

Through What Stage Are We Passing?

[The] assertion that 'everything is possible in human affairs' is either meaningless or false.

—E. H. Carr¹

What Happened to the Socialist Revolution?

Anyone who has pretensions to being a revolutionary socialist nowadays, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, is surely obliged to answer one simple, if salient, question: what on earth has happened to the socialist revolution?² For those of us who believe that the socialist transformation of society must through necessity pass through the gate of the *revolutionary* overthrow of the capitalist order the fact is that moves to do just that have, since the mid point of the last century, been almost entirely absent from our planet; and *absolutely* absent³ from that part of our planet where the locus of capitalist power is lies—the advanced metropolis of western Europe, north America and Australasia.⁴ While the first half of the last century, as we shall see, was indeed a period rich

¹ *What is History?* (Harmondsworth, 1977), 93.

² The thought process behind this article was inspired by an online conversation I had around two years ago with the late, and much-missed, Mark Jones; it is therefore dedicated to him, and I can only hope that he would have agreed with at least some of it. (For the conversation itself, see: Mark Jones, 'thinking out loud' (24 July, 2002), <<http://archives.econ.utah.edu/archives/marxism/2002w30/msg00079.htm>> [28 December, 2004], Ed George, 'Re: thinking out loud' (25 July, 2002), <<http://archives.econ.utah.edu/archives/marxism/2002w30/msg00108.htm>> [28 December, 2004], and Mark Jones, 'Re: thinking out loud' (25 July, 2002), <<http://archives.econ.utah.edu/archives/marxism/2002w30/msg00113.htm>> [28 December, 2004].)

³ To anticipate a little, it will surely be objected that the Portuguese Revolution of 1974-5, and possibly the events of the French May '68, disprove this assertion. However, I would argue that, tumultuous although these experiences might have been, the ease with which capitalist order was subsequently restabilised gives the lie to this argument. Neither of these events, although they did indeed provoke a reorganisation—and a radical reorganisation in the case of Portugal—at the level of government, brought about the kind of breakdown at the level of the *state* that February 1917 did in Russia, for example, or the uprising of November 1918 did in Germany.

⁴ Whenever this assertion is made it is common to see proffered the charge of 'Eurocentrism'. But it would be a very curious form of internationalism indeed which posited the possibility of the survival of revolution in the non-metropolitan world *without* the overthrow of bourgeois rule in the centre. This is of course not to say that the oppressed of the non-European world are 'dependent' on the workers of the centre, and are therefore obliged to abstain from struggle until the latter move into action; rather the reverse is true. Revolutionary outbreaks, because of the nature of the capitalist order itself, are necessarily international in character, and each actual revolutionary experience has involved revolution spreading *from* the periphery *to* the centre. It is the workers of the 'west' (or, nowadays, perhaps the 'north') who need those of the periphery, not the other way around. The whole of pre-revolutionary Russian social-democracy (and not just the Bolsheviks) understood this perfectly. Before the heady days of 'socialism in one country', for *all* shades of the Russian revolutionary movement the idea that the revolution in Russia could sustain itself *without* revolution throughout Europe would have been regarded as absurd. Their only error was related to the time that would be necessary for the revolution to fail.

in revolutionary experience in just this part of the world capitalist system, since the restabilisation of social and political order following the Second World War the metropolitan capitalist citadel has remained pristine in its resistance to revolutionary challenge.⁵

For sure, the quarter of a century following the Second World War witnessed a period of economic growth and social stability arguably without parallel in human history: that openly anti-capitalist struggles were marked only by their absence in the bourgeois democracies of the ‘west’ in this period was only to be expected. But what of the period which opened up at the cusp of the sixties and seventies of post-Second World War boom? Those who believed that the ‘long detour’ of the previous two decades would end in a renewal of the conditions favourable to placing the socialist revolution back on the historical agenda will have been sorely disappointed.

While some will surely use this state of affairs as further ammunition for the argument that the revolutionary struggle for socialism was always a chimera, it is incumbent for anyone maintaining a commitment to socialist transformation with a modicum of intellectual honesty to point out that other roads to socialism—the so-called parliamentary one, for example, or the once modish strategies of ‘counter-hegemony’ and the like—have been found even more wanting in their efficacy in shifting the power of the bourgeoisie and its political institutions than the socialist revolution. The hard truth is that capitalist power has only ever been directly and successfully challenged by a *revolutionary* socialism. So, if the conclusion that the struggle for socialist emancipation was only ever a naïve and utopian dream is to be avoided, the question poses itself in all its force: what is it that is *absent* from the current world set up that was *present* in the first half of the twentieth century; and what might be the circumstances that will announce its return?

The ‘Long-Waves’ of the Capitalist Economy

It is now commonly accepted across the most diverse schools of economic thought—bourgeois and Marxist, mainstream and heterodox—that the global capitalist social order (whether it is labelled as such or not) has since its infancy been subject to long-rhythm cycles (or ‘waves’ or ‘periods’ according to taste) of more and then less accelerated growth, of relative expansion and relative contraction, of now more advanced development and now relative regression. There is, of course, vigorous disagreement as to what the real root cause of these successive long-term waves of relative boom and slump may be, and what in turn the waves themselves represent;⁶ given the scope of this essay, however, we shall for the moment be skating around these questions, and taking the *existence* of the phenomenon for granted.

⁵ I am not, for reasons of space, going here to enter into the anyway tangential debate surrounding the precise characterisation and assessment of the post-Second World War social overturns in Eastern Europe.

⁶ The reception of ‘long-wave’ theory in the socialist tradition is usefully summarised by Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London, 1975) (by which comment I do not mean necessarily to endorse Mandel’s own interpretation of long waves, which appears to me to be overly ‘technologist’). The name with which the phenomenon of long waves is most closely associated is of course that of Nikolai Dmitrievich Kondratieff, the head of the Soviet Institute of Economic Investigation in the 1920s. Like many other outstanding members of his generation, Kondratieff died during the purges of the late 1930s. Trotsky’s short critique of Kondratieff’s work, ‘The Curve of Capitalist Development’, originally published in 1923, and in English in 1941, has been republished by the Scottish International Socialist Movement in the October 2001 issue of their journal *Frontline*, and is available online here: <<http://www.redflag.org.uk/frontline/four/04flashback.html>> [21 December, 2004]. Trotsky’s criticism of Kondratieff amounts to arguing that long waves, if they exist, rather than being structural phenomena arising from the inner workings of the capitalist mode of production, occur as a consequence of more external contingencies. Long-wave theory has subsequently formed a central plank in the ‘world-system’ view of Immanuel Wallerstein and his followers.

How can we periodise these long-term cycles? Again, while debate surrounds the details, there is perhaps surprisingly general agreement as to the rough outline of the model. The following table⁷ would induce little outrage, even across the most diverse schools of economic thought:

CYCLE		RISING PHASE			DECLINING PHASE		
I	1780/90	————	A	————	1810/17	————	B ————— 1844/51
II	1844/51	————	A	————	1870/75	————	B ————— 1890/96
III	1890/96	————	A	————	1914/20	————	B ————— 1940/45
IV	1940/45	————	A	————	1967/73	————	B ————— ?

Table 1: The Long-Waves of the Capitalist Economy

According to this model, the modern global capitalist system has undergone four successive cycles of (relative) development and (relative) stagnation; we should now be, were it to continue repeating itself, either right at the end of the fourth or just at the beginning of the fifth of them.

Following this model, and by a process of induction alone, where should we expect significant revolutionary socialist challenges to the capitalist system to occur? It should brook little argument that revolution requires deep economic and social crisis to be triggered: we should therefore not expect to find significant *revolutionary* upsurges—at least, not in the metropolis—in the ascending ‘A’ phases of the cycle. And indeed we do not.

Nor should it provoke too much opposition if we assume that revolutionary *socialist* movements will post-date the formation of genuinely proletarian mass organisation, so we shall ignore the period before the mid-point of the nineteenth century. We—knowing nothing else—should deduce that the socialist revolution would pose itself as an actuality in the descending ‘B’ phases of the second, third and fourth cycles, in other words within the roughly demarcated periods 1870 to 1896, 1914 to 1945, and 1967 to the present day.

But what do we really find? It is true that *one* of these periods—1914-1945—did indeed witness significant revolutionary struggle: the last great metropolitan socialist revolutionary cycle—indeed, the only one there has ever been in human history—took place here. The great revolutionary wave of 1914 to 1923 saw not only the first successful overthrow of capitalist rule in human history, in the Russian October 1917, but revolutionary conflagration across Europe east and west, from Finland to Italy, from Siberia to Spain. And in the 1930s the

⁷ This particular example (although many similar examples could be cited) is taken directly from Peter J Taylor, *Political Geography: World-Economy, Nation-State and Locality* (London and New York, 1985), 13; Taylor, one of the better political geographers we have, is, interestingly enough, something of a Wallersteinite himself.

spectre of revolution was again to criss-cross the European theatre: now in Germany; then in France, Austria, and Portugal; and finally in Spain. Such was the way in which the sense of mortal danger was felt within the institutions of bourgeois society that the blunt instrument of fascist dictatorship was unleashed with the aim of forever eliminating the threat of the socialist revolution. But in vain; for once again, over 1944-45, a continental-wide mass insurrectionary movement, directly aimed at the liberation from Nazism, once more posed the actuality of socialist revolution.⁸

Put another way, then, the entire period from 1914 to 1945 in Europe was one in which the very existence of capitalist rule was periodically challenged by revolutionary movement from below.⁹ According to our earlier inductive suppositions this is what we might have expected to find.

But what of the other two periods? What of 1870-1896 and post-1967? It is of course clear that no period of capitalism is entirely free from struggles, sometimes very great struggles, and these two periods are no exception to the rule. The first saw possibly the first great proletarian insurrectionary movement in human history—the Paris Commune; and the second bore witness to two of the most highly developed mass struggles of recent living memory—May 68 and the Portuguese Revolution. But neither of these periods can compare with that of 1914 to 1945 in the way that in this last case the capitalist system was *repeatedly* and *consistently* confronted with revolution. At the very least, and leaving to one side for now the already-addressed question of whether these struggles really *did* pose the possibility of overthrowing bourgeois rule (rather than simply modifying its form), The Commune, May 68 and the Portuguese *Revolução dos Cravos* do rather stand as exceptions within their respective periods; while, on the other hand, in the revolutionary decades of 1914-1945 it is precisely those times of quiescence which appear exceptional.

And now, of course, we have arrived again at the question posed at the outset. Why is the present post-1967 period not like that of 1914-1945? Once again: what has happened to the socialist revolution?

Shifting Hegemony

I have assumed—and further assumed that it will not be objected to—that economic stagnation is a precondition of socialist revolution. But is it the only one? Are economic collapse, crisis and slump sufficient to impel the masses to undertake the potentially mortal struggle for political power— and are they sufficient to allow them to win?

I have consistently described the capitalist order in the foregoing as a ‘global’ order. This is not to say that the global capitalist economy is composed of an undifferentiated and unmediated social structure: relations of

⁸ It will probably be countered that not all of these experiences were truly *revolutionary*. Limits of space preclude all but a select bibliographical rebuttal of this (anticipated) contention. With regard to the German Revolution: for a discussion of the range of demands raised by the working class movement see Dick Geary, ‘Radicalism and the Worker: Metalworkers and Revolution 1914-23’, in Richard J Evans, *Society and Politics in Wilhelmine Germany* (London, 1978); for an account of the evolution and character of the USPD over this period, see David W. Morgan, *The Socialist Left in the German Revolution* (Ithaca and London, 1975), especially 53-17; for an eye witness account of the revolutionary atmosphere in Berlin after the Kaiser’s ‘flight’ see Theodor Wolff, *Through Two Decades* (London, 1936) (Wolff was editor of the *Berliner Tageblatt*). With regard to Spain, see Fernando Claudín, *The Communist Movement: From Comintern to Cominform* (London, 1975), especially 210-42, and P Broué and E Témime, *The Revolution and Civil War in Spain* (London, 1972). For the 1934 rising in Asturias, see also Adrian Shubert, *The Road to Revolution in Spain: The Coal Miners of Asturias 1860-1934* (Urbana, 1987). On the revolutionary crisis in France through 1934 and 1936, see Claudín, 179ff., and D R Brower, *The New Jacobins* (Ithaca, 1968). On the World War Two resistance in general, see Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre *Is Paris Burning?* (London, 1965), F. Knight, *The French Resistance* (London, 1975), and Claudín, 307-454.

⁹ See note 5 above.

domination, subordination, dependence and inequality clearly obtain within its social fabric, but they are not ultimately relations between national *capitalisms*, but between nationally-located *capitals* within a single, global, social structure. Even though it should not really be necessary to insist on this, the *global*, supra-national, nature of capitalist social relations, it probably is. Let us reiterate, then: ‘capitalism in one country’ has been historically as much of a myth as ‘socialism in one country’ ever was; something on which the founders of classical Marxism were absolutely clear.¹⁰

But nationally-located capitals are indeed *nationally*-located: it is too highly pertinent to observe that while at the level of the social capitalism tends to the global, at the level of the political the fundamental structure of the bourgeois order is precisely national. And if we look at the capitalist order on a global scale, we see alongside an international capitalist economy a highly structured international *system of national states*. And one of the most notable features of this state system is that it is hierarchical: not just in the sense of the relations between the states of the imperialist and imperialising metropolis and those without, but between the states of the metropolis themselves. The history of the capitalist system is at the same time the history of this highly structured hierarchical state system *within* the metropolis: of its evolution, and of the rise and fall of successive hegemonic states within it.

It is generally accepted that thus far under the capitalist mode of production we have witnessed three such states outstanding from the point of view of their economic influence: the Netherlands, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries; Britain, in the nineteenth; and, today, the United States.

But what is a *hegemonic* state; or, in other words, what distinguishes a hegemon from a simple *primo inter pares*? It seems to me that for one state to be considered truly hegemonic within the international state system it would have to play a determining role with respect to how the whole system itself operates; and, since we are considering here the capitalist state (or capitalist states), that set of political institutions which arise from the capitalist social structure, correspond to it, and create the legal and political institutional framework within which capital accumulation and reproduction occurs,¹¹ a hegemonic state is hegemonic to the extent that it is able to set the framework within in which the whole capitalist system operates, in which the accumulation of capital on a global scale takes place.

The significance—and importance—of this distinction between a genuinely hegemonic state and a simple *primo inter pares* is best illustrated by looking at the concrete historical cases.

It was period opened up by the Treaty of Utrecht of 1713 that witnessed the beginning of Britain’s emergence as the world’s principal naval and commercial power. Subsequently, she rapidly became the world’s greatest port and warehouse, at the same time accumulating for herself generous masses of colonial territory. But despite the fact that Britain was as a consequence by the end of the eighteenth century the most important economic and

¹⁰ For example, and typical, from Marx: ‘Along with the national debt there arose an international credit system, which often conceals one of the sources of primitive accumulation in this or that people. Thus the villainies of the Venetian system of robbery formed one of the secret foundations of Holland’s wealth in capital, for Venice in her years of decadence lent large sums of money to Holland. There is a similar relationship between Holland and England. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, Holland’s manufactures had been far outstripped. It had ceased to be the nation preponderant in commerce and industry. One of its main lines of business, therefore, from 1701-1776, was the lending out of enormous amounts of capital, especially to its great rival England. The same thing is going on today between England and the United States. A great deal of capital, which appears to-day in the United States without any birth-certificate, was yesterday, in England, the capitalised blood of children.’ (*Capital* vol. 1 (Harmondsworth, 1990), 920.)

¹¹ ‘It is in each case the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production—a relationship whose particular form naturally corresponds always to a certain level of development of the type and manner of labour, and hence to its social productive power—in which we find the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social edifice, and hence also the political form of the relationship of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the specific form of the state in each case.’ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (Harmondsworth, 1981), 927.

military power in Europe, and hence the world, it would be difficult to consider her a genuine *hegemon*, at least while the true hub of world finance remained, as it did at this point, Amsterdam: London it was not; at least, not yet. In fact it would be difficult to claim for Britain a *determining* role within the world state system at least before the post-Napoleonic settlement by which point British economic and political dominance really did begin to appear genuinely unchallengeable. In other words, British hegemony – as understood here – can be dated to have begun only after the first quarter of the nineteenth century, reaching its height in the subsequently ushered-in *Pax Britannica* ‘Free Trade’ era of the middle third of that century, and entering into decline in the last quarter of the century, as rival imperialisms, principally Germany and the United States, emerged to challenge British supremacy.¹²

By the same token, if we want to locate the period in which the United States began to play a *directing* role within the world state system in terms of the reproduction of the social system of capitalist production, perhaps the key date should be July 1944—the signing of the Bretton Woods agreement, which saw the subsequent setting up of the IMF and IBRD—events which, in their own way, set the conditions anew for the functioning of the post-bellum global capitalist economy within the framework of supranational institutions in which the United States would call the shots. And perhaps the first signs of the weakening of US hegemony can be dated to the collapse of this system, in 1971.

These observations lead us to a number of interesting conclusions.

First, it seems as though capitalism ‘needs’ a hegemonic power within it, to give it stability. The period between British and United States hegemony was of course marked by two World Wars, each in turn witness to human and material destruction on a scale hitherto unseen; and the period immediately preceding British hegemony again saw continental-wide total war. In fact, it is difficult not to see these wars as a product of the *absence* of hegemony, and as a mechanism to *resolve* the absence of hegemony.

Second, the two periods under consideration of—British and United States—hegemony seem to correspond to distinct stages of development of the capitalist system itself; and if we factor in the period of Netherlandish hegemony, the observation is confirmed. The Netherlands functioned as the hegemonic power in the period of ‘commercial capitalism’, through its dominance of world commerce, by controlling shipping and the international monetary order. Britain, with a pre-classical imperialist industrial capitalism through its manufacturing dominance and its naval policing of ‘free’ trade. The United States, within the modern imperialist system proper, through the hegemony of the dollar (and subsequently its military machine) and its dominant role within supranational state institutions, including those set up under the auspices of Bretton Woods. Thus the manner in which hegemony is exercised within the capitalist state system seems to be in turn a function of the stage of development of the capitalist system itself: mercantile capitalism, industrial capitalism, finance capitalism. Qualitative changes in the latter bring about a qualitative reorganisation of the state hierarchy.

Third, if we, now look more closely at the dates of British and United States hegemony, we see that, respectively, these two hegemonic periods run from something like 1820 to 1890, and 1945 to the present day, with a clear

¹² Perry Anderson dubs the epoch of global free market under British direction ‘diplomatic-industrial imperialism’, and the following period of increasingly intense inter-imperialist rivalry ‘military-industrial imperialism’ (Perry Anderson, ‘Origins of the Present Crisis’, *English Questions* (London and New York, 1992) (originally *New Left Review* 23 (January-February 1964)), 24). Anderson goes on to explain: ‘By “diplomatic-military imperialism” is meant the economic subjugation of other nations, usually secured by the threat of force, rather than by outright annexation. “Military-industrial imperialism” [on the other hand] proceeded by straight conquest; it was a product of the fear of rival European imperialisms, in particular of Germany, whose shadow haunted the extreme patriots of the period. It thus marks the moment at which British world supremacy was no longer unquestioned.’ (Ibid.) It is curious, but not paradoxical, that it is this latter period of relative British decline, and not the golden age of *Pax Britannica* that had preceded it, that produced the symbols and ideological paraphernalia of ‘Empire’ in its classical and familiar form: formal demarcation of colonies (‘colouring the map of the world pink’) and the ideology and sloganising of ‘jingoism’.

ascendant and descendent phase in each case. Two things now immediately stand out: first, that between each hegemonic phase there is an extended interregnum, a transitional period of non-hegemony; and second, that our two hegemonic periods now look very similar in scale, and rhythm, to our long-wave economic cycles II and IV. Let us then replot the original long-wave table, and, without stretching the dates too much, map our periods of state-system hegemony on it.

CYCLE	HEGEMON	RISING PHASE				DECLINING PHASE			
I	(none)	1780/90	————	A	————	1810/17	————	B	———— 1844/51
II	Britain	1844/51	————	A	————	1870/75	————	B	———— 1890/96
III	(none)	1890/96	————	A	————	1914/20	————	B	———— 1940/45
IV	United States	1940/45	————	A	————	1967/73	————	B	———— ?

Table 2: The Long-Waves of the Capitalist Economy (Political-State Hegemonic Periods Shaded)

I would suggest—but here can do no more than suggest—that this relation between cycles of political hegemony and economic rhythms is not casual: that capitalist relations need—and find, through force of necessity—a stable institutional political framework in which to unfold themselves, and this institutional stability is granted them through a state system held in balance by a hegemonic state power. Each cycle of state hegemony corresponds with a phase in the economic cycle. But, as the modalities of capitalist accumulation evolve—from commercial capitalism, through industrial capitalism to finance capitalism, the necessities of the economic structure *vis-à-vis* the institutional framework change, and the hegemon acts as a break on economic development, while new possible contenders for the role of hegemon are pushed forward: hence the close match between the ascendant and descendent phases of the political and economic cycles. Finally, freed from the shackles of a redundant hegemon, a new economic cycle begins—less spectacular, less stable and more prone to crisis than the preceding one. Increasing instability at the institutional level—manifested most clearly in wars (the Napoleonic Wars and the two twentieth-century World Wars)—supervenes to bring the cycle to a close. The political instability—the wars—have the function of resolving the interregnum, and a new cycle, now newly hegemonic, begins.¹³

¹³ The similarity between this account of mine and Marx's statement of method in the 1859 *Preface*—‘The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure’ (‘Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy’, *Early Writings* (Harmondsworth, 1992), 426)—will be clear, especially if we follow G A Cohen's reading of Marx (*Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Princeton, 1978)), and his—in my opinion entirely convincing—assertions that what Marx there denominates ‘superstructure’ is in fact the *state*, and that the relation between this last and the economic structure is a *functional* one: ‘superstructures are as they are because, being so, they consolidate economic structures’ (Cohen, xi).

Some Results and Prospects

So what happened to the socialist revolution?

Lenin once famously remarked¹⁴—chiding the voluntaristic impatience of the early British Communists—that for revolutions to occur it is not only sufficient that the exploited classes not want to go on in the old way, but for the exploiters too to be *unable* to carry on in the old way. Now it is clear that the exploiting classes—and their political apparatuses, the state—are afflicted by mortal crisis not only by the prevailing economic conditions and by political challenges from below, by the mass movement impelled by the ravages of slump and war, but also by their relations with the exploiting classes of other states. In other words, when we look for the ‘objective’ preconditions for socialist revolution it is not sufficient to look for them only in the socio-economic fabric of capitalist society, or with respect to the level of conscious and/or combativity of the working class, but also in relation to the situation of the ruling class and its institutions *vis-à-vis* its relations with other classes and institutions both within and without the country.

The problem I posed above—why do we find that revolutions occur in only one of the descending ‘B’ phases of the long-term economic cycles, when we should expect them to occur in two more—should now not be so perplexing. For what distinguishes the ‘B’ phase of the third cycle—the period 1914 to 1945—is that it is the ‘B’ phase of a cycle within a period of an *absence* of hegemony within the political-state structure. And if we are looking for a factor present in the inter-war period and absent today it is precisely this: United States hegemony may be on the wane, we may be on the cusp of a new cycle of political and social ascendance and descentance, but we are still clearly living, and have lived since the late 1960s, under a state system within which the United States predominates to the extent that it determines the global functioning of the system, i.e. in which she functions as a true hegemon.

My argument here is that a necessary condition for the ruling classes to be unable to go on in the old way is a breakdown in bourgeois state hegemony within the metropolis. That without such a breakdown the institutions of capitalist rule here prove—have proved—too robust to be shaken in any real qualitative—revolutionary—way. The post-1967 period witnessed no socialist revolution in the metropolis for precisely this reason: US hegemony, operating at both the political and ideological levels, even if in the descendent, has resulted in a bourgeois institutional structure that has proved itself too strong.

If the foregoing has an element of truth to it—and this is a big ‘if’, for, as should not need saying, what I am presenting here is nothing but a sketch, which can only have the scientific status of tentative conjecture—what conclusions can we draw?

First, in relation to the character of the period we are about to enter. We can surmise that we stand on the brink of a new long-wave cycle—the fifth under capitalism. The forthcoming cycle will be marked by an absence of global hegemony; or, rather, will form an interregnum between one global hegemon—the United States—and the next. Which the next will be, of course, we do not know, as this will be something determined by inter-imperialist competition between the declining power—the United States—and new, rising, ones, and overdetermined by other factors exogenous to the cyclical process. But who might the contenders be? What seems to be happening in the present leads to the conclusion that the coming period of inter-imperialist competition—and this is what will be new about the forthcoming cycle—will be fought out not between states but between *blocs* of states: a northern American bloc, a European bloc, a Pacific bloc. And it seems not unreasonable to project that, while these imperialist blocs will operate within a world with clearly definable core, periphery and semi-periphery regions, as now, within these blocs too we will be able to discern core, periphery and semi-periphery regions, and the consequent tensions and instabilities arising from these multiple relations of political and economic dependence and domination.

¹⁴ In his *‘Left-Wing’ Communism – An Infantile Disorder. Selected Works* (Moscow, 1968), 561-2.

If it is historical analogies that we are looking for, then we can say that the coming long-wave will not have the political characteristics of the present cycle but those of the one before, i.e. that we will be moving in a period more akin to that of 1890-1945 than 1945 to the present. The ascendant phase of this cycle, it will be recalled, was coloured by the imperialist scramble to divide up the hitherto unconquered world; the forthcoming cycle may well be conditioned by a redivision of the world in a desperate and increasingly competitive scramble for dwindling energy supplies. The recent oil wars would appear to point to that possibility: the element of inter-imperialist competition being signalled by the differences within the imperialist world—between the United States and Europe, for example—on the strategy of war, and the growing conflict between the dollar and the euro in, amongst other places, the oil market itself.

We can expect the ascendant phase of the coming cycle to be marked by a slower and more unstable rhythm of growth than we saw during the post-Second World War boom, and the descendent phase by qualitatively more turbulent than the post-1970 period: the descendent phase of the third long-wave cycle opened of course with World War One and closed with World War Two. But the supervening period was that single period in human history to see a genuine flourishing of socialist revolution.

What conclusions can we draw as socialists, particularly in respect of the type of political organisations we should be building? It should now be clear that what should not be not on the agenda is the type of organisation that was being built in the late 1930s, as the few remaining socialist revolutionists struggled desperately against time and against seemingly impossible odds to construct parties that would be ready, in extraordinarily unfavourable circumstances, to deal with what was seen as an imminent struggle for power. We are in a period more akin to the end of the nineteenth century, in which the mass parties of the Second International were built. And, although it is generally regarded today that the Second International ended in failure, in ignominious collapse in the face of imperialist war, this one-sided picture misses its real lesson. What really happened was that, faced with the outbreak of World War One, the parties of the Second International *split*: the very crisis of war acted as midwife to that radicalisation, spurred on by the Russian Revolution, which bequeathed to us not only the chauvinistic, reformist social-democratic parties of present-day Europe but also the *only* global mass revolutionary socialist force we have *ever* seen: the young Third International.

The only political current which today retains any filiation to the idea of socialist revolution is that emanating from Trotsky's Fourth International, formed exactly towards the end point of that last period of revolution and counter-revolution. But the political practice of the organisations which trace their origins, however indirectly, to this tradition—'leadershipism' and leadership cultism, literary fetishisation of programmatic declarations, bureaucratic centralisation to the point of monolithism, catastrophism, extreme hyperactivism, vanguardism, 'short-cut' substitutionism—are precisely a reflection of the fact that these groups still see themselves on the brink of a real collapse of the capitalist system and an actual and imminent struggle for power, as if the maxims of Trotsky's *Transitional Programme* that 'the historical crisis of mankind is reduced to the crisis of the revolutionary leadership', that the 'prerequisites for the proletarian revolution have not only "ripened"; they have begun to get somewhat rotten', that 'mankind's productive forces stagnate',¹⁵ were not conjunctural pronouncements contingent on the circumstances of the time but timeless and ahistorical programmatic ones (akin to the way in which Lenin, at the Fourth Congress of the Comintern, characterised the approach of the young European Communist Parties to the resolution on organisational structure approved at the Third as akin to 'hanging it in the corner like an icon and praying to it'¹⁶).

No: the parties we need to be seeking to build will be built much more in the way in which, for example, Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?* was precisely *not* presented as a blueprint for a doctrinally pure and programmatically pristine centralised 'propaganda group' but as a call to, and for, 'revolutionary social-democrats', *all* revolutionary social-democrats, to build a party of the Russian working class movement, in close connection

¹⁵ Leon Trotsky, *The Transitional Programme for Socialist Revolution* (New York, 1977), 111-2.

¹⁶ Cited in Jane Degras (ed.) *The Communist International 1919-1943: Documents* (London, 1956), vol. 1, 257.

with and out of that movement; exactly in the same spirit as the *Communist Manifesto*, which declared its aim as the ‘formation of the proletariat into a class’, could declare that ‘The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working-class parties. They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole. They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mold the proletarian movement.’¹⁷

Engels, writing much later (in 1884), summarised his and Marx’s ‘party’ approach:

When we founded a major newspaper in Germany, our banner was determined as a matter of course. It could only be that of democracy, but that of a democracy which everywhere emphasised in every point the specific proletarian character which it could not yet inscribe once for all on its banner. If we did not want to do that, if we did not want to take up the movement, adhere to its already existing, most advanced, actually proletarian side and to advance it further, then there was nothing left for us to do but to preach communism in a little provincial sheet and to found a tiny sect instead of a great party of action. But we had already been spoilt for the role of preachers in the wilderness; we had studied the utopians too well for that, nor was it for that we had drafted our programme.¹⁸

And this is the choice we face: To ‘take up the movement [...] and to advance it further’, building ‘a great party of action’; or ‘to preach communism in a little provincial sheet and to found a tiny sect.’

And, while my argument here is that the struggle for power is not on the *immediate* agenda, it is also that it *will* come, and the former statement is, as a consequence of the latter, no alibi for quiescence. For 1914-45, while it brought the socialist revolution to the fore, also brought with it terrible, and unimaginably terrible, world war. So we had better not fail, for socialism or barbarism it will be again.

León

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¹⁷ Karl Marx, *The Revolutions of 1848* (Harmondsworth, 1993),

¹⁸ ‘Marx and the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* (1848-49)’ (n.d.),

<<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/03/13.htm>> [28 December, 2004].