

The World System: A Life Cycle Discourse

Johan Galtung
Transcend Institute
France

How do we conceive of the world system? For a long time, say 1950-2000, there were two clear answers based on real world divisions coinciding with the compass: the West-East, and the North-South discourses; the former based on ideology and military alliances and the latter on economic development. NATO versus WTO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization versus the Warszawa Treaty Organization, and then the NN countries, the Neutral-Nonaligned. And, the More Developed Countries versus the Less Developed Countries, MDCs versus the LDCs, roughly measured by GNP/capita, also referred to as the First and the Third Worlds, the OECD Group and the Group of 77, with the socialist countries as the Second World.

Like NATO-WTO the more developed versus less developed division was supervised by Washington DC or WDC. The Washington group had the final word on who belonged where. Thus, to WDC the formula MDC vs LDC, indicative of a conflict-like exploitation coming out of centuries of colonialism--not merely a classification, was an anathema. But NATO vs WTO as a conflict, not only a classification, was mandatory. The West-East goal was to contain WTO in general, the Soviet Union in particular, and communism, if possible with their collapse. And the North-South goal was to prevent the classification from becoming antagonistic, particularly by the South aligning itself with the East, through such measures as development assistance, covert operations and overt military intervention to prevent wealth distribution favoring the South and the poorest in the South (Perkins, 2004). The overriding goal was to maintain the North-South divide, using the divide as a Ricardian division of labor.

The divisions could be combined into Northwest, Northeast, Southwest and Southeast, the First, Second, Third and then the Fourth world, with China and Japan on a different path..¹ The First world was more Christian, I-culture, and the Fourth world Buddhist, we-culture.

Divisions and Identity

Both divisions were identity producing, West-East through fear of a nuclear war, North-South through the pride of being developed in the North, increasingly mixed with the fears of such consequences as pollution and depletion, dissolution of social tissue and normative controls, with divorce, corruption and violence, and through hopes for development as panacea in the South. They looked solid, and were not.

The East did collapse, more through inner dialectic than Western pressure, and was opened up for democratic electionism and capitalist economism. The triumphalism of the West prevented them from seeing the obvious: East moved further East as NATO did the same in the wake of WTO and Soviet Union collapse. WTO became SCO, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, with six members, China, Russia and four Islamic Central Asia countries, and with India, Pakistan and Iran as observers, a quasi-alliance with an economy based on unfettered capitalism, with the state ready to intervene at any time. There will soon be more members.

Without a credible military threat from the East a West-East divide based on mutual fear was no longer viable. And with a credible economic threat from the South a North-South divide based on a subservient South in the classical roles as markets and provider of resources also is no longer viable. The first hint came with OPEC countries exporting capital for investment, not only oil, and now with two big countries alone, China and India, soon dominating the world secondary and IT sectors.

Of course, during the whole period there was also a political discourse with military implications, old-fashioned but important: the idea of big, even "great", powers as opposed to the rest, enshrined in the United Nations Security Council. And then the recent cultural discourse based on the Lewis-Huntington Clash of Civilizations thesis, reduced to West vs Islam, as a successor to the West vs East discourse.

However, the focus here is on a discourse that would cover both military, economic, political and cultural power dimensions, not only one at a time, even as an effort to make the other aspects opaque, unavailable. Just to take an obvious example: of the five UNSC permanent members four are Christian—rotestant, Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox—and one is Confucian-Buddhist-Taoist. There is a clear cultural message here: excluding 1.3 billion Muslims, and soon the same number of Hindus, while including 1.3 billion Chinese, and all three varieties of Christianity. This is certainly unviable for a world body.

In addition to that we notice the obvious: discourses come and go, related to the circumstance that the leading discourses are those of the leading countries, states, "powers". One reason for that is simple: even leading states and state systems come and go, not necessarily by dying like the Soviet Union but that they decrease in significance like the United States of America (whose Empire is now experiencing its death throws). And they come, not necessarily in the sense of being born like the approximately 140 states coming out of decolonization, but also in the sense that they are reborn, recohere, reincarnate, like a Germany inside the Mother European Community and then also reunited, or a China in the Ching-Guomindong-Communist Party dynastic successions.

The Life Cycle

This reminds us of the human life cycle running from Childhood via Adolescence and Adulthood to Retirement. But after Retirement what? The West says Death, with an afterlife in glory (the Napoleonic construction for many French) or ignominy (the Hitlerite construction to most). The Hindu-Buddhist has the 3 "re"s above. And with eternal life as deep culture/structure survival, like the Roman Empire survived as an ideal, still imprinting on humanity: today the USA.

To use human life cycles as discourse for the state system we need an idea of the essence of those five stages, adding "after retirement". What undergoes basic change, to the point of defining the human life cycle stages, apart from the obvious biological changes referred to as birth-growth-maturity-aging-death? Something spiritual, to believe in, producing meaning, referred to here as a project, the French *projet*.

The project of an actor defines ends and means and not only serves as a compass but produces meaning for those who embark on the road, like a Camino de Santiago. We could define Adulthood as the period of enacting a project, and the best known project is work within a job to sustain Self and family. We could define Adolescence as a period of preparation by acquiring the values (ends) and skills (means) necessary and sufficient for project enactment; the project becoming more articulated as time passes on. The typical characteristic of Childhood would be the absence of a clear project, and yet there is the preparation for the preparation for one through play, learning general patterns of ends, means and their relations. And typical of Retirement would be the absence of any project beyond staying alive, reproduction, security, status quo. There are of course those virtual projects called hobbies, like playing golf or bridge or collecting stamps, having no impact beyond the person(s) doing so.

This Western pattern just described should then be contrasted with the Hindu *dharma-artha-kama-moksha* and reincarnation; all four present at all phases in life, but with the point of gravity moving as indicated. The *dharma* phase is the inculcation of values and skills, the preparation for the project of the *varna*, roughly the occupation; the *artha* phase is its enactment; the *kama* phase its enjoyment; and the *moksha* phase the sharing of the wisdom accumulated with those in search of dharma. Whereas the West thinks it does better without the wisdom of the Elders.

Like Humans, Like States

Childhood states are in search of projects of their own, busy with the project "development" defined as economic growth handed down to them from above, preparing for something, not yet knowing what. African states seem to be in that stage today, yet experimenting with some regional, even a continental African Union identity-producing project beyond that.

Adolescent states do what adolescents do, either the positive identification with what they think are adult states, adopting their projects like economic growth as their own, or the negative, anti-identification, with adult states through such anti-projects as the present Latin American distribution project, not only growth, and *Estados Unidos de America Latina (y el Caribe)*; and the Islamic project of *sharia*, a *khalifat*, possibly based on the Organization of the Islamic Conference, also with alternative economics, more based on human contact. These projects may then graduate from postures to real projects, engaging and inspiring vast masses of people, even becoming self-evident.

Adult states already enact projects as major sources of identity, and serve as temporary abodes for the *Weltgeist*. Two rather major countries had been placed in the LDC category by using mechanically the GNP/capita indicator: China and India, Nos 1 and 2 in population. They are now in a position to produce all the

industrial goods for world consumption at very high quality/price ratio, leaving for the MDCs some luxury products for small markets. Pride produces meaning. But they also have cultural messages, combining the Hindu *moksha* and the Chinese Confucian tradition, as wise men seasoned by thousands of years of experience, ready to dispense world wisdom to what to them are adolescents like, for instance, the United States of America. Other major countries may soon join, like Indonesia, Iran, Brasil, Mexico. With messages.

Retired states are characterized by having no major new project beyond status quo, security, reproduction. As models we have retirement or, less politely, old age homes, and the 30,000+ security areas in the USA where wealthy people buy exactly that, security, complete with guards, dogs, barbed wire, electronic surveillance etc. The parallel to the walls separating the USA from Mexico and Israel from Palestine as Israel defines it; furthermore, water surrounds the USA on two sides, the UK, Japan and Australia completely, and the *Schengen* system for EU – *Festung Europa* being too strong—is obvious, but also serves to remind us that behind barbed wire new projects may also be hatched, for reincarnation.

In this old age home for states, we would place tired countries whose economic growth project is running out of steam as evidenced by growth rates below, say, 2%; Whereas England needed 60 years for doubling the GNP/capita, and the USA and Japan about 40, China recently needed 12 years. In the old age home there is even a special section for retired, low growth tigers, like Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. Korea, however, has another project, reunification, if not of the states, of the nation.

Project Failure

The economic growth project may fail to inspire spiritually long before the rates climb down, and vice versa. Norway, with a still high rate of growth, is not peopled with strong believers in that growth. An acceptable project like letting oil and gas stay where they are because we have done enough damage as it is, is possible here. Especially if linked to the dedication of a substantial portion of the enormous "oil fund" (Norway is the only country in the world with a retirement fund not only for the citizens, but for the country as a whole) to alternative, non-depleting/non-polluting forms of energy conversion; as would a project like telling the USA to leave NATO - organization for the defense of democracy and human rights - else, Norway leaves. With others following.

Running out of projects beyond security-maintenance-repair work, then, is seen as the major criterion for retirement. But again, there are alternatives, like Spain presently engaging in a major project of redefining its state from Franco's *Espana, una, grande, libre* to *Espana, una comunidad de naciones*, thereby indicating a new future for "unitary" states with devolution-federalism-confederalism being the norm. There is life after retirement. To use a very meaningful phrase from a more individual level of discourse: the state may reinvent itself. In no way should projects be seen as necessarily "good". They may produce meaning, identity for the holders of the project, but at great expense to themselves like the West-East militarist and North-South economist

projects when they drown their practitioners in police state and ecological and social problems like what China is now experiencing.

And even more problematic is the case when the practice of the project is at great expense to others, either because the project is imposed upon them, like West-East, and North-South to some extent, or because they are means to the realization of the ends of others, like the colonial and imperial projects of yesteryear, but still with us, only decreasing rapidly in legitimacy. Decolonization was a late realization that colonization far from being a mission *civilisatrice* project was mainly exploitation, the use of others as means for the colonizer's own ends, like evangelical missionary action serving their own salvation.

Pathology in the Life Cycle

Thus, the project slides over into the psycho-pathological, when states think they are above the law and have a right to use others given the will to do so and the power to enact that will. Cases include, of course, Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, militarist Japan and Bolshevik Russia. And today's hegemonial USA, defining its hegemony as the best for the world. And today's Israel with the same idea for the region.

These hegemonic projects open the space for one more category: *insane states* in a mental asylum, whether it is a hospital with a reasonably successful therapy; a storage place away from the normal, for the excluded, the pariah states; or for euthanasia, like the Soviet Union, Nazi-Germany, militarist Japan. Fascist Italy was clever enough to reinvent itself through some kind of self-steered therapy, then declaring itself healthy, in 1943.

The criterion for mental disorder is the megalomaniac idea of some divine selection, anointment that places them above others with their rank-and-file laws and truths. Defying the League of Nations was obvious, and all four regimes collapsed. Today the USA and Israel defy the UN.

To propose and practice a project as model for others, to be a "light upon the nations" is unobjectionable and indeed laudable, to impose, even use others for one's own project is not. The USA and Israel are both practicing projects that presuppose the compliance of others; if not the project will be enforced upon them. Thus, the neo-con project in the USA, and the hardest Zionist project, Israel from the Nile to Euphrates with bordering Arab countries being subordinate politically, economically and culturally, and even to the military point that they can turn their swords into ploughshares because all power rests with Israel anyhow, qualify as symptoms of deep-rooted mental disorder. Something similar applies to Australia suppressing indigenous existence, craving for a position as deputy sheriff for the South Pacific.

Conclusion

That gives us five state and super-state categories, not mutually exclusive. What are the conditions for moving from one to the other, and what are their interrelations? The first question is easily answered: [1] by designing a project, [2] by reviving a fatigued project (EU today?), and [3] by redesigning projects that do not satisfy the basic condition: **A valid project does not impede others from having theirs.**

The military alliance project, far from impeding others from having theirs actually promotes the same project in Others as an arms race, or more generally an alliance race; now known as the terrorism-state terrorism race. The economic development divide, however, impeded LDC development because MDCs took away resources that the LDCs badly needed for their development. (This is a god argument for self-reliance as development; relying primarily on oneself, and on oneSelves, in cooperation). The political divide is a monopoly on veto power; the project is for that group only. The cultural divide works more like the military alliance project, if it is bilateral, not merely a unilateral missionary project, then they will be reinforcing each other in an escalating fundamentalism race.

With five classes of states we get ten pairs, easily spelt out:

- [1] Childhood vs. Adolescence: a major source of inspiration
- [2] Childhood vs. Adulthood: a more distant, top-down guide
- [3] Childhood vs. Retirement: even more distant, possibly irrelevant
- [4] Childhood vs. Insanity: alluring, fascinating, and very dangerous
- [5] Adolescence vs. Adulthood: admiring and/or tense, competitive
- [6] Adolescence vs. Retirement: irrelevant or tense, watchful
- [7] Adolescence vs. Insanity: very tense, mutually reinforcing
- [8] Adulthood vs. Retirement: triumphalist, watchful, they may return
- [9] Adulthood vs. Insanity: very tense, highly competitive
- [10] Retirement vs. Insanity: very tense, very watchful

Obviously, it is possible to be both retired and insane, with the insanity as a reaction to retirement and forced retirement as a reaction to insanity – the double tragedy of the US Empire today. Will the US elites be able to respond to the double challenge of insanity and retirement – demanded by a Toynbee and long before him by an Ibn Khaldun?

Correspondence

Johan Galtung
 Rector, Transcend.org
 51 Bois Chatton, F-01210 Versonnex,
 France.
 Tel: +33-450-42 73 06
 Mobile: +33 6 0735 9724
 Fax: +33-450-42 75 06.
 Email: <galtung@transcend.org>

Notes

1. The present author used that fourfold division in courses, lectures and conferences, but the manuscript *World Politics of Peace and War* remained unpublished. One finding was an Islamic belt in the middle, connecting all four worlds.

References

Perkins, John. (2004). *Confessions of an economic hitman*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

