THE SECOND COMING OF WOMP? (Notes on Restoring Vision, Hope, Reason, and Faith)

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Prologue

A decade after the start of the 21st century there exists a storm cloud of despair that casts a dark shadow across the future of humanity, giving rise to anguished cries of quest: ‘another world is possible’ or ‘imagine a better world’ These cries are anguished because the combine a realization that what exists and emerging is unacceptable, and what seems necessary and desirable is at this time politically unattainable, although it just might be at least imaginable. In starkest terms this is the gauntlet thrown down on the path clearer in past years by the WOMP process and similar endeavors throughout the world: IS IT USEFUL TO DEPICT THE POLITICALLY UNATTAINABLE? IS THE SHAPE AND FORM OF THE NECESSARY AND DESIRABLE EVEN IMAGINABLE?

For those of progressive outlook, the anguish itself seems to center on two clusters of issues: the absence of any serious challenge to the persistence of predatory globalization as the ideological foundation of world order; and the lack of political will on the part of state-centric world order to cope with global warming or militarism in a credible manner. These unmet challenges in the setting of the ongoing ‘war on terror’ (what the Pentagon has dubbed as ‘the long war,’ and does move toward the Orwellian image of a total state dedicated to permanent war in the name of security but for the sake of a domestic imperium) in which every citizen is simultaneously treated as a potential terrorist suspect who is continuously vulnerable to being criminalized by malice or accident as each person is encouraged to report on whoever acts suspiciously. Such a societal circumstance creates a rarely articulated realization that constitutional democracy and human rights are withering on the vine to be replaced by ‘creeping authoritarianism,’ or more alarmingly, by a drift toward fascism, whether or not so named. These concerns are aggravated by the lack of ideological credibility associated with Marxist, socialist, and even social democratic modes of thought creating a crisis of confidence in the ranks of the historic left.

Somewhat further in the background, although menacing in its potentiality, is the unwillingness of the geopolitical magnates of world order to seek in good faith the elimination of nuclear weaponry from the military arsenals of sovereign states, preferring reliance on a two-tier structure of nuclear have and have-not states. This dualistic structure epitomizes the embedding of double standards as the core reality of world order, also replicated in the persistence of the veto in the operations of the United Nations. These double standards seriously compromise the legitimacy of both the United Nations and vitiate the authority of international law. The proliferation preoccupation is also a geopolitical mind game, convincing the political leadership of the world, and much of the public, that the main danger of the weaponry arises from the behavior of the political actors that do not have the weapons rather than from those that possess, develop, and
might threaten to use them, and have in the past actually threatened use or used. In the
beginning the non-proliferation commitment was supposed to be balanced against the
disarmament commitment of the nuclear weapons states, but with the passage of time two
developments can be discerned: a hardening of the non-proliferation ethos, making its
implementation a pretext for aggressive war and the de facto lapse of the disarmament
commitment (or the silent substitution of arms control).

For those with a more mainstream or conservative outlook the sources of pessimism are
elsewhere: in acute vulnerability to Islamic extremism; in the related clash of civilizations
giving rise to a new cold war; in the absence of sufficient fiscal discipline threatening
economic implosion; in the burdening
of market forces with an array of social goals; in the decline of traditional values and the
embrace of decadence; in the rise of China and other non-Western centers of economic
and political power; in the erosion of ethnic identity via immigration, legal and illegal.

There is also growing uncertainty about the reshaping and management of world order in
the near future: There is a growing consensus about the relative decline of the United
States, but less agreement on whether this will morph into a process of absolute decline
or produce a militarist last ditch effort to restore American global preeminence. There is
also the prospect of the regionalization of world order with countries such as the United
States, China, Brazil, India, and the EU playing roles as regional hegemons. Such a
prospect has been analogized to the character of world order in the 12
th century when
regional empires prevailed in the main regions of the world.

At present, the state-centric world controls the dynamics of global problem-solving in
one of several ways: a continuing hegemonic role for the United States; a shared duopoly
or oligopoly of managerial authority in which the United States is joined by China, or by
the BRIC countries; a statist pluralism in which norms of behavior are set by ‘consensus,’
interpreted as unanimity as at Copenhagen Climate Change Conference or as super-
majority as at its Cancun sequel.

It is against this background that the question of a rebirth of WOMP takes shape, at least
in my mind. Is there the intellectual landscape on a global level that would be receptive to
systematic, transnational, and comparative explorations based on a shared value set
prepared to set forth proposals as to the shape and character of those political changes in
the near future that could restore hope and inspire citizen engagement throughout the
world? Assuming that such a substantive resonance exists, is there the will and capability
to provide the financial and organizational basis for a project of this global scope to
become more than the figment of a vacationing imagination? It is important to underscore
that WOMP 1 was not content with critique and diagnosis, but did produce visions of
preferred worlds and transition scenarios for the passage from here to there. The fact that
none of these visions were realized within the allotted time span is not fatal to the
enterprise, but it dramatizes the need for taking stock of the past effort. And it raises an
important issue: should a hypothetical WOMP 2 put more stress on what is attainable, or
should it accept its role as cartographers of the highly unlikely in the domain of ‘future
worlds.’ If we are unable to provide answers to these questions and concerns, we should
be prepared to agree that ‘the second coming of WOMP’ is unable to do more than provide a congenial venue for nostalgia. Arguing somewhat against myself as to our capacities for self-appraisal, I am reminded of W.H. Auden’s plea: “We who are about to die demand a miracle.”

Perhaps, this way of posing the problem of reviving WOMP is too stark. Perhaps, instead, we need envisage something far less ambitious than the initial project with its working groups throughout the world and its periodic meetings of research directors in different national settings. Perhaps, what could be undertaken is as modest as a single edited volume that invites contributions from a likeminded group constituted by those gathered here augmented by added invited contributions, conceptualized and heavily edited by post-WOMP 1 public intellectuals and scholars; without the infusion of ‘new blood’ the second coming would likely be an embarrassing rendering of ‘WOMP redux’! Perhaps, our gathering will not be able to find a path to the future, even a modest one, and if this is so, we should have the integrity to acknowledge that we also are victims of this pacifying mood of despair.

What WOMP Missed

Perhaps, it is covering up failure, but the magnitude of what WOMP missed in terms of developments and new challenges is in a perverse way provides a source of hope. By realizing the limited capabilities of projecting the future, it suggests that certain ‘impossibilities’ are realizable, and that normative commitments should not be put aside merely on the ground of infeasibility. To put this assertion methodologically, and epistemologically, the ‘impossible’ happens for better and worse. For better, the end of the Cold War, the liberation of East Europe and minorities peoples within the Soviet Union, the peaceful transition of South Africa to a multiracial constitutional democracy whose first president was Nelson Mandela, the election of an African American as president of the United States were each an impossible goal except in retrospect.

For worse, the resilience of a state-centric world order (despite its post-Westphalian features) and of the neoliberal capitalist ideology and practice (despite its 1998 ‘crash’ and normative failings) are dispiriting realizations as of 2011. Beyond this, the unanticipated emergence of the multidimensional climate change challenge to the future of human wellbeing combined with the exceedingly weak institutional and psychopolitical capabilities for collective problem-solving whenever major private sector economic interests are at stake. Most dispiriting of all, was the interaction between the mega-terrorism of the 9/11 attacks and hyper-militarism of the American-led response, spreading warfare without relying on soft power instruments (law, intelligence, addressing legitimate grievances). Of course, the American neoconservative leadership in 2001 used the attacks to launch a grand strategy designed to solidify the global and Middle Eastern ambitions that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Disappointment followed from the earlier world order achievements as measured by several instances of benevolent problem-solving: public order of the oceans; suspended sovereignty and mining claims relating to Antarctica; responding to ozone depletion.
These success stories resulted from fairly enlightened hegemonic leadership by the United States, relatively small economic interests at stake (except in relation to the law of the seas), creative bargaining of competing interests and varying national priorities (for instance, freedom of navigation for naval vessels versus enlarged coastal claims to living and non-living resources). Significantly, these agreements were achieved in the Cold War atmosphere of acute geopolitical tensions, which have not led to comparable results in the subsequent Era of Globalization.

Why? The collapse of American global leadership due to the internal rise of ultra-nationalist forces, especially after the 9/11 attacks, combined with foreign policy failures and a major economic recession that has produced an anti-internationalist public mood. Beyond this, the unevenness of circumstances among states, and their differing views on the distribution of responsibilities, makes reaching lawmaking agreements much more difficult, especially, if the scale of economic obligations is large as is the case in the climate change negotiations. The reaction of global civil society, favoring building global democracy from below, does not seem responsive to the gravity of the dangers posed and harms being caused by global warming.

Comments on the Two Phases of WOMP 1

The guiding idea of WOMP I was to encourage principal authors to set forth in a detailed manner their preferred worlds for the 1990s, together with according attention to the transition problem. An impressive scholarly output resulted in the late 1970s. The overall impression was one of diversity, reflecting civilizational identity and differing relationships with the hegemonic order, an overall lack of consensus as to the nature of a preferred world except for a negative consensus exhibiting hostility to world government or world federalism. Such a negative consensus created an abiding tension in WOMP 1 as it was a disavowal of the views of the principal organizer and convenor of the project who remained committed to institutional centralization as the necessary and attainable basis of an acceptable world order.

A later attempt was made in WOMP 1 to have the original participants plus several prominent newcomers cooperate on producing a consensus model of a preferred world for 2010, or thereabouts. In this second phase of WOMP the undertaking was named ‘The Global Civilization: Challenges for Democracy, Sovereignty and Security.’ This phase did not yield any genuine agreed product, although there were several workshops and some publications, but of a character that exhibited mainly the views of the author. The continuing work of WOMP was best reflected in the pages of its magazine, Alternatives, which tended to express the disunity of opinion among public intellectuals about how to promote a just world order, as measured by priorities and horizons of opportunity. There did remain a semblance of coherence due to an implicit sharing of values: minimizing violence, enhancing economic wellbeing, human rights, ecological sustainability, and political identity. And with the notable exception of Mendlovitz, shared skepticism about world government as neither necessary nor desirable, and certainly not attainable except possible in an imperial form. Despite this, it was
Mendlovitz’s entrepreneurial energies, managerial enthusiasm, and leadership talents that kept the project alive so long.

What Now?

My own view is that this could be a kairos moment for a new version of WOMP. There is a far greater recognition than in the 1980s that the range of world order challenges is overwhelming the capabilities of the current hybrid world order that combines Westphalian and post-Westphalian features with bewildering complexity. This sense of frustration reflects several developments since 1990s: the lost opportunities for nuclear disarmament and a stronger UN after the collapse of the Soviet Union; the rise of non-state actors; trends toward economic, informational, and normative globalization; the lack of policy response to the scientific consensus on climate change; UN gridlock re reform or responding to humanitarian catastrophe (e.g. Gaza); interest in and support for democratizing world order, including transparency and accountability for state actors and greater participatory rights for non-state representation (e.g. global peoples parliament).

Yet stating this historical case is far from presupposing that the human commitment and resources are present to attempt such a Promethean task. I have my doubts given the immensity of the challenge, but welcome being surprised by plausible expressions of enthusiasm and engagement. We can only wait and see what our discussions yields during these days.

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iii My own early attempt to interpret this interaction is to be found in Richard Falk, The Great Terror War (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2003); for a somewhat later reassessment see Falk, The Iraq War: The UN, International Law, and World Order After Iraq (New York: Routledge, 2007).

iv This geopolitical sleight of hand, combined with the large gaps in the official version, has fueled suspicions that 9/11 was either allowed to happen or an inside job. For the most persuasive assessments along these lines see David Ray Griffin, The New Pearl Harbor (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, updated ed., 2008); see also his alarming critique of the efforts to discredit a prominent Obama appointee's proposal to infiltrate and discredit the criticism of the 9/11 official story: Griffin, Cognitive Infiltration: An Obama Appointee's Plan to Undermine the

v For different interpretations see Sheldon Wolin, Democracy Inc., Managed Democracy and the Spector of Inverted Totalitarianism (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); and Peter Beinert, The Icarus Syndrome

vi Principal books by Kothari, Lagos & Godoy, Mazrui, Galtung, and Falk, as well as edited volume by Mendlovitz with wider representation.