Interpretations of the new world
Fred Halliday

Fred Halliday identifies surprising continuities in the shape of the international scene which has emerged since the end of the cold war. Communism, like colonialism before it, has turned out to be a diversion from the main line of capitalist world transformation predicted by Karl Marx.

In the last six years the world has undergone a strategic and intellectual earthquake, comparable in its effects (though not, at least as yet, in human suffering) to World Wars I and II. A hegemonic system, and its attendant distribution of power, has collapsed. The map of states is being redrawn. A degree of uncertainty unparalleled since the 1930s prevails in the international arena.

The world created by this set of changes corresponds to no easy model, and has rightly provoked considerable bewilderment. In broad terms, three kinds of response have predominated. One, generally associated with the centre and liberal right, is an optimistic one, that sees the world as having moved decisively forward and as being in a period when certain desirable goals - peace, democracy, greater prosperity - are now available to all. The second is a pessimism of the left which asserts that we are in a new imperialist epoch - that the north is incapable of assisting in the development of the south, that ecological destruction is
oncoming, that the USA will, on its own, or in association with its old allies, use the new opportunities to consolidate its domination of the world. An alternative form of pessimism, a gloomy sobriety of the right, sees the breakdown of the cold war order as in many respects a return to the world before 1914, or between the two world wars, leading to greater inter-state conflict, nuclear proliferation and hyper-nationalism. Samuel Huntingdon's 'clash of civilisations' is perhaps the best known of these forebodings.

These approaches have the merit of aspiring to make sense of the world, but in some obvious respects they are all deficient. The hope that the liberal democratic model will within any realistic time-scale be generalised to the world as a whole is, as will be argued later, illusory, as is the belief that war and military competition as a feature of international relations will decline. For a brief period in 1988 and 1989, when the USA and USSR were working together to reduce points of tension, the term 'new world order' had a real, if limited, meaning. But the collapse of the USSR has deprived it of that meaning, and the proliferation of conflict, not only in the third world, but in the Balkans as well, shows how unfounded this oneiric outlook was. Even in its liberal internationalist form, according to which the great powers will do their best to help sort out the world, such liberal optimism is misleading, since it overstates the willingness of the governments, or populations, of the developed world to assume their global responsibilities in either the economic or security fields. The reluctance of any western countries to become involved in Bosnia, the reservations of Japanese politicians, and the confusion about Clinton's reform policy bear this out.

The contrary position, the pessimism of the left, is strongest on economic issues, notably the growing inequalities in the world market, but much weaker in politics. This position gained much credibility from the Gulf war of 1990-1991, and there were many who sought to draw general lessons about the post-communist world from that event. But it is now possible, over four years after the end of that conflict, leaving aside for the time being the analysis of why the war occurred, to see that the critics of the war have, in most respects, and not least with regard to the longer-run significance of the conflict, been proven wrong. First of all, and for all the destruction visited on Iraq, the cost was far less that its critics suggested at the time: total Iraqi dead were around 20,000 - a tenth of what was claimed. Despite rhetoric about Iraq being bombed back to the stone
age, most of the war damage had within a year or so of the war been repaired. Secondly, the US has not been able to use its victory to put pressure on its economic rivals, or on other third world countries; militarist sentiment has shown no permanent increase in the US, as George Bush found out to his disappointment in the 1992 elections. And while critics claim the war achieved nothing, it has had some significant, if as yet incomplete, consequences - there has been movement on a range of Middle Eastern issues, including the Arab-Israeli issue, and some increased freedom of expression, for Kuwaitis themselves, in Kuwait. The Gulf war was an important, but essentially diversionary, chapter in world affairs. And if we look at some of the other major international questions of the day, there is no clear 'left' position at all - the range of opinion on Bosnia runs as wide a gamut among socialists as it does on the right, Michael Foot agreeing with Margaret Thatcher, and the friends of Serbia being an equally diverse bunch.

The third perspective of a return to 1914 appears to draw sustenance from new forms of inter-state conflict and from the rise of nationalism, but it forces the analogy too far: the major powers are not, on present evidence, in the grip of nationalism directed against strategic rivals, and are, for the moment at least, relatively uninterested in preparing for military action against each other. There is a torrent of nationalism around, but it takes a communal, inter-ethnic, as distinct from strategic form. The most powerful states involved on the international scene have themselves changed dramatically since 1914, most notably through the universalisation of democracy (no major states had universal suffrage in 1914) and by the growth of economic prosperity. Germany, for one, is not the state it was in 1914, or 1939: neo-nazi youth is repugnant, but it is not yet dangerous for other states, as was the Kaiser or Adolf Hitler. We are, therefore, in what is in many respects a novel international situation, both with regard to the pattern of the post-1945 period, and more generally. Only when this novelty is grasped can a new set of policies, and moral positions, be suggested.

A novel world situation
A perspective, informed by this notion of novelty together with the pattern of events since 1993, gives us at least some context within which to assess the broader pattern of the post-cold war world. The historical outlines and hence originality
of what happened in the late 1980s can be summarised in brief. A bloc of states, dominated by the USSR, which had since the 1940s been engaged in great power competition with the west, and which had, in the form of the USSR itself, been challenging the western world since 1917, collapsed. The originality of this system's collapse needs recognition: it occurred without inter-state war, in a very short space of time, without the presence of evident forms of political vanguards or organisations and without significant bloodshed. Moreover, in contrast to other revolutions since 1789 which had to some degree claimed to defy the international norm or propound something 'new', those demanding change in this context wanted not, as had hitherto almost always been the case, the creation of something 'new', an alternative to the prevailing world order, but rather conformity to that order, a recruitment and incorporation, as rapid and painless as possible, into what was deemed to be the prevailing norm, be it 'civilisation', 'democracy', the 'west', or 'modernity'.

Certain qualifications of a major kind are necessary: most of those ruled by communist parties since 1988 (1.7 billions) still are (1.4 billions); there is no certainty about what kinds of government will emerge in the former Soviet Union, or in many of its former allies; the future pattern of Russian foreign policy is obscure. Nonetheless a cataclysm of great propositions had occurred, and one that brings to an end not only the cold war and the challenge of the Bolshevik revolution but also a longer period of international history in which a movement of contestation of the hegemonic capitalist form was identifiable. At the risk of what one could term 'megalo-presentism', it could be suggested that 1989 brought to the end a period of history that began in 1789 with the French revolution. If only in this sense, the argument of Francis Fukuyama, that what is new about the contemporary situation is that there is only one set of answers now acceptable on a world scale, is to a considerable degree, and if only for a limited span of time, valid. It is in this above all that the historic importance of 1989 consists. Historical precedent would, however, suggest that this is not a situation that can last: a world of objective inequality, and one where the majority of the world's population is vividly aware of the existence of this inequality, is sooner or later bound to produce movements and ideas of contestation.
The end of 'Great Power' confrontation?
In this perspective the 'end of the cold war' is a composite phenomenon involving several broad historical trends, each of which will take time to work themselves out.

In the first place, the end of the cold war marks the end of the inter-state conflict that has dominated the world since 1945 and the end of the Soviet-US nuclear confrontation. Two obvious prospective issues are whether this marks an end of great power military rivalry as a whole, at least for a generation or so, and whether a new pattern of inter-state blocs and of hegemony will emerge to replace the old. The argument on the former would seem to have considerable historical force - that while for a century since the Sino-Japanese war of 1894 great powers have been engaged in major military confrontation, or in the threat thereof, the prospect of this now seems definitely to have receded. There are those who foresee new great power conflicts in the future, yet the pattern of the past century would appear to have been broken. As for hegemony, we now see a situation of great fluidity in which no bloc of states seems likely to emerge to match the USA, but where the USA itself appears reluctant to play the unipolar 'Roman' role which the collapse of the USSR has allotted to it. The last thing the ascendant Republican right wants is to pay, or assume responsibility, for a larger international role. Moreover, the argument that war between states is almost precluded when they are liberal democratic states has much to recommend it, and, if true, would focus our attention on whether some of the great powers, Russia or Japan, or depression-ridden US, UK or Germany, may in the longer run diverge from this model.

The end of communism?
The second dimension of the end of the cold war is the end of communism as a political force. As already indicated this is, as yet, a phenomenon confined to Europe: but the trend within China would seem to indicate a move towards capitalism, if not liberalism, and the remaining communist states are unable to provide an international alternative (Cuba, Vietnam, North Korea). Two large questions arise here: first, what the future of an alternative to capitalism now is, indeed if such an alternative has a future at all, and secondly, what the historical import of the whole communist experience was. In regard to the first it seems that no programme of revolutionary political challenge to liberal capitalism from
the left now has any serious credit or support: the communist challenge is now exhausted. For the moment what remains are variants of social-democratic adaptation within advanced capitalism, but ones that are more and more restricted - in part by international conditions, in part by changing social and political configurations within individual countries themselves. It is conventional to state that the collapse of social-democracy is in part a result of the failure of communism: the reverse may, however be the case - the dynamic of social-democracy and its equivalents was broken in most advanced countries in the 1970s (Britain, USA, Australia, Germany). As recently as 1993 some social-democratic parties were re-elected - in Spain, and in Australia. But that of France was ousted, and the programme of accommodation, evident for more than two decades, continued. The very lack of a credible middle, or third, road meant that the choices facing communist reformers in the late 1980s were all the starker.

The question of what was communism, too near to allow of an easy perspective, has occasioned several candidate explanations: a dictatorial tendency whereby revolutionary elites seized control of societies, a flawed movement for the self-emancipation of the working class, an expression of messianism, a product of oriental despotism, a failed developmentalist project. Some explanation involving different elements of the candidates listed above may be most appropriate: we should not forget that this attempt to escape the conventional path of capitalist development was for a time remarkably successful, not least in the ideological and military challenge it posed to the west. But in the end it was forced to capitulate, and to do so almost without a semblance of resistance. If nothing else, the communist collapse deserves careful study from the perspective of those who believe in elite-led or state-dictated social and economic development: this is certainly one 'lesson' of communism. But there is another lesson, of equal importance, that is too easily overlooked in current triumphalist accounts: communism was, as much as liberalism, a product of modernity; and of the intellectual and social changes following on from the industrial revolution. It was a dramatic response to the inequalities and conflicts generated by that modernity: the continuation of these same inequalities and conflicts suggests that further challenges, of an as yet indeterminate nature, will result.

'Soundings'

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Although its collapse is now seen as inevitable, this was not how the communist experiment appeared for many decades: both amongst those who supported it, and those who feared it, there was a belief in the efficacy of socialist state intervention that subsequent events have belied. Nowhere was this more so than amongst those states opposed to communism: faced with the challenge of the Bolshevik revolution and its successors, the capitalist world was forced to modernise its own political and economic systems. Indeed the greatest achievement of communism may well turn out to have been not the creation of an alternative and more desirable system contrasted to capitalism, but the modernisation of capitalism itself: no account of the spread of the suffrage, the rise of the welfare state, the end of colonialism, or the economic booms of Europe and the Far East after 1945 could omit the central role which the communist challenge played. A defiant revolutionary modernity provoked a transformation of its non-revolutionary counterpart.

The breakup of nation states?
The third element in the end of the cold war is that it has broken a 'regime' that prevailed since the end of the Second World War, in terms of which the existing map of the world, for all its iniquities and arbitrariness, was maintained. For all the talk of secession and unification that marked the post-1945 epoch, it is striking how, until 1989, the map more or less held. States became independent, some lost bits of territory, but the actual division into 170-odd states was more or less frozen. Unification or fusion occurred only by force and at moments of uncertainty arising from decolonisation (Palestine, Western Sahara, Timor and, it can be argued, Tibet). Secession only occurred in the case of Bangladesh in 1971, but that was of an entity that was already geographically separated from the rest of Pakistan. Since 1989 both the fusion and fission have come again onto the order of the day: we may assume that the fusion of the Yemens and the Germanies will be followed, albeit with some delay, by that of the Koreas and probably, in some form or other, of the (three) Chinas. On the other hand, fission has been the fate of four of the multi-ethnic states of the former communist system (USSR, Yugoslavia, Ethiopia, Czechoslovakia), with the result that in the space of two years over twenty new

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sovereign states have come into existence.

The breaking of the post-1945 regime will encourage many others to think that they too can achieve separate statehood. This will affect some areas more than others: but parts of Europe and Africa, as well as India, are likely to be subject to increased strains, now that is has been shown that secession is allowed. Yet while such strains have grown, and will continue to grow (even Latin America is now affected by forms of ethnic politics and secessionism) it may well turn out in the end (say, by the year 2000) that the fragmenting impact of 1989 will not be universal, but will be confined only to those countries where there has been a crisis of communist rule. This is plausible for the reason that in most cases where secession has been successful it has been not only - or even not so much - because of the strength of the secessionist movement, but because of a weakening, in war or through abrupt political change, of the power of the central state. Such a weakening is what has characterised the ex-Soviet communist world; is is not a general phenomenon. Indeed the moral of the post-1989 story, far from being that secession and independence are now the order of the day, is a rather different one. On the one hand, it would seem plausible to argue that the breakup of states, however painful, has been of far less importance than its contrary, the fusion of hitherto separate ones: reunified Germany and China matter more than a string of Georgias and Eritreas. On the other hand, for all the formal, and moral, respect it is shown, there is not, and never has been, general acceptance of the principle of self-determination. The map of the world that we have today corresponds in Europe to where armies stopped fighting, in the rest of the world to where European colonialism drew lines. The addition of twenty or so new states (with one or two more to come, such as Palestine) will still produce a system of under 200 states in a world where there are many hundreds, if not thousands, of other potential candidates: there are, after all, 4000 languages still spoken, and even communities with the same language can form separate states, as speakers of German, French, Arabic, Malay and English can show.

A new era of global democracy?
The collapse of communism and the apparent spread of liberal democratic political forms to a range of countries, post-communist and third world, has led some to suggest that a new era of global democracy is at hand. This is in essence
the argument of Fukuyama, although he is careful to state that he distinguishes the claim that there is no other viable model on offer from the claim that its consolidation in all countries is imminent or even plausible. In certain respects, this claim is a valid one, in that the end of communism has, in spite of the survival of the Asian communist bloc, underlined the extent to which the old, alternative revolutionary, path of political development is not viable or attractive. In some parts of the third world - Sendero Luminoso in Peru, the Khmer Rouges in Cambodia, the PKK in Turkey - dogmatic parties of the traditional left continue; but they offer no solution, except further bloodletting, to the problems their societies face. Much is made of the 'Islamic' challenge, not least by protagonists of the Koran themselves, who make out that with the collapse of communism they represent the true challenge to the west. Yet Islamism is no challenge to the west, upon which Islamic societies depend financially and militarily, and its political vocabulary, presented by proponents and opponents alike as an alternative, non-European, discourse is, on closer inspection, vintage populism in a Koranic disguise: anti-imperialism, nationalism, hostility to the corruption of states and elites, promises of economic emancipation. If Islamism is a threat to anyone it is to the peoples of the Muslim world itself, who face the prospect of decades of rule by incompetent, cruel and benighted regimes that have no answers, other than demagogy, gender repression and the gun, to the socio-economic difficulties these countries face.

There is no global alternative to the dominant consensus at the moment, but, as already indicated, it is highly unlikely that one will not emerge at some point in the future. Moreover the system of liberal democracy is far more precarious and imperfect than its supporters imply. First, the attainment of a democratic system is not a rapid or once-and-for-all process, but takes a long period of transition to attain: Britain and the USA became fully democratic, in the sense of one person, one vote, only in the 1960s, after hundreds of years of development. Many other states are still in the process of attaining this through various forms of 'semi-democratic' evolution - Mexico, Singapore and Egypt being cases in point. Second, no-one can be sure if a democratic system is established for at least a generation: the fate of the Weimar Republic and of a range of third world democracies that appeared reasonably secure in the 1960s
and 1970s should make that clear (Lebanon, Liberia, Ceylon). The political strains within most countries newly arrived at pluralism indicate that matters may take a very different turn in the years ahead. The early 1990s gave examples enough of that: growing tensions in one of the most enduring third world democracies, India; military overthrow of a recently elected government in Africa (Rwanda); continued crises of democratic rule in Latin America (Venezuela, Peru, Chile, Brazil). Thirdly, while the left authoritarian model has been discredited, there is far from being unanimity amongst capitalist states that democracy on some kind of American-European model is most desirable. In the Far East in particular there are a range of states where alternative forms of capitalism, not of the most brutal, but authoritarian nonetheless, can be identified and which may provide a more attractive model for former communist states, China and even Russia amongst them. Finally, the long-run stability of liberal capitalist states themselves may be insecure, as a combination of socio-economic strains and falling political participation threatens established, and in themselves far from ideal, norms. There are also a number of longer-run trends within advanced industrial society which make for less, rather than more, democracy, not least the new potentialities for electronic and mediatic manipulation and surveillance, and the collapse of the working-class movements which for the first three quarters of this century ensured a degree of political and social compromise in these societies.

Precarious democracy

The implications of this precariousness of democracy for the post-cold war world are two-fold. First, if there is some reasonably binding relationship between liberal democracy and peace, then the travails of democratisation will have a major impact on the future course of inter-state relations. The precondition for world peace is the consolidation of democracy on a world scale. Secondly, the process of democratisation itself, and the degree to which all states in the world are pressured into conforming to it, focuses attention on how international norms, and mechanisms such as foreign aid and trading conditionality, can now operate to enforce a single mode of domestic political and economic practice. In other words, it raises the question, of how far, beyond acceptance of certain
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international norms, states are also compelled by the system to conform internally, or to pay a higher price for not doing so. That has always been one of the underlying dimensions of international relations, but one which recent events enable us to look at in fresh light. Not only in the communist and post-communist worlds, but also in the more advanced states of the west this issue of competition and convergence is visible, as is evident in anxious reflections on the records of economic competitors in the fields of education and productivity: nowhere more so is this clear than in the recurrent references made by politicians in the USA, a country where everything was once held to be of the best, as to how much better Germany and Japan perform on certain key indicators.

The world created by industrial capitalism remains a singularly unequal and divided one, yet what is striking is how states that wish to compete within it are forced, over time, to conform and converge. One can indeed speak here of the pathos of semi-peripheral escape: the repeated effort by states that are at some medium stage of the development process to accelerate this growth by adopting forms of political and economic strategy that circumvent the established norms: communism on the left, fascism on the right have both represented this, as have, at different points, the clerico-conservative regime of Fianna Fail in Ireland, or, in an earlier epoch, the institutionalisation of slavery in the USA. What is striking is how the very attempt to bypass development leads in turn to an international pressure to conform - by war and occupation, in the case of Germany, Italy and Japan, by gradual attraction (to the EEC) and erosion of political exceptionalism in the 1960s and 1970s, in the case of Spain, Portugal, Greece and Ireland.

An agenda for the new world

An agenda for dealing with this new world involves several different components. In the first place, it requires a balanced assessment of the distribution of power in the contemporary world, and of the possibilities open to those states with the greatest amount of it. Neither benign indulgence nor unreconstructed anti-imperialist rejection will help much in assessing how, for example, the US or the UK can be expected to respond to issues of strategic or economic crisis in the contemporary world. If capitalism has disappointed its supporters, by the idiocy of its speculative uncertainty, and its inability to diffuse its wealth, it has also, on occasion, surprised its critics by getting some things
right. Secondly, there needs to be a recognition within the richer and more powerful countries that in the post-cold war world a retreat to a narrow definition of 'national interest' is both impossible and morally reprehensible. The refusal to confront issues of ecology or north-south relations except in the most selfish of terms is one index of a failure to grasp the requirements of the situation. So too is the abject failure to act over Bosnia: the permanent members of the Security Council are enjoined, by virtue of their being signatories of Article 24 of the Charter, to assume 'primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security', something they have signally failed to do in the past few years. Logic alone would suggest that if these states do not want to assume this role, then they should resign their seats on the Security Council and leave the door open for others who may be better able to do so.

The prevalence within international conflicts and many other areas of international debate of the issue of nationalism, and of appeals to relativist justifications, reinforces the need for a third component of contemporary policy, namely a cautious, but firm, insistence on universal standards and rights. We have seen an explosion of nationalisms and particularism in recent years, much of it muddled and pernicious: without comment on the particular rights and wrongs of any one case, it could be suggested that a general reduction of sympathy, a period of benign universalist impatience, is now in order. What is most revolting about many of the new nationalisms that have emerged from the post-communist world is their disregard for established norms of political and social behaviour, be it in regard to ethnic minorities, dissenters or women, and the indulgence which this too often receives, from the consensus in the developed countries. In many post-communist countries, obnoxious practices of discrimination on national grounds are being practised - not just in former Yugoslavia, but in the Baltic states, Georgia, Rumania and elsewhere. Islamic countries in their droves are returning to shari’a law, without anyone seeming to care that in several respects, not least the equality of men and women before the law, and the infliction of corporal punishments, this code is quite inconsistent with international conventions to which these countries are all signatories. Post-modern relativism and liberal apologia can be the servants of repression and viciousness.
Keeping the peace

At the political-strategic level, the question is how far a system of peaceful and co-operative relations between states can be maintained in a post-cold war world: the question is whether the developed capitalist countries, and in particular the USA, are willing or able to assist in this process, in a way that will certainly provide some benefits to the powerful, but also in some measure meet the interests of the system as a whole. It is precisely this which a range of radical third world movements - from the ANC, and the PLO, to the Eritrean People's Liberation Front - tried to encourage by engaging, critically but actively, with the foreign policy-making process in the USA: long excluded, they in the end attained recognition and the prospect of power. A world of inter-state and intra-state conflict will benefit no-one, and hurt the weaker states most.

The problem of inequality

Beyond these political issues, there is the question of the evident universalising trends in the world political and economic system, and whether these trends will serve to diffuse prosperity and reduce the gap between richer and poorer states. The most important, and apparently intractable, question of all is that of promoting the diffusion throughout the world of the economic standards and political freedoms enjoyed, in a relatively secure way, by about 10 per cent of the world's population. This is an argument that has been much debated within liberal economic and marxist camps for the past four decades: the least one can say is that the jury is still out - incomes in most states are rising, but the gap between rich and poor is widening, and new problems - ecological, demographic, inter-ethnic - threaten many states. There appear to be very strong rigidities in the international hierarchy: there has been considerable alteration of position within the group of high income states, but over a century and a half none has left this group, and only one, Japan, has joined.

In broad terms, this was precisely the question that communism, in its seven decades of existence, sought to address - it was a crude, very brutal and costly attempt - although for a time quite successful - at an alternative development project, a creation of semi-peripheral states. Now it has foundered, in the face of

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some more successful developmental projects, and the communist states have been returned, chastened and re-subjugated, like escaped labourers, to their place in the international capitalist hierarchy. Communism failed to come up with an answer that was either politically acceptable or economically competitive. Whether capitalism can do so, for the majority of the world's population, remains to be seen. The irony is that Karl Marx was one person who did believe that developed capitalism could transform the whole world in its image and that, *grosso modo*, it was doing a successful job in the process. In this respect, at least, the new international environment of development looks very much like the old, not least because it has now been stripped of two diversions, both the artificial cover of colonialism (1870-1960) and the chimera of a revolutionary alternative (1917-1991): this international environment turns out, at least in the fundamental issues it raises - peace, democracy and economic growth - to have varied remarkably little over the past century and a half.