither classes nor states, thanks to Communism. For Marx and Engels, the state appeared to be a class instrument, one which was taken up after the Industrial Revolution by the capitalists of each country.

Instead, today, everywhere in the world, the state is getting larger, except in some particular instances. The direction of the state and of society is currently the subject of debate inside the developed and developing countries, alike. And while, in general, private economic entrepreneurs and executives favor a smaller role for the state, popular and leftist parties favor a more pronounced presence for the state.

In the economic crisis facing the European Union, for instance, leftist parties are viewing the recovery as dependent on a larger involvement of the state, promoting expenditures and consumption to stimulate production, even at the costs of an increase in the public debt and inflation. Meanwhile, the other party sees the solution through policies of austerity, cutting debts, and diminishing the role of the state as a provider of wealth.

Looking to the world framework, one observes that the developing countries, such as Brazil and especially China, have historically and currently featured a dominant role for the state. On the other side, the US appears as the model of a country that since its foundation aimed to have a state that plays a minimum role in domestic affairs.

However, in face of the current universal economic conjuncture, the US now faces a new dilemma of giving the state a larger role. Often, one sees President Barack Obama being called a “socialist” as a strategy by the right wing to prevent any growth in the role of the state. For instance, the Affordable Care Act is increasing the number of
people covered by medical insurance; it is doing so gradually by raising income taxes on
the rich, with the rationale that the inequality of income distribution is reaching its
historically high levels. Actually, one may think that the future of the US, as the
number one nation of the world, lies in the choices it makes about the role of the state in
economic and social practices.

Potential Future Dangers

Although air transportation is considered very secure today, in every airplane seat one
finds recommendations “in case of.” The same can be said about the dangers of having
world war. Since the end of the Second World War up to the present decade, the world
conjuncture has furthered conditions of world peace among the hegemonic powers. It is
not easy today for any of the developed or developing countries to mobilize citizens for
wars of conquest or to resolve differences not serious enough to put their national
survival in danger. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, for instance, were fought mostly
by American professional soldiers.

However, some dangers are still present, even if they appear to be small in the face of
the larger interests of the majority of the world population for peace. Let us list some of
the dangers.

The European Union is having difficulty in overcoming their current economic crisis,
where some countries have rates of unemployment above 20%. This is a framework
that has consequences, including the rise of right wing parties hostile to the EU.
Germany, with its 80 million people and with the world’s fourth largest gross domestic
product, has started to have great influence over EU policies. The result is an increase
of animosity against Germany in some of the weaker states of Europe, reviving
resentments once held against Germany for its role in World War II. For many
economists, one of the components of the present European crisis lies in the fact that the
free movement of people, merchandise, and capital between states with a common
currency is producing enormous economic concentration in Germany. The currency is
common, but not the duties of administrating the states.

At present, the political opposition between centrist and leftist parties includes their
views in regard to the strengthening or the weakening of EU political ties. The current
positions taken by the European left is increasingly anti-globalization and anti-
American, with a resurgence of past nationalistic ideologies.

“Opposed extremes are approaching,” writes Anne Applebaum, about current elections
in European countries. The European leftist parties, such as the Greek leftist coalition,
urge distancing their country from Europe and then approaching Russia (Applebaum,
2012). As it is well known, there is conflict of interests between Russia and NATO,
particularly about a rocket shield intended to be established by NATO in eastern European states.

However, these opposition movements in Europe are unlikely to shift to military hostilities, because the population is less interested in socialism than in the realization that wars between states will be disastrous.

The case of China presents two main political issues: the present structure of power in the country and the continued role of the Communist Party and of the People’s Army. The army is the guardian of the revolution led by Mao. The party is the provider of government leaders and the setting wherein the political intelligentsia acts. This party is managing the country and introducing modernity.

Since the modernizations introduced by party leader Deng Xiaoping, China as a whole has benefitted enormously (Zenin, 2002), and domestic politics are relatively peaceful. However, Chinese urbanization and growth is introducing regional and social inequalities and more social demands. Thus, for some analysts, some questions are asked about these inequalities and how a long continuation of the world economic crisis could affect Chinese political evolution.

Increasing domestic demands can influence current policy and political movements in two different directions. They may distract the country’s attentions from external disputes, or on the contrary, the external issues could be used to divert the population from its domestic problems. In the case of China, internal troubles, a sharp fall of its economic growth, may bring back ideological struggles for power and might involve an army that has a particular political role. Given that China has very sensitive questions on its international agenda, harder or softer ideological political lines may affect its external policies, more or less aggressively (The Economist, 2012).

A second issue has to do with Taiwan, a very important Chinese issue. This issue began in 1949, when the Communist revolution took power in continental China. China claims sovereignty over Taiwan; Taiwan has claimed independence (with unification perhaps an ultimate goal), its status protected by treaty with the US. The fact that the impasse has remained static for more than 60 years can be viewed in two ways. One way is that traditional Chinese patience still works. The other way, also decisive, is that the neither the US nor China is interested in a war. The independence of Taiwan is maintained with the support of a large portion of the island population. It is certainly possible to reach an agreement on the issue of Taiwan by following lines somewhat similar to what was established for Hong Kong.

A danger lies, however, in the linkages between this issue and the questions raised above. In the case of a strong internal struggle between harder and softer sectors of the
Communist Party and of the People’s Army, the issue of Taiwan may become hot. Any sector in power might be obliged to emphasize the Taiwan question for its legitimacy.

Another danger of a large world war lies in armed hostilities started by belligerent smaller countries with nuclear capability. A conventional war could escalate into a nuclear one, drawing in major powers.

At present, North Korean threats of imposing its domination over the whole Korean Peninsula and Iranian nuclear weapon developments seem to be the most dangerous threats to world peace. They appear to be very dangerous because these countries seem to be reluctant to open negotiation about their aims. The nuclear issue is potentially the worst, considering commitment of Islamic fundamentalism to terrorist practices and the danger of transferring nuclear explosives to terrorist groups. And one must also consider the possibility of India and Pakistan, both nuclear powers, inadvertently going to nuclear war.

**Closing Remarks**

The threat of a new world war has receded since the end of the World War II. We have seen the spread of capitalism to most of the developing countries. It has diminished the power of traditional aristocrats, enlarged the influence of corporations, and facilitated the rise of a new class of executives. It is this class that has guided the movement to globalization.

One does not desire to give the impression of a rosy picture of the capitalist mode of production and globalization. The critical emergence of income disparity, such as that in the US, is dangerous. However, throughout history, war has never established a better life for the people of the world. The most important shield against war is the strengthening of peaceful ideologies as civil societies develop into cognitive cultural societies.
References


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