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Transformative International Relations Theory of Robert W. Cox

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the concept of change in international politics as conceptualized in Robert W. Cox's critical theory and its implications for the prospects of a post-hegemonic world order. The paper employs a critical theoretical approach, drawing on Cox's historicist-dialectical framework to analyze the transformative potential of historical change in international relations. The findings suggest that Cox's critical theory offers a more nuanced understanding of structural transformation, emphasizing the importance of material conditions, ideas, and institutions in shaping world orders. The paper also highlights the potential for countertendencies based on new historical blocs to emerge in response to deepening socioeconomic cleavages and the decline of Pax Americana. Drawing on Cox's critical theory, this paper provides a comprehensive view of the potential for structural transformation of the neoliberal world order from the "bottom upwards".

Keywords: *international relations theory, historical materialism, Robert Cox, hegemony, world order, structural transformation*

Introduction

Canadian historian and political economist, Robert W. Cox is recognized for his outstanding contribution in the field of international political economy (IPE) and critical international relations theory. In his controversial and widely cited paper *'Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory'*, Cox (1981) opened the debate on the status quo bias of neorealist theories. Cox (1981, p. 87) wrote, "Theory is always for someone and for some purpose". He argued that the purpose that gives rise to problem-solving (neorealist) theories is to make the existing order of relationships and institutions work smoothly by dealing effectively with particular sources of trouble. However, this relative strength of problem-solving theory is based on faulty assumptions of static human nature and the structure of the international system (Cox, 1981, p. 89). In reality, the social and political order is dynamic and subject to change, at least over the long term.

Statement of Problem

The purpose of critical theory, in contrast, is to understand and examine political order in a changing reality and clarify the range of possible alternatives (Cox, 1981, pp. 88-89). Critical theory, thus, contains an element of utopianism in the sense that it allows for a normative choice in favor of a social and political order different from the prevailing order.

This paper explores how the concept of change in international politics is conceptualized in Cox's critical theory (also called the historicist-dialectical approach or historical materialism) and what are the Coxian prospects of post-hegemonic world order. The findings suggest that Cox's critical theory

offers a more nuanced understanding of structural transformation, emphasizing the importance of material conditions, ideas, and institutions in shaping world orders. The paper also highlights the potential for countertendencies based on new historical blocs to emerge in response to deepening socioeconomic cleavages and the decline of Pax Americana.

Research Objective

This paper aims to explore the concept of change in international politics as conceptualized in Robert W. Cox's critical theory and its implications for the prospects of a post-hegemonic world order.

Results and Discussion

Conceptualization of Change in Problem-Solving Theories

Although positivists (realists and liberals) lean heavily in favor of continuity, in the duality of continuity and change, according to Cox (1976, p. 62), there are two ways in which change is conceived in the positivist paradigm. The first method, which Cox called the natural-rational approach, views the world in terms of a duality distinguishing the inward nature from the outward appearance of human institutions and events. The inward nature is universal (a reflection of objective principle), is knowable by reason (common rationality), and provides the constraint against which purposive action (a reflection of subjective principle) of constructing and upholding a polity takes place (Cox, 1976, p. 62). In Machiavellian tradition, when purposive action possess "creative energy" (virtù) politics will rise to meet utopian ideal, but in the absence thereof, pressure of external constraints will result in the subordination of civic spirit to the pursuit of particular interests (Leysens, 2008, p. 20). Thus, this model conceptualizes change as political cycles – hopeful periods are followed by phases of progressive corruption – in historical processes.

The second method, which Cox called the positivist-evolutionary approach, holds that all of reality is reducible to comparable and quantifiable factors that interact to form a system with an equilibrium tendency (Cox, 1976, p. 64). Equilibrium or "integration" is achieved, and allows for emergence of relatively stable structure, when constitutive parts of a system exist in functionally harmonious complementarity. Social evolution as a system's progressive integration was conceptualized in nineteenth-century sociology, particularly by Tönnies and Durkheim, as a shift from a traditional, rural, organic society to a more complex urban and industrial division of labor (Cox, 1976, p. 64). Change as a historical process in this model is introduced by the notion of a "feedback loop". The interactions of the system produce certain outputs or consequences – such as population growth, production, resource depletion, pollution – which provide feedback for modification of inputs for the next round of outputs (Cox, 1976, p. 65). Systemic dynamics (change) are thus explained in terms of outputs and modified inputs due to feedback from outputs (Leysens, 2008, p. 20).

The application of the natural-rational and positivist-evolutionary approaches provides distinct pictures of the global order; the former has critical potential while the latter is biased in favor of the status quo (Cox, 1976, p. 65). The natural-rational approach, which is predicated on the rationality of human nature, tends to highlight the role of "creative energy" (virtù) in explanation of social order. As found in Kant's observation, this approach assumes that world political order as a whole cannot be inconsistent with any one of its constituent pieces (Cox, 1976, pp. 67-68), that injustice or disorder in the parts would threaten the maintenance of order and justice at the global level.

In Kant's view, the normative condition for eternal peace is liberal pluralism in the global order and its constituent polities. However, by the late 1960s, the United States – the chief exporter of liberal pluralism – had turned to endorsing authoritarianism, which was justified as a necessary "function" of "underdeveloped political structures" (Cox, 1976, pp. 68-69). It was overlooked that the institutions of pluralism presuppose a diffusion of power, but where power is dispersed extremely unevenly, institutions that

appear pluralistic on the surface will actually be despotic facades (Cox, 1976, p. 70). This inference suggests that the natural-rational approach has an insufficient understanding of the Machiavellian concept of "necessità", the material constraints that must be taken into account in shaping action toward the normative goal.

In contrast, the positivist-evolutionary approach is limited to depicting world order based upon a projection of the observed tendencies of contemporary society (Cox, 1976, p. 65). A more centralized international system, for example, is envisioned by functionalist theories developed in the post-war era as the result of an ongoing process of global integration (Cox, 1976, p. 70). While the transnational approach highlights the role of non-state actors, such as multinational corporations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the transgovernmental approach emphasizes the role of intergovernmental organizations such as the European Union (EU) in the integration of international system. Both approaches project these integrating trends into the future while neglecting the reality that, when a trend becomes observable, it is frequently met with thwarting forces and movements (Leysens, 2008, pp. 22-23). Brexit is a case in point.

To sum up, despite the natural-rational approach's critical potential to account for the influence of purposive action, its inability to promote justice in the contemporary context reveals a lack of understanding of the material constraints. On the other hand, the positivist-evolutionary approach posits a continuing present – the permanence of the institutions and power relations which constitute its parameters (Cox, 1981, p. 89). Dominant norms of post-war period thus lead this approach to anticipate a more centralized international system whose function is to maximize productivity while maintaining social stability. It stands in service of problem-solving, the purpose of which to make the existing order of relationships and institutions work smoothly by dealing effectively with particular sources of trouble (Cox, 1976, p. 64).

A Historicist Dialectical Approach to World Order

In contrast to natural-rational, the historical dialectic approaches the notion of dualism (subjective/objective) in a totality rather than in separation (Cox, 1976, p. 65). Furthermore, unlike the positivist-evolutionary approach, which looks for trends or predictable regularities in objective data, the historicist-dialectical approach bases its conclusions on facts delineated in intersubjective ideas (Cox, 1976, pp. 65–66). Thus, the historicist is a "holist" for whom objective events are intelligible only within the larger totality of contemporaneous thought and action (Cox, 1976, p. 66). Beyond individual experience, the historicist approach introduces a level of generality with reference to particular historical phases with concepts like feudalism, capitalism, liberalism, fascism, etc. They represent ideal types expressive of the dominant orientations to actions of a period, rather than thought of a specific historical actor (Cox, 1976, p. 66). The method of historical structures is thus one of representing what can be called limited totalities – a simplified representation of a complex reality and an expression of tendencies (Cox, 1981, p. 100). The critical theory of Robert W. Cox can be broken down into four main arguments:

i. There are no universally valid laws that characterize the basic attributes of the social system as standing outside of and prior to history. Human nature and structures of human interaction are historical, not fixed.

ii. The relationship between social material (idealism) to physical material (materialism) is dialectical. They are two necessary and complementary ways to approach reality.

iii. Hegemony represents stability in social order and arises from a "fit" between material capabilities, ideas, and institutions.

iv. Change in social order involves a conflict model, i.e., societies change

because of the appearance of ideological and material "antagonisms" within them.

Cox was influenced by a number of scholars within the critical historicist tradition. Among the influential thinkers was the eighteenth century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico, who argued that human nature is not a fixed essence but the ensemble of social relations changing through the course of history (Cox, 1996, p. 29). Coxian historicism, thus, takes into consideration changes not only in technology and relative capabilities of actors but also in human nature and structures of human interaction (Cox, 1985, p. 53). Although regularities in human activities may indeed be observed within particular eras, and thus the positivist (problem-solving) approach can be fruitful within defined historical limits, for Cox (1985, p. 53) both human nature and the structures of human interaction change in the long run. History is the process of change in human nature and the structures of human interaction. Historicism, thus, reveals the historical structures characteristic of particular eras within which such regularities prevail, and more importantly, explain transformations from one structure to another (Cox, 1985, p. 53).

Georges Sorel taught Cox to appreciate the role of subjective movements (purposive action) in historical struggles and structural transformations (Cox, 1996, p. 27). Sorel maintained that although outcomes are unpredictable, nothing is ever achieved without passion, and therefore, it is crucial to understand the sources of political passion (Cox, 1996, pp. 27-28). This led to the revelation that objective realities (social and political institutions) are collective responses – constituted by intersubjective ideas – to the "physical material" challenges of natural world (Cox, 1985, p. 52). These institutions in turn form part of the "social material" framework – that is, artificial nature or the network of social interactions – where historical action takes place. This means that the relationship between social material (idealism) to physical material (materialism) is dialectical. According to Cox (1996, p. 28), "They are two necessary and complementary ways to approach reality." The historicist-dialectical approach, thus, is identical to historical materialism in that it conceives history in the relationship between mentalities and material conditions of existence (Cox, 1996, p. 27). It connects the mental schema through which people conceptualize action and material world that constrains what individuals can do and how they can think about doing it (Cox, 1985, p. 52).

From Antonio Gramsci, Cox learned that the conception of power, underlying the dominant orientations to actions of a period, extends beyond the distribution of economic and military capability to broadly accepted mode of thinking (Cox, 1985, p. 56). For Gramsci, the state is not the mere expression of the particular interests (capitalists) in civil society as perceived by Marxists, nor is it an autonomous force expressing some kind of general interest as perceived by non-Marxists (Cox, 1981, p. 96). The actions of state are best explained by the hegemony of relations among social classes; where the nature of power involved in hegemony is of a centaur, part man, part beast, a combination of consent and force (Cox, 1981, 119). Hegemony, thus, expresses itself in the union of outward and inward, of material capabilities and consciousness in service to a given ideal type (Cox, 1976, p. 77). In contrast to historical economism, which reduces everything to technological and material interests; Gramsci's philosophy recognized the efficacy of ethical and cultural sources of political action (though always in relation to the economic sphere). It is fully conscious of the contradictions of philosophy and freed from unilateral ideological elements (Cox, 1981, p. 118).

Cox learned from Marx and Sorel that the point in studying society was to change it (Cox, 1996, p. 28). Sorel also inspired Cox to look beyond the economic determinism of structuralist Marxism and focus on historical materialism instead which conceives historical change in the dialectical relationship between idealism to materialism (Cox, 1996, p. 27). Cox (1981, p. 95) asserted that in two aspects – ahistoricity and essentialist epistemology – structural Marxism of Althusser

(1979) and Poulantzas (1968) is identical to neorealist problem-solving approach; the main difference is in the precision of handling data. Historical materialism, on the other hand, is the most important source of critical theory since it thinks historically and aims to both explain and promote changes in social relations.

Historical materialism corrects neorealism in four important respects. First, at the level of history, Cox (1981, p. 95) argued that "dialectic is the potential for alternative forms of development arising from the confrontation of opposed social forces in any concrete historical situation". In other words, historical materialism sees conflict as a possible cause of structural change as opposed to neorealism which views conflict as a recurring effect of a continuing structure. Cox (1976, p. 77) maintained that emergence of a new form of consciousness against the hegemonic ideal type can lead to a shift in power relations and cause historical change. Change in historicism, thus, involves a conflict model, i.e., societies change because of the appearance of ideological and material "antagonisms" within them. These antagonisms often emerge from increasing contradiction between a widely held conception of the world and the realities of existence for particular groups of historical people (Cox, 1976, p. 66).

Second, historical materialism's emphasis on imperialism adds a vertical dimension of power – the dominance of metropole over hinterland and center over periphery – to the neorealist horizontal rivalry among great powers (Cox, 1981, pp. 95-96). Third, historical materialism expands the realist perspective by including civil society and its relationship with the state in the framework of IR (Cox, 1981, p. 96). The world order and the particular historical forms of states ought to be examined in terms of its constitutive state/society complexes, which exhibit the relationship between structure (economic relations) and superstructure (the ethico-political sphere). Lastly, historical materialism pinpoints the importance of production process, which is completely ignored by neorealism, in the explanation of the particular historical form taken by a state/society complex. Power of the state is based on material capabilities generated by production process. Who uses state power and for what purpose is therefore directly linked to the issue of control over production, and the resultant power relations between social forces related to production (Cox, 1981, p. 96).

In conclusion, the historicist-dialectical approach can be understood as a deepening of classical realism (Cox, 1992, p. 514). It analyzes the social processes that generate and modify forms of state and the state system itself, and the changes in intersubjective conditions that constitute and reconstitute the objective world order, in contrast to realism, which concentrates on the state and the state system. According to Cox (1992, p. 514), historicist-dialectical approach begins with assessing dominant tendencies in existing world order and moves on to identifying the antagonisms that arise within it that may eventually lead to structural change. The first task is accomplished by method of historical structure, which reveals the underlying patterns of social relations and power configurations that shape societies and international systems. The second task involves identification of counterhegemonic force (new historic blocs) that results from a combination of (a) an increase in the material resources available to a subordinate group and (b) a coherent and persistent articulation of the subordinate group's demands that challenges the legitimacy of the prevailing consensus (Cox, 1977, p. 364).

Frameworks for Action: Historical Structures

Cox borrowed the term "historical structure" from French historian Fernand Braudel (Cox, 1996, p. 29). For Braudel, a historical structure is the "longue duree", the enduring practices that people have developed to deal with the recurrent necessities of social and political life and which they have come to view as fixed attributes of social interaction and human nature (Cox, 1985, p. 55). In *Production, power, and world order,* Cox (1987, p. 4) wrote that "historical structures are persistent social practices, made by collective human activity and transformed through collective human activity". According to Cox (1987, p. 395) historical structures express the

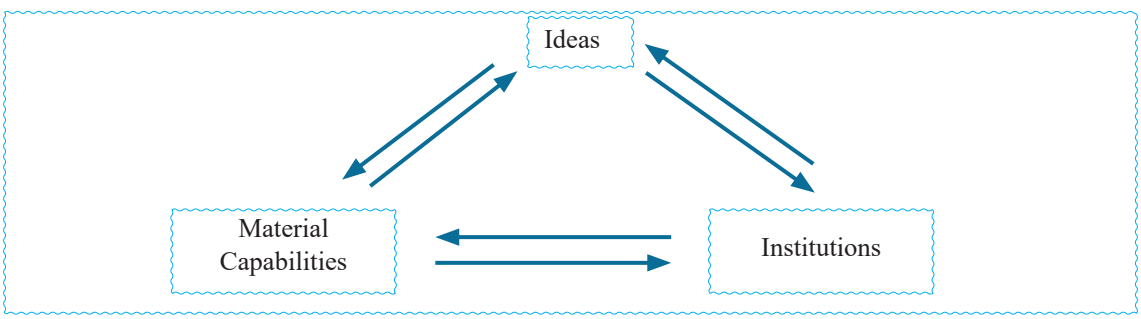
unity of the subjective and the objective. Despite not being actual physical objects, a state, a class, or a religion give the human condition actual form. The social context in which actual physical individuals exist is composed of these ideas that they share. These structures provide a framework of expectations, demands, and constraints within which people act, although they do not influence human action in a mechanical sense (Cox, 1981, p. 98). In the words of Cox (1992):

> Historical structures are persistent patterns of human activity and thought that endure for relatively long periods of time. They are the result of collective responses to certain common problems – whether these relate to the satisfaction of material wants (economics), the organization of cooperation and security (politics), or the explanation of the human condition and purpose (religion and ideology) – which become congealed in practices, institutions, and intersubjective meanings for a significant group of people. These practices and meanings in turn constitute the objective world for these people. (p. 514)

At the synchronic (static) dimension, for Cox, a historical structure is a snapshot of prevailing power configuration that underpins enduring patterns of social relations (Leysens, 2008, p. 147). Three categories of forces– production (material capacities), ideas, and institutions – interact within a structure that produces the regularities in human nature and structures of human interaction characteristic of particular eras, expressed as ideal types (way of organizing production or form of state). The relationships among these three categories of forces (expressed as potentials) can be assumed to be reciprocal, in that, no one-way determinism exists between one force in relation to another (Cox, 1981, p. 98). The trajectory of relation is instead determined by historical events, such as wars, revolutions, economic crises, and ideological shifts.

Figure 1

Three Categories of Forces (Cox, 1981, p. 98)



Material capabilities refer to productive and destructive potentials represented by technological and organizational capabilities of society in dynamic form and stocks of equipment (for example, industries and armaments) and wealth in accumulated forms (Cox, 1981, p. 98). Ideas are classified into two types – intersubjective meanings and collective images of social order. Intersubjective meanings, though durable over long periods of time, are historically conditioned and can change over time (Cox, 1981, p. 98). These ideas cut across social divide and constitute the common ground of social discourse. For example, certain kinds of behavior are to be expected when conflict arises between states, such as negotiation, confrontation, or war. Unlike intersubjective meanings, collective images of social order – which relate to the legitimacy of prevailing power relations, the meanings of justice, and the public good – can differ and form the basis for the emergence of alternative structures (Cox, 1981, p. 99).

Institutions are unique combinations of material capabilities and ideas that influence the evolution of both ideas and production relations (Cox, 1981, p. 99). Institutions promote collective images consistent with the power relations from which they originate. Institutions gradually take on a life of their own, enabling the universalization of policy as well as the representations of diverse interests. Institutionalization and hegemony are closely related concepts (Cox, 1981, p. 99). When institutions make concessions for weaker parties, strong actors can secure the weak's consent to lead and frame the prevailing power relations in terms of universal interests rather than just serving their own. This reduces the need for force and serves as the anchor for hegemonic strategy. However, shifts in the relationship of material forces or the rise of ideological challenge can render institutions inefficient as a means of regulating conflict; they can become battlegrounds for conflicting ideas and inclinations; or rival institutions may emerge to replace them (Cox, 1981, pp. 99-100). Thus, institutions are not the same as hegemony; they may be a reflection of it.

The method of historical structures is one of representing what can be called limited totalities – a simplified representation of a complex reality and an expression of tendencies (Cox, 1981, p. 100). Because historical structure represents a specific area of human activity in its historically located totality, not the whole world, it is able to avoid the ceteris paribus problem, which undermines problem-solving theory by presuming total stasis. The representation of reality is based on the assessment of dominant tendencies in existing world order, and continual adjustment to this changing reality is captured in the identification of antagonisms generated within that order (Cox, 1981, p. 100). At the diachronic (dynamic) dimension, historical structures illustrate the process of structural change in social relations caused by change in material and intersubjective conditions, and power moving from one configuration to another (Cox, 1976, p. 78). In the words of Cox (1992):

> These structures are historical because they come into existence in particular historical circumstances and can be explained as responses to these circumstances. Similarly, they are transformed when material circumstances have changed or prevailing meanings and purposes have been challenged by new practices. This historical malleability of structures differentiates them from a structuralism that posits fixed and immutable structures, for example, like those of neorealism. (p. 514)

Since structures are already present in the world into which individuals are born, in one sense, structures are prior to individuals (Cox, 1987, p. 395). Before people can learn to criticize or oppose or try to change social and political structures, they must first learn how to behave within them. However, contrary to what some structuralist theories would have us assume, structures are not in any deeper sense prior to the human drama itself. The consent of the masses cannot be taken for granted; it has to be continually re-negotiated and re-secured in changing historical circumstances (Moolakkattu, 2009, p. 441). Structures are "mades" (facts), not "givens" (data); they are the products of collective human action and transformable by collective human action. The hegemony or constraining power of structure is, thus, a historical moving force that is continually readjusted in response to shifts in the material and ideological aspects of global power relations (Cox, 1977, p. 364). The historically malleable nature of structures sets apart historical structures approach from structuralism (Cox, 1987, p. 395). Thus, historical structures are relatively stable, but not immutable, framework within which social action takes place.

In the short run, the underlying configurations of forces provide parameters of action and consequent patterns of social behavior, thus, can be explained adequately by problem-solving theories. However, over time, new form of consciousness can lead to a shift in power relations which can lead to structural change, where structural (problem solving) theories are no longer applicable to understand such change (Cox, 1976, p. 77). Because the components of social forces of a framework are historically volatile in existence and composition, the emerging

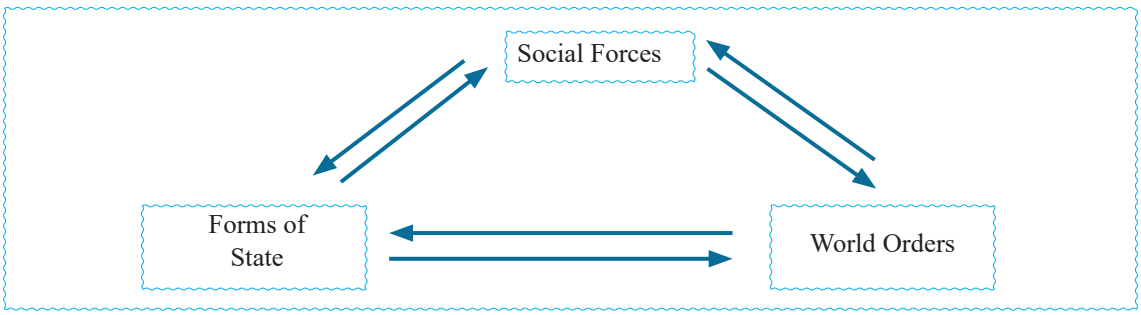
nature of structure is indeterminate. The only clue lies in the contradictions and conflicts affecting the parameters of the system, i.e., in the principles by which societies are organized into polities (Cox, 1976, p. 77). This is why critical theory is crucial to explain the structural change.

The method of historical structures is applied to three levels, or spheres of activity (Cox, 1981, p. 100). The underlying forces of historical structures interact dialectically to shape social forces, forms of state, and world orders within the international system. The structure of production – capitalist, centrally planned, or otherwise – arranged by prevailing ideas and institutions within a society gives the basis for its class structure (Cox, 1987, p. 6). Different forms of state as state/society complexes, such as liberal state, welfare state, or fascist state, reflect varying configurations of material capabilities and ideology. World orders emerge from the interactions between states, non-state actors, and transnational forces (Cox, 1977, p. 358). These orders are characterized by distributions of material capabilities, dominant ideas, and institutional arrangements. The relationship among these three levels of activity – social forces, forms of state, and world orders – is reciprocal and non-unilinear as well. In the words of Cox (1981):

> Considered separately, social forces, forms of state, and world orders can be represented in a preliminary approximation as particular configurations of material capabilities, ideas, and institutions. Considered in relation to each other, and thus moving toward a fuller representation of historical process, each will be seen as containing, as well as bearing the impact of, the others. (p. 101)

Figure 2

Three Spheres of Activity (Cox, 1981, p. 101)



Changes in the organization of production generates new social forces that impact forms of state, and when new forms of state become more widespread, the problematic of world order is transformed (Cox, 1981, p. 100). For example, the emergence and assimilation of the industrial working class (social forces) in Western Europe after the 1880s resulted in the welfare-nationalist state (Cox, 1987, pp. 161-162). This shift in the forms of state gave rise, in turn, to a new world order known as rival imperialism, which was characterized by increased military and industrial rivalry between the major European nations (Cox, 1981, p. 101). States have also been influenced by transnational social forces through the world order, as demonstrated by the bourgeoisie's influence on the evolution of forms of state in both the core and periphery throughout the expansive capitalism of the nineteenth century.

The non-unilinear trajectory of relation means that the problematic of world order can also change forms of state, and forms of state can shape social forces as well. The rise of Stalinism, partly, as a response to a sense of threat to the existence of the Soviet state from a hostile world order is an example of how world order can influence forms of state (Cox, 1981, p. 101). The hostile nature of world order also serves for the justification of military-industrial complex in core countries; and

the prevalence of repressive militarism in periphery countries can be explained by the external support of imperialism as well as by specific combinations of internal forces. Likewise, social forces evolve in response to the kinds of dominance that states exert, such as advancing the interests of one class and obstructing those of another (Cox, 1981, p. 101).

Hegemony and World Order

The concept of hegemony is often equated to stability of social order (Cox, 1981, p. 103). It is a form of dominance, but there can be domination without it by means of brute power relationship. Historical structure may be hegemonic or nonhegemonic depending upon the management of power relations (Cox, 1981, p. 99). In contrast to a nonhegemonic order, where no power has been able to prove the legitimacy of its dominance, a hegemonic structure, in which power takes a primarily consensual form, arises from a "fit" between material capabilities, ideas, and institutions (Cox, 1981, p. 120).

On a domestic level, national interest is defined in a hegemonic sense, meaning that it refers to the way that dominant groups within the state have developed a widely accepted style of thinking about general or national interests by allowing concessions to the claims of subordinate groups (Cox, 1985, p.56). According to Cox (1983, p. 137), after a dominant social class establishes an internal (national) hegemony, it eventually expands outward to become world hegemony. The economic and social institutions, the culture, the technology related to this national hegemony serve as models for imitation overseas. The more peripheral nations are impacted by such an extended hegemony in the form of a "passive revolution" (Cox, 1983, p. 137). The Pax Britannica and the Pax Americana are illustrations of hegemonic stability at the level of the world order.

Coxian concept of hegemonic stability and structural change is comparable to the work of Robert Gilpin, a scholar of realist tradition, who was concerned with the stability of the international economy in a period of American hegemonic decline (Gill, 1990, p. 369). According to Gilpin (1987, p. 116), the stability of the international economic system requires political leadership but the process of uneven growth undermines such leadership. In the long run, the rate of growth in the core tends to slow down and the location of economic activities tends to move into new growth centers in the periphery (Gilpin, 1987, p. 95). This shift in production power and its impact on the standing and welfare of individual states escalates the stress between rising and declining states (Gilpin, 1987, p. 55). The "hegemonic war" that settles this stress ultimately determines which state or states will be dominant in the new international hierarchy. Gilpin's (1987, pp. 91-92) theory of hegemonic stability thus highlights the idea that the rise and decline of the hegemon is a crucial determinant of structural change.

According to Cox (1981, p. 119), Gilpin used hegemony in the limited sense of leadership of one state (the hegemon) over other states in the system. Gilpin's theory views the international political economy in terms of interaction between the interstate system and international exchange relations; it places less emphasis on domestic social forces (Gill, 1990, p. 369). In contrast, Cox (1983, p. 136) argued that the hegemony of a world order depends, more importantly, upon the opportunities that it provides for forces of civil society to operate on the world scale (or on the scale of the sphere within which hegemony prevails). Cox approached the problematic of global power in terms of three levels of analysis rather than only focusing on redistribution between states (Gill, 1990, p. 376). Cox's approach identifies the prevailing class alliances and ideological perspectives, i.e., the historic bloc, which influences state action in terms of how society organizes production and what leaders and followers perceive to be the limits of what is feasible at any given time in history. Thinking in these terms allows us to construct an image of the world economy and the state system from the "bottom upwards" (Gill, 1990, p. 376).

Cox (1983, p. 135) maintained that we must be able to ascertain when a hegemonic period started and when it ended to apply the concept of hegemony to

world order. Cox (1987, p. 109) argued that we can roughly categorize the past two centuries into three distinguishable periods: Pax Britannica (1789-1873); the era of rival imperialisms (1873-1945); and Pax Americana (post-World War II). Out of the three, the era of rival imperialisms represents a nonhegemonic period when dominance of a nonhegemonic kind prevailed. Two ongoing processes of the third structural phase that require special attention are the internationalization of production and the internationalization of state. The former is influencing the world economy while the latter is affecting the interstate system. Each successive structure of world order was characterized by its own forms of state, historic blocs, and configurations of production relations (Cox, 1987, p. 109).

From Westphalian State System to Pax Americana

According to Lawson (2020, p. 43), "international orders are regularized practices of exchange among discrete political units that recognize each other to be independent." International orders conceived as encounters and exchanges in the form of trade, war, and diplomacy reveals several international orders that have existed throughout world history dating back as far as the sedentary societies of ancient Sumer (modern-day Iraq). In the discipline of international relations, however, the international order begins with the Peace of Westphalia (1648), which put an end to the Thirty Years' War and recognized state sovereignty within a multipolar system (Black, 2008, p. 102). The Westphalian state system was characterized by secular absolutism within the state and a structure of balance-of-power in inter-state relations. These developments ultimately led to revolutions that established the dominance of the bourgeoisie in England (1688-89), the US (1775-83), and France (1789-99), as well as wars around Europe from which England emerged as a great power.

Under the new Westphalian state system, the international community was subject to the distinct and dominant interests of monarchs, and no practice of intercourse could be regarded as sacred, not even the inviolability of embassies (Cox, 1987, p. 113). Naturally, political realism became the dominant philosophy that guided statecraft, especially in continental Europe (Keohane, 1986, p. 8; Cox, 1987, p. 113). From this philosophy, the accumulation of military and economic power was seen essential to preserving one's position in the interstate power struggle. In an effort to increase relative power over competing states, states pursued "mercantilism", which involved the establishment and protection of monopolies in trade, access to resource, and colonial settlement (Cox, 1987, p. 115). The necessity to maintain permanent military forces, however, translated into increased taxation for the bourgeois class which contributed to their discontent towards monarchies. The dispute between the Crown and Parliament over fiscal authority served as the impetus for both the English Civil War and the constitutional struggles of the seventeenth century (Cox, 1987, p. 115).

The new ideas about universal rights, espoused by Hobbes and Locke, made a huge difference in the formation of the new historic bloc of the bourgeois class in England. Following the disposal of the Stuart dynasty by parliamentary forces in 1689, the new monarch, William of Orange accepted a constitutional arrangement that upheld the idea of "no taxation without representation" (Fukuyuma, 2014, Democratic Accountability). Less than a century later, in 1776, the American colonists rebelled against British rule, inspired by this very principle. Of course, demands for universal rights were merely "superstructure" masking hard economic self-interests of the bourgeois class. Throughout the eighteenth century, private slave-trading corporations traded shares on the stock exchanges in Amsterdam, London, and Paris. At this time, the yield on investments earned in the slave trade was extremely profitable, averaging around 6% per year (Harari, 2014, The Capitalist Hell). Nevertheless, the cohesive articulation of the English bourgeoisie – first defending the feudal rights of Englishmen and then, a century later, demanding natural rights as human beings – contributed to the establishment of the liberal state

and, by hegemonic extension at the world-level, the liberal order. During the first period (1789-1873), thus, the liberal state and the liberal world order emerged together, taking shape through the establishment of bourgeois hegemony in Britain and of British hegemony in the world economy (Cox, 1987, p. 123). This period came to be known as "Pax Britannica".

During the second period (1873-1945), the British hegemony ended with the rise of Germany and the United States, and a new world order arose where neither the balance of power nor hegemony could be restored (Cox, 1987, p. 153). Protectionism superseded free trade, the gold standard was abandoned, and the global economy broke apart into economic blocs (Cox, 1983, p. 136). In a world where industrial strength underpinned military and naval power, and industrialization had resulted in rapid urbanization, political action in form of labor unions became more feasible and more threatening to the bourgeois hegemony and liberal order. The spread of literacy, emergence of a popular press, and formation of mass-based political parties with socialist allegiance all contributed to this probability (Cox, 1987, p. 156). States responded to this phenomenon – widely acknowledged as "the labor problem" – by creating three alternative forms of state.

These forms of state were seen as means of preserving a nation's independence, accelerating industrialization, and elevating its role as a great power in an unstable and potentially dangerous world system (Cox, 1987, p. 163). The welfare-nationalist state maintained bourgeois hegemony within while adapting it to a nonhegemonic external environment. Fascism represented a rift within internal hegemony, a state founded on dominance that allowed it to awaken savage tendencies that were dormant in all populations. The Soviet state emerged from a war of movement; it replaced the Czarist state, which had powerful coercive powers but no solid foundation in civil society. The Bolshevik party of the new Soviet state utilized its ideology to garner widespread popular support. However, the belief that the nation would become vulnerable to foreign threats if industrialization proceeded at a "snail's pace", led Soviet regime to justify draconian enforcement of labor discipline to adjust an industrial labor force of ex-peasants to factory work (Cox, 1987, pp. 200-201). The redistributive party-commanded form of state soon evolved into the coercive and repressive Stalinism.

After World War II, the US created a new hegemonic world order that was akin to Pax Britannica but was built on institutions and ideologies that were adjusted to account for a more intricate global economy and national societies that were more susceptible to the political ramifications of economic crises (Cox, 1983, p. 136). Depending on how developed the productive forces were, several forms of states evolved in this period, two of which were major players in the global economy. Welfare-nationalist states transformed into neoliberal states, countries that formed the OECD, where an internal bourgeois hegemony was maintained (Cox, 1987, p. 218). Late-developing peripheral economies adopted the model of pre-war Italian fascism to form a certain type of state, which we might refer to as the neomercantilist developmentalist state. Because there was no established bourgeois hegemony, it started the capitalist development as a passive revolution within an authoritarian framework led by the state (Cox, 1987, p. 218).

According to Cox (1987, p. 244), the Pax Americana or neoliberal world order is an internationalized production model that emerged within the existing international economy of classical trade theory. It is made up of transnational production or organizations whose constituent parts are dispersed across various territorial jurisdictions. The social forces that supported state authority realigned throughout the transition from a national to an internationalizing corporatism (Cox, 1987, p. 244). Consensus on world-economy requisites supplanted national economy goals as the foundation for policy formation, which led to the marginalization or exclusion of certain nation-based interest groups that had previously been part of corporatist coalitions. The transnational

capitalist and managerial class penetrated central agencies of government through institutions such as the Trilateral Commission, World Bank, IMF, and OECD (Cox, 1981, p. 111). Today, states are increasingly serving as instruments for adjusting domestic policy to the dictates of competition in the world market, a phenomenon known as internationalization of state (Cox, 1997, p. 106). Thus, internationalizing of production has created an international structure of production relations (control dynamics) between social groups in different countries (Cox, 1977, p. 358), and internationalization of state has strengthened global hierarchies (Cox, 1997, p. 106).

Towards a New Multilateralism

Cox (1981, p. 98) claimed that social actors cannot ignore pressures emanating from historic structures, whether they choose to adhere or oppose them. Insofar as they are able to successfully oppose a prevailing historical structure, they support their actions with a competing structure, which is an alternate emerging configuration of forces. The emergence of a counterhegemonic force, i.e., new historic blocs, might cause a change in hegemony. The counterhegemonic force results from a combination of (a) an increase in the material resources available to a subordinate group and (b) a coherent and persistent articulation of the subordinate group's demands that challenges the legitimacy of the prevailing consensus (Cox, 1977, p. 364). The simple realization of democratic ideal may lead to countertendencies against internationalization, and social rejection of the normalization of the growing inequality between the rich and the poor, as well as the powerful and the powerless (Cox, 1997, pp. 106-107). Karl Polyani's analysis revealed that society's self-defense mechanism through politics, the second phase of "double movement", ultimately led to the formation of welfare states during the early 20th century in response to the unfettered rule of the self-regulating market over society, the first phase of "double movement" (Cox, 1997, p. 107).

Many observers see a growing disparity between US military power and its financial and economic capacities. For example, Gilpin (1987, p. 336) claimed that the United States has become international debtor and that the strength of the dollar has accelerated the deindustrialization of the American economy. Cox (1996, p. 33) asserted that, since the "Nixon shocks", the more or less spontaneous consensual US hegemony in the non-Soviet world has been replaced by a series of negotiated agreements, most of which involved financial compensation in exchange for US military protection. For example, during the Gulf War, the United States took the decision to go to war, maintained control over the conflict, including how it was portrayed on television, and built the coalition through coercion and side deals like Egypt's debt rollover. Pax Americana has evolved into a tributary system from hegemony (Cox, 1996, p. 33).

Assuming that US hegemony is eroding, a number of plausible scenarios could emerge in the future. According to Cox (1992, p. 518), the most improbable outcomes are (i) revival of the declining hegemony and (ii) establishment of a new hegemony by a different state successfully universalizing its own principles of order. Many scholars (Wade, 2011; Zeng & Breslin, 2016; Rinaldi & Pires, 2021) retain Cox's conviction that the Pax Britannica and Pax Americana have no plausible successors, and that the era of dominant single states establishing hegemony is past. For Cox (1992, p. 518), the prevalent globalizing trend, at least in the medium term, gives most probability to (iii) revival of the universals of the declining hegemony supported by an oligarchy of great powers that would have to coordinate their efforts. There is a distinct possibility that (iv) a nonhegemonic order may emerge based upon an organization of rival world regions, lacking in effective universal principles of order and functioning as an interplay of rival powerful states, each with their own client states. Lastly, in the long run, for many of the world's less powerful, the establishment of (v) a counterhegemonic order based on broader diffusion of power, devoid of dominance, is both a possibility and an aspiration (Cox, 1992, p. 518).

According to Cox (1976, p. 77), the concept of conflict as the source of change provides some relief from absolute indeterminism. While determining the prospects for counterhegemony involves identifying crises, predicting the future world order entails taking into account alternative directions of historical change that would be conditioned by differences in power relations among the social forces involved (Cox, 1976, p. 78). In the synchronic dimension, the thought process would involve situating national societies into a particular historical context and approaching the problematic as one of incremental change in the way the inter-state systems operate (Cox, 1997, p. xvi). On the other hand, the diachronic dimension would direct attention to changes in the structures underlying world order by withdrawing from the principles by which societies are organized into polities, and critically assessing how the existing structures came into being, the forces that could be changing them, and the potential for a more broadly defined multilateralism (Cox, 1997, p. xvii).

Like any other problem-solving theory, Gilpin's conception of international change is limited to synchronic dimension of change. His interest exclusively concerns the study of inter-state system, particularly the Thucydides's Trap, i.e., the structural stress that arises when a rising power threatens to unseat a dominant power. Allison (2017), too, maintained that the crucial question regarding the future of global order is whether China and the US can avoid falling into Thucydides's Trap (Introduction, Are the US …). However, Cox's approach challenges us to discard the oversimplified state-centric vision of world order and to replace it with a modified vision of reality (Cox, 1997, p. xvii). Cox (1997, p. xvii–xviii) also noted that the analysis of regime that is privileged in the mainstream school of international studies is status quo oriented. It takes on the perspective of those forces with the most influence on outcomes – the G7, the dominant actors in the WTO, the IMF and the World Bank – and ignores the value preferences (such as greater social equity, protection of the biosphere, moderation and non-violence in dealing with conflict, and mutual recognition of civilizations) of Third World countries (Cox, 1997, p. xviii).

Since the crises of authority arise within societies and extend their effects into the international system, according to Cox (1976, p. 78), the future ought to be considered in view of changes within societies in terms of power relations influencing these crises. Cox (1997, p. xix) argued that the ongoing process of decomposition and recomposition of transnational civil society would have to be mapped as a starting point towards understanding the conditions for building new authorities (Cox, 1997, p. xxi). Alienation from existing regimes, states, and political processes has manifested in several forms of apathy and depolarization including low electoral participation. According to Cox (1997, p. xix), populist or Caesarist authority may be based on a direct relationship between a charismatic leader and an unarticulated mass, but such a formation is not conducive to durable authority in the state, let alone in the world system. A "new multilateralism" – a future oriented thought rather than a present reality – would ultimately be built from the bottom up on the basis of constructive discourse bearing upon crises of authority (Cox, 1997, p. xxi).

The major crisis with the existing world order and the kind of multilateralism that supports it is that, especially when one looks at global society, it is leading to an increasingly extreme division between the powerful and the weak and the rich and the poor (Cox, 1997, p. 247). As Galston (2018, p. 8) wrote, technological disruption has facilitated new class divisions, and the dominance of highly-educated new elite class has led to feelings of marginalization and resentment in the less educated who are not so included in the globalizing neoliberal economy. The growth of the so-called "underclass" in the United States is another example of a cleavage that exists within advanced capitalist civilizations (Cox, 1997, p. 248). In the US, race is the main factor that defines it. Long-term unemployment in other nations is the cause of the issue, which has sparked xenophobic, racist populism (Cox, 1997, p. 248).

According to Cox (1997, p. 248), spread of neoliberalism throughout the former Soviet empire and the Third World has also created a stark cleavage between aspiring political leaders and suffering populations. The implementation of structural adjustment policies insisted by the managers of the globalizing formation and their organic intellectuals have resulted in rising unemployment, the destruction of public services, inflation, and crime. Sponsorship of 'shock therapy' have put political leaders in a precarious position as their populations are on the verge of revolting (or, more passively, of withdrawing from obedience). It is unclear if their societies will hold together long enough to become a part of the expanding global economy (Cox, 1997, p. 248).

Cox (1997, p. 248) maintained that that where such societies may collapse, other latent lines of cleavages, such as ethnic and religious forms of mobilization, are poised to take the lead in the painful process of destructive fragmentation and perhaps ultimate reconstruction. Many observers believe that the politics of identity is replacing or absorbing the politics of class (Cox, 1997, p. 249). The aforementioned analysis of cleavage lines indicates that the core of the issue with world order continues to be political, social, and economic dominance and subordination. However, experiences of exploitation and marginalization in relation to identities – such as, gender, ethnicity, and religion – are becoming more prevalent (Cox, 1997, p. 249).

According to Cox (1997, p. 250), liberals have uncritically assumed a necessary compatibility between an unregulated market capitalism and democracy, and so far ignored the social cleavages generated by globalization. However, where the market polarizes society, the popular demand that the market be subjugated for the sake of social equity tends to reintroduce politics into economics. Until this response is fully articulated, a wide range of "morbid symptoms", including new fascisms and xenophobic racism, may be unleashed in tandem with crises of authority (Cox, 1997, p. 250). Furthermore, Cox (1997, pp. 251-252) stressed that in order to address the crises of biosphere – such as global warming, deforestation, soil erosion, and the imminent extinction of some important species – future multilateralism will need to rethink economics in a subordinate relationship to a science of nature.

However, for Cox (1997, p. 253), the challenge facing multilateralism is to create a shared understanding of reality – "a kind of 'supraintersubjectivity' that would provide a bridge among the distinct and separate intersubjectivities" (Cox, 1992, p. 519) – that is not merely the imposition of a single hegemonic perception. The prospects of accomplishing this based on prevailing cultural traditions appear rather slim; the current trend seems to accentuate difference (Cox, 1997, p. 253). Even in the United States, which was once seen as the pinnacle of the melting pot, uniting races and cultures into a single unbroken secular patriotism, separate identities are currently in the foreground. Growing forces of fundamentalism in all civilizations are challenging the "mutual recognition" of the relativity of values inherent to multiculturalism, which allows for tolerance of difference (Cox, 1997, pp. 253-254). Cox (1992, p. 519) asserted that a post-hegemonic order requires the satisfaction of both conditions – supraintersubjectivity and mutual recognition – the latter implies a readiness to try to understand others in their own terms. On an institutional level, fortunately, the UN system contains within it various segments and agencies that have become interlocutors for the new forces that have the potential to eventually alter forms of states and the very nature of the state system in the long run (Cox, 1997, p. 255).

Implications for the Left

The rising economic inequality and declining trust in the mainstream political parties witnessed in the recent decades indicate a growing gap between the neoliberal idea of a society that is supposedly "free" and the reality of life for the majority of people. Many observers argue that the Right's anti-globalist rhetoric has proven to be nothing more than fake populism. Browning (2018) claimed that Brexit has not provided the closure promised, and

today Leave supporters often appear decidedly anxious and angry. Bessner and Sparke (2017) wrote that while Trump presented himself as anti-globalist, his actual economic policies – such as tax cuts for the wealthy, deregulation, anti-unionism, and the strict enforcement of property rights – served to reinforce capitalist interests rather than challenge global capitalism. President Trump's nationalism, in contrast, seemed more evident in his hostility towards immigrants within the country and in his foreign policy towards China. After he declared that China was a "revisionist power", relations between the two countries have become increasingly tense. The return of great power rivalry in international relations can be directly attributed to crisis of authority within states that has unleashed a wide range of "morbid symptoms", including new fascisms and xenophobic racism.

According to Cox (1992, p. 519), the challenge for the Left is to create a shared understanding of reality – "a kind of 'supraintersubjectivity' that would provide a bridge among the distinct and separate intersubjectivities". In a similar vein, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, in their book "Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics (2008)", argued the need for building a broad-based political alliances and mobilizing popular support around shared demands of heterogeneous set of social groups. The concept of power and hegemony illustrated in Cox's philosophy highlights the importance of articulating new counterhegemonic ideas and formulating institutions for broad-based political alliances. For this, left-wing populism must be effective in the use mass media in promoting its ideas in the public sphere. The internal democracy of political party, strong ties to labor unions, and dissemination of political education are characteristics that are necessary to keep socialist institutions from degenerating into Stanlinsm. Arguably counterhegemonic blocs should appear in relatively democratic regions, for example, the North America or Europe, and spread into other parts of the world as passive revolution. However, counterhegemonic blocs can also appear in the developing world and may be equally effective to orient similar transformations in the West.

It may be even more crucial to articulate counterhegemonic views and establish socialist institutions in the developing world for their own sake. For example, the strict immigration laws adopted by right-wing populist governments could translate into reduced opportunities for migrant labor, which could significantly impact economies reliant on remittance, such as Nepal. The adoption of structural adjustment program has failed to create and maintain a stable economy in Nepal. Nepal continues to face challenges such as political instability, poverty, and infrastructure deficits, which has diminished the confidence of public in its government. If the Left remains inarticulate, Nepal's politics may be dominated by a hegemonic revival of conservatism or rise of Caesarism, reinstating the exclusionary policies and authoritarianism of the past. The security competition between US and China poses additional challenges to Nepal in maintaining a balanced relationship at the international level. The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Compact, a $500 million grant from the US government for the development of Nepal's electrical transmission lines and road upgrade project, was approved by Nepal's parliament on February 27, 2022 despite concerns raised by People's Republic of China (PRC). Echoing the opinions of many Chinese scholars, head of the Department for Asia-Pacific Studies at the China Institute of International Studies, Jianxue (2022) wrote that the US is influencing Nepal through MCC with a geopolitical goal of targeting China.

According to Giri (2022), many in Nepal have viewed the MCC compact as an American attempt to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which Beijing is using to increase its influence in Asia, Eastern Europe, and Africa. Nepal's decision to be involved in economic diplomacy of rival great powers, amid geopolitical concerns raised by each sides, can be seen as a brave attempt to meet the country's needs for increased foreign investment as it enters an economic development phase. However, Roka (2022) warned that MCC is actually a part of the United States' larger Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), connected to military

agreements like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) that are meant to contain China, and Nepal's non-alignment policy will become vulnerable after accepting the grant. If the relations between US and China deteriorate, then such bold initiatives of smaller states can jeopardize their security – Ukraine is a case in point.

Conclusion

Robert W. Cox began his scholarly career in the discipline of international relations as a loner, but by the end of it, he had become one of the leading authorities on international political economy (IPE) and international relations theory. Cox spent twenty-five years working in different roles in the International Labor Organization (ILO) where he was subject to hegemonic practices of labor-management relations. This inspired him to develop a critical theory that not only explains prevalent regularities in the system but also captures opportunities of system transformation. A self-proclaimed historical materialist, Cox is widely regarded for criticizing the ahistorical assumptions of positivist theories and rescuing the discipline of international relations from the total stasis of conventional methods. For Cox, history is the process of change in human nature and the structures of human interaction; and historicism is the method that reveals the historical structures characteristic of particular eras within which social regularities prevail, and more importantly, explain transformations from one structure to another.

For Cox, hegemony is a sign of a social order's relative stability. The stability of social order depends upon the power of hegemony that exists in terms of material capabilities, ideas, and institutions. The relationship between these three forces underlying any historical structure is reciprocal and manifests into three levels of activity – social forces, forms of state, and world orders. Hegemony, however, is a dynamic force, and the trajectory of change is shaped by contradictions and crises that arise within the historical structure and the international system. The emergence of a counterhegemonic force, i.e., new historic blocs, might cause a change in hegemony. The counterhegemonic force results from a combination of (a) an increase in the material resources available to a subordinate group and (b) a coherent and persistent articulation of the subordinate group's demands that challenges the legitimacy of the prevailing consensus.

Cox's method has significant implications for both the way history is explained and the current trends in international politics. It puts power at the center of analysis to explain both stability and change. However, unlike positivist approaches, Cox's conception of power goes beyond the state-centric view and incorporates the role of social forces. In a hegemonic structure, power is exercised under the norms of 'common interest'. Common interest is the hegemonic ideal of dominant groups within the state, the outward expansion of which could form world hegemony. However, interstate war is likely to break out if the historic bloc of a peripheral state rejects the ideal type of core state. Much of the history represents dominance of a nonhegemonic kind. Until the first half of 20th century, a core state would typically coerce its ideal type onto the periphery (for example, forced opening of Japan in 1853-54 and China in 1857-58). But the cost of relying on a brute power relationship to internationalize ideal type to the periphery has increased due to militarism and security alliances.

In the context of declining Pax Americana, the stability of neoliberal world order requires more than ever on the willing sponsorship of neoliberal values by peripheral leadership (such as the roll-back neoliberalism of Mexico in 1988-94 and ideological volte-face of Bolivia's leftist government in 1989-93). Nonetheless, the increasing socioeconomic cleavage caused by the unchecked power of the self-regulating market over society indicates that countertendencies rooted in new historical blocs might proliferate in the future. This also implies that peripheral states led by new historical blocs could have to put up with the harsh tactics of the Washington consensus, similar to what happened in Chile (1973-1990) and Argentina (1976-1983). Simultaneously, the rise of anti-globalist populism within core nations suggests the potential for radical democracy to bring about structural transformation.

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