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ANALYTICAL ESSAY

Cycles in World Politics

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This article argues that we are living through a period when political institutions are out of step with dramatic, economic and social changes. In similar periods in the past, war has often played a key restructuring role. But contemporary wars are much less likely to achieve this. The main agents of change are social movements and new forms of communication. The article concludes that we need new forms of global governance and some critical rethinking of academic discipline.

Keywords: cycles, transition, new wars, global governance, social movements, information and communication technologies, resource-saving

"The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.
—Antonio Gramsci (1971, 275–76)"

Introduction

Antonio Gramsci was writing in the interwar period between the first and second world wars. Many have noted a similarity between that era and our own times. We experience a sense of foreboding about the future—a feeling that something bad is going to happen. We note a widespread loss of trust in our institutions and in the dominant political classes. At the same time, this is a period of experimentation, especially in the political sphere, when new and old currents of thought and activism come bubbling up to the surface (Kaldor and Selchow 2015).

In this article, I want to suggest that the anxieties of contemporary times can be explained in terms of how various fields of activity (political, economic, military, or social) change at different speeds over different periods. By change I refer to changes in ways of doing things, expressed in such phenomena as norms, standards, rules, outputs, and institutions. Crises can be explained in terms of disharmony or mismatches between different fields of activity; in particular, they are rooted in the failure of dominant political and social institutions to adapt to far-reaching economic and technological change. In similar periods in the past, wars have played a key role in reordering institutions. I argue, however, that today's wars, what I call "new wars," play a disordering role. If the "morbid symptoms" we are witnessing are to be cured, it will not be through fighting and winning wars but rather through the construction of global governance institutions that have a greater

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Table 1. Five successive technological revolutions, 1770s to 2000s

Technological revolution	*Popular name for the period*	*Core country or countries*	*Big-bang initiating the revolution*	*Year*
First	The "Industrial Revolution"	Britain	Arkwright's mill opens in Cromford	1771
Second	Age of steam and railways	Britain (spreading to Continent and USA)	Test of the "Rocket" steam engine for the Liverpool-Manchester railway	1829
Third	Age of steel, electricity, and heavy engineering	USA and Germany forging ahead and overtaking Britain	The Carnegie Bessemer steel plant opens in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania	1875
Fourth	Age of oil, the automobile, and mass production	USA (with Germany at first vying for world leadership), later spreading to Europe	First Model-T comes out of the Ford plant in Detroit, Michigan	1908
Fifth	Age of information and telecommunications	USA (spreading to Europe and Asia)	The Intel microprocessor is announced in Santa Clara, California	1971

Source: Perez (2002, 11).

capacity than at present to sideline or eliminate wars and address—simultaneously and interrelatedly—such challenges as global inequalities and climate change. A word of caution is necessary before embarking on this set of propositions. This complex and condensed article is speculative. It is an introduction to ideas and directions of thought that need to be developed. It is an invitation to criticism, disagreement, and even disproof—it is meant to be the beginning of a conversation. The aim is to contribute to a debate about the future and how to study it.

The article is divided into four parts. The first section explores the notion of economic transition, drawing heavily on the science and technology studies literature. The second part examines the role of war in transitions and the changing character of war—the difference between "old" and "new" wars. The third section analyzes the role of social movements and communications, and the conclusion reflects on the difficulties of studying the current period within the framework of traditional disciplinary boundaries, especially international relations.

Transitions

Scholars of science and technology studies suggest that ever since the Industrial Revolution, capitalism has evolved through long waves or "surges of development." These waves or surges last around half a century and are characterized by a cluster of technological innovations known as a techno-economic paradigm or style; these innovations take place within a particular set of social and political institutions that serve as facilitators. Table 1 (above) shows Carlota Perez's depiction of the five great surges of development.

Gramsci was writing at the end of the third surge of development when the fourth was struggling to be born. It was the end of the steel, electricity, and heavy industry era associated with the hegemony of the British Empire, upheld through military and naval power and the pivotal role of the pound sterling as a global currency. It was a period of high unemployment as the older industries declined and the full potential of productivity increases in the new industries were not yet realized. It was a time when the fundamentalist belief in the role of the market held sway much like

the neoliberal mantras of today. It was also a period of political experimentation, with both the rise of fascism and the growth of left-wing ideas.

It took two world wars to usher in the fourth surge of development, based on the intensive use of oil, mass production and mass consumption, and, above all, the automobile. The wars replaced British hegemony with American dominance, hugely increased the role of state intervention, and brought about a massive redistribution of income that made mass consumption possible. The scientific and technological advances of both the third and fourth surges were what made possible the unleashing of systems of mass destruction. The current moment, on this line of thinking, has to do with the exhaustion of the fourth surge of development—the American model based on oil and mass production—and the problems of adapting to a new surge based in information and communications technologies (ICT).

Industrialization was a product both of states organized within an international society (or a states system) and of markets. States provide the necessary financial, legal, moral, and even physical infrastructure, both domestically and across countries, that markets require. Markets offer creative destruction, eliminating the uncompetitive and opening up opportunities for innovation (Schumpeter 1943, 1961). But these two types of institutions change at different rates. Markets involve multiple actors under competitive pressure for more or less continuous adaptation, although there are ups and downs. States and states systems are shaped by war and politics; they are fewer and less flexible and tend to be characterized by inertia for long periods and by dramatic changes as a consequence of war and revolution. Small democratic states are more responsive to the need for change than large and/or authoritarian states.

The current time period can thus be explained in terms of these differing rates of change—moments when the market has wrought far-reaching economic and technological change, but the states and the international order are unable to escape the heritage or legacy of an earlier era. Market fundamentalism, like today's neoliberalism, is a typical response to the stagnation of the state. Or to put it another way, policies and programs designed during an earlier surge of development become institutionalized and normalized and consequently slow to adapt, thereby imposing a brake on further development. Deregulation and liberalization of markets, as a way of coping with the inflexibility of a state, can be hugely destructive, tearing down the sectors and institutions that were typical of the earlier surge. But markets are unable to provide the necessary regulatory and ethical framework, social institutions, and infrastructure that can provide a basis for a new surge of development. That is why the "new" cannot be "born"—it requires similarly far-reaching changes in political institutions.

Schot and Kanger (2016) suggest that the current moment is more than just a turning point in a techno-economic paradigm or model of development in the history of industrialization. They ask why this turning point is taking so long. If the new ICT paradigm had its origins in the invention of the microprocessor in 1971, surely it should have reached a stage of maturity, when the paradigm is beginning to exhaust itself, by now.[1] They suggest that the entire history of industrialization, the whole story of long waves and surges of development, can be depicted as what they call the first deep transition. This moment is more than a turning point in a long wave; it is a much bigger rupture between the first and second deep transition. They argue that, despite differences, each surge or long wave shared certain commonalities: increasing reliance on resources, especially fossil fuels; the pivotal importance of science and technology; and a set of shared beliefs, including optimism about the human ability to control nature and produce endless prosperity. This rupture,

[1] Perez argues that each surge is characterized by four phases: irruption, frenzy, synergy, and maturity. Turning points or transitions are between frenzy and synergy. Synergy is the period of golden ages when economic prosperity and trust in political institutions go hand in hand, until maturity sets in. The irruption stage of a new surge overlaps with the maturity phase of the old.

they suggest, is a break with those commonalities—citing Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991), they propose that it is the end of industrial modernity and the beginning of reflexive or late modernity.

I agree that this rupture is probably more profound than earlier turning points described by long wave theorists and that this may well have to do with the factors Schot and Kanger outline. But my focus is on a different element of the rupture. I contend that war can no longer play the role that it played in earlier transitions precisely because of the unleashing of mass destruction. It does not mean the end of war, but it means either that we face endless war and transition or else we go beyond the war-based states and states system. The emergence of states and the states system was pivotal for the Industrial Revolution. War, as Charles Tilly (1990) has taught us, made the European state and the states system. Going beyond war, which may be a necessary condition to address our current ills, would imply a shift from international relations to world politics, from the states system to a form of global governance involving a layering of political institutions—a rupture as significant as the Peace of Westphalia itself.

The Role of War

Alongside the literature on long cycles or surges of development in capitalist history is a separate literature on long cycles in war. It is often argued that in the modern period, since the Peace of Westphalia, it is possible to identify a roughly one-hundred-year cycle of what are known as hegemonic wars, wars between the dominant powers, with smaller wars bunched together in mid-century. Quincy Wright (1942) identified the Wars of the Spanish Succession (1701–14), the Napoleonic Wars (1795–1815), and the two World Wars (1914–45) as hegemonic wars. Lesser wars bunched together in between include the Seven Years' War (1756–63) and the concentration of wars in the mid-nineteenth century, including the American Civil War (1861–65), Crimean War (1853–56), Franco-Prussian War (1870–71), and Austro-Prussian War (1866). Of course, this theory was only concerned with interstate wars largely between European powers; it did not into take into account the skirmishes, police actions, gunboat diplomacy, and counterinsurgencies that were taking place almost continuously in the colonies and were usually not classified as war.

It can be argued that these wars largely coincide with turning points in long waves—the interregnum when the earlier surge is dying and the new surge has not yet been fully deployed. These wars were critical in reordering the international hierarchy. As Hinsley (quoted in Ikenberry 2011, 11) notes, "At the end of every war since the end of the eighteenth century, the leading states made a concerted effort, each one more radical than the last, to reconstruct the system on lines that would enable them, or so they believed, to avoid a further war." The wars also introduced innovations in the structure and behavior of states and in the technology used for war-making that contributed to the spread of the newly emerging techno-economic paradigm. Charles Tilly (1990) famously describes how European wars involved a process of state-building in which taxation and borrowing were regularized and increased to pay for wars; citizens' rights were exchanged for taxation and military recruitment (starting with domestic security, then suffrage, and culminating, during the two world wars, in welfare); and, as a result, the idea of the nation was forged. Table 2 (below) suggests the role of the Napoleonic Wars in the turning point between the first and second surge of development, the mid-century wars between the second and third surges, and the two world wars between the third and fourth.

So, are contemporary developments likely to lead to war? In my view this is highly likely; indeed, it is already happening in the Middle East. But war is not likely to take the form of the classic interstate war between great powers that are described above. It can be argued that the two world wars were the final expression of

Table 2. War and turning points

Major war	*Geopolitical outcome*	*Techno-military paradigm*
Napoleonic Wars 1795–1815	British hegemony Concert of Europe Spread of democratic Practices	Mass armies, uniforms, conscription
Midcentury wars: Crimean War, 1853–56	Rise of Germany and the United States; Bismarckian Concert of Europe	Use of railways and telegraph
American Civil War, 1861–65 Austro-Prussian War, 1866 Franco-Prussian War, 1870–71		Mass production of small arms
Two world wars 1914–45	US hegemony Welfare state	Weapons platforms (tanks, aircraft, ships, and missiles), nuclear weapons Intensive use of oil

conventional military power. These wars were hugely destructive—some 70 million people were killed. The invention and use of nuclear weapons during the Second World War became a symbol for the impossibility of this type of war. Battles have become too destructive to be fought; even relatively unsophisticated weapons like Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) can counter the theoretically advanced weaponry possessed by states. Old-fashioned war-fighting military power has been shown in recent wars to be extraordinarily ineffective in the classic sense of "compellence." The Iraq and Afghan wars have left both countries with greater instability than that which they experienced before the invasions. Russia razed Grozny to the ground twice, yet it is still characterized by criminality and terrorism. The inch by inch battle against ISIS in Iraq and Syria is producing more casualties than those inflicted by ISIS yet ISIS is already reappearing in liberated areas.

Rather, what is likely to happen is what I call a new war on a global basis. A new war is a mixture of crime, sectarian conflict, and massive violations of human rights, evident in the former Yugoslavia or in Libya, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Yemen, and Syria today. New wars are perhaps closer to the bouts of violence that were not called war in the colonial period. New wars emerged in the period after the end of the Cold War. They are to be distinguished not just from the interstate wars of the past but also the civil wars of the 1950s and 1960s when usually left-wing revolutionary groups fought against colonial or authoritarian regimes. New wars are usually framed in sectarian terms and fought in the name of ethnic and religious identity by loose networks of state and nonstate actors. The construction of these extremist identities can be understood as a way of suppressing or diverting democratic or social demands in the context of political and economic liberalization in formerly authoritarian states. They could be represented as a reaction to the destructiveness of the laisser-faire phase that marks the decline of the fourth surge of development. New forms of communication and triggering devices for improvised explosive devices have facilitated the organization of networks, the spread of extremist ideologies, as well as the evolution of what might be described as vernacular technology, combining ICT with easily available ingredients (Revill 2016).

The rise of extremist political movements world-wide can be explained in similar terms—both as a way of resisting democratic demands and of mobilizing political support in the context of deprivation and inequality associated with market fundamentalism. The danger of today's right-wing populism is not so much the risk of

an "old war" but rather the spread of violence that is typical of a "new war." For the most part, right-wing populism is not directed against other states but against groups (Muslims, immigrants, Mexicans, Jews, blacks) and against internationalism, especially the United Nations and the European Union. It is increasingly pervasive violence of the sort already experienced in the former Yugoslavia, Africa, and the Middle East and that could easily come to characterize the United States (especially given the availability of guns) and perhaps Britain as well.

Unlike the hugely destructive and tragic wars of the twentieth century, which were decisive and profoundly restructured societies, a global new war will be decentralized and fragmented. New wars are likely to increase inequalities and to benefit a few rich and usually armed groups, as was the case for the criminalized and predatory violence of the premodern period in Europe. Casualties are unlikely to be as high as in earlier wars, but mass forced displacement will become the norm. As we have experienced over the last thirty or so years, such wars are almost the opposite of the wars described by Charles Tilly—they involve a vicious cycle in which the decline in tax revenue leads to a decline in public spending, a decline in legitimacy, an increased privatization of violence, and the emergence of a war economy based on violence-related activities such as loot, extortion, and smuggling. They are, in effect, wars of state "unbuilding"—a kind of neoliberalism in the military sphere. They are hugely destructive but do not involve and indeed prevent the kind of restructuring necessary for future development. They are not civil wars because they are both global and local; they are wars in which the very distinctions between inside and outside and public and private dissolve because of the state unbuilding character of the war. They are better described as a sort of social condition in which the various networks of armed groups benefit from ongoing violence rather than from winning. This is why they are so persistent and difficult to end. Moreover, these wars tend to spread through extremist ideas, transnational crime, and trauma. Even if the United States and Europe are able to pull back from the brink, we cannot avoid the effects of the global new war in the Middle East; in fact, we already experience this through the increase in terrorism, the high levels of migration and refugees, and the spread of global organized crime.

The War on Terror can be analyzed as one element of the global new war. Aimed at individual terrorists rather than other states, it is the twenty-first-century war-of-the-manhunt, using a sophisticated combination of surveillance, algorithms for identifying targets, and drones—a military expression perhaps of the technological paradigm that characterizes the fifth surge. It is a war that cannot be won but endlessly creates the conditions for its own reproduction and feeds into and exacerbates new wars taking place in different parts of the world.

So, is there an alternative to a global new war that might allow the new to be born? Can we construct institutions that would be relevant for a model of development or a techno-economic paradigm based on the spread of ICT that would also have to be resource saving for both climate change and future prosperity? The only way to address the morbid symptoms we are witnessing today is through a new or reformed set of institutions at the international or global and local levels. New wars can only be managed through both international cooperation and resistance at local levels; they require a complex cooperative set of policies that are aimed at reversing the social condition rather than winning or reaching a diplomatic compromise (Chinkin and Kaldor 2017, see especially chapter 11). In turn, the legitimacy of regional and international institutions depends on their capacity to bring about a new peace. But how might this come about?

Social Movements and Communication

Social movements are perhaps the missing link in the story of long waves or surges of development. Social movements can affect how each new surge is framed and

how a dominant discourse is constructed. Social movements rise and fall; at their height, they either succeed by transforming and creating new institutions, or they fail, become marginalized, and perhaps turn to violence. Turning points can also be regarded as moments when social movements succeed or fail. The first and second surges were linked to the rise of nationalist movements, which aimed to construct the nation as a demos for the state; such movements were preoccupied with democracy and the spread of prosperity. The Italian revolutionary d'Azeglio believed that railways would "serve to sew up the Italian boot" (Trebilcock 1982, 350). In the third and fourth surges, the labor movement was more significant. Nationalism during this period took on an uglier approach, using fear of the other as a tool to deflect demands for more democracy and social justice; this is one important explanation for the outbreak of World War I (Fischer 1961, 1967). But in the end, WWI was followed by WWII, which opened the way for a new narrative, drawn from the labor movement, about redistribution and social citizenship. The labor movement was institutionalized within a national framework in the form of socialist and communist parties and trade unions.

The post-1968 movements, it can be argued, are the harbingers of the current turning point. They were concerned with issues of gender, the environment, peace, and human rights and were more globally oriented than earlier movements; this was in part because states that were institutionalized largely within the framework of the fourth surge of development tended to be inflexible and resistant to change, and so the movements sought new pathways to get their messages across, often through newly developed regional and global institutions like the European Union or the United Nations. Alongside these emancipatory movements was growing political support for neoliberalism within the private sector and more right-wing political currents motivated by a similar disillusion with the role of the state. The new information and communications technologies facilitated both of these tendencies. The 1989 revolutions could be presented as a victory for the post-1968 movements; the period after 1989 was a period of consolidation for emerging mechanisms of global governance institutions in dialogue with newly created international NGOs, often the professional embodiment, the institutionalization, of the earlier social movements. The post-1989 period also ushered in the heyday of neoliberal policies, which were widely adopted by Western governments and imposed worldwide, giving rise to the acceleration of what became known as globalization.

The War on Terror, the return of authoritarianism and geopolitical rivalry, the rise of Trump, and Euro-skepticism are phenomena that can be interpreted as counterattacks on the globalizing tendencies of the 1990s—not just a reaction to neoliberalism but to globalist ideas about human rights, the environment, and ending new wars. These backward tendencies are typical of the morbid symptoms that characterize interregnums. They are the phenomena that are likely to lead to a global new war. Emerging contemporary movements like the Arab uprisings, Occupy, or party movements like Syriza, Podemos, or Momentum, however, tend to be locally or nationally focused. If the full potential of information and communications technology is to be realized in a new "golden age," then what is required is a new narrative that combines demands for social justice, combatting climate change, and ending new wars on a transregional and transnational basis. Such a narrative would be necessary to inform an appropriate set of public policies on the part both of states and, more importantly, the institutions of global governance, if the new has a hope of being born.

Social movements are inextricably linked to forms of communication. Ernest Gellner (1983), in his classic book on nationalism, argued that prior to the modern state, society was characterized by horizontal high cultures based on religion and a scholarly written language—Latin, Arabic, or Sanskrit for example—and multiple local low cultures based on oral traditions. The invention of printing made it possible to publish books, newspapers, political tracts, and manuals in a vernacular

language, often based on a specific local dialect, which was then spread through reading and education. This offered the basis for a vertical national culture that was promoted from above by the state and from below through teachers, journalists, and an emerging class of national intellectuals. Techno-economic paradigms are associated with innovations in communication—canals, railways, the telegraph and telephone, automobiles and aircraft, and radio and television—which, up to now, largely helped to strengthen state-dominated discourses.

The new ICT-based paradigm has been diffused to a large extent through the communications of post-1968 social movements and transnational companies, offering possibilities for horizontal communities based in international languages like English, Spanish, Russian, or Arabic, as well as very locally based differentiation. The implications are, to be sure, contradictory and complex, as current debates about filter bubbles and echo chambers testify. They depend on how people decide to use the technologies and to regulate them, all of which is part of the process of constructing the "new."

Conclusion

Writing in 1939, the historian E. H. Carr (1939) drew a distinction between utopia and realism in international relations. Utopians propose various international schemes for world peace. Realists analyze the world in terms of states and the military and economic power they possess. Carr argued that the utopians of the interwar period had failed to take realism into account, even though the realists often found it necessary to clothe their power in utopian language in order to exert power. I think the opposite is the case today: utopianism, the construction of effective global institutions, is the only realistic option. Putin and Trump clothe their actions in the language of traditional realism (statism and sovereignty) and this can only lead to war. The only way to address the problems that we face today is through a new or reformed set of institutions at international or global and local levels designed to facilitate the deployment of a new techno-economic paradigm that is ICT based and green and global.

But those of us who study these questions need to go beyond the traditional conception of liberal internationalism that focuses on interstate relations. We need a shift from IR to world politics, where the latter is about transnational and transregional debates involving a wide range of actors from grassroots militants to international NGOs and multinational corporations and including both states and international institutions. To be sure, this shift has been underway since the nineteenth century, although it accelerated after 1989. But it is under threat at present, and it is only by taking the shift further—thicker and deeper—that the kind of action needed at global levels, whether in relation to war, poverty, or climate change, can be undertaken. It may be that newly emerging regional organizations that go beyond the classic intergovernmental institutions like the European Union are the vehicles for carrying this forward. Such institutions need to be more accountable and more responsive to rapid changes in technology. If the classic answer to military power was state diplomacy, the answer to the kind of violence that characterizes new wars is the legitimacy of political institutions at all levels. And legitimacy can only be achieved by tackling global challenges effectively—something perhaps that could be facilitated by the emerging technological paradigm.

What I have tried to set out is a research agenda based on the study of cycles in different fields of activity—something that requires a wide-ranging interdisciplinary approach, drawing on science and technology studies, history, economics, sociology, and anthropology, as well as international relations and political science. The task is to recast liberal internationalism in terms of the accountability and effectiveness of a layered system of global governance. In this dangerous interregnum, the critical role of scholars is more important than ever.

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