

Introduction

This is a people's history of the capitalist world-system, focusing on the period from 1492 to 2008. It is written in solidarity with the 7.6 billion of us who work for a living, and struggle against the hegemony of the approximately two thousand billionaires who appropriate our labor. Our main thesis is that the history of geopolitics since 1492 – the story of which power or powers became hegemonic over the planet and which did not, how each hegemon managed the political, social and economic contradictions of its rule, and why each hegemony or co-hegemony ultimately unraveled as it did – is one of the most critical and yet overlooked elements of today's struggles for political freedom, economic justice and cultural dignity.

The immediate impulse for this work came from a famous speech by Charles de Gaulle, who remarked that 1945 signified the conclusion of Europe's second Thirty Years War.¹ This comment is by no means a piece of cynical Franco-imperial revisionism. Rather, it contains the seed of a genuinely dialectical insight into the nature of the post-1492 capitalist world-system. This insight is the crucial role of geopolitical conflict and of hegemonic powers in determining the daily operation and long-term evolution of that world-system.

From our vantage point in the early 21st century, three periods of planetary geopolitical conflict have occurred during the capitalist world-system's four and a half centuries of existence. These periods of conflict were so vast in their scale and scope, and so far-reaching in their economic, political and cultural consequences, that we will term them “supercycles” to distinguish them from the smaller, shorter cycles of dynastic wars, colonial expansionisms, national and imperial rivalries, and competing colonialisms and neocolonialisms. The three supercycles in question are the Thirty Years War of 1618-1648, the Forty Years War of 1775-1815, and the Thirty-One Years War of 1914-1945. We will refer to them as the first, second and third supercycles.

While each supercycle has its own unique characteristics, they share two key features. First, each supercycle was triggered by a protracted crisis within a previously hegemonic empire or empires. This crisis was resolved by means of a wrenching transformation of the world-system, and the inauguration of a new hegemon or group of co-hegemons. Second, these supercycles were not triggered by ideological dogmas or scheming leaders. They expressed the deepest logic of the capitalist world-system, that is to say, the logic of an unremitting expansionism teeming with irreconcilable contradictions. Capitalism exploded into planetary war precisely because its contradictions were planetary – and explosive.

One of the most profound of these contradictions was governance. While the capitalist world-system is based on universal competition, this competition requires universal governance structures in order to function properly. However, the development of these structures has always been as uneven and contradictory as the economic and cultural institutions of the world-system. Each supercycle was the result of irreconcilable conflicts over control of these governance structures, in the sense that some geopolitical entities had to win, while others had to lose.

This zero-sum logic did not take the form of a simple linear progression from one hegemony to another. It played out at variable speeds and degrees of intensity, due to the heterogenous political, cultural and economic histories of pre-capitalist rural regions and urban centers, and to the equally heterogenous histories of pre-capitalist cultural and political formations (dynastic empires, nobilitarian lineages, craft guilds, hieratic orders, familial and kinship networks, and so forth).

Geopolitical crises thus follow much the same asynchronous – that is to say, dialectical – logic as their economic and cultural counterparts. Where economic crises in the capitalist world market are the result of countless small increases in productivity which trigger those periodic crises of relative overproduction called the business cycle, and where cultural crises are the result of countless small innovations which trigger those periodic crises called aesthetic revolutions, geopolitical crises are the cumulative result of a host of micro-level changes which generate a wrenching macro-level transformation.

Just as each economic crisis temporarily resolves the underlying tensions of economic competition by bankrupting the least competitive capitalists and enabling the renewed expansion of the most competitive, and just as each cultural crisis temporarily resolves the tensions of cultural competition by rendering certain forms of cultural production obsolete or marginal and popularizing new ones, so too does each geopolitical crisis temporarily resolve the tensions of geopolitical competition by reducing the power of the least competitive geopolitical entities and allowing the new hegemon or co-hegemons to restructure and expand the world market.

While the thesis of the three supercycles can help to explain why the capitalist world-system regularly exploded into apocalyptic violence, it suffers from the weakness of all concepts of historical rupture. This is the inability to explain periods of historical continuity, or more precisely, periods of hegemonic peace. This is not to argue these periods were devoid of significant military conflicts, but merely to underline the fact that such conflicts were limited in nature and extent. They did not fundamentally alter the prevailing economic arrangements, political institutions or cultural practices of the world-system in the cataclysmic manner of the supercycles.

We will argue that the three supercycles are best understood in the context of four intervening periods of hegemony or eras of “long peace”, to borrow Paul W. Schroeder's useful phraseology.² We will define the first as the Hapsburg long peace of 1492 to 1618 (126 years), the second as the Dutch-French long peace of 1648-1775 (127 years), the third as the British long peace of 1815-1914 (99 years), and the fourth as the American long peace of 1945-2008 (63 years).

To help us understand the nature and evolution of each supercycle and long peace, we will have frequent recourse to the field of geopolitics. In its original incarnation, geopolitics was the science of imperial management, i.e. how empires were created or destroyed, how they were maintained, and how they waged wars against each other. Later variants of geopolitical thinking broadened this mandate to include the study of the political systems which administered imperial rule, the cultural institutions which legitimated empires, and the economic structures which financed and sustained them. In the 20th century, the field of geopolitics expanded once more to include the categories of anti-imperial mass mobilizations and postcolonial nation-state formation.

Given its inherent association with the managerial aspects of empire, it should surprise noone to discover that the field of geopolitics has always been deeply complicit with the horrific violence of post-1492 imperialism. These latter are vast systems of domination which have generated the worst despotisms and biggest genocides in recorded human history. Yet this very complicity is what makes the study of geopolitics indispensable to theories of the world-system.

The critical rethinking of geopolitical concepts enables us to shuttle between the macrological level of the largest institutions of the capitalist world-system, and the micrological level of the smallest decisions taken by individual human beings in that system. This enables us to comprehend phenomena ranging from the structure of imperial populisms to the institutions of

neocolonial statecraft, and from the outbreak of anti-colonial national revolutions to the formation of postcolonial nation-states. By deciphering post-1492 geopolitical competition as the mask of capital, we can grasp yesterday's anti-colonial insurrections and today's democratic resistance movements as the embryonic forms of a transnational solidarity beyond the dictates of capital.

This excursus is divided into eight chapters. The first chapter describes the emergence of the 1492-1618 Hapsburg hegemony and the first supercycle, a.k.a. the Thirty Years War of 1618-1648. The second analyzes the Dutch-French co-hegemony of 1648-1775, and examines the emergence of systems of wageless (slavery and serfdom) and partly waged labor. The third analyzes the second supercycle of 1775-1815, the epoch of national insurrections, revolutions and the Napoleonic wars. The fourth and fifth examine the British long peace of 1815-1914, and the rise of national imperialisms, national capitalisms and systems of fully waged labor on the ashes of systems of wageless labor. The sixth analyzes the events of the third supercycle from 1914 to 1945, including the beginning of the disintegration of the 19th century super-empires and the rise of US monopoly capitalism to hegemony. The seventh and eighth focus on the first and second halves of the long American peace, namely the Global Plan from 1945 to 1973 and the Global Minotaur from 1973 to 2008, with a special focus on end of the super-empires, the Cold War, the construction of the European Union, and the rise of East Asia and China.

This excursus is not meant to be a narrowly political, cultural, or economic history. Rather, its goal is to unite all of these things into a series of transnational ensembles, the geopolitical equivalent of Adorno's conceptual casts or constellations. These ensembles do not stand outside of a given period of history or represent it from afar, but embody its innermost spatial and temporal contradictions. For example, each political development is considered in terms of its cultural and economic consequences, each cultural achievement is analyzed in terms of its economic and political ramifications, while each economic transformation is grasped in terms of its political and cultural dimensions. Conversely, each ensemble is linked to the others in what amounts to a speculative time-travel, a mode of dialectical thinking capable of both reconstructing each past out of the multiplicity of its speculative futures, while grasping each future in terms of the counterfactuals of its past.

Above all, this is a history of resistances, uprisings and rebellions past and present, whose flaws, deficiencies and failures are to be grasped in the light of the revolutions yet to come. In an era of the unchecked despotism of the billionaires, the critique of geopolitics opens the portal to the democracy of the billions.

- 1 . Charles de Gaulle. Address on July 28, 1946. <http://mjp.univ-perp.fr/textes/degaulle28071946.htm>.
2. Paul W. Schroeder. "Chapter 8: Embedded Counterfactuals and World War I As An Unavoidable War." In: *Stability, Systems and Statecraft*. New York: Macmillan, 2004 (157-192).