A World in Transition

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Notices: 1. This is chapter 10 of Global Economic and Cultural Transformation.

2. The chapter starts on page 175 and ends with page 194.

3. I will mark the end of each book page to make it easy to quote and cite.

A careful look at our world as the second decade of the twenty-first century advances reveals that we are getting closer to completing a historical transformational transition that promises to take us to a higher, more complex civilization. It is a period dominated by five major trends of change: economic integration across state lines; political fragmentation within state lines; sociocultural segmentation within national lines; a fast changing balance of global economic power; and the creation of virtual communities of individuals across all national, cultural, and political lines.

While economic integration is moving fast, creating a global economy, and weakening the state’s ability to control its nation economy, political fragmentation is causing the division of nation-states into smaller entities that compete more and cooperate less with each other; sociocultural segmentation is working, largely unnoticed, to divide all societies into groups rather than social classes that have little in common. On the other hand, economic integration and the rise of new world economic powers is changing the balance of power and causing the center of global economic power to shift rapidly from the West to the East. Meanwhile, the creation of virtual global communities of individuals is causing cultures, particularly traditional cultures, to gradually lose their major characteristics and capacities to hold communities together.

The first transitional period in human history, which moved most ancient societies form the pre-agricultural to the agricultural civilization, took about 3,000 years to complete, because change was incremental and traveled very slowly. As a consequence, the impact of the transformation on society and its culture could not be noticed or felt by any generation. The second transitional period, which enabled many societies to move from the agricultural to the industrial age, took about 300 years to complete. Because this period was relatively short, the transformations it caused were noticeable in many parts of Europe, causing the successive generations that [page 175] went through that period to feel the depth of change and its impact on their cultures and life conditions. It also caused the number of societies that could complete the transition and experience the industrial revolution to be limited. The third major period of transition is the one we are living today. It is expected to last about 30 years, at the end of which, around 2025, a small number of societies will have moved from the industrial to the knowledge age. Because this period is very short, almost every person in the world is able to feel the impact of change on his life conditions, as well as on the lives of others.

The Nature of Transition

Transitional periods of civilizational change are troubling times; they create doubt and cause confusion and fear, leading some people to lose their sense of direction, while encouraging others to nurture guarded optimism. They also cause many more people to feel bewildered and lead them to seek refuge in old traditions and traditional values and religious beliefs. In the short run, the ability of values to resist change enables conservative cultural and religious forces to score some gain, but rationality and history win in the long run, causing diehard conservatives to lose and be sidelined. However, resistance to change deepens the struggle between beliefs and rationality, science, and faith, and causes societies to be divided along sociocultural lines in addition to the old socioeconomic ones. As a consequence, change becomes more disruptive of all life conditions and relationships and thus more painful.

Radical nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and cultural particularism are the major forces that usually oppose change, and because they believe that history is capable of reversing itself, they usually call for the creation of a future in the image of an imagined past that may have never existed as imagined. Due to such convictions, the only connection such conservatives have to reality is a negative one; they reject it, see no hope in it, and express readiness to use whatever power they may have to hasten its demise. Though conservatives in general tend to express belief in history and claim to accept its judgment, they have repeatedly failed to learn history’s most fundamental lesson, which says that history never repeats itself. As a consequence, conservative forces are always on a collision course with history, unable to understand its logic and accept that social, cultural, and economic transformations are inevitable and irreversible.

The reaction of nationalism, ethnicity, and religious fundamentalism to the sociocultural transformations that characterize our times has caused [page 176] these ideologies to become less of a liberating force and more of a bind that ties people to an outdated past, more able to limit their horizon than expand it. Meanwhile, the economic and cultural transformations caused by globalization continue to weaken the nation-state, forcing it to lose its ability to manage its economy and become more of a liability than an asset. On the other hand, ethnic aspirations are emerging as ghosts haunting the memory of the nation state, threatening its integrity and sovereignty, and undermining its moral and political authority. And as transformations proceed and create uncertainty and spread fear, they cause religion to become more popular as a sanctuary for the deprived, the weak, the ignorant, and the hopeless. The ascendance of money and interests at the expense of values and ethics have, moreover, caused democracy to lose its spirit and become less able to represent the masses and less capable of responding to their legitimate needs and changing life conditions.

Meanwhile, the media, by promoting a culture of individualism, pleasure, greed, envy, and unlimited consumption is undermining the social glue that ties members of society together. Through its various entertainment programs and commercials, the media is distorting reality and making vice, immorality, drugs, and violence, not just acceptable actions, but at times respectable virtues. It is gradually destroying the essence of community and the values that served people well for countless generations— values that enabled man through trials and tribulations to make progress toward liberty, freedom, tolerance, human rights, justice, cultural diversity, and the pursuit of happiness in a just society.1

The Culture of Individualism

Economic and cultural transformations of recent decades have made competition a characteristic of individual and group attitudes toward most things in life, transforming individualism into a culture of selfishness and greed. “So many of the rich want to turn their backs on the poor; selfish concerns seem to displace enlightened self-interest.”2 Robert Theobald says that the standard by which individualism judges what is sacred in life “is money and the only thing more sacred than money is more money.”3 Individuals are being empowered by technology and laws that emphasize individual and corporate rights but fail to emphasize individual and corporate responsibilities.

During tribal times, the tribe represented the unit of society as well as society itself. During agricultural times, the clan, or the extended family, became the unit of traditional agricultural community as well as society. While agricultural community usually consists of a few clans, agricultural society [page 177] consists of many communities. In the industrial age, the family replaced the clan to become the unit of community as well as society. And as the knowledge age advances, the unit of society is fast becoming the individual. This clearly indicates that the unit of society has gotten smaller with every succeeding civilization.

Within tribal societies, loyalty and responsibility are collective: the cause of the tribe is the cause of every one of its members, and the cause of each member is a tribal cause. Within agricultural societies, both loyalty and responsibility are clannish: the cause of every individual is the cause of the clan to which he belongs, and the cause of the clan is the cause of every one of its members. As a consequence, any commitment made by an individual or a family or a clan to community or society is largely voluntary, not obligatory. Within industrial societies, loyalty and responsibility are familial; the cause of each individual is the cause of his or her family, and the cause of each family is the cause of every one of its members. Consequently, any commitment made by an individual or a family to community or society is voluntary, not obligatory. As the knowledge age advances, both loyalty and responsibility are fast becoming individualistic, causing any commitment made by an individual to family or community or society or national or international cause to become strictly voluntary.

The individual of our times has become like the nomadic man of the hunter-gatherer times a lonely creature; he has almost no loyalty or attachment to any place except to the individual social unit that he represents and to which he belongs. And while his predecessor spent his entire life roaming the fields and forests and deserts looking for vegetables and fruits to collect and animals to hunt, the nomadic man of the knowledge age is spending his time roaming our global village in search of an opportunity to exploit, even if his actions come at the expense of others. While the main goal of this man is to make as much money as possible and gain as much power as attainable, his lust for both money and power drives him to often disregard business ethics, social values, the rights, and feelings of other people, as well as the interests of society. And since passion and love are collective feelings shared by more than one person, the new man is on the verge of losing most intangible things that make him truly human: a man who knows how to live and love and care for others.

A culture based on individualism is as dangerous and removed from reality as any ideology the world had witnessed in the past. Since all previous ideologies have caused more pain than gain, individualism is harming society and distorting its human image. Emphasis on individual rights without equal emphasis on individual social responsibilities is undermining the value systems that nurture decency, honesty, equality, and social justice in society. As a consequence, a need is created for new values, [page 188] ethics, and laws to manage a world of individuals who feel no obligation to any cause except to themselves and have no goal except accumulating more wealth and power. “Any serious quest for a just society,” wrote Roger Conner, “starts with a recognition that the values represented by rights and responsibilities are morally equal.”4 The ascendance of the law in society and emphasis on its role in defining and protecting individual rights, though indispensable to a properly functioning society, have restricted the role of ethics and values in guiding human and community relations.

In an environment of individualism, lack of social responsibility, and money worship, inequality is widening and fast becoming structural in the rich and poor states, as well as in all other states in between. “We live in a world scared by inequality,” said former World Bank president James D. Wolfensohn, “Something is wrong when the richest 20 percent of the global population receive more than 80 percent of the global income ... and when 2.8 billion people still live on less than $2 a day.”5 In the United States, over 16 percent of the American people lived in 2010 under the poverty line. And while over 30 million tons of food is wasted every year, millions of people sleep hungry every night; many of them sleep on the streets and under the bridges of American cities. “Each year, Americans waste 33 million tons of food. Forty percent of the food in the U.S. today goes uneaten, which means Americans are throwing out the equivalent of 165 billion dollars’ worth of food each year.”6

The Reality of the Middle Class

A nomadic life organized around hunting and grazing and regulated by strict traditions and tribal customs kept the tribal society classless for tens of thousands of years. But as man developed agriculture and began to build settlements, private property appeared causing social classes to emerge slowly. Throughout that age, people were either rich or poor; there was no middle class. Religion, which was the predominant social philosophy at the time, convinced the poor to accept their lot in life; the poor were made to believe that God ordained their fortunes and position in society. Meanwhile, the poor were seen by most religions, particularly Christianity and Islam, as being closer to God and morally and spiritually superior to the rich. Both the rich and poor, as a result, were largely satisfied, the first having money in their pockets and slaves to serve them at home and farm their land, the second having God on their side.

In the industrial age, both the economic conditions of life and the ways of living changed dramatically. While the position of religion in society was weakened and transformed into a social system with diminishing [page 179 moral authority, new values and work ethics were introduced, enhancing labor productivity, and enabling the industrious person to make and accumulate more wealth. And as science and technology advanced, and economic liberalization, freedom, and democracy spread, traditional and religious wisdom began to lose its role in society. The poor, consequently, were no longer considered closer to God, and could no longer claim moral superiority; their position eventually drifted to the point of being seen as liabilities and socially and morally inferior. But as the rich and poor were being separated by wealth and knowledge and even brick walls, a middle class emerged gradually to bridge the gap between them. However, as the economy expanded and diversified further, the socioeconomic gaps separating the three classes from one another began to widen rapidly.

While land ownership defined the line separating the rich from the poor in traditional agricultural society, income and the means to earn an income defined the lines separating all classes in the industrial society. As a consequence, the fortunes of all classes became a function of their ability to recognize and exploit the economic opportunities that industrial society was creating. However, the requirements to recognize and exploit such opportunities grew more complex, demanding capital, skills, experience, and formal and informal education. As a result, the traditional socioeconomic gaps began slowly but systematically to reflect sociocultural divides. And due to the adoption of the free market philosophy in the 1980s, the middle class began to lose income, lose power, and shrink in size. The economic shift from manufacturing to services and the changing nature of knowledge have caused opportunities open to members of the middle class to narrow drastically. A knowledge barrier, as a result, was added to the old capital and skill barriers causing upward mobility in all mature industrial Western societies to decline substantially.

People in the new knowledge age are fast becoming more materialistic and less ethical; they are no longer able to see lofty goals, except money. They fight largely on their own to win battles they often frame by themselves and target. Individuals have difficulty accepting reality; they are always on the move searching for new opportunities to exploit, new virtual relationships to forge, and new realities to shape. Most people today seek to maximize pleasure, wealth, and power, while minimizing worry, risk, and pain. As a consequence, a privileged class made up of the superrich has emerged, poverty has increased, and the traditional middle class is being squeezed. And “out of that squeeze comes a moral crisis that makes us want to cut loose from those who are suffering,”7 as if to say—in word and deed—every man is on his own. [page 180]

Materialism, which has gradually and quietly been acquiring the role claimed by religion in agricultural society, has become the major driving force in life. People are rich and poor, not because God and religion had ordained it, but because economics and knowledge and culture have determined it. Man, consequently, is seen as the master of his own fate, and that neither God nor religion has anything to do with his lot in life. And because individualism has become the philosophy of the knowledge age, both poverty and community are no longer seen issues of particular concern to the elites that control society. Meanwhile, national cultures are being divided into subcultures, national societies are gradually disintegrating into sub-societies, and the “national interest” is fast becoming a vague concept that is hard to define or relate to.

The industrial society was the only society in history that could and did produce a credible middle class. The tribal society had one class, the agricultural society has two classes, and the knowledge society is clearly unable to sustain the middle class it has inherited from the industrial society. The middle class, therefore, must be considered an aberration in the history of societal development, hardly 150 years old. Since history never repeats itself, we need to adjust our assumptions to reflect this fact in order to understand the new reality and deal with it rationally. Even the industrializing Asian nations are not expected to emulate the Western experience and produce middle classes capable of holding society together and forcing social and political change in their favor as their European and American predecessors did. People who have middle-class incomes in a knowledge society are unable to form a middle class, because their associations and the nature of their work denies them the opportunity to develop a class consciousness; one of the major requirements for forming a social class.

People who are fortunate enough to climb the social ladder and reach a middle-class status in the new industrializing states are more likely to move to other, less developed countries where the general environment is conducive to foreign investment and join the ranks of the rich in those countries; countries they are less likely to adopt, but more likely to exploit. And since they represent foreign capital interested in making money, they are unlikely to feel an obligation to contribute to the well-being of societies they live in and benefit from. Unless economic structures and production relations within society and between societies are changed, and the rights and responsibilities of individuals and corporations and the state are reformulated to reflect justice and equality, the world is likely to witness the disappearance of the middle class by the middle of the twenty-first century.

In the fast emerging world community, the knowledge segment of the world society would, generally speaking, represent the world’s upper class, [page 181] while the industrial segment represents the world’s middle class. The agricultural segment of all societies, meanwhile, would represent the world’s poor, and the tribal society and the poverty-stricken people everywhere would represent the underclass of the world. The only class expected to be large enough and powerful enough to influence global change in its favor is the knowledge class, unless states intervene to ensure the well-being of the other classes. The rich are able today to use knowledge and wealth and the infomedia to falsify the consciousness of most people, corrupt politics, and buy politicians and dominate the world.

The Reality of Capitalism

Change associated with the advancement of the age of knowledge has exposed the limits of both capitalism and democracy, which form together the organizing principles of the Western industrial society. As explained earlier, capitalism was hijacked in the 1980s by the free market idea, and democracy was hijacked by money, causing capitalism to lose its capacity to build and sustain an economy capable of benefiting everyone, while leading democracy to become largely dysfunctional. The average person in the new society, especially the American society, has become subject to manipulation by the media, exploitation by the free market forces, and deception by politics and politicians. At times, one is also at the mercy of violence and the constant fear of losing his job to immigrant labor and foreign nations, which feeds racism and deepens sociocultural fragmentation of society.

The free market economy, which was advanced over the last three decades by the United States and the International Monetary Fund as the solution to every problem in society, has never been as free as claimed, and its impact on society has never been as positive and desired. Lack of adequate state regulations and oversight has caused the system to lose its efficiency and fairness. Monopoly and oligopoly practices, control of certain industries and technologies, mergers and the continuous threat of mergers, and control of credit have erected strong barriers to market entry, making the system less free and less competitive and thus unjust. Economic downsizing, consolidation, manipulation of consumers, greed and the relentless pursuit of profits make free markets dangerous and socially irresponsible. “The market economy,” wrote John Kenneth Galbraith, “accords wealth and distributes income in a highly unequal, socially adverse and socially damaging fashion.”8 Financial institutions and investment banks, insurance companies, large and multinational corporations, media conglomerates, and the oil and food industries tend to escape [page 182] social scrutiny, bypass ethical standards, and avoid paying their fair share of taxes.

On the other hand, corporate decisions to relocate production and service operations in foreign countries, or expand production where labor is cheap and submissive and environmental regulations are weak and permissive have fueled competition among states and workers. The desire of some states to attract as many companies as possible and be competitive has caused some of the problems produced by the early industrialization in Europe to reappear in many developed and developing states. Such problems include exploitation of child labor, trafficking in human beings, polluting the environment, wasting natural resources, and the spread of slums and ghettoes. In a poor though thriving country like India, labor has become largely disposable. Workers are often exploited until their utility is exhausted; then they are abandoned to live in filth and die of hunger and disease. Meanwhile, income inequality and sociocultural diversity are causing upward mobility to become difficult and often morally hazardous.

Equality of opportunity, which was promoted as an alternative to the utopian concept of total equality in society, can neither help the poor nor can it protect the needy. Michael Young argued in 1958 in The Rise of the Meritocracy that equal opportunity serves to divide society into two groups. One is capable of seizing the opportunity offered to it, the other is incapable of doing so. Because of its inability, the second group finds itself moving downward and forming a lower, largely poor and neglected class. But unlike any other lower class in history, this class is neither enslaved nor oppressed, nor exploited, not even officially excluded. It is rather free yet excluded, has opportunities yet poor, lives in an open society yet cannot move upward on the social ladder. It is, as a result, permanently left behind, deprived even of a cause to rally around.

Since the formation of this lower class is not the result of certain actions taken by the state, its conditions cannot be changed by state action only. Structural changes in the social and economic and political systems of society, as well as the culture of the poor themselves are needed to make it possible for members of this class to move upward and be included. The association of knowledge with wealth and wealth with power in the new society is probably the single most important factor contributing to keeping this class permanently poor and excluded.

People with knowledge, that is people with the right education and the right attitudes, have the capability to seize opportunities, make more money, and move upward; they even have the capability to create new opportunities for themselves and for others to exploit. Moreover, people with money have the resources to acquire the right knowledge and get access to the power centers and expand the range of opportunities open [page 183] to them. In contrast, people with neither wealth nor the right education are left behind, with nothing to enable them to compete in an increasingly complex world, where knowledge has become very important for making a decent living and gaining social recognition. “During this period of increasing income inequality, the value of a four-year college degree has dramatically increased. Those with one have continued to move ahead; those without one have fallen further behind.”9 Since equality of opportunity is not enough to facilitate social mobility, democracy cannot claim that it leads to a just society. “Gross inequality in wealth is itself a social evil, which poisons life for millions,”10 and causes them to lose faith in democracy and pushes them toward apathy and despair.

Intellectuals and the Poor

In most cases in the past, voices representing the poor and the dispossessed emerged and gained public recognition and led often to alleviating the suffering of poor people. This was possible because societies were small, ethics were strong, and the misery of the poor was noticeable and intolerable. But due to the growth of populations and urban centers, and the rising walls and social barriers separating the rich from the poor, reaching the poor and knowing their life conditions have become more difficult. Meanwhile, giving the poor the opportunity to explain their situation and needs and present their demands has become subject to getting access to the mass media. But access to such media is increasingly becoming more difficult due to the prohibitive cost of media time and the exclusive culture of the media’s owners and managers, causing the poor to be neglected and largely forgotten.

On the other hand, the ideas of dissenting intellectuals who have traditionally defended the rights of the poor have largely been curtailed by the media, forcing them to move within closed circles. The ideas of the rich and powerful, in contrast, have become prominent, coloring every society’s outlook, and influencing everyone’s views of life and the other. As a result, dissenting voices are being forced to adopt an attitude and develop a vocabulary that expresses more rejection than constructive engagement. In fact, forces of rejectionism everywhere, on the left and right, in the rich and poor countries, seem today, as they have been throughout history, to be more aware of what they stand against, but less sure of what they stand for.

Intellectuals are individuals who have enough knowledge to understand what is going on in society and enough awareness to know where society is heading and what are the major obstacles it is facing and problems it is creating. Because of this knowledge and awareness, intellectuals usually [page 184] express commitment to defending the rights of the disadvantaged and the needs of future generations. Foucault says,

For a long period, the ‘left’ intellectual spoke and was acknowledged the right of speaking in the capacity of master of truth and justice. He was heard, or purported to make himself heard, as the spokesman for the universal. To be an intellectual meant something like being the conscious of us all. So the intellectual, through his moral, theoretical, and political choice, aspires to be the bearer of this universality in its conscious, elaborated form.11

Nevertheless, the ever-widening sociocultural gaps in society, along with the tendency of intellectuals to associate themselves with like-minded individuals who often belong to the middle and upper middle classes, have caused intellectuals to be separated from the poor and the majority of the masses by culture, lifestyle, and language. The life experiences of the two groups are growing increasingly divergent, making communications between them more difficult day by day. This causes miscommunications and mutual mistrust to spread and deepen and allows demagogues and ideologues to exploit the fears and needs of the masses and the poor, radicalize some and convince others to accept their lot in life and be content. While the masses and the poor are increasingly getting more doubtful of the honesty of intellectuals in general, intellectuals are increasingly getting more suspicious of the rationality of the masses in particular. This leaves the masses and the poor with no enlightened leadership they can understand and trust, and leaves intellectuals without a big cause to fight for. Whatever intellectuals do for the world’s poor today is done by largely marginalized intellectuals who have neither money nor power; only a tortured conscience that refuses to let them sleep comfortably.

Helping the poor in pre-industrial times was very useful to the rich; it enabled them to atone for their sins and feel closer to God in a deeply religious environment. Helping the poor in the industrial age was also useful to the rich, particularly to owners and managers of large businesses; it enabled them to show generosity and social responsibility and gain recognition and popularity in a nationalistic environment. In knowledge society where individualism reigns supreme and ideology is dying, and where globalism and money is the new frame of reference, helping the poor has become of no particular use to the rich. And because the poor can be isolated and are being isolated everywhere, they are being ignored and largely forgotten; they no longer get the attention they deserve or the compassion they need. In the not-distant past, societies used to care and give, even when their abilities to do so were limited. Today, most societies ignore the poor, even rich societies that can give without financial pressure. [page 185]

A Future Global Outlook

Social issues such as justice, freedom, human rights, and equality of opportunity are no longer domestic issues any state can address on its own. They are issues that can be addressed only through international cooperation and global institutions. Today, every national problem, every national goal, and every challenge facing a nation, or even a multinational corporation, has an international dimension to it. Therefore, every political, economic, and security actor needs to think globally as he plans and acts locally. Otherwise, all such actors will fail to find long-lasting solutions to problems facing their societies and the world and create a space in which people can pursue their goals and realize their aspirations.

Throughout history, knowledge has been more spiritual than materialistic, more liberal than conservative, more pluralistic than ideological. Because of such characteristics, knowledge has played a constructive role in helping the poor and the needy, solving social and economic problems, causing change, and making progress, and predicting future challenges and preparing societies to face them. However, the bulk of knowledge in the new age is more materialistic than anything else; it is composed primarily of technological knowledge and information and computer programs. And while technological knowledge has high economic returns that reinforce materialism in the form of greed and consumerism, information is vulnerable to manipulation by the media and other social actors to suit every strain of thought and business concerns. As a consequence, knowledge and the knowledge elite are increasingly becoming less committed to the causes that intellectuals and thinker of the recent past had fought for. Intellectuals and thinkers need, therefore, to become more conscious of the changing nature of knowledge as well as the evolving socioeconomic circumstances in order to address the daunting challenges of tomorrow.

Non-governmental organizations promoting respect for human rights and the protection of the environment, and others struggling to empower the world’s uneducated and often enslaved men and women will be under great pressure to keep up with the deteriorating conditions of the world’s poor. The United States, despite being the only superpower, is unlikely to succeed in solving its major domestic and international problems because politics is controlled by money and money is concentrated in the hands of small and ruthless global elite out to enrich itself at the expense of everyone and every issue. As members of this elite gain more knowledge, they acquire extra wealth and power and become more class-conscious, more ruthless, and self-centered. [page 186]

For example, as most American corporations were reducing their labor forces following the 2008 financial crisis, compensations of executives were increasing at astronomical rates. Compensation for senior executives, especially CEOs, has climbed to levels that strike many as excessive under almost any circumstances, [causing] the gap between the boss and workers [to stretch] to levels that many find difficult to comprehend. The Institute for Policy Studies estimated that the average CEO earned about 319 times more than the average worker in 2008, compared to a multiple of 42 in 1980. The sums paid to executives on Wall Street are greater still.12 The New York Times reported in 2012 that “nearly half of all revenue on Wall Street is earmarked for [executive] compensation.”13

The transition from the industrial to the knowledge age is causing the four processes of societal transformation to become more active and disruptive of all systems. Today, the sociocultural process is contributing more to social segmentation and competition than to harmony and cohesiveness; the political process is contributing more to political fragmentation and conflict than to unity and peace; the economic process is contributing more to concentrating wealth in fewer hands than to narrowing the income and wealth gaps in society ; and the infomedia process is contributing more to falsifying the consciousness of the masses than to informing and educating them. The change instigated by these processes and the way they are managing domestic and international affairs are creating countless reasons to provoke conflict and radicalism, and equally countless reasons to contain conflict and accommodate change. The new world, consequently, is expected to live, not only in a perpetual state of transition, but, strangely enough, in a largely constant state of balance.

Therefore, every society is expected to change but without being able to transform itself by itself or according to its wishes. Attempts to carry out social revolutions are unlikely to succeed because of the conflicting interests of the thousands of players participating in the global game. Sociocultural and socioeconomic transformations can no longer be initiated by individual leaders, groups, or political parties alone, and the state is increasingly becoming less able to do so. This simply means that change and conflict, peace and war, economic growth and stagnation have become global issues requiring cooperation at the international level.

Many developing states are expected to experience more conflict than peace because ethnicity, nationalism, religion, and authoritarianism are fighting for survival. However, future wars are expected to be short, unless foreign powers intervene to protect old interests or to promote new ones. [page 187] Nevertheless, serious civil and regional wars are likely to be limited in scope and duration because the great powers and the global economic elite will not allow such wars to escalate beyond control or last very long. In addition, the changing nature and requirements of war is making it very difficult even for a superpower to fight a long, protracted war; the cost of such wars in human and economic terms and lost opportunities has become prohibitive, while the chances of success have become less probable.

The real war that will be waged in the coming years with passion is a war of ideas: a war between ideology and liberalism, between religion and science, and between alternative sociopolitical and socioeconomic systems. The nature and intensity of this war will determine the pace of transforming the old world order into a new one as well as which model of socioeconomic organization will win the hearts and minds of most peoples. The five major international organizations, the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and NATO are expected to play a significant role in debating alternative economic and security systems and determining the choices to be made.

By the time the knowledge age becomes a reality around 2025, ten major players are expected to emerge as global powers to shape and manage the new world orders. Seven of these players are expected to be industrial and largely knowledge states sharing influence, power, and wealth. They are the United States, the European Union, China, Russia, Japan, India, and Brazil. As for the other three global players, they are expected to be nongovernmental organizations working in the public sphere and having conflicting interests and different goals to pursue; they are the United Nations and its affiliate organizations and agencies, the multinational corporation, and the global civil society organizations working to help the poor, empower the powerless, promote freedom, defend human rights, and protect the environment.

Today the world is witnessing a shift of economic power from the West to the East, causing the global balance of power to change drastically and irreversibly. A new balance based more on economic power and less on military power is expected to emerge in the near future, giving the multinational corporation a lot of leverage to advance its interests at the expense of the nation state and most peoples. For example, more than half of the largest 100 economies today are corporations, not states; for example, the market value of Apple exceeds the combined GDPs of the North African Arab states of Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, and Tunisia by more than $100 billion. So as the major economic powers compete for economic advantages, they will struggle to tame the multinational corporations and the global civil society organizations. [page 188]

On the other hand, problems related to poverty and social justice, freedom and human rights, extremism and racism, conflict resolution and peacemaking, as well as environmental concerns are expected to persist, causing global civil society organizations to grow and become more active and assertive. Meanwhile, the relative decline of the state’s ability to deal with the many issues and multifaceted challenges at home and abroad is expected to force the great powers to strengthen the UN, not only as a forum to present their views and air their grievances, but also as a mechanism to contain conflict and deal with failing and failed states. Therefore, the UN is expected to gain more powers and assume more responsibilities, causing it to become one of the major global players. This clearly suggests that until the new world order emerges, the coming years are expected to be rather chaotic, where ordinary people and corporations and nongovernmental organizations rather than states will lead change and unconsciously determine its course and ultimate outcome, and thus influence the making of history.

Global strategic competition is expected to intensify due to the rise of several Asian and Latin American economic powers and the revival of Russia on the one hand, and the continued relative decline of the old Western powers on the other. Due to these changes, the balance of power is expected to change, and the center of economic power to shift from the West to the East. The new balance will be based more on economic power and less on military power. Nonetheless, most of the old issues and pressing problems of poverty, terrorism, extremism, racism, ethnicity, and conflict will not disappear; they will continue to occupy the time of politicians and be exploited by radicals and the media and free markets. The following are some of the trends that are expected to accelerate in the future.

Decline of ideology

Ideology in general and nationalism in particular is expected to decline further as issues of fairness, justice, human rights, environmental concerns, women rights, and poverty become common knowledge and global. These are issues capable of galvanizing conscious intellectuals, social reformers, workers, and students worldwide and motivating them to view the world as one village and its people as one extended family with the same roots, needs, fears, feelings, and expectations. Their message will probably echo what Martin Luther King once said: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

The collapse of Marxism around the year 1990 ended the age of ideological determinism, but heightened ethnicity and religious fundamentalism. Ethnicity causes national identities of people to contract and their [page 189] traditional allegiance to the nation-state to weaken. Most people living in knowledge societies and others belonging to global cultures are increasingly becoming less attached to the nation-state and less willing to defend its often misguided zeal. In addition, no state today, especially democratic states living in the post-industrial age, is able to define its “national interest” in terms that enjoy national or even elite consensus. All states have lost the organizing principles of their foreign policies and societies. Today every state policy is being challenged on social or security or economic grounds, or because of human rights or environmental considerations.

The world’s global economic and knowledge elites in general are losing their national identities and the ideologies they inherited from their parents, and, with that, the desire to fight for causes that do not concern them anymore. For example, about 40 percent of young Americans and probably a higher percentage of young Europeans say that they do not belong to any particular religion. As a consequence, the new battles are fast becoming personal rather than communal or national, and the battle grounds are mostly confined to tables situated behind closed doors in comfortable rooms equipped with computers and networks where ideas are debated, goals are defined, and strategies to achieve them are drawn away from the public eye.

Expanding globalization

Globalization is expected to continue to expand and impact the lives and destinies of peoples everywhere. Expansion is expected to go beyond economics and culture to include knowledge and education and other aspects of life. Interests, which have triumphed over values, and universal values that are about to triumph over ideological ones are linking the world’s elites and young in many different ways. Interests are linking businesspeople and corporations and pushing them to close ranks to protect their entrenched interests against the state and the public. Meanwhile, human rights and environmental concerns, and the deteriorating conditions of the world’s poor are slowly linking conscious intellectuals and scientists, educators, social activists, and students and encouraging them to work harder to make our world safer, more livable, and humane. On the other hand, young people are using the social media to link together and form virtual communities that nurture varied worldviews that separate and differentiate them from their countrymen.

International cooperation

Realizing the increasing importance of economic power, the world powers are expected to devise new frameworks to coordinate policies to manage [pare 190] financial and economic crises and enhance mutual interests. On the other hand, the realization that international trade and foreign aid are effective tools to advance national interests is expected to encourage such powers to compete to win the hearts of the peoples and states that matter most to them, causing international relations to become more dynamic. Nevertheless, the realization that economic growth and prosperity are functions of peace and cooperation, not conflict and ideological antagonism, should make such competition moderate and largely civilized. Goals sought traditionally by military means, such as access to natural resources and foreign markets, are likely to be sought through economic means such as trade, investment, and foreign aid.

The spread of democracy

Democracy is expected to spread further and affect the attitudes of individuals and groups and the behavior of states everywhere. This development, however, will not come as a result of the accomplishments of democracy only, but due to the utter failure of the competing sociopolitical systems. However, the apparent shortcomings of the American democratic model are dampening enthusiasm among Third World intellectuals for democracy as a political system but encouraging them to unconsciously promote democracy as a sociocultural value that calls for equality, social justice, freedom of speech and worship, tolerance, and respect for human rights. The increasing international acceptance of the democratic idea, even in states where nationalism and religion still thrive, is expected to moderate extremism, facilitate cultural interaction, and help make our world more peaceful in the long run. Democracy complicates all national decisions, especially decisions related to war; it makes elite and public consensus very difficult to reach and impossible to sustain for a prolonged period of time. And this weakens the tendency of world powers to go to war and encourages them to seek peace and accept compromise solutions to whatever problems they may have to deal with. Nevertheless, by facilitating cultural diversity, democracy tends to implicitly legitimize racism and pave the way for the revival of extreme views calling for racial purity and denial of minority rights, as the new trends in several European states indicate.

Learning the lessons of war

While wars are horrible and painful, their consequences last for generations and poison the spirits and destroy the lives of many people. Weapons that the world powers already own and others they are capable of producing can destroy our planet and all human life on it in days. Winning a war, [page 191] moreover, has become easier and sometimes less expensive than winning the peace that is supposed to follow. In fact, wars seldom end, even after battles stop and troops go home. The American experience in Afghanistan and Iraq proves beyond doubt that fighting an easy war does not guarantee winning a difficult peace. Moreover, since the Korean War in the 1950s, the United States has not been able to win a major war, causing military power to lose its capacity to achieve strategic objectives on its own. The exposure of the limits of military power is expected to encourage states to use diplomacy and conflict resolution tools to deal with most problems, giving the many global civil society organizations and the United Nations new opportunities to become more active and influential.

Continued decline of the American Empire

The United States’ influence, which has been declining since the late 1990s, is expected to continue declining in the future and bring an end to US hegemony. America is experiencing today all the problems that caused previous empires to retreat and slowly disintegrate. Poverty, crime, homelessness, racism, widening income and wealth gaps, lack of business social responsibility, greed, materialism, and loss of economic competitiveness have become endemic. Politically, America is experiencing ideological polarization, decline of the middle class and its societal role, and the hijacking of politics by money; it is also experiencing war fatigue and exhaustion due to fighting unwinnable long wars. Consequently, America is no longer able to dominate the world. What keeps the rest of the world listening to what America says are the fear of American military might and the absence of another world power capable of challenging the American power. The next 10–15 years are expected to witness the end of the American empire and the slow emergence of a new balance of power shared by seven economic powers and three non-state actors, as explained earlier.

The exposure of the spying scheme on Americans and foreigners by the National Security Agency is probably the last nail in the coffin of the American Empire. The criminal insider trading cases in stocks, which the 2008 financial crisis has exposed, are likely to be replicated by trading information that NSA employees and contractors have access to. Such trading will be used to blackmail and extort innocent and not-so-innocent individuals and corporations and, consequently, spread fear, mistrust, and loss of confidence in the American state and its major institutions. This suggests that the coming decade is expected to be rather chaotic, where political and economic and sociocultural change moves in all directions without a clear sense of direction, and where people rather than states will have to lead change and determine its ultimate outcome. [page 192]

The rise of China

China’s population size and potential military power make its rapid economic growth a unique geopolitical phenomenon of strategic importance. “When China was poor and introverted, it posed little threat to anyone but its own people. Now its expanding economy gives it more weight and the means to strengthen its military.”14 However, no one should expect China to use military force to attack its neighbors, because using such force would hurt China’s image and trade relationship with other nations and consequently its future economic prospects. The Chinese leadership that dared to deviate from communism in favor of capitalism years before the Cold War ended is more likely to be flexible when it comes to territorial claims and economic interests.

China has managed within a generation to transform itself from a vastly underdeveloped, poor country to an industrially developed nation with the second largest economy in the world, and accumulate the largest foreign currency reserves, estimated to have exceeded $3 trillion at the end of 2012. The Chinese leadership seems to realize that rigid ideology and aggressive behavior produce nothing except enmity, and that the unprecedented economic achievements it has so far accomplished were made possible because of its willingness to play by international rules whose violation carries a price. The pronouncements made frequently by Chinese officials suggest that nothing besides economics really matters to them anymore. However, China’s economic power and large population and location and history would not permit it to be a mere trading state like South Korea or Taiwan for long; it will have to behave as a superpower that cares for its long-term economic and security interests.

But as China builds and modernizes its economy, it will experience deep sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical transformations, causing some people to feel rich and free, while others feel poor and denied their legitimate rights. As a consequence, subcultures and sub-societies will appear, creating a pluralistic society and complicating the decision-making process. And as the ideological leadership shaped by the Cold War legacy disappears, many Western-educated Chinese will assume leadership roles. Interest groups will eventually be formed, causing the economic process to be strengthened at the expense of the political one. Moreover, as China becomes an integral part of the global economy, the Chinese leadership will become an integral part of the global elite that is more interested in cooperation and national gain than in competition and conflict. The Chinese society, meanwhile, will have become fragmented, with little power in the hands of the nationalistic class to contemplate waging war. [page 193]

There are two wild cards in this scenario, the United States and China; how they choose to behave and pursue their perceived national interests will largely determine the fate of peace, fairness, stability, economic change, international cooperation, and the world order. And how they view each other and the world, and how they manage their relationships will affect the future of all nations. If the United States acts like a wounded wolf and China acts like an opportunistic imperial power, the Cold War will be renewed with vengeance, and the Third World will be made to pay a heavy price again. But if leaders on both sides act as rational partners that care, not only about themselves, but also about the interests of future generations, things will be much better. Let us hope that they continue to conduct themselves in a responsible way and compete, as they pursue their legitimate objectives, to win the hearts and minds of the rich and poor, the powerful and powerless everywhere. [page 194]

Footnotes

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*Since my motto is, “Knowledge not shared is Knowledge wasted, and the more we share, the more we gain knowledgeable people” I ask all readers to recommend every article and book they like because it will help inform others. We all share the responsibility to make our world more hospitable to peace, social justice, and freedom; a lofty goal we cannot reach without spreading knowledge and awareness in every corner of our mother earth.*

*Prof. Rabie is a distinguished professor of International Political Economy; he attended 5 universities and taught at 10 others on four continents. He has published 54 books in addition to over 100 scholarly papers and 1,500 newspaper articles. Books are 15 in English, one in Albanian, and 36 in Arabic. English Books include four that Palgrave Macmillan published between 2013 and 2017: Saving Capitalism and Democracy; Global Economic and Cultural Transformation; A Theory of Sustainable Sociocultural and Economic Development; The Global debt Crisis and its Socioeconomic Implications. Arabic Books include 3 poetry collections, 2 novels, and a story; the rest is mostly academic books and collections of ideas and reflections. Prof. Rabie is president of the Arab Thought Council in Washington, DC, a member of the Arab Thought Forum, and a fellow of the Alexander Von Humboldt Foundation since 1992. Grants and scholarships financed his education from high school to receiving his Ph.D. in 1970; grants covered studies in Jordan, Egypt, Germany, and America. In 2015, Rabie won the State of Palestine’s Lifetime Achievement Award for scholarly publications and several other awards. His writings and positions reflect a strong commitment to peace, social justice, freedom, human development, as well as social, cultural, economic, and environmental sustainability.*

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