Interregnum of Despair:

The End of American Hegemony and the Transition to the Unknown

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**Introduction**

The observation that world order is in disarray has become conventional wisdom among observers and analysts of global politics.[[1]](#footnote-1) At the heart of this observation is a debate about the fate of the United States in this newly competitive and contested environment. While many argue the United States will remain and ought to remain at the center of any reconfiguration of global power, others quickly point to the rising power of China and the leading indicators that show Asia as the new center of gravity in the making of world order.[[2]](#footnote-2) Beyond the discourse focused on great power politics, developments pertaining to the growing volatility of global finance, the increasingly severe impacts of climate change and the struggle to confront and contain the COVID-19 pandemic show the inability of the structures and institutions of global governance to meaningfully address these planetary challenges and the lack of leadership shown by the United States in confronting these problems. On multiple fronts, the “rules based” liberal international order built after World War II is under severe pressure and its key protector and sponsor, the United States of America, is undergoing a “crisis of despair” that prevents it from performing it traditional custodial role and risks spreading throughout the world.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Yet beyond the ability to recognize and describe the disruptions, prominent scholarship and foreign policy seems frustratingly limited in what to make of these phenomena. While the terms like “crisis” and “transition” feature prominently, they are usually not teased out with any theoretical rigor and remain descriptors of events rather than analyzers.[[4]](#footnote-4) This paper will argue that one concept that does not receive much use in the various accounts of a world in disarray but might be useful is the notion of “interregnum.” Broadly defined, this term refers to “a period during which the normal functions of government or control are suspended.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Applied to the current status of world order in crisis, it opens a way of thinking about a world order where no one state, ideology or social relations of production predominate and thus competing variations of these variables create a volatile and dangerous environment where stability is not achieved and major problems that require global solutions remain unaddressed and unresolved.

Yet what precedent is there for talking about interregnum in the context of world order? The theoretical literature—especially the liberal mainstream perspectives that take the arrangement of global governance over the past seventy-five years for granted—has little to say about wholesale systemic change in global politics. Other theories, like that of realism, may do a better job of studying change but usually explain these changes in very shallow ways that do not go beyond mechanistic frameworks like balance of power and polarity. Theories with more critical orientations, however, and that include a more historical sweep to their vision exist and often serve ably in the task of giving sophisticated accounts of change in global politics. This paper will deploy one of these theories, the neo-Gramscian perspective, to make the following argument: 1) there exists in the critical literature of international relations an underdeveloped but useful concept of interregnum that is distinct from the usual notions associated with “hegemonic transition” or “power transition” for understanding changes in the configuration of world order and 2) this concept of interregnum can help contemporary scholars and observers make sense of the “morbid symptoms” that afflict the global population.

**Crisis from the Gramscian Perspective**

An appropriate starting point for this discussion begins with the following line from Gramsci’s *Prison’s Notebooks*: *La crisi consiste appunto nel fatto che il vecchio muore e il nuovo non può nascere: in questo interregno si verificano i fenomeni morbosi piú svariati.*[[6]](#footnote-6)A direct translation of this phrase would read: *The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear*, however, due to some artistic license by subsequent translators, the phrase is most often rendered in the following way among more popular media: *The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters*.[[7]](#footnote-7) Sticking with the more direct English translation, one observes the two key ideas that are of most interest. The first is the notion of crisis, a concept Gramsci is widely celebrated for developing in the context of political philosophy.[[8]](#footnote-8) The other is the less analyzed and more unrefined notion of interregnum. Clearly, an understanding of the latter requires first to explore the meaning of the former.

While Gramsci does not offer a formal or academically rigorous theory of crisis in his writing, Milan Babic nevertheless argues, “While Gramsci did not develop a theory of crisis himself, his thinking can be described as *crisis-driven*, as it evolves through many crises of the national and international spheres during these decades of social and political turmoil.’[[9]](#footnote-9) Gramsci’s writings during the early decades of the twentieth century, particularly those written during his incarceration between 1929 and 1935, constitute enough raw material for a framework of crisis analysis and an accounting for the growth, maturity, contestation and collapse of world orders.[[10]](#footnote-10) At the heart of this account is the notion of the historical bloc**.** At a given point in history, one can observe a particular arrangement of material capabilities (including economic production, military power and media capability) fused with a particular ideology and legitimizing institutions dictating the terms of social and political life for all those that live within the community under analysis. This arrangement of forces is never arbitrary but reflects the interests and values of a dominant hegemonic social class and its allied cohorts. As Cox writes, “Where the hegemonic class is the dominant class in a country or social formation, the state (in Gramsci’s enlarged concept) maintains cohesion and identity within the bloc through the propagation of a common culture.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Yet the power of the hegemonic groups is never total. There are always undulations of resistance and discontent among subaltern groups that oppose the prevailing assemblage of power or are marginalized from them. As will be seen a bit later, these peripheral elements will be one of the wellsprings of crisis.

The bulk of Gramsci’s analysis focused on Italy and other European countries in the interwar period. However, the framework of analysis has also been applied to the historical structures of international politics and the world orders that international politics studies. Like with domestic political structures, world orders also have their dominant prevailing cadres of power that consist of leading social classes, ideologies of legitimacy and access to the means of production, coercion and persuasion. Cox has argued that this formation of world order can be thought of as an assemblage of power comprising three components: social forces, forms of state, and world orders. In each of these components, one finds these three elements of power.[[12]](#footnote-12) Thus, a global bourgeois class of international industrialists will consist of this classes’ ownership of assets of production, the ideas behind their use and deployment of this productive capacity, and the institutions that justify, legitimize and normalize the way these assets are controlled and maintained to wider community. Modern nation-states will consist of military capabilities that protect the assets and interests of the bourgeoise while also perhaps maintaining some productive capacities of their own with their own complimentary ideologies and institutions that may at times conflict but more often than not facilitate the interests of the bourgeois elite. Finally, the outlines of a world order consisting of its own variations of the prevailing material forces, ideologies and institutions completes the picture. This world order may at times stir friction with the dominant states and social classes over minor incongruities, but because it is made from the same elements as the other two ingredients, it acts in a way that compliments its counterparts in the given assemblage of global power.[[13]](#footnote-13) Also, as Cox writes, “the three levels are interrelated. Changes in the organization of production generate new social forces which, in turn, bring about changes in the structure of states; and the generalization of these changes in the structure of states alters the problematic of world order.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Thus, each historic bloc features an arrangement of social forces and institutions centered around a particular means of production that usually have global ambitions, a dominant state or set of states that reflect the leading social forces but also provide protection for them, and a world order that represents the planetary aspirations of the social forces at the base but also places restraints on what those social forces can and cannot do. Anarchy and the absence of formal institutions of world government prevent this assemblage or power from “ruling” the world, but they can nevertheless exercise substantial influence over it compared to all other actors with the potential of global reach. This primarily occurs through the development of a hegemonic influence where the dominant array of social and political forces seek consent and legitimacy for their preponderance rather than ruling exclusively through fiat and coercion.

Hegemony, however, is always in flux and never permanently fixed. Different formations of power representing minority or peripheral sets of values and interests of different social groups and alliances struggle with each other and the prevailing assemblage of hegemonic power for influence and relevance with the aspiration to challenge, topple and replace the existing formation of power. When the prevailing hegemonic structure enjoys wide approval from the society in which it is embedded, these dissident movements have little chance of success, but when the prevailing assemblage us undergoing a loss of confidence by a substantial cross-section of the society, these dissident movements have greater purchase among the population and thus a greater chance of successfully challenging the status quo configuration of power. When this happens, the hegemonic actors often must use more coercive measures to protect their increasing fragile positions of leadership, including drawing on the power of the state and its monopoly on violence.

It is here where the idea of crisis emerges. Gramsci writes, “That aspect of modern crisis which is bemoaned as a ‘wave of materialism’ is related to what is called the “crisis of authority.”’[[15]](#footnote-15) This crisis is marked by the lack of “consensus” among the various other factions and groups in society and the emergence of a more confrontational and partisan political environment where past ruling cohorts must exercise coercive force more frequently and with greater intensity. The masses, who were apt to defer to the judgment and expertise of those occupying the offices of government and leading industries, are now skeptical at best of the technical expertise of the ruling cadres and at worst downright hostile. It is in this environment of an agitated population and a delegitimized set of ruling ideas and institutions that the “morbid symptoms” begin to materialize.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Each assemblage of power can be identified and studied within the historical context that that configuration exercises hegemony. “In applying the concept of hegemony to world order,” Cox writes, “it becomes important to determine when a period of hegemony begins and when it ends.”[[17]](#footnote-17) While debates exist in determining where one historic bloc of world order begins and ends specifically, there is general agreement that, for example, the years 1815 to 1914 constituted a “long nineteenth century” where a world order led by Great Britain was paramount before giving way to a period of non-hegemony between 1914 and 1945. After that, a still on-going “long twentieth century” takes shape with the United States as the leading state of the current configuration of world order.[[18]](#footnote-18) Within these specific historic blocs, one can identify the hegemonic material forces, institutions and ideas that animate the social forces, forms of state and world order that constitute the historic bloc. However, one can also identify counter-hegemonic forces that resist and push back against this assemblage of power. When these counterforces become strong enough, a crisis emerges.

A crisis in the prevailing configuration of power occurs when the heretofore accepted arrangement loses its legitimacy and by extension its authority to rule. As Gramsci explains, “If the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e. is no longer “leading” but only “dominant,” exercising force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe, etc.”[[19]](#footnote-19) “When such crises occur,” Gramsci says elsewhere in his notebooks, “the immediate situation becomes delicate and dangerous, because the field is open for violent solutions, for the activities of unknown forces, represented by charismatic “men of destiny.”[[20]](#footnote-20) It is here where we see the talk of “morbid symptoms” of a configuration of rule threatening to collapse while some kind of coherent replacement has yet to emerge.[[21]](#footnote-21)

**Interregnums in World Order**

A good place to begin is an examination of the word itself. *Interregnum* came to English in the late sixteenth century largely intact from its original Latin spelling and pronunciation.[[22]](#footnote-22) Zygmunt Bauman says the word “was originally used to denote a time-lag separating the death of one royal sovereign from the enthronement of the successor.”[[23]](#footnote-23) While uncommon, these brief periods of rupture were fraught with uncertainty and change and often required the deployment of extraordinary or extraconstitutional power to restore legitimate authority.[[24]](#footnote-24) Once legitimate power and authority is restored, interregnum gives way to imperium (a Latin word that obviously did not make the trip into the English language as unscathed as *interregnum*). In the Roman Republic, imperium referred to the power of the consuls to rule the government and command its armies and administration. Nothing was to undermine this constitutional authority so when breakdowns did occur, “such as when both consuls died or where to be absent for a lengthy time,” the interregnum denoted a short period where the old arrangement of power no longer applied, the new arrangement of power was not yet instituted, and power temporarily transferred to an alternative institution (such as the Roman Senate).[[25]](#footnote-25)

For Gramsci writing in *The Prison Notebooks*, there was not such precision when it came to a formal definition of interregnum. Instead, there was only a few key references to the concept. The first, comes from the quotation mentioned at the beginning of this paper: “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”[[26]](#footnote-26) In the line of text immediately before the above quotation, Gramsci writes,

“If the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e. is no longer “leading,” but only “dominant,”

exercising coercive force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become

detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe

previously. Will the interregnum, the crisis whose historically normal solution necessarily be

resolved in favor of the restoration of the old? Given the character of the ideologies, that can

be ruled out—yet not in an absolute sense.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Taken together, Gramsci gives a rudimentary account of interregnum that has two components. The first is that the defining features of an interregnum is the existence of “morbid symptoms” appearing in the breach of the pre-existing assemblage of power. Without a prevailing and legitimate hegemonic social class controlling the means of production, persuasion and destruction nor a well-organized counterhegemonic alternative ready to sweep into the gap, space and oxygen exist for any number of extremist or eclectic manifestations of power to emerge. Secondly, that the emergence of these insurgent expressions of political power and belief will be fleeting and transitory as they lack the mass support needed to challenge the hegemonic formation of power. Nonetheless, their existence will provide a temporary appeal and curiosity among the disgruntled masses who have lost faith in the prevailing institutions of society and willing to embrace them for a time. Gramsci suggests that these alternative bursts of political vector will never take deep root in the body politic, but that does not mean that their presence will not have a profound impact on the politics of the historical moment nor that they will soon be forgotten.

Gramsci never went into any extended discussion of what the “morbid symptoms” of an interregnum in part due to the censorship restrictions that were in place at the time of his writing and the effect of this censorship on his ability to write freely about the contemporary politics of Italy. In certain places Gramsci was able to use lesser-known names of key figures of individuals like Vladimir Lenin or Joseph Stalin, but his ability to discuss how the rise of Mussolini and Italian fascism might be a morbid system of the crisis of authority in Italy and Europe was severely curtailed. No such restrictions existed in talking about the more distant past, however, and thus the richest and most compelling account of the interregnum and the morbid symptoms its produces came from his discussion of Caesarism, or the rise of what Gramsci calls “men of destiny” who pose as saviors coming to the rescue of the hapless and paralyzed politics of the state. As Gramsci goes on to write, “When the does not find this organic solution, but that of the charismatic leader, it means that a static equilibrium exists…it means that no group, neither the conservatives nor the progressives, has the strength for victory, and that even the conservative group needs a master.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Gramsci used the label Caesarism to “express (this) situation in which the forces in conflict balance each other in such a way that a continuation of the conflict can only terminate in their reciprocal destruction.”[[29]](#footnote-29) In Caesarism, the problem of the interregnum—the absence of a dominant group able to deploy the power of the state in a way that the people of a community see as legitimate and right—is temporarily solved by an individual deliverer who promises to restore order, smite the partisan political actors, and return the nation to place of pride and stability.

Gramsci was not the first to remark upon this interesting condition. In writing about the turbulent politics of France in the early and mid-nineteenth century, Marx observed the tendency for the bourgeoise to lose control of the levers of the state in the face of fierce popular opposition, and that in these moments of crisis, a charismatic leader rises to assume authoritarian power in a such a way that neither the bourgeois fundamental interests are threatened but still give some kind of hope for change to the masses. The first time was in the aftermath of the social unrest unleashed by the French Revolution. In the terror and chaos that followed, Napoleon Bonaparte stood atop French society, pacified the warring social factions and directed the energy of the French nation toward foreign conquest. In 1848, an unraveling of class coalitions within French society created so pronounced a paralysis that “a grotesque mediocrity” in the form of Napoleon’s nephew Louis Napoleon III was able to impose a temporarily stable (if far less dynamic) order on French society. Because both instances of class stalemate resulted in an autocrat named Napoleon taking control of the country, Marx dubbed this phenomenon “Bonapartism.”

However, Caesarism was not a solution to crisis, but a “morbid symptom” itself. This is what Gramsci implies when he writes, “the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.” Both Napoleons, Caesar and Cornwall were all examples of a society where no faction had sufficient control of political, economic and social assets to assert and promulgate a plausible and appealing national and class narrative that could win the support of the masses and be backed up by tools of coercive force. Their presence may have pacified the situation momentarily, but their temporary control on the reigns of the state did not represent a permanent solution.

Applying this to the realm of global politics, Robert Cox argues that when a configuration of global power is in crisis, the resolution of the tension can have two possible outcome, “either the constitution of a new hegemony or caesarism, i.e., the freezing of unresolved contradictions…In order to bring about structural change in the economy it is necessary to realize a realignment of social forces, either by consent (through hegemony) or by the more or less stabilization of contradictory forces (through caesarism).”[[30]](#footnote-30) In the first instance, the crisis is resolved when the prevailing forces of social order make a new “bargain” with either old rivals that have become too powerful to ignore or repress, or new forces that have arrived on the scene and threaten to destabilize the status quo (even if this is not their intention). In the second instance, both the forces of the status quo and the forces of resistance mutually neutralize each other and create spaces for the aforementioned “morbid symptoms” to take hold. Because there is no global sovereign, the caesarism of world order will not feature the rise of a single “man of destiny” or international despot. Instead, the morbid symptoms will take the form of insurgent formations of power (which may be led by “Caesar-like” figures) tainting the functionality and legitimacy of the prevailing structure of order.

**Distinguishing Crisis from Interregnum**

Not all crises are the same and not all of them (indeed, very few of them) are indicative of an interregnum. Some are borne of forces that emerge from the contradictions of established assemblage of power and have genuine staying power as they highlight a flaw in the dominant system that cannot be solved. Grievance with that flaw forms a more permanent assemblage of opposition that survives and even thrives on these festering conceptual and material wounds. Gramsci calls these crises “organic” in that they are “relatively permanent” and can last for extended period of time—sometimes decades.[[31]](#footnote-31) Indeed, Gramsci himself believed he was living though just such an example of an organic crisis with the rise of fascism and the empowerment of a configuration of forces that was responsible for plunging Europe into tension and crisis.[[32]](#footnote-32)

These organic crises are set apart from “conjunctural crises” where the roots of the crisis lay in the “occasional, immediate and accidental” or “immediate and ephemeral.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Protest or social unrest may give the appearance of a grassroots resistance to some policy, but if both sides still agree on the fundamental legitimacy of the prevailing system, one cannot say that an organic crisis is afoot. More often than not, these outbursts of dissent are the result of localized or niche causes and will disappear or fade out on its own with little need for formal state action. During the mercantilist period in European history, states fought wars to determine such administrative matters as rights of succession, disputed claims on territory and colonies and to suppress peasant uprisings. The deployment of violence may have stirred a brief conjunctural crisis, but at no point was the overall system threatened in any way. Mercantilism as a world order never was in existential danger when Spain supplanted Portugal as the hegemonic state or when the Netherlands or England made similar moves. Very few of these events could be considered “morbid symptoms.”

Interregnums tend to emerge from organic crisis. The loss of legitimacy with one element of the assemblage of power—dominant form of state, global relations of material force and world order—undermines the legitimacy of the other elements. For example, a loss of confidence in the viability and legitimacy of the present-day neoliberal state epitomized by the United States both within its domestic politics and its place in global politics also weakens the legitimacy of the post-Cold War *Pax Americana* and the global network of production, supply, trade and finance. If all three components lose viability and legitimacy, then the entire assemblage of power risks collapsing putting the entire historic bloc at risk. If no viable alternative or counter-hegemonic formation of power exists waiting in the wings and no prevailing sets of ideas, institutions and material capabilities generate a new historic bloc, then the period of interregnum has begun.

Loss of legitimacy does not only come about due to loss of legitimacy by the prevailing assemblage of power, but also by the challenge of other states offering counter-hegemonic formations of power. The interregnum begins when the challenging state takes a specific action or set of actions that would displace some portion of the predominant power’s grasp on hegemony—what we might label an “overtaking maneuver.” Such an action might include a military campaign, major diplomatic initiative, challenge of established rules of trade or financial exchange, a bid to establish a rival international institution that would perform a similar function as an existing institution or some combination of these types of events and others not mentioned here. Of particular note is the fact that the action the challenging state takes is one that would have been impossible before because it would have been squelched by the hegemonic power of the dominant state or the challenging power would have been too weak to mount such a contest. Indeed, the action may not even have been contemplated just a few years prior on the assumption that such a move would cause a strong and possibly violent reaction by the prevailing state. As the power of the dominant state wanes however and the moral authority of the established order loses its legitimacy, any number of spaces open up for challenging states to make their maneuver. Or, to use Gramsci’s language, the war of position exercised by the challenging state transitions to a war of maneuver.[[34]](#footnote-34)

At the heart of the overtaking maneuver is an alternative set of productive material forces, notions of morality and legitimizing institutions that form at a cellular level the embryo of an alternative world order and global assemblage of power. While these basic ingredients may not be fully-fledged nor their moral imperatives fully fleshed-out, their novelty and freshness gives the challenging array of power extra energy and drive as they take root in the world. In this sense, a dialectical relationship is always detectable with the forces and structures of the status quo revealing their shortcomings and tensions in an every-changing social environment and demands for something new or “disruptive” gaining an ever-growing following.

In Gramci’s framework, the challenging party, led by a leadership cohort of intellectuals and strategists, makes the decision to change tactics and actively outflank the established power in order to gain control of the key institutions of the state. This is best done, according to Gramsci, when sufficient support has already been established within the state’s civil society. Yet at the international level, the same dynamics may not be in play as the struggle for power is more an overt contest between rival states and one cannot speak of a global civil society in the same way one speaks of civil society with a state. Thus, a state engaging in an overtaking maneuver may not be aware or conscious that the policies it is enacting are bids for world hegemony and may be understood as merely pursuing national interests. The rise of American power in the early twentieth century and its decisions to intervene in World War I were not seen by most US foreign policy decision-makers as opportune moments for the US to supplant Great Britain as the manager of world order. Though there was no shortage of voices within the United States that believed the US had a right to assert its power over what it saw as inferior nations and peoples in the name of civilization, these were not arguments for the United States to lead the world. Indeed, the customary view of the US place in the world was a more isolated and detached “empire of liberty” in the Western Hemisphere that remained aloof from the corrupt politics of the rest of the world.

At other times however, the overtaking maneuver is seen as just that—an attempt for the upstart state to push aside the contemporary hegemon and place the challenger at the top of the podium. After its victory of France in 1871, Germany, first under the leadership of Bismarck, took deliberate steps to build-up its military and economic capacities to compete more directly with Great Britain and France on the world stage. The Berlin Conference sought to firmly establish German access to its own colonial possessions in Africa while its program of naval expansion was a bid to ensure that Britannia no longer ruled the waves of the twentieth century. These efforts at building institutional and material capabilities to rival British and French power in the world received a matching ideology in the notion of *Lebensraum* which posited the legitimacy and rightfulness of a European political order with German as the dominant states and its neighbors either subject to or deferential towards its national interests. The rise of Nazism gave this *Weltpolitik* framework of German hegemony an aggressive layer of proto-fascist intensity.

The effects of the overtaking maneuver can vary widely. Like a car attempting to pass a slower vehicle on a steep and narrow mountain road, the state attempting to overtake the hegemon may find it does not have the power to get around its target and must abandon the effort when confronted by a vehicle coming in the opposite direction. Beginning in the 1970s, much of US foreign policy writing expressed concern for the rising economic clout of Japan and the fear that it would strip away commercial and financial dominance from the United States. There was even some concern that Japan might decide to shun its military alliance with the US and reconstitute its skeleton armed forces in a bid for strategic preponderance in Asia. Yet with the fall of the Soviet Union and the economic boom brought about by globalization that brought enormous benefits to American political and economic interests, the fear of a nascent *Pax Nipponica* quickly dissipated. Indeed, the story of Japanese power since the 1990s has been one of stagnation and sluggishness amid the widely accepted perception that China is now the peer competitor of the US in Asia.

Other overtaking maneuvers can be rapid and full of alacrity. England, which was late to the mercantilist game behind Portugal, Span and the Netherlands in the wake of the voyages of “discovery” quickly made-up ground when its domestic political situation stabilized in the late seventeenth century and revolutionary turmoil on the European continent meant French and Dutch bids for hegemony would have to take backseat to quelling domestic social unrest (if not abandoned altogether). The famous sale of the Louisiana Territory to the United States by Napoleon in order to raise revenue for his wars in Europe signaled to the rest of the world that if France were to seek global dominance, it would have to come after the conquest of Europe and the removal of its continental rivals. Though Britain would be forced to get involved in the land war in Europe in order to put an end to Napoleonic expansion, the wars themselves did not force Britain to abandon its efforts to consolidate and expand its overseas territories and take the steps to embed the logic of free trade, free navigation and other key concepts of the emerging *Pax Britannica*.

Even in relatively speedy transitions of hegemonic power, however, there is that period of time where the outcome of the overtaking maneuver is steeped in doubt. To return to the metaphor of the passing car on the steep mountain road, there is that moment of uncertainty when both cars are alongside of each other and the outcome of the pass remains unknown. Will the passing car continue its attempt to overtake or will it suddenly abandon the move as the cars approach a curve around which unknown hazards await? Will the car being passed refuse to surrender the lead position and accelerate in the hopes of dissuading the passing vehicle to continue its maneuver or will it slow down to facilitate the maneuver? On the road these questions are usually answered in matter of seconds. When looking at transitions in world order, they make take several years or decades to fully shake out. To mux the metaphors, it this period of flux where the outcome is unknown when the morbid symptoms emerge and the danger to the two cars on the road are at their greatest.

***After the Interregnum of Despair: A Pax Sinica?***

In the wake of this discussion on overtaking maneuvers, the last question needing to be addressed here is whether or not the current spate of crises and disarrays in world order are indications of some form of interregnum with some fundamental aspect of the contemporary assemblage of power changing shape, structure or constitution. While it is clear many “morbid symptoms” do exist (including the impulsive decision by strongman Vladimir Putin to invade Ukraine) that indicate such an interregnum might be present, the symptoms do not necessarily point to what world order will look like after the illness of the interregnum has passed. At the very least, the position of the United States as the provider and protector of world order seems to be under enormous strain and pressure with many suggesting the age of American hegemony is not only over, but the symptoms of despair that typify the fall of the United States from dominance are tainting all aspects of the present world order.[[35]](#footnote-35) Nevertheless, for an interregnum to be occurring, there must exist a possible upstart assemblage of power around which a new historic bloc can emerge but has yet to take full form and leading state that contemplating an overtaking maneuver. The only place currently where such a formation could grow would be out of Asia with China the leading state in a new assemblage of power.

As Robert Cox has argued, an assemblage of power consists of the multiplying of a particular form of state sponsoring and guarding a specific relations of economic production within a larger context of a unique world order. Together, these components form an historic bloc of power within which all actors in global politics operate.[[36]](#footnote-36) The challenge in determining the Chinese led world order is to identify and describe the nature of the new Chinese state and the extent to which other states copy it (or key aspects of it), the relations of global economic production Chinese state power supports and protects, and the larger world order these activities produce and incentives and restraints for other actors in this world order. Together these would form a potential *Pax Sinica* constituting a new historic bloc of world order for the twenty-first century and beyond.

The first element would be a new form of state/economic interphase of Chinese political social institutions. At the heart of the Chinese state is the legacy of social and economic policies instituted first by Mao Zedong and then substantially reformed by Deng Xiaoping. While Mao sought to build a Chinese people’s republic based on Marxist principles that, the Chinese state that exists today is largely the legacy of Deng Xaioping’s political and economic reforms first implemented in 1977. At the heart of these reforms were measures designed to liberalize China’s weak and closed domestic economy in such a way as raise the prospects of a state that had endured several decades of war, political strife and virtually no human development. This began with the creation of key entrepreneurial institutions like the town and village enterprise that would operate outside the rigid authority of the local Maoist commune and allow rural peasant farmers to sell surplus produce for extra income. These entities, along with the larger industrial state-operated enterprises quickly became focal points of much foreign investment from states outside of China that was able to enter the country as a result of the relaxation of capital barriers.[[37]](#footnote-37) The rapid economic development that grew from these initial investments allowed the Chinese state to begin major infrastructure projects, the purchase of billions of dollars of US debt and the financing of a foreign policy strategy called the “Belt and Road Initiative” where Chinese capital would be invested in Eurasian and African countries to facilitate closer economic and financial ties with China that would compete with the traditional western investment and development institutions.

With this new Chinese political economy—a political economy David Harvey dubbed “neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics,” the global supply chains became restructured and reflected new world social relations of production.[[38]](#footnote-38) In a story now familiar to most scholars, global manufacturing relocated from its traditional locations in the developing world to various states in China, East Asia and a handful of states in the “Global South.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Indeed, the symptoms of despair that were the jumping off point of this paper became most acute as a result of this reordering of the global political economy and the social relations of production. Residents in industrial cities and towns in the US found themselves out of work as their manufacturing jobs went elsewhere while new legions of middle-class consumers grew in the old epicenters of misery and despair in China and India. In both places new digital technologies created a race to find lucrative applications that have spawned an unprecedented number of billionaires atop global tech firms and their highly-paid support staffs basking in the largesse of their wealth as the world adopts the communications and media technologies they pioneered. Yet this mass consumer base that provides the revenue support for these tech initiatives are a class of mostly precarious service industry workers whose knowledge and savvy in the use and deployment digital media technologies and techniques more often than not does not allow them to acquire the same employment security their manufacturing forebearers enjoyed.

It is with these darker and more sinister applications of media technology where one might observe some of the most definable features of a possible emerging *Pax Sinica.* The Chinese state is the most robust example of the authoritarian turn in the global economy with China refuting the adage from the era of the *Pax Americana* that economic prosperity required the accompaniment of democratic principles. While in the earlier days of Chinese economic growth, some hoped that emerging Chinese power was the best promise for a more emancipated and progressive world order that kept the best of the US historic bloc but was more attendant to the needs of the populations neglected by the western dominance of world politics.[[40]](#footnote-40) However, the rise of Xi Jinping to power and his effort to insert irredentism, nationalism and a more smothering and repressive state that uses the innovations of digital technologies to more closely monitor and control populations suggest such a progressive future is not on the horizon and that any *Pax Sinica* that does develop with be laden with its own set of tensions and contradictions that will set the stage for its own crisis of despair.

**Conclusion**

The world finds itself at a potential crossroads in world history with the passing of a “long twentieth century” of American hegemony and a transition into a mysterious future. What that future consists of is unknown as this point. This paper has argued that the existence of “morbid symptoms” in world politics indicate an extended period of interregnum in world order where the old order is in crisis but will not fall from its pedestal as there is an insufficient assemblage of power to topple it and takes its commanding position. These symptoms manifest themselves in a number of different ways ranging from the elements of a crisis of despair among large populations within states to the emergence of authoritarian “monsters” who provide the promise of stability and buoy the spirits of certain segments of hyper-nationalist and hyper-partisan constituencies, but in the end fall ignominiously and do not offer a coherent alternative to the decaying world order. While there are signs of other states and other global institutions posing as the centerpiece of a new assemblage of power, these alternative frameworks remain too underdeveloped and too regional to constitute a genuine counter-hegemonic bloc of power. The emerging power of China and its effort to expand its influence throughout Eurasia is the best example of this and will likely remain the focus of scholarly attention in the study of possible counter-hegemonic assemblages of power one day vying to supplant a decadent western order.

It ought to be added that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is not an example of a Russian led counter-hegemonic bloc of power emerging on the scene and competing for influence. If anything, Putin and his lordship over Russia represents one of the morbid symptoms of the current interregnum where the “men of destiny” Gramsci mentioned in the *Prison Notebooks* find the space to exercise their megalomania and offer their leadership as a cure to the symptoms of the age.[[41]](#footnote-41) In Russia, the crisis of despair has been an on-going phenomenon and Putin’s rise to power has been facilitated by his offering the balm of Russian imperial nostalgia combined with greater consumerism to alleviate that depression that plagued Russian society after the Soviet Union fell.[[42]](#footnote-42) Putin’s invasion may stoke the fires of that nationalism inside of Russia for a brief period of time, but given the reaction of the rest of the world, it is clear that Putin is more likely to go the way of Napoleon than be at the head of new global assemblage of power organized around Russian ideas, institutions or economic capabilities.

Indeed, whatever the outcome in Ukraine, world politics will continue to be ridden with crisis and uncertainty for the foreseeable future. Only when a coherent alternative counter-hegemonic alternative emerges will the nature and character of the twenty-first century be more accurately discerned.

1. Richard Haass, *A World in Disarray* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Joseph R. Biden, “Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump,” *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 2 (2020), 64-68 and Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-First Century* (London: Verso, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Anne Case and Angus Deaton, “The Epidemic of Despair: Will America’s Mortality Crisis Spread to the Rest of the World?” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-02-03/epidemic-despair [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. An example of this might include the writings of G. John Ikenberry, whose recent works have all featured the term “crisis” in the title, subtitle or chapter title. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “interregnum,” accessed March 2, 2021, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/interregnum. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, 5 vols., Giulio Einaudi, ed. (Turin, Italy: 1977), vol. 1, 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For the first and more accurate translation, see Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith eds. (New York: International Publishers, 1999), 276. The origin of the more evocative but less accurate translation is in dispute, but is most likely a poor English translation of a poor French translation. See Ross Wolfe. “No, Žižek did not attribute a Goebbels quote to Gramsci,” *The Charnel-House*, Available at: <https://thecharnelhouse.org/2015/07/03/no-zizek-did-not-attribute-a-goebbels-quote-to-gramsci/>. Accessed January 5th, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Milan Babic, Let's talk about the interregnum: Gramsci and the crisis of the liberal world order, International Affairs, Volume 96, Issue 3, May 2020, 767–786, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz254 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. 768. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Robert Cox, “Gramsci, hegemony and international relations: an essay in method” in Stephen Gill, ed. *Gramsci, Historical Materialism and International Relations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 49-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 56-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Robert Cox, “Social forces, states and world orders: beyond international relations theory” *Approaches to World Order,* Cambridge United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 100-101. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 275. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 276. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Cox, “Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations,” 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. For more on this idea see Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*: *Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks,* 275-276. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 210. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., 276. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “interregnum,” accessed March 2, 2021, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/interregnum. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Zygmunt Baumann, “Times of Interregnum,” *Ethics and Global Politics* 5, no. 1 (February 2012): 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Giogio Agamben details how this process worked in the Roman Republic. See Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Philippe Theophanidis, “Interregnum as a Legal and Political Concept: A Brief Contextual Survey,” *Synthesis* 0, no. 9 (2016): 109-110. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks,* 276. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., 275-276. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Robert Cox, *Production Power and World Order: Social Forces in the Making of History* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1987), 273-274. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks,* 177-178. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. See Cox. *Production, Power and World Order,* 289-298. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks,* 177-178. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. See Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks,* 238-239. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See note 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Cox, *Approaches to World Order,* 85-123. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 120-135. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. See Robyn Meredith, *The Elephant and the Dragon: The Rise of India and China and What It Means For the Rest of Us* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. See Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-First Century* (London: Verso, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Gramsci. *Prison Notebooks,* 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. McFaul, Michael. “Choosing Autocracy: Actors, Institutions, and Revolution in the Erosion of Russian Democracy.” *Comparative Politics* 50, no. 3 (2018): 305–25. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26532688. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)