Towards an Atlantic World Order: Fundamental Transformation and Learning Processes in the Long Twentieth Century

https://www.e-ir.info/2023/08/11/towards-an-atlantic-world-order-fundamental-transformation-and-learning-processes-in-the-long-20th-century/

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The New Atlantic Order (2022) challenges hitherto dominant narratives of how the international system, and politics, changed in the twentieth century. Both realists and neo-realists have argued that the modern international system has been determined by essentially cyclical power struggles between great powers and a changing global "balance of power", which eventually culminated in the nuclear "balance of mutually assured destruction" between the American and Soviet "super empires" during the Cold War (Morgenthau, 1948; Aron, 2004; Mearsheimer, 2001; Gaddis, 2006). The global Cold War also came to be viewed as the pivot of a "short" twentieth century that Hobsbawm called an "age of extremes" (Hobsbawm, 1994; Westad, 2018). By contrast, important liberal, English School, and constructivist contributions have highlighted the growth of a modern international society, which expanded towards a world community, developing new norms and practices amidst an ever higher degree of transnational interconnection and interdependence (Iriye, 2014; Bull and Watson, 1984; Ikenberry, 2011; Wendt, 1999; Porter, 2020; McKeil, 2023).

The New Atlantic Order seeks to substantiate a different, more comprehensive interpretation. It illuminates more profound and essentially *dialectic* transformation processes, alongside processes of individual and collective learning and reorientation, on a fundamentally changing, and overall globalising, playing-field of international politics. To this end, it introduces a novel conceptual framework designed to go beyond previous interpretative strictures and conventional periodisation: the framework of the transformative "long" twentieth century, which dawned at the world-historical watershed of the 1860s and most likely ended with the disintegration – or perhaps renewal – of its eventually largely rule-based world order in the "turning-point year" 2022. This novel approach can cast fresh light not only on the wider origins of the long twentieth century's two world wars, and the Cold War, but also on how, and why, the global order actually came to be remade before, during and after these wars – and under radically changing geopolitical and geo-economic conditions. At the core, however, my work interprets the remarkable reordering efforts of the Paris Peace Conference and of the unjustly neglected 1920s in a new way. It explains why they could only become a limited and ultimately unsustainable first bid to build a modern Atlantic *and* global order for the long twentieth century (Cohrs, 2022, pp. 1-8, 16-40).

Formative Transformation and Learning Processes of the Long Twentieth Century

As my analysis shows, at the dawn of the long twentieth century a new global constellation emerged after the overall peace-enforcing superstructure of the nineteenth century's European and global order, the Vienna system of 1815, disintegrated in the wake of the Crimean War. From the 1860s, a fundamentally different and conflict-prone international system emerged, the "(dis)order" of high imperialism. It was now that the modern, increasingly industrialised and imperialist states were formed, or consolidated, that eventually fought each other in the Great War: the reconfigured European pentarchy of imperial powers, including the Bismarck *Reich*, a modernised Meiji Japan and a rising American world power whose inner union had been salvaged by Lincoln in 1865. Against the backdrop of the first genuine globalisation, not just of capitalism but also of European-style power politics, these states and

societies came to engage in an unprecedentedly dynamic, all-embracing and essentially *unlimited* competition that would affect the entire world and subjugate most of it to imperialist domination. This competition soon became inseparable from a *realpolitical* contest within Europe with ever higher stakes. And it was driven not only by rivalling nationalist and imperialist ideologies but also by civilisational Darwinist notions of a "struggle for the survival of the fittest world power". Crucially, the interconnected struggle that thus ensued made an eventual general war not inevitable but ever harder to avoid.

Though notable countervailing forces emerged as well – above all the Socialist International and progressive liberal internationalists who sought to civilise power politics by strengthening international law, notably through the Hague conventions of 1899 and 1907 – they could never wield decisive influence. Yet the main decision-makers of this critical period did not "sleepwalk" into the abyss either. What rather proved decisive were fundamental *systemic* changes. The peace-enforcing European concert of the Vienna era gave way to an inherently conflict-prone balance-of-power system and intensifying polarisation processes between what, at the end, hardened into two rigid alliance blocs. Finally, when the July crisis escalated in 1914 Sir Edward Grey and the other decisive political actors no longer had either an effective conflict-resolution mechanism to prevent an all-out war or indeed the mind-sets and political room to manoeuvre to do what was necessary to salvage peace (Cohrs, 2022, pp. 41-168; cf. Clark, 2012).

What the ever more total and essentially catalytic Great War set in motion was not a linear but rather a dialectical process that spanned more than five decades – and that my work elucidates for the first time. It was a process of trial and error, *and of successive longer-term* learning, in response to two global wars and one massive world economic crisis in-between. And it was through this process that the international system was fundamentally remade, not just with a view to the distribution of power and influence but also, on a deeper level, in terms of the governing rules, norms, principles and practices of international politics. Ultimately, it would thus be possible to construct a more durable global order (Cohrs, 2022, pp. 4-8, 34-7).

In my interpretation, the system that finally superseded the "disorder" of globalising imperialism was at the core a novel *Pax Atlantica*, an unprecedented Atlantic order of peace, security and development that, in a global perspective, also formed the *constitutive nucleus* of a new, rule-based world order for the long twentieth century, which first took shape in the fledgling United Nations system and the institutions of Bretton Woods. Based on a more comprehensive cooperation between the new American hegemon and the states of Western Europe, including Western Germany, this novel system of order was created on two core pillars, the European Recovery Program and the North Atlantic Alliance. This was done under the pressures of the escalating Cold War yet essentially on deeper foundations that reached back at least to 1919. What developed grew into a veritable Atlantic community, a system of collective security, peaceful conflict resolution, democratic government, human rights and social democratically restrained liberal capitalism and development. It was strengthened further by countless transnational networks and provided vital conditions for the novel process of West European integration. Though often challenged and despite instances of overreach and violations of its norms, this peace system gained an impressive degree of stability and legitimacy. After 1989, this opened up unprecedented prospects for building on such advances – not just to extend them to Eastern Europe but to work towards a more comprehensive and legitimate *global* order (Cohrs, 2022, pp. 4-8, 999-1005).

The Crucible of the First World War and the Fundamental Challenges of Modern Peacemaking

Essentially, *The New Atlantic Order* argues that the efforts to rebuild peace after the First World War only marked a very problematic starting-point of this broader and indeed epochal transformation process. But it also shows why they should indeed be reinterpreted as an unprecedented endeavour – the endeavour to construct a new *Atlantic* world order. The premise of my analysis is that the Great War was not the "original catastrophe" of the "short" twentieth century (Kennan, 1979, pp. 3-4; Hobsbawm, 1994, pp. 1-17). Rather, it should be understood as the crucible of the long twentieth century, both in a transatlantic and in a global perspective. What made more comprehensive pursuits of peace and order in its aftermath both so eminently necessary and daunting can only be fully grasped by recognising not merely the unparalleled global challenges the war itself created but also the deeper, longer-term challenges left behind by the globalising imperialist competition of the pre-war decades. These the peacemakers now all had to confront simultaneously. The Great War precipitated not only the collapse of the Wilhelmine, Habsburg,

Czarist and Ottoman empires but also, more fundamentally, the demise of the entire European state-system and global "order" of the era of high imperialism. At the same time, it thrust the United States into a novel global role for which it was hardly prepared – the role of not only the world's newly pre-eminent economic and creditor power but also as the world's decisive political power. And it marked a watershed in a much wider *global* struggle between the interests of the remaining imperial powers, especially Britain and France, and the "self-determination" claims of anti-imperial nationalists in the "colonised world" (Cohrs, 2022, pp. 16-8, 171-88, 299-348).

Yet the First World War had also led to an unprecedentedly fierce political and ideological "war within the war", which also chiefly became a transatlantic contest not only about the meaning of the war itself but also about the shape of the international order that was to emerge in its aftermath. This spurred a deeply polarising "ideologisation" and moralisation of international politics. First, western "ideas of 1776 and 1789" collided with the German "ideas of 1914". Then, from 1917, the struggle intensified when Wilson's aspirations for a "peace to end all wars" and a new League of self-governing nations came to clash not only with the war aims of the main European belligerents but also with Lenin's call for a Bolshevik world revolution and new order of Soviet republics. This fomented massive, indeed exaggerated *and conflicting* expectations about the kind of peace that had to be made to justify the enormous sacrifices of the war and even to banish war for good. By the time the armistice was concluded in November 1918, a massive moral and ideological conflict was still raging between the western victors and the vanquished, especially Germany, not only over who was responsible for the catastrophe but also over what now constituted a "just peace" (Cohrs, 2022, pp. 189-266).

Against this background, the most critical task was *neither* to create a radical "new world order" anchored in a League of Nations with far-reaching authority *nor*, as has often been claimed, to establish a new, viable global balance of power, above all by imposing and then enforcing restrictive terms on the defeated powers (*New Republic*, 1919; Keylor, 2011; Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 42-51). Either of these aspirations was in fact as elusive as it was counterproductive. Nor, however, was making economic and financial peace the preeminent task, however vital this undoubtedly was (Keynes, 1919; Tooze, 2014, pp. 8-16). Rather, the only realistic path towards a more sustainable postwar order could be opened up *politically* – by embarking on an *inclusive*, as far as possible *balanced*, negotiating and reordering process. For only such a process could lay the groundwork for what was most vital: a reformed, essentially *integrative* peace order, negotiated on terms that could be regarded as *legitimate* by all the relevant actors, not just the victors. Only through such a process interests and expectations could as far as possible be *accommodated*. In systemic terms, what had to be achieved above all, and could only be approached this way, was the construction of a novel Atlantic concert of democratic states at the core of the new global system, and at the heart of the novel institution of the League. To be effective, this concert had to include not only the United States, Britain and France but also the fledgling Weimar Republic. And it could eventually be extended to include Japan and other key powers as well, while the future of the Bolshevik regime was still unpredictable at this stage (Cohrs, 2022, pp. 18–22, 322–33).

The First – and Frustrated – Bid to Build an Atlantic World Order for the Long Twentieth Century

A truly comprehensive analysis, as I have sought to offer, can bring out that what shaped the negotiations in Paris was the arduous struggle to found a new order that could no longer be Eurocentric and could not yet be truly global but essentially had to be built around an unprecedented Atlantic nucleus. Advances to this end depended above all on far-sighted engagement of the old British and the new, untested American hegemonic power. Those who endeavoured to remake the international order after 1918 had to act not only under very unsettled conditions but also on a profoundly altered playing-field of international politics. It was characterised by an unprecedentedly intense interplay of international, transnational and domestic forces. And it featured an unparalleled multiplicity and diversity of actors who tried to influence the proceedings and pursued competing agendas, from the representatives of the victorious great powers to those representing smaller states, various national causes and non-governmental pressure-groups. Yet delegates of the vanquished powers remained excluded, as was Lenin's regime. Nonetheless, what unfolded at the Paris Peace Conference indeed became the most complex peacemaking process in history, with worldwide repercussions (Cohrs, 2022, pp. 571–88).

Despite or rather because of these daunting conditions, the main parameters and outcomes of the Paris negotiations

were largely determined by the leading decision-makers of the principal victors, and their key advisers. What unfolded thus became a strikingly hierarchical process, which the victors clearly dominated. At the core, it was shaped by the struggle to reconcile three distinctive visions of postwar order, which were global in some ways but essentially *transatlantic*: Wilson's pursuit of a progressive new Atlantic order framed by the superstructure of the League; Lloyd George's endeavours to forge a new Atlantic concert that also safeguarded Britain's imperial world system; and Clemenceau's ambition to conclude a new Atlantic alliance whose core purpose was to contain Germany. This struggle became even more arduous because the "Big Three" were democratically accountable and had to gain support for their decisions in their respective, very unsettled domestic-political force-fields. The protagonists of 1919 thus had to embark on difficult learning processes. They had to find ways to negotiate terms and rules for new international architecture *and* a complex modern *compromise peace* that each could then also legitimise domestically (Cohrs, 2022, pp. 588–95).

A Fraught "Beginning of a Beginning": The Outcomes of 1919 and Their Consequences for the Long Twentieth Century

The peacemaking processes following the Great War undoubtedly reshaped the global system. At the same time, they had both massive and ambivalent effects on regional spheres of order outside Europe and North America. They affected East Asia, as illustrated most vividly by Wilson's *realpolitical* deal with the Japanese delegation, which granted Japan authority over the Shandong province and left China's aspirations to regain sovereignty frustrated and its future very uncertain. The most dramatic repercussions were felt in the Middle East, where violent reordering processes after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire were only, preliminarily, terminated through the Lausanne agreement of 1923. But the post-First World War era did not see the dawn of a new *world* order. In a global perspective, it was a critical juncture at which wider expectations to overcome imperial domination and globalise self-determination, which especially Wilson's rhetoric had raised, collided with the still prevalent power and the vested interests of those, particularly in Britain and France, who even sought to expand imperial prerogatives. Essential imperialist structures of influence and power were not fundamentally recast. No new principles and norms of *universal* validity were established. Key hierarchical gradations and double standards were maintained, especially when it came to self-determination. This notably manifested itself in the League's neo-imperial mandate system. But Paris nonetheless reset the stage for the longer and violent process that would eventually erode the legitimacy of formal and informal imperialism and culminate in the decolonisation struggles after 1945 (see Cohrs, 2022, pp. 317-22, 573-76; Manela, 2007; Pedersen, 2015; Leonhard, 2018; Getachew, 2020).

Yet in 1919 the most significant, even potentially transformative changes clearly occurred in the newly vital Euro-Atlantic sphere – and core European and transatlantic questions clearly dominated the conference agenda in Paris. Because the victors' approaches to peace and order remained irreconcilable in crucial respects, because their legitimation requirements remained so disparate, and because the challenges they faced were so immensely vast, they could only manage to strike very *tenuous* compromises on the most fundamental issues. This held true for the key question of postwar security – where only a tenuous architecture of specific Anglo-American guarantees and League-based collective security could be hammered out. It also held true for the interdependent problems of reparations and Europe's reconstruction. And it held true for the massive task of reorganising Eastern Europe after the collapse of the eastern empires. Especially here it is essential to recognise that the western powers' ordering capacities reached distinct limits. In view of Eastern Europe's complex ethnic intermixtures, clashing national claims for the same territory and the victors' conflicting strategic priorities, creating a *stable* new East European configuration of states on the basis of the self-determination principle was clearly impossible. No less elusive was the prospect of finding a genuine *modus vivendi* with the Bolshevik regime in the midst of an on-going Russian civil war. Where the peacemakers have a decisive influence – in addressing the structurally most unsettling problem of the Polish-German border – they still could not avoid creating a structural antagonism over borders and minorities between a still powerful Germany and an unavoidably fragile new Polish state (Cohrs, 2022, pp. 650-716, 788-808, 717-64, 765-87).

Most consequential, however, was the victors' mishandling of the crucial German question. The principal defeated power was not radically punished or diminished, but it was not accommodated either and instead initially ostracised from the new order – and put on probation. On a deeper level, all victors shared, and maintained, certain core

hierarchical assumptions, especially the assumption that those leading the most civilised powers had the "right" to impose a "stern but just" peace on the vanquished. What mattered even more, though, was that the protagonists of Paris could never really agree on the essential underpinnings and ground-rules on which the new Atlantic order was to be based. In its combined effect this had one crucial consequence: it ruled out actual negotiations with the representatives of the vanquished and thus any advances towards a qualitatively different and potentially more legitimate *peace of accommodation*. Such advances would have been extremely hard to make in the constellation of 1919, but not impossible. In the end, a victors' peace was concluded instead, and imposed in a humiliating manner (Cohrs, 2022, pp. 650-716, 809-77). The wider consequences of this tragic denouement reverberated far into the long twentieth century.

The fledgling Atlantic order that gained contours in Paris was not just established on shaky foundations. It was also founded as a markedly *unfinished* system of the victors that lacked legitimacy in the eyes of the vanquished, and the Bolsheviks, and all those whose demands for self-determination had been rebuffed. It had proved impossible to create a new, more viable Atlantic concert of democratic states that provided more effective safeguards of peace by drawing in the fledgling German republic and binding it to *mutual* guarantees and commitments. The League came into being, not as an *inclusive* and truly *global* organisation but as an *exclusive* victors' institution. Thus, there were no effective mechanisms or ground-rules for initiating what would hence be most imperative: broader accommodation processes that could turn the truncated "Versailles system" into a more durable and legitimate Atlantic world order, which also included Weimar Germany, the other defeated powers and, eventually, the Soviet Union and all others who had remained excluded in 1919. In sum, the peacemaking efforts after the Great War did not yield the best possible compromise under adverse circumstances (Steiner, 2005, pp. 15-6, 68-70). Rather, the contested victors' peace of Paris could only mark a deeply fraught "beginning of a beginning" of attempts to forge a viable Atlantic peace order for the long twentieth century (Cohrs, 2022, pp. 878–99).

It is important to stress, however, that the outcomes of 1919 did not invariably lead to the rise of Hitler, the destruction of international order in the 1930s and ultimately another world war. And it is as important to emphasise that the 1920s actually became, not a "decade of illusions" but rather a remarkable period of progress and learning in the history of transatlantic and global politics. It was a period in which those who succeeded the peacemakers of Paris managed to draw consequences from their shortcomings and advance significant, overall stabilising reforms of the Versailles system, which mainly found expression in the 1922 Washington Conference's agreements on naval arms control and a more forward-looking East Asian *status quo* and, above all, the Locarno security pact of 1925, which fostered a reconfigured Euro-Atlantic concert that finally included Weimar Germany (Cohrs, 2022, pp. 993–8; 2006).

Alas, these advances could not be made sufficiently robust to withstand the shockwaves of the World Economic Crisis. But, as *The New Atlantic Order* seeks to elucidate, what had been tried, and failed, in the post-First World War era is indeed enduringly relevant. In a *longue durée* perspective, it initiated a much longer, and seminal, process of reordering, and learning, in the second half of the long twentieth century. It not only prefigured but also provided decisive lessons for the endeavours of those who would seek to remake Atlantic and world order after the Second World War, and after the Cold War. And it allowed them to make significantly more, indeed transformative progress in this direction – progress that at the end of the long twentieth century is once again in existential jeopardy.

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