

Introduction to International Relations (U23201)

What kind of world do we live in?

In this essay I will argue for a critical perspective of the world situation. I would argue that relations between today's governments are still largely reduced to economic factors. But before I explain that I'll explain how we got here.

I think the balance of power in the cold war reached the most equilibrium in the mid 1980s. On the US side the New Right in the US had gained significant influence to take power in the form of Ronald Reagan's administration. This coincided with the election of Margret Thatcher in Britain and Augusto Pinochet's regime in Chile (before it was dismantled in 1988). Of course these countries were always capitalist, but from around that time they began holding firmly to free-market principles. This in turn meant a global free market hegemony was established whereby all capitalist countries had to compete with one another and socialist countries had to compete with capitalist countries. This concept is best understood on the lowest level of the free-market where even egalitarian worker co-operatives are forced to exploit themselves in order to compete.

On the socialist side the 1980s followed a spate of anti-colonial national liberation movements in Africa and Asia throughout the 1970s and 1960s. India's constitution was rewritten in 1976 to identify it as a "sovereign socialist secular democratic republic"¹, Vietnam and Laos had recently gained independence as people's republics and Cambodia had been freed from the genocidal Khmer Rouge.

Africa had emerging people's republics in Ethiopia, Somalia, Mozambique, Angola, the Congo, Benin and Burkina Faso, as well as anti-colonial governments in Zambia, Zimbabwe, Algeria, Ghana and Madagascar. Each of these countries in turn influenced the countries around them and made the left stronger overall. To put it simply the democratic and anti-imperialist forces of various socialist countries had more or less achieved equilibrium with the capitalist forces of the west.

In 1991 the USSR was dissolved, the large majority of socialist countries redefined themselves as pro-western the balance of world power shifted dramatically towards the US, and this is still much the same position we find ourselves in today. This position is applicable to poststructuralist or postmodernist ideas. The modernist phase, dominated by grand ideological narratives is typical of the cold war where capitalism battled socialism. By contrast the postmodern world is a fragmentation of these narratives to the point where they are barely recognisable. Every permutation of socialism and capitalism has been deconstructed, subverted and finally denounced as a failure from one perspective or another.

This makes up one strand of critical theory, and could also be described as realist, because it sees the world arranged in perfect chaos. I would argue that grand narratives still exist, and that it's too late to give up on the modernist perspective.

Despite the setbacks the US still has a role as a superpower, with an empire and a clearly defined ideology which guides it. The position of the '2nd superpower' is quickly being taken up by China, who are replacing the role the USSR took during the cold war. In 2009 China had a Gross Domestic Product growth rate of 9.1% meanwhile in the same year the US had a growth rate of -2.6%². China's overall GDP is still only \$4.985 trillion (35% of US GDP) and if it maintains it's current growth rate it'll reach the US GDP in 11 years³.

1 The constitution (42nd amendment) Act, 1976. Clause 2(a).

2 Google public data, accessed 27/10/2011 [http://www.google.com/publicdata/explore?ds=d5bncppjof8f9 &met_y=ny_gdp_mktp_cd&idim=country:CHN&dl=en&hl=en&q=china+gdp+chart#ctype=l&strail=false&bcs=d&nselm=h&met_y=ny_gdp_mktp_kd_zg&scale_y=lin&ind_y=false&rdim=country&idim=country:CHN:USA&ifdim=country&hl=en&dl=en](http://www.google.com/publicdata/explore?ds=d5bncppjof8f9&met_y=ny_gdp_mktp_cd&idim=country:CHN&dl=en&hl=en&q=china+gdp+chart#ctype=l&strail=false&bcs=d&nselm=h&met_y=ny_gdp_mktp_kd_zg&scale_y=lin&ind_y=false&rdim=country&idim=country:CHN:USA&ifdim=country&hl=en&dl=en)

3 Google public data, accessed 27/10/2011 http://www.google.com/publicdata/explore?ds=d5bncppjof8f9 &ctype=l&strail=false&bcs=d&nselm=h&met_y=ny_gdp_mktp_cd&scale_y=lin&ind_y=false&rdim=country

An opinion piece in the People's Daily (Mao Yingying: 2011) names the US as the 'sole superpower', this implies that China doesn't see itself as a superpower. However, their influence among developing nations, especially in Africa, and their socialist ideology means while they may not think themselves a superpower, they still play out the role performed by the USSR in the 20th Century. This is my reasoning for defending a modernist position.

As was shown in Stephen Walt's article on Hawks, Doves and Realists (Walt: 2010), the US no longer needs to use military power to advance its strategic interests, as in some cases these can be much better achieved with the use of soft power and neocolonialism.

This comes to a debate between neoconservatives and neoliberals. The neoconservatives are strongly nationalist and defend their national power with a large military complex, and by extension a strong state to support it. On the other hand the neoliberals are essentially internationalist, because their allegiances lie with global capital.

From the neoliberal point of view power is exercised through regional elites, it's not a case of any individual nation such as the US becoming dominant, rather it's the dominance of the international capitalist class through national vessels.

They're less prone to imperial military conquest in part because the outcome of wars is often the destruction of the economy of the defeated country and because a more efficient outcome can be achieved through the use of financial mechanisms and trade systems to dominate the economies of others. Military intervention only becomes necessary, as with Iraq (Heinberg, 2004: 64) or Libya when governments break out of the capitalist system and don't share their resources, or more specifically oil, with the rest of the world.

The theory advanced in Naomi Klein's book "the Shock Doctrine" is explained in her interview on Citizen Radio⁴. To summarise it, neoliberal economists take advantage of natural or man-made disasters to restructure the affected economy according to the principles of austerity, privatisation and deregulation. In Gerald Caplan's review of "the Shock Doctrine" (Caplan: 2010) he cites the Iraq War, Hurricane Katrina, and the Haiti earthquake as examples of the shock-doctrine in action.

Having covered the realist and critical theory, the only perspective left is the liberal one. In his article "Globalization: Alive and Well" Thomas Friedman argues that the dominance of the free market is inevitable. He uses "India's Silicon Valley", Bangalore as an example of how entrepreneurship can bring prosperity to developing economies. Unfortunately he neglects to mention the effect this has on the workers in countries with a well established IT industry. The cheap 'intellectual labour' of Indian workers undercuts the workers in these countries and leads companies to outsource jobs to India, in the process undermining worker's rights in both countries and pitting both groups of workers off against another.

On a more sinister note there's the case of western companies in Kerala who sucked dry the natural aquifer and then poisoned the rivers and streams with toxic sludge (Haviland: 2003). This is a direct result of the deregulation that accompanied the opening up of India and it's well documented in Mark Thomas's book "Belching out the Devil" (Thomas, 2008: 203).

Lastly, this essay asks 'what kind of world do we live in'? I would answer is that we (generally) live in a neo-liberal world, but I hold a critical perspective on that world. This is not the world we should live in. To use the popular alter-globalisation slogan "another world is possible".

<http://wearecitizenradio.com/2011/09/15/20110915-naomi-klein-on-keystone-xl-pipeline-climate-change-shock-doctrine/>

4 Citizen Radio 15/09/2011, accessed 27/10/2011 <http://wearecitizenradio.com/2011/09/15/20110915-naomi-klein-on-keystone-xl-pipeline-climate-change-shock-doctrine/>

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