Contesting Neo-Realism and Liberal Idealism; Where do Hopes for a 'Perpetual Peace' Lie?

War has been an omnipresent aspect of the international order since the beginning of recorded history. Consequently, 'realism' sees conflict and war as the defining aspects of international relations. On the other hand 'idealists' posit that human reason/different forms of societal organization can curb or even eliminate belligerency. This essay shall critically analyse the realist position drawing on 'critical theory' to show that it is limited to analysing the world system without committing to *change* it. Realism's "a-historic" nature and descriptive limitation presupposes that patterns discovered are immutable truths and by eliminating the internal nature of states from consideration, realism fails to provide adequate account for the changing nature of war. Following analysis on the effects of economic interdependence and democratic regimes upon war, the essay shall argue that though democracy and economic interdependence amongst equal trading partners hamper belligerency, the effects of capitalist globalization corrupt such gains and perpetuate conflict. The aim is to show that war is not necessarily inevitable, but in order to significantly reduce or eliminate war the world must reach a post-capitalist stage.

THE ROOTS OF WAR

The lack of organization, technology and communication would make war unfeasible until a relatively recent time, so it is safe to assume that mankind's pre-history was a non-military one. Pre-historic breeding and feeding groups may have been prone to group ferocity but this does not amount to "organized armed struggle between groups in which each side seeks to displace or to dispel, to dominate or punish, or simply to be rid of the other by inflicting 'defeat'"[1]. War requires a political purpose of some sort. Though it has not yet been established whether war is inevitable amongst *sovereign*[2]states, the notion of sovereignty lies at the root of "war". War's purpose is the removal, limitation or exercise of another state's 'sovereignty', without 'Sovereignty' war would not be necessary.

Clausewitz saw war beginning when the "weak defender" realised organised resistance was the only way of giving the "strong offender" a taste of his own medicine[3]   *Conflict* is seen as the main reason why men organized themselves into societies. This view that the state and war came into existence in a symbiosis is expressed in Montesquieu's dictum –

"once in a political society, men lose their feeling of weakness whereupon their former equality disappears and the state of war begins'[4].

This is a convincing account of war's origins. The "state" enables war to occur, it is necessary for war (also true of the "war on terror"[5]) if war is to be different from chaos. Moreover, as Michael Howard notes war has had a huge influence upon the evolution of states. For example, Medieval Europe before the development of guns was "parcelled out between thousands of Lords, each with his own power base"[6]. However, "the development of guns was the final argument of Kings against overmighty subjects (lords) whose castles could now be reduced to rubble"[7]. Heavy cannon enabled Kings to establish their authority and centralise power over greater territory. Conflict, through developments in weapons technology, began the process of consolidating "nation states".

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War has had a massive influence upon the world we know, however this should not lead us to see the state and war as partners in a relationship which is necessarily equal to each. The dependence of the state upon war/conflict is not logically necessary. Even if both arose together and even if the state depended upon war to establish itself, the relationship is not necessarily perpetual. Nevertheless, 'realism' would dispute this claim.

REALISM

Following the demise of Liberal idealism, scholars such as George Kennan, Walter Lippman and Hans Morgenthau, whose main goal was influencing US foreign policy to tackle the new exigencies posed by the 'cold war', restored the ancient tradition of power politics to orthodoxy. At birth, "political realism" was more interested in practice than abstract theory, aiming to produce an interpretive guide enabling us "to look over the shoulder of a statesman … and anticipate his very thoughts"[8]. Realism was presented as the universal language of power, the international system as its stage and states as its actors.

Morgenthau would attempt to extrapolate a science of international politics from this 'practical guide', using the concepts of power, rationality and the balance of power as its analytical tools. He theorized international politics as a struggle for power in a hierarchic international system, constituted by power balances with the ability to create both "equilibrium" (negative peace) and conflict through power struggles. Power was not understood as an instrument to attain other ends, but as an end in itself, due to the "limitless character of the lust for power (which) reveals a general quality of the human mind"[9]. The basic elements of "power" and "conflict" are essential to understand realism's development.

Neo-realism emerged from a critique of "political realism" positing that "human nature" is insufficient to explain behavior. Human nature is treated as a historical constant and therefore fails to explain variations in war over time and space. Furthermore, if human nature varies -as some argue- it is the sources of that variation and not human nature that account for war. Morton Kaplan and Stanley Hoffman (amongst others) began to account for conflict in terms of the competitive and anarchic nature of world politics as a whole. Kenneth Waltz expanded upon this to produce "structural realism". Where Morgenthau saw international politics as a hierarchy consisting of power balances, Waltz maintained international politics is inherently anarchic and deemed the 'structure' of any system to transcend the characteristics of its units. State behavior is explained in structural terms, by the system it operates within. To illustrate this point Waltz used the "oligopolistic market" analogy –

"within an oligopolistic market, the ability of firms to arrive at some convergence regarding prices… cannot be adequately understood either by examining negotiations among the firms or by studying their internal decision making process. Rather it is the structure of the market itself, in which a few key actors collectively hold the dominant market share… the tendency for competition is dampened through mutual adjustments over time'[10]

In the same way, state behaviour cannot be explained by internal characteristics, but is determined by the structure of the international system which (like other 'structures') varies across three dimensions:

"*by their ordering principles, the specification of functions of formally differentiated parts and the relative capabilities of the units*"[11].

States are "ordered" by the principle of anarchy and "function" as rational power maximisers. The only remaining difference amongst states is their "relative capabilities" (power) International Relations becomes limited to analyzing the relative power between states. Changing power configurations can affect alignment and levels of conflict. Nevertheless, in an anarchic world order, competing sovereign states with different levels of power create conflict and war, which is seen as inevitable amongst sovereign states.

REALISM'S EPISTEMOLOGY

A great part of the difference between those who see war as a necessary and inevitable part of international relations and those who contend that war can be avoided or even eliminated is based upon the distinction between synchronic

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and diachronic understandings of history. Though they are not mutually exclusive, the synchronic dimension (space rather than time) tends to see the world as a series of interrelated parts with a tendency for equilibrium whereas the diachronic dimension (time rather than space) sees history as a process, naturally leading to enquiry into circumstances/events which bring about system transformation[12].

Realism's synchronic understanding of history views the international system as essentially unchanging, enabling the deduction of knowledge through the analysis of behaviour throughout history, much like the analysis of physical phenomena in the natural sciences. This positivist epistemology leads to the deduction of 'universal truths' such as the anarchic nature of the international order and state's behaviour as power-maximisers. History is reduced to a "mine of data", Robert Cox points out this has negative effects on neorealist historicism;

"There can be no dispute about Kenneth Waltz's adherence to the positivist approach … the elegance he achieves in the clarity of his theoretical statement comes at the price of an unconvincing mode of historical understanding "
Robert Cox[13]

Neorealism's positivist approach eliminates subjectivity from consideration. Therefore, the event observed – war/conflict – is removed from any possible causal relation with the subjective actors – states. Only the structure and the effect are left to analyse, eliminating the possibility for a subjective cause of 'war'. Analysis is restricted to the structure within which war occurs. The only internal characteristic being a disposition to act as power-maximisers, necessitated by the "anarchic" structure of the international system, an external factor. Realism is not interested in analysing *why* states use war beyond the universal claim that states invariably act as "power maximisers". Fukuyama criticises realism on this point; "realism introduces assumptions about the nature of human societies that make up the system, erroneously attributing them to the system rather than the units which make it up"[14]. By ignoring the effect a state's internal nature has upon its relationships within the international system, realism amputates from itself a key area of analysis.

Clear gaps in realist theory become apparent. For example realism would analyse "Imperialist War" (Lenin 1916) in the same terms as the religious crusades of the middle ages – power balance within an anarchic international system. Neorealists treat "anarchy" as a historical/structural constant, unaffected by different forms of organization, and therefore cannot adequately account for variations in war and peace. Kenneth Waltz concedes on this point noting that "although neorealist theory does not explain why particular wars are fought, it does explain war's dismal reoccurrence through the millennia"[15]. Variables such as the power polarity of the system provide a limited account for variations in war and peace and, inkeeping with realist tradition, these remain accountable to the international system itself, not the nature of the units which constitute it.

In order to account for research that has clearly favored dyadic over systemic explanations for the outbreak of war (Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman, 1988, 1992)[16] it has been argued that "structural realism requires a supporting theory of state"[17]. However, to consider the internal nature of states would surely be a complete reversal from structural realism's inherent principle – that structure transcends the characteristics of its units. Such a theory is more likely to fundamentally reshape neorealism rather than complement it.

Realism is essentially a-historical, its positivist epistemology degenerates history into "a mine of data illustrating the permutations and combinations that are possible within an essentially unchanging human story"[18]. Moreover, by limiting itself to analysing the structure and the effect, realism eliminates from analysis the impact subjective actors (states) have upon war and ignores the fact that changes in societal organization *affect* war.

An understanding of history as a process enables analysis on the effects different conditions and different forms of state have upon war. This lends itself to a rejection of positivism and adoption of "critical theory"[19] where the role of philosophy is to change the world, not merely to interpret it-

"The real social function of philosophy lies in its criticism of what is prevalent … the chief aim of such criticism is to prevent mankind from losing itself in those ideas and activities which the existing organization of society instills into its members" Max Horkheimer[20]

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Realism may not be "losing itself" in *presently* hegemonic ideas, a synchronic understanding of history enables its core argument to survive throughout historical periods. However by extrapolating *trans-historic* conclusions, it loses itself in the "bigger picture", failing to consider how different circumstances (beyond power balances) affect war and ignoring the possibility to prescribe changes for its elimination. Realism does not see the ideas prevalent in the existing organization of society as self-evident natural laws or "higher truths", it sees a pattern which has survived changes in societal organization and produces its own "higher truths" from it, ignoring the fact that changes in societal organization affect war.

This condemns realism to the conclusion that war is an inevitable and immutable part of international relations, burdening discourse with pessimism and perpetuating complacency. Scholars should aim to prescribe changes to the existing order with a view to improving it. The internal nature of states, the nature of relations amongst them and different international "ordering principles" account for variations in war and peace. Analysis of these differences – far from producing utopian prescriptions – could provide humanity with very real possibilities for eliminating, significantly reducing, or at least preventing the tragedy that is war.

Accusations of futile utopianism will surely be made against such a claim. However, I would suggest that it is the realist who engages in a largely futile endeavour. For if realism believes its own conclusions – the necessarily power maximising behaviour of states, the anarchical international order and the inevitability of conflict – it eliminates the possibility for any positive contributions transcending these factors, limiting analysis of the international system to mere descriptiveness. Ultimately, realism suffocates International Relations like Creationist dogma suffocates Evolutionary Science.

ECONOMIC INTERDEPENDENCE AND CONFLICT

"Peace is the natural effect of trade. Two nations who traffic with each other become reciprocally dependent; for if one has an interest in buying the other has an interests in selling: and thus their union is founded on mutual necessities" Montesquieu [21]

Montesquieu's dictum has been a centrepiece of Liberal arguments for centuries; commercial openness increases the dependence of private traders and consumers upon foreign markets. Therefore, because political antagonism risks damaging the economic relations enjoyed by the participants and jeopardizes gains from trade, these actors shall press government to refrain from military action. This trend is intensified when government is accountable and democratic, for bellicosity is further restrained as long as society views it as illegitimate/damaging. Moreover, the "peaceful nature" of democratic government is complemented by a free market economy,

"(which) absorbs the full energies of most people at all economic levels… there is much less energy to be vented in war and conquest than in any precapitalist society… its people are of an unwarlike disposition"[22].

Economic exchange and military conquest are seen as substitute means of acquiring the resources needed for economic growth and political security. As trade increases the incentives to meet these needs through territorial expansion, imperialism and conquest decrease. Furthermore economic intercourse increases contact and communication between actors in different countries, thereby encouraging cooperative political relations and fostering peace.

S.W. Polachek's study in 1980 seemed to support this position[23]. He analysed the relationship between the volume of bilateral trade and an indicator of the annual "net conflict" between countries from the 'conflict and peace data bank', finding an inverse relationship between the two factors. Generally, as trade increased, conflict decreased. Further studies exploring this link at different levels and over different periods of time mostly found the same trend[24]. An influential study drawing on these assumptions, adding to them a consideration of democratic regimes and international organizations concluded in a "Kantian Tripod for Peace", made up of three "legs"*democratic regimes, economic interdependece and shared membership in international institutions* – each strongly affecting the likelihood of conflict[25].

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Though much of the research indicates that trade and conflict are inversely related, deeper analysis of this relationship yields different results. For example, Polachek himself noticed that when analysing U.S. relations interdependence and conflict increased simultaneously [26]. In this case, interdependence seemed to stimulate conflict, suggesting that certain trade relations, such as unequal ones, stimulate conflict [27].

This adds weight to the neo-realist rebuttal. Interdependence exaggerates the extent to which great powers depend on others and since close interdependence means closeness of contact it raises the prospect of conflict, asserting "a false belief about the conditions that may promote peace"[28]. Heightened trade could actually stimulate belligerence – especially low-level "occasional" conflict. Moreover, if accepted that interpendence fosters peace it must also be noted that political-military relations shape commercial relations. Peace and trade are perpetuated amongst states with existing, positive commercial/political relations whereas conflict and negative commercial relations are perpetuated amongst states with bad political/commercial relations. It seems that it would be extremely difficult to transcend such divisions.

Nevertheless, the evidence shows that interdependence amongst *equal* trading partnersdecreases conflict, therefore equal relationships should be recommended. If accepted that capitalist globalization encourages inequality, the promotion of peace can only work under a different system. Thus, in order for a "Kantian tripod" to promote peace, the impact of capitalist globalization upon its "three legs" – democracy at the national level, interdependence at the intra-national level and international institutions on the supra-national level – should be considered.

DEMOCRACY, CAPITALISM AND PEACE

"Political democracy is a relation among human beings who control themselves. 'Market democracy' is a competition in which people try to control each other … this one is a misnomer, for the control of one human being by another, no matter how subtle the means, is no democracy" Earl Shorris[29]

It has become "common sense" to treat Capitalism and Democracy as "Siamese twins", complementing each other. This is a myth; democracy and capitalism are diametrically opposed. For the market to function, private property rights must be guaranteed, venerated and elevated to the status of personhood, excluding other potential forms of societal organisation. In fact, most classic Liberal thinkers at times of early Capitalism worried about the threat to property that an extension of suffrage to the mass propertyless would entail, even the relatively progressive J.S. Mill proposed giving multiple votes to property holders[30]. Clearly, the enlargement of popular sovereignty required by Democracy is inhibited by the collision produced between property rights and personal rights. Capitalism damages democratic theory; "a sphere cannot be considered private if it involves the socially consequential exercise of power"[31]. Under these relations, the needs of the market dictate to society, when, under a rational and democratic system the inverse would occur. So, how has it come to pass that capitalism is perceived as democracy's natural brother? Simply put, what in this case passes for "democracy" is, in fact, not. The representative system prevalent in modern industrial societies is best described as "*polyarchy*"**[32]** which, though preferable to tyranny, is no "*democracy*"**[33]**. Under polyarchy, sovereignty does not belong to the electorate (as in democracy) but to a *privileged* class with disproportionate economic and political power. Capitalism's corrosive influence ultimately incapacitates democracy.

As the driving force behind globalisation, capitalism's influence at the state/national level is perpetuated onto inter-state commercial and political relationships. Therefore, "interdependence" does not necessarily strengthen cooperative bonds between equal actors across states but creates international relationships between powerful market forces that have the potential to influence, dominate or corrupt economic, political processes and sovereignty at the national level. This represents what Cox terms "vertical power" (operating within civil society and imperialism) a dimension of power ignored by Realism (whose focus is on conflict between states – "horizontal power") epitomising what Gramsci[34] meant when he said that "international relations (the character of the international system) flow from social relations".

Conflict at the national and international level between social forces and states which suffer from global capitalism and those which benefit becomes inevitable. Moreover, such a huge Western advantage within global markets

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guarantees unequal distribution of trade gains, stimulating conflict. Many development theories posit that underdeveloped countries in the international system's "periphery" are at a constant disadvantage to the developed countries in the "center", destined to supplying cheap raw materials with deteriorating terms of trade and providing niche markets amongst local elites for the consumption of Western manufactured goods[35]. Thus interdependence in a world capitalist system does not eliminate imperialism, as argued by Liberals, but *replaces* it and improves it by eliminating the military cost of colonialism. "Peace" becomes the subjugation of the underdeveloped majority to the developed minority, a situation that is unsustainable.

Not surprisingly, capitalism also exterts a corrupting influence upon the transnational institutions forming the 'third leg' of the Kantian Peace. Following the end of the cold war, the acceleration of capitalist globalisation has been marked by the emergence of the IMF, World Bank, G-7 etc having a huge impact on the economic and political position of developing nations in the international system. Luis Jaramillo notes that such developments are "clearly directed at strengthening more and more the economic institutions and agencies that operate outside the United Nations system which (in spite of its flaws) remains the only multilateral mechanism in which the developing countries can have some say"[36]. The organisations, taking over from the UN, routinely promote free market dogma and even impose policy upon developing nations. These institutions become the decision makers for the key economic decisions that affect developing countries and are characterized by "their undemocratic character, lack of transparency, dogmatic principles and lack of pluralism"[37]. The *de facto* world government taking shape with the emergence of the IMF, the World Bank, G-7 and other such structures is conveniently immune from popular influence whilst creating a world suited to the needs of investors and often contrary to the public interest. Shared membership in such institutions increases the privileged prosition of developed nations at the cost of others, promoting a "peace" which is dependent upon the perpetual submission of most of the world to Western interests.

CONCLUSION

Realism is a destructive theory for international relations. Its main strength, the simplicity of its argument, is also its main weakness, for it incapacitates it from proposing anything new. As Robert Cox points out, this is due to the *problem solving*[38]and positivist approach it applies to theory and history. The critical theorist does not take the prevailing order at face value but enquires into its emergence and possible disappearance. This can lead to a very different view on *conflict*. Realism sees conflict as immutable and serving only to reshuffle power, whereas Marxist/Materialist forms of critical theory see conflict between social forces, espousing different forms of development as the creator of alternatives and the engine of progress.

'Historical materialism' could serve to deepen realist analysis by adding a "vertical dimension of power (imperialism and social forces) to the horizontal dimension of rivalry amongst states"[39] through its concern with the relationship between civil society and the state. This could be the "complementary theory of state" some have deemed neo-realism to need. However, it would fundamentally reshape realism's nature. Adding "vertical power" analysis, it becomes clear that the international system's current "ordering principle" is not "anarchy" but *capitalism*. Today more than ever, increased technology and communications further enable capitalism (which has always been an international phenomenon) to transcend state boundaries, making its influence over individuals, communities, civil society, states and the international system increasingly pervasive. However, unlike "anarchy", under Capitalism system transformation is possible. Capitalism is not a "historical/structural constant", it is a form of economic relations within and between states which in turn defines the relations amongst them and currently dominates the international structure.

Face value analysis of the world system by the critical theorist need not differ from the neorealist one. The crucial distinction would be critical theory's different theoretical base which transcends the ideas/perceptions instilled by the prevailing order, or what seems prevalent throughout history. An *epistemological revolution* striking at the heart of realist theory would enable realism to move away from the road leading to pessimism, complacency and perpetual war. Instead of losing itself in the "bigger picture", realism could see beyond it, enabling the prospects for a postcapitalist order.

History can show us how humanity could begin to transcend Capitalism. With the extension of suffrage in the early

industrial age, a significant amount of power was transferred from the market to people. A major consequence of increased political equality was an extensive redressing of the huge economic inequality suffered at the time, through decades of Labor struggles and other social movements (even if the survival of free-market productive relations limited such gains) The same process needs to be applied today to the global system and its institutions in order to eliminate, significantly reduce or at least prevent war more efficiently. Many have argued for the need to democratize international relations (David Held et al) and build globalization from the bottom up, not from the top down (Bello, Klein, Chomsky) Now that market relations are increasingly globalised, such changes are far more necessary today than they were in the industrialised states of the 19th century.

Following the bloodiest century in human history, with the West using its economic dominance to suffocate "infectious" alternatives and its military might to promote capitalism and "polyarchy" in the name of "democracy", the new century has started in the same vein. The world is captured and uprooted by Capitalism's massive and expanding influence. As Hobsbawm notes, "our world risks both explosion and implosion… it must change… the price of failure, the alternative to a radically changed society, is darkness"[40]. Though History does not show how war can be eliminated, it does show that system transformation is an omnipresent possibility which affects war's *nature*. A realistic hope for eliminating, significantly reducing or at the *very least*, aiding the prevention of war lies therein. Ultimately, to enable a "perpetual peace", humanity must transcend Capitalism.

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[1] Gallie, W B. "Understanding War", Routledge, 1991, pg 39

[2] "Sovereign"- the exclusive right to complete control over an area of governance or people

[3] Clausewitz, Carl V. Brodie, Bernard. Howard, Michael E. Paret, Peter. "On War" p 92

[4] Gallie, W B. "Understanding War" p 31

[5] Though "the war on terror" challenges traditional notions of war, the "terrorist" side may not have a state. but, it aspires to, claims to defend the infringement of Sovereignty upon a religiously/culturally/historically homogenous region and different states within it by its opponents and finally, though it is in conflict with a set of values/morality/religion the object of its aggression are state structures and citizens of the opposing states.

[6] Howard, Michael "The Invention of Peace and the Reinvention of War", Profile Books, 2001, p 11

[7] Ibid, p 13

[8] Keohane, Robert O. "Neo-Realism and its Critics", Columbia University Press p 10

[9] Ibid p 11

[10] James, Patrick "Structural Realism and the Causes of War", *Mershon International Studies Review*, 1995, (39) p 182

[11] Keohane, "Neo-Realism and its Critics" p 14

[12] Cox, Robert W. & Schechter, Michael G. "The Political Economy of a Plural World: Critical Reflections on Power, Morals and Civilization"Routledge p 28

[13] Ibid p 243

[14] Fukuyama, Francis. "End of History and the Last Man". Penguin. 1992 p 245

[15] Waltz quoted in- Levy, J.S, "The Causes of War and the Conditions of Peace", p 142

[16] Cited in – Ibid

[17] James, Patrick "Structural Realism and the Causes of War" p 182

[18] Keohane, "Realism and its Critics", p 243

[19] See Immanuel Kant "Critique of Pure Reason" and Karl Marx "Theses on Feuerbach"

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[22]Schumpeter in Fukuyama, "The end of History and the Last Man" p 260

[23]Mansfield, Edward D & Pollins, Brian M. "The Study of Interdependence and Conflict; Recent Advances, Open Questions and Directions for Future Research", *Journal of Conflict Resolution,* Vol. 46 (6) 2001 p 838

[24]Ibid

[25]Ibid. p 839

[26]Ibid

[27]Ibid p 840

[28]Waltz in J.C. Pevehouse, "Interdependence Theory and the Measurement of International Conflict",*The Journal of Politics* 66 (1) 2004

[29] Earl Shorris in Birchfield, Vicki. "Contesting the Hegemony of Market Ideology: Gramsci's 'Good Sense' and Polanyi's 'Double Movement', *Review of Inernational Political Economy*, 6:1, 1999, p 32

[30] See "John Stuart Mill: The Ultimate Collection of Online Works" in *www.john-mill.com*

[31]Birchfield, Vicki. "Contesting the Hegemony of Market Ideology: Gramsci's 'Good Sense' and Polanyi's 'Double Movement', *Review of International Political Economy,* 6:1 Spring, 1999 p 34

[32] "**Polyarchy**" – a system in which a small group rules and mass participation in decision making is confined to leadership choice in elections dominated by a ruling/privileged class. (See Dahl, "Democracy and its Critics, 1989)

[33] "**Democracy**" – universal suffrage amongst adults (like polyarchy) with a *sovereign* electorate(unlike polyarchy)*NOTE- an electorate is "sovereign" if- (1) Its members are reasonably well informed about the issues to be decided by the political process and reasonably active in contributing to their resolution and (2) there is no stable minority class that has political power at least equal to that of elected officials, unmatched by another stable grouping- a "privileged" or "ruling" class.-* Schweickart, "After Capitalism", Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002, p 105

[34] Gramsci, Antonio "The Prison Notebooks", Independent Publishers, 1971 p 176

[35] See Prebisch, Raul. "Dependency Theory" and Wallerstein, Immanuel "World System"

[36]Chomsky, Noam. "World Orders, Old and New", Pluto Press 1997, p 179

[37]Ibid

[38] Cox in Keohane, "Realism and its Critics", p 212

[39] Ibid. p 215

[40] Hobsbawm, Eric. "Age of Extremes; The Short Twentieth Century", Penguin 1994. p 578

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Date written: 2007