CRISIS AND CATASTROPHE AS MIDWIVES OF GLOBAL TRANSFORMATION

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"A crisis is a terrible thing to waste."

Thomas L. Friedman, quoting Paul Romer, NY *Times*, April 18, 2004

We have had more than half a century to get it right. In 1945, at the end of what appeared to be the greatest catastrophe in history–the Second World War–humankind enjoyed an unprecedented opportunity to build a stable, just, and integrated world order. It did not. The catastrophe, however great it appeared at the time, was not great enough. Too much had survived intact. For the most part, we went back to business as usual. The globalization of corporate capital and modern technology, a process already well under way in earlier centuries, accelerated; and every nation continued to pursue its vividly imagined vital interests. The well-deserved outcome has been the further multiplication of human misery, runaway environmental ruin, and relentless unmanageable conflict among cultures and peoples presaging the possible collapse of civilization.

The catastrophe of the Second World War was, so to speak, wasted. Will we waste the still greater catastrophe now on its way? Is it conceivable that the best hope for humankind is a global crisis so all-pervasive and threatening that the handwriting on the wall blazes too brightly for anyone to ignore? Failing that, is our next best hope something still vaster, an apocalyptic crash of the present-day world-system that will enable its enlightened and chastened survivors to build anew on stronger foundations? Is it only in times of immense peril and even loss that human beings are willing to jettison old ways and old values?

In what may be called the "new-world-order community"–liberal and progressive supporters of global democracy and a world rule of law–the universal answer to such questions is an unqualified negative. They read the record of events since 1945 quite differently. They point to the apparent emergence of a planet-wide consensus on the necessity of parliamentary democracy, the modest but persistent good offices of the United Nations, and the system of international courts and tribunals flourishing under its wing as encouraging evidence that comity slowly but inexorably replaces discord in the affairs of men and women. By working tirelessly along the same lines, we may some day create the "stable, just, and integrated world order" that could–and should–have been constructed in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Virtually identical visions of a future felicity occupied many liberal and progressive minds ten years after the inauguration of the League of Nations, just before it proved its futility in Manchuria, and soon everywhere else, for another hapless decade.[1]

The difference between now and then is that we enjoy the perspective of six decades, not just one. As many people have died in wars and civil wars since 1945 as died in the Second World War itself. The vaunted courts of the United Nations system have not even attempted to call to justice the authorities of the People's Republic of China who killed millions of their own

people in the early postwar era; or the rulers of imperial Israel, who ethnically cleansed most of the former British mandate of Palestine and are still aggressively colonizing what little remains; or the architects of the American-led genocide in Vietnam; or all but a few of the bloodsoaked tyrants of postwar Latin America, Africa, and Asia; or the *conquistadores* in Washington and elsewhere who have orchestrated the invasion and occupation of two large Middle Eastern republics just since 2001. The list of unpunished wrongs is almost endless, reducing the tribunal in The Hague to judge the evils of the Milosevic regime in the "former Yugoslavia," however great those evils may have been, to absurdity. One almost cheers for Milosevic, not because his lethally lunatic Serbian nationalism deserves a grain of sympathy, but because politically selective enforcement of international (or any other) law is abhorrent. Such doings mock the law they profess to defend.

But never mind the manifest hypocrisy of having one alleged murderer tried and/or convicted by the official representatives of many others. Call it the Nuremberg Principle, when the kettle that obliterated innumerable cities, with millions of innocent civilian casualties, and massacred thousands of Poles in the Katyn Forest, called the Nazi pot black. The fact remains that there is nothing like a world rule of law, nothing like global democracy, and nothing like peace, justice, and stability in the international jungle of competing tribes, creeds, and corporate tigers.

All the same, the new-world-order community shrinks from endorsing the belief that reason will not prevail, that catastrophe is more or less inevitable, that we are all collectively whistling in the deep and impenetrable dark. David Held, for example, a distinguished theorist of "cosmopolitan democracy," closes a recent essay with the admission that there are "many reasons for pessimism. ... Advocacy of cosmopolitanism may appear like an attempt to defy gravity or walk on water!" But so might the treatises of Jean Bodin and Thomas Hobbes arguing the case for the sovereign modern state have appeared to observers in the 16th and 17th Centuries. Yet within 200 years the sovereign modern state "became the dominant form of political organization, in Europe and later elsewhere." Given the impetus already provided by the globalization process, the vision of a cosmopolitan democratic polity is even "less utopian" than theirs, and if theirs eventually triumphed, so can ours.[2] Held's comparison is happy, but it assumes a span of years available for transformation that we most likely do not have.

More directly responsive to the issue of catastrophe are the comments of the world-system sociologists Terry Boswell and Christopher Chase-Dunn on my scenario-novel, *A Short History of the Future*. Boswell and Chase-Dunn are also well-credentialed members of the new-world-order community, and in many ways less hopeful than Held, but my *Short History* goes too far even for them. In the novel I venture the black thought that a rational democratic world polity may not be achievable except in the aftermath of a devastating world war that destroys much of the human race. Although Boswell and Chase-Dunn do not doubt that such a war is all too possible, they argue that it would be "immoral" for activists to place any reliance on it. At most it might provide the basis for some sort of "Plan B."[3] Actually, I agree. If the price of democratic world integration is several billion corpses, this is not a price anyone should offer to pay, even assuming they had the choice. No one should linger on the sidelines waiting for catastrophe to save the day.

Nevertheless, we live in a world of mortal flesh and blood, not in the Garden of Eden (which eventually had its own problems, as I recall). We are not just a few more treaties, multinational conclaves, U.N. resolutions, or stentorian academic tomes from the Promised Land. The doomsday clock is ticking. Crisis and catastrophe are not options. They are not ours

to choose or bring about. They are coming regardless of anyone's wishes. They may be impossible to avert, but we must be seriously ready to take advantage of them, when (and if) they arrive.

What does it mean to "take advantage" of tragedy? I think most members of the new-world-order community noted above would agree, with varying emphases, on the great overriding goal of creating a planetary political system in which all peoples have an equal chance of achieving a decent standard of daily living, in which natural resources are husbanded with a wise eye to posterity, and in which force is monopolized not by rival states but by a democratically chosen global authority protective of human rights. The distribution of land, capital, power, and natural resources and the conservation of the biosphere cannot be left to fiercely competing tribes and private trusts. Indeed they are the problem, not the solution.

Of course we should not forget that the "tribes and trusts" are we ourselves, or rather the modalities in which we have happened, throughout the long course of history, to collaborate for our collective good. In the process we have forged many distinct and separate cultures and exploited or fallen victim to many rivals. It would be criminal to legislate the annihilation of these cultures or to seize the assets of these megacorporate entities, at least without democratic referenda and fair compensation.

But the creation of a sovereign planetary governance system and a network of global economic controls would only reproduce at a higher level the process by which all the tribes and trusts arose in the first place. All of them were social artifices from the start, ways of productively pooling the efforts of individual men and women. Since the emergence of *Homo sapiens* as a unique species of speaking and reasoning primates, generation upon generation of such artifices have succeeded one another, culminating today in inventions as vast as "China" or "India" or "The United States" or the "Arab World." These inventions are incomparably more complex than any community of prehistoric times, and the people whose allegiance some of them command outnumber the whole human race as of 5000 B.C.E. Each incorporates the elements of numerous now extinct or bypassed predecessors. If, in *la longue durée*, a single global culture eventually comes to supplant the separate and distinct cultures of the 21st Century, which in the order of things is well-nigh inevitable assuming that civilization itself does not implode, it will–in one sense–represent not a revolution but a reiteration of what has happened many times before.

In the near to middle future, however, the most we can hope for is a world order that conserves the languages, creeds, and institutions of the hardy survivors of past cultural competition and protects freedom of enterprise subject to the demands of elementary social justice. The tribes will not disappear and the trusts will not be summarily confiscated. They will simply find themselves under the shield and the governance of a higher authority representing humankind.

The question remains–are we justified in hoping for a new world order at all? No one can be sure. Anticipation is not prediction. But as I read the omens, the transition to global democratic governance almost certainly cannot and will not occur as the result of negotiation and compromise. There is not one regime on Earth in the first decade of the new millennium that would yield (and none earlier that would have yielded) its sovereignty to "a higher authority representing humankind." Today there is not one mass electorate, no matter how well educated or free, that would vote for such a transfer. There is not one multinational corporation, no matter how global its business, that would lobby for it in legislative assemblies. As Immanuel Wallerstein has persuasively argued, the capitalist world-system of our time could not have

arisen or flourished except in an arena of rival city- and nation-states.[4] It needs such an arena even now. The only powerful planet-wide movement that ever advocated anything like global democratic governance, the quasi-Marxist "Communism" of the post-1919 era, collapsed in disgrace as the result of the sordid complicity of most of its leaders and fellow-travelers with Soviet (or Chinese) nationalist autocracy. Marxism itself, in various transmogrifications, survives, but the attempts to translate it from paper to reality have thus far all foundered.

In the face of such baleful prospects it may be instructive to review the history of crisis and catastrophe in human affairs. This history may not be inspiring, but it edifies nonetheless. Indeed a goodly fraction of the most decisive innovations in the sociocultural and political life of our species has resulted from response to calamitous breakdown or gravely threatened breakdown of existing sociocultural and political orders. What qualifies as "calamitous" cannot be measured by statisticians. It is not a matter of how many people die or how much property is laid in ruins, but of how viscerally the prevailing order of culture, society, and governance is attacked and invalidated. More or less total annulment (or impending annulment) of that prevailing order prompts, in some instances, creative response. In other instances, the survivors are too weak or too few, and no meaningful response is possible.

Almost all the great civilizations and empires of pre-modern times, for example, were in large measure the product of catastrophic wars of invasion and conquest bringing millions of people together under a common sway in which wealth could be accumulated and the arts of peace could be pursued by a leisured elite. There would have been no Ch'in and Han China, no Maurya and Gupta India, no Persia of Cyrus the Great, no Rome of the Caesars, and no Mexico of the Moctezumas without catastrophe, both for earlier ways of life and for all the innumerable victims of their legions. The astounding collapse of Rome in the 5th Century C.E. provided the political space in which three great civilizations could germinate and thrive: medieval Western Christendom, Byzantine Christendom, and the largely Arabic *dar al-Islam*, dividing among them its whole patrimony. The decay of Byzantium in turn helped make possible the rise of the Ottoman Empire and centuries of Turkish civilization and rule in the Balkans, the Middle East, and North Africa. The division of medieval India into many separate kingdoms after the fall of the Gupta dynasty in the 6th Century C.E. explains, in part, why invading Muslims were able to establish, first, the Delhi Sultanate in the late 12th Century C.E. and, later, the Mogul Empire in the early 16th, creating a unique Indo-Islamic culture that thrived for more than 300 years.

Some of the world's leading pre-modern religious faiths also owe their dissemination and maturation to catastrophe. Biblical and Talmudic Judaism, as it has come down to us, is unthinkable without the stimuli of the Hebrew invasion of Canaan, the Babylonian Captivity, the occupation of Palestine by Rome, the disastrous rebellions against Roman power, and the Diaspora that followed the Roman defeat of Simon Bar Cochba in 135 C.E. Endlessly repeated persecution and flight have tempered and shaped the religion of the Jews down to the present day, and no people so modest in numbers has contributed so vitally to the civilization of the West or the Middle East.

Nor would the lineal descendant of Judaism, Christianity, have arisen but for the Roman tyranny in Palestine and have diffused so widely without the existence and then the downfall of the Roman Empire. Islam is yet another lineal descendant of Judaism and thereby the heir of all its ancient tragedies. The spread of Indian-born Buddhism beyond India began in good measure with the strenuous missionary efforts of the great Maurya emperor Asoka. But Asoka was the grandson of Chandragupta Maurya, who had unified most of India by the sword in the wake of the collapse of the empire of Alexander the Great of Macedon, an empire that had included

northwestern India. Asoka's conversion to Buddhism prefaced the conversion of hundreds of millions of Ceylonese, Burmese, Thais, Indochinese, Tibetans, Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese to this remarkable faith, usually by peaceful means. Yet much of it began with Asoka, and he was, at least in his decisive early years on the throne, no man of peace, nor the grandson of one.

In the New World of the Americas, catastrophe yielded yet another outcome: the extermination or subordination of hundreds of indigenous Amerindian cultures at the hands of Western European invaders between the 16th and 19th Centuries. This is not the narrative preferred by most North American historians or by scholars respectful of the Luso-Hispanic heritage, but from the Amerindian perspective, whether Iroquois, Sioux, Aztec, Mayan, Incan, or some other, it is indisputable. Partly through the witting or unwitting transmission of disease, partly through deliberate ethnic cleansing, inhumanly coerced labor, and massacre, the invaders and colonists from Spain, Portugal, Holland, England, and France bear responsibility for a holocaust with far more victims than the genocide instigated by Adolf Hitler in the 1940s. 95% of the vast indigenous population of the Luso-Hispanic New World died prematurely in the first 100 years after European conquest. In the vast but less densely populated lands of what later became the United States and Canada, the percentage of deaths was comparable, and few indigenous cultures survived intact.[5]

To replace or supplement the indigenous work force, the European invaders and colonists also imported tens of millions of Africans to toil as slaves on their plantations and in their mines, which led to a second holocaust. Many Africans died crossing the Atlantic, and many more died of brutality and overwork. Especially in the Latin half of the New World, those who survived were often given no chance to sire or bear children, a foreclosure of life no less criminal than the suffering visited on their prospective parents.

But *Homo sapiens* is a hardy and resilient species. The incomparable catastrophe of European invasion since 1492, at least from the Amerindian and African perspective, has given us the complex Afro-Indo-Hispanic and Afro-Indo-Portuguese cultures of present-day Latin America, quite different to be sure from anything that existed before 1492, and from anything that Europeans alone could have generated, but not without their own special vitality and richness. And the surviving Amerindians of the United States and Canada have carved out a modest place for themselves in the life of these republics, as have the millions of descendants of African slaves. It was a catastrophe all around, for Amerindians and for Africans alike, but not without positive outcomes, even if they arrived at much too high a price–as they surely did.

In more recent times catastrophe has not been idle. The crisis that ensued from the English Civil War of the 1640s and its sequels later in the 17th Century laid the foundations of modern parliamentary democracy, not only in England but–in hindsight–worldwide. The American and French Revolutions supplied the model of the modern secular democratic republic, which is (or eventually will be) essential in a culturally pluralistic world of educated citizens. It took the catastrophe of the Napoleonic wars to give us the Concert of Nations of the1820s, a deeply flawed, short-lived, but instructive precedent for international collaboration in the interests of peace. It took the catastrophe of the Civil War between the Federal and Confederate states of the American republic to grant citizenship and freedom to its African population.

In the 20th Century the catastrophe of the First World War made the Soviet experiment possible, a catastrophe by many standards, and yet not without its blessings, such as the destruction of Russian feudalism, the opening of unprecedented opportunities for both urban and

rural masses, and the forced-march industrialization that enabled the Red Army to crush the Nazi Third Reich, in its own right yet another offspring of catastrophe. Without the heroic efforts of that army, which absorbed the full brunt of Hitler's formidable military machine, the conflict would probably have ended at best in a draw and at worst in a racist nightmare setting Western civilization back by many centuries.[6]

The Second World War, despite its horrors, failed to generate the just new world order it might have done, in good part because the United States remained intact and emerged much stronger than ever, but it did accelerate the liberation of Asia and Africa from European rule, it did help to unify Western Europe for the first time since Charlemagne, and it gave us the United Nations and its Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which might imaginably have made and could still make a significant difference. The Great Depression and World War II also vastly extended and consolidated the welfare state in at least the Western world, lifting millions of working people from near-destitution to something approaching dignity, security, and–dare I say?–comfort. By following in the footsteps of the West, much of East Asia has now undergone a comparable transformation. I do not ignore or scoff at such gains. No one can understand the politics of the postwar world and the apparent conservatism of electorates without taking such gains into serious account, although they cannot be expected to continue indefinitely and are already showing signs of erosion.

All the same, to return to our original premise, the contemporary capitalist world-system is probably scheduled for self-destruction in the balance of this century. Its very power and its very successes virtually ensure its downfall.

At the heart of the problem is a tangle of contradictions: economic, ecological, political, and cultural. In each instance, the system is fighting itself. As progressive economists have pointed out for centuries, beginning perhaps with the Swiss scholar J.C.L.S. de Sismondi in his *Nouveaux Principes d'économie politique* (1819), its engine is profit, which requires the minimization of labor costs, which constricts the purchasing power of consumers, which reduces profits. Opening new markets for goods, labor, and capital and developing new technologies that increase the efficiency of labor can temporarily raise profits and stimulate growth, but the basic contradiction keeps reasserting itself, and in any event globalization has reached its geographical limits. Moreover, the economic contradictions of capitalism are compounded by its ecological contradictions. Growth requires the consumption of more and more natural resources and the degradation of more and more of our terrestrial living space–atmosphere, hydrosphere, and lithosphere. As resources become scarcer, the cost of locating and exploiting them rises. Damage to the environment doubles and redoubles, not to mention the cost of repairing the damage (if we repair it at all) and the cost of trying to prevent further harm. Once again, technology can spring to our rescue in various ways, but technology itself is costly to develop and implement, major breakthroughs take time that we may not have, and in any event the Earth is not a storehouse of infinite riches.

Another fundamental contradiction is embedded in the political order of the modern world-system. As we have seen, it is necessarily an order of sovereign states, although their sovereignty, to follow Held, is no longer (if it ever was) absolute and unconstrained.[7] The competition of these states with one another in the absence of an overarching supreme authority gives capitalists the incentives and the space in which to globalize and profiteer at will. But these states in turn monopolize coercive force within their boundaries. They can choose to confiscate the corporate entities headquartered in their domains, as happened in the former Soviet Union, or harness them to provide the means of waging global warfare, as happened in

Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. Or states can recruit much of their leadership and upper bureaucracy from the corporate sector and follow business-friendly policies, as in the United States. But no matter what relationships exist between states and corporations, the states are major independent actors in the world-system with every reason to arm themselves, vie with one another, and, when it seems advisable, go to war. In an era of so-called weapons of mass destruction, when even non-nuclear, non-chemical, non-biological weaponry is often unimaginably deadly, the sovereignty of states, so essential to the modern world-system, gravely menaces that system and could blow it to smithereens in a matter of hours. Social scientists who think of the contemporary nation-state as largely irrelevant and of the contemporary multinational corporation as all-powerful are indulging in a dangerous fantasy.

But perhaps, when the history of the 21st Century comes to be written (if there are still historians in the 22nd), it will turn out that the most perilous contradiction of all was the cultural. Samuel P. Huntington is much reviled by progressive thinkers for his thesis about the "clash of civilizations," and Benjamin R. Barber has drawn criticism for his screed on "Jihad vs. McWorld," but these are highly significant concepts.[8] A clash of cultures (the term "civilizations" is both too grand and too oversimplifying in this context) is clearly occurring in the world of the early 21st Century, as it has been for decades past; and "Jihad" (Barber's unfortunate metaphor for militant tribalism) is clearly contending with the juggernaut of globalization. The contradiction involved here is between the market logic of capitalism, which hypothesizes an economic animal known as the "consumer," who lives only to acquire goods and services, and the values of real-world people, who are also shaped and conditioned by forces best understood by anthropologists and historians.

All too often these forces–for which the apt shorthand is "culture"–do not agree with market logic. They have evolved over centuries and millennia as ways of ensuring cooperation and consensus among people. One may gladly go unfed, unclad, unsheltered, in misery and pain, rather than offend the mores of one's tribe. Witness the willingness of Palestinians to forego jobs and bread for the sake of an end to Israeli occupation. Or the willingness of Israeli settler families to undergo all manner of hardships and mortal threats for the sake of their dream of a New Jerusalem.

Unfortunately for loyal tribalists, the planet is no longer the habitat of thousands of self-contained tribes and cults, although it was never quite that even in the most remote past. Everyone is now everyone else's neighbor, willy-nilly. But the values inherited from ancestors persist, identities persist, allegiances persist, and they make a great hash of market logic. They also threaten the sovereignty of states. Most of the wars of the post-1945 era have been civil wars, the determination of one or more tribes not to be ruled or at least oppressed by one or more other tribes within the boundaries of the same nation.

This clash of cultures is often represented as a "North-South" conflict, between "the West and the Rest," but such a characterization profoundly distorts reality, as Huntington himself would be swift to reply. Tribalism is everywhere. Ancestral faiths are everywhere. Corporate moguls might wish otherwise, but they would wish in vain. The strongest and most capitalist of present-day great powers, the United States of America, is awash in evangelical Protestant Christians, Zionists, Mormons, devout Catholics, fervent Muslims, people of color intensely conscious of their racial identities, white supremacists and vigilantes, and many other tribes. No chief executive of this republic can close a public oration without invoking the blessings of the supernatural. Europe, despite its greater proportion of rational citizens at this point in time, is not without numerous pullulating national and sub-national and creedal separatisms, above all in

that traditional tinderbox of European conflicts, the Balkans. Japan has been largely spared internal dissension in recent centuries, but only because it is ethnically homogeneous, xenophobic, and hostile to immigration. In much of the rest of the world, intertribal friction is endemic and frequently fatal.

One may downplay the significance of cultural conflict by arguing that it is intrinsically local and easily localized, but this is not always, and may not always be, the case. Given a systemic breakdown of the world-economy and a corresponding loosening of the authority of sovereign state establishments, we can readily imagine an explosion of long-seething intertribal disputes in many parts of the world all at the same time, with cascading and catastrophic results; or the formation of close links among warrior configurations, such as a military alliance of Islamic fundamentalists of many nations, that would paralyze and ultimately disaggregate the world-system.

Forecasting the exact sequence of events that will bring down the modern world-system, with all its multiple contradictions, is of course out of the question. Any number of crises could singly or in combination cause the world economy to crash catastrophically: a new Ice Age triggered by man-made global warming; skyrocketing grain prices prompted by the overindustrialization of China and India; near-exhaustion of oil and natural gas reserves before suitable alternative technologies are in place, leading to prohibitively high energy costs; an exceptionally fierce spin of the Kondratieff cycle producing a depression even deeper than the world-systemic slump of the 1930s; and much more. The plausible scenarios are legion. Half the planet's nations are living beyond their means, others are growing increasingly poor and desperate, and the gulf between affluence and poverty within nations, which had shown signs of narrowing in the previous century (especially in its third quarter), has once again begun to widen.

Just as ominous are the prospects for the further proliferation and use of weapons of mass destruction in wars between "developing" nations or in defense of those nations against aggression from the West. A replay of Armageddon in the Middle East or a nuclear war on the Indian subcontinent or foolhardy interventions by foreign powers in civil wars anywhere could swiftly destabilize the whole world-system, especially if it was already reeling from economic woes. Where and when the fatal flash point will be reached is unpredictable. What matters is the vulnerability of the modern world-system to its contradictions. There are too many contradictions and too few efforts on the part of its friends or its foes to counter them. And–need I add?–too few foes.

My conclusion is that people who regard themselves as progressives must take the likelihood of planetary catastrophe seriously and organize and act in its light. The time has long passed for miscellaneous segmental good deeds, for assisting this or that national liberation movement or demonstrating against this or that imperial military adventure or saving this or that rainforest or whale. The world-system is planetary and totalizing. It must be confronted on the same scale by a planetary politics of confrontation, resistance, and revolution.

Thus far no such politics has materialized. What world-systems analysts call "antisystemic movements"[9] are often not antisystemic at all, but rather efforts by underdogs to improve their standing in the global hierarchy. Campaigns for the rights of women or gays or racial minorities or for the emancipation of oppressed nationalities (e.g., Chechens, Kurds, Palestinians) do not assail the system *qua* system but rather perceived inequities in the system. Parties representing the interests of underpaid workers or landless peasants are usually asking only for a fairer slice of the national pie. Greenpeace and other environmentalist groups strive to preserve the biosphere but not necessarily to re-make the world political order. Anti-

globalization activists take commendable umbrage at the predatory shenanigans of multinational capital, but they have no coherent game plan to right its wrongs. The World Social Forum, founded in Brazil in 2001, furnishes an umbrella for thousands of liberal and progressive organizations and individuals, and speaks bravely of making "another world," but so far it is only a forum, underwritten in part by megacorporate charity. Advocates of strengthening and expanding the United Nations system rarely challenge multinational capital and have no effective institutional base or any serious chance of support from national establishments. The single unambiguously antisystemic movement of historic consequence in the 20th Century was the Comintern, founded in Moscow in 1919. But in due course the Comintern became little more than an arm of Soviet (in effect imperial Russian) foreign policy.

Of course we are not without radiant fantasies of global synthesis. The immensely popular "Star Trek" franchise, launched in the mid-1960s, has always taken as its premise a far future in which a federation of Earth, various extrasolar sister planets, and their several races battles for justice and freedom against galactic evil-doers. North Americans and Russians, Asians and Africans, and even pointy-eared aliens work together for the common good. The founder of science fiction in modern times, H.G. Wells, devoted many of his later novels to scenarios of global crisis or catastrophe ensuing in a world state, from *The World Set Free* (1914), in which the midwife was general nuclear war (Wells coined the phrase "atomic bomb" and even inspired a nuclear physicist–Leo Szilard–to persuade President Roosevelt to initiate the Manhattan Project), to *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933), in which universal conflict involving other weaponry of mass destruction pulverizes the old world-system and allows a conspiracy of visionary technical experts to construct a sane world order. Wells's imaginings typically lacked a firm commitment to the democratic principle, a defect glaring even in his non-fictional manifesto, *The Open Conspiracy: Blue Prints for a World Revolution* (1928), but no other 20th-Century writer did as much to circulate and promote the idea of a collectively rational alternative to the invertebrate world-system of his–and our–time.[10]

I have contributed myself to the production of such fantasies in a number of books and articles directly inspired by Wells, including *The City of Man* (1963), *Building the City of Man* (1971), and, most recently, *A Short History of the Future* (1989, 1992, 1999).[11] In the last-named, a quasi-fictional history of the next 200 years, already noted above, catastrophe in the form of a third world war fought in 2044 prepares the way for the emergence of a global democratic socialist commonwealth originating among Southern Hemisphere survivors. The agency of transformation is a worldwide movement known simply as the World Party, founded in the decade before the catastrophe to consolidate the efforts of progressive activists on every continent. It becomes the governing party of the commonwealth, drastically reconstructs the world political order as a single unitary republic, creates a secular world religion (the "Service of Being"), repairs the biosphere, and rules democratically until it is defeated at the polls by still more progressive forces in the 22nd Century.

One may readily compare the World Party, which I had also imagined in some detail in *Building the City of Man* many years earlier,[12] to some of the Green parties of today, especially if they were to evolve into a coherent Red/Green international, or even to the World Social Forum as it may still become. In any case, it is not a movement that arises out of the ashes like a phoenix–although Wells's last manifesto on world revolution was significantly entitled *Phoenix* (1942)–but rather a party already vigorous, planet-wide, and well-rooted before calamity strikes. It does all it can to prevent that calamity and thereby enjoys enough moral authority and tangible support to assemble the broken pieces of the postwar world and build a democratic cosmopolis.

In the process it must sometimes resort to military action against the armed forces of recidivist elements trying to re-establish portions of the old order, military action that it does not shrink from undertaking. But the point is that the World Party was already a potent presence on the global political scene well before 2044. It did not simply react to an opportunity; it was proactive from the start.

Whatever form a movement or movements that aim at global democratic transformation may take, there is no case for waiting until the hammer falls. By far the likeliest aftermath of a catastrophe great enough to topple the modern world-system is bloody anarchy followed by hysterical retreat to tribalisms and creedal fundamentalisms more narrow, intense, and intolerant than anything we may have witnessed in this era. In a crisis people naturally clutch at what they know best. As far as I can see, only an already credible, viable progressive political formation with the merited respect of communities everywhere can successfully challenge the bullies, bigots, and demagogues who are certain to surface in the wake of a global disaster.

So let us be prepared, and act with foresight and deliberation. A time of ultimate testing is at hand, perhaps sooner than we think. I see almost no chance of dodging the doom toward which the modern world-system stumbles year by year. There is no will to dodge it on the part of our exalted leaders, whose main ambition is re-election or continuance in lawless power. Progressives have, so far and in the main, proved too timid and irresolute and disunited to mount a believable alternative to the mastery of the corporate moguls and their venal allies in professional "public service." The great mass of urban and rural working people throughout the world are too cowed, brainwashed, and skittish to resist the fraudulent blandishments of these blackguards. The best humankind can expect in the rest of this century is a narrow escape.

ENDNOTES

1. See, for example, Philip Gibbs, *Since Then* (New York: Harper, 1930), "The Record of the League" and "The Post-War Mind," pp. 346-355 and 438-469.

2. David Held, "From Executive to Cosmopolitan Multilateralism," in Held and Mathias Koenig-Archibugi, eds., *Taming Globalization: Frontiers of Governance* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 2003), pp. 182-183.

3. Terry Boswell and Christopher Chase-Dunn, *The Spiral of Capitalism and Socialism: Toward Global Democracy* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2000), p. 220. "Wagar's deus ex machina [World War Three] is there in part because it is difficult to imagine that the ostrich will take its head out of the sand without a swift kick. But it is immoral to simply bide time waiting for massive disasters to occur so that we may take advantage of them. Instead, we must proceed as suggested above to organize a political force that can democratize the system and that will try to prevent these holocausts from happening. But we should also be aware that these efforts may not succeed, and that it would also be wise to prepare a 'Plan B' of the sort discussed by Wagar." I thank Boswell and Chase-Dunn, but I must remind them that I never advocated "biding time" or "waiting" for anything. In *A Short History of the Future* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 3rd ed., 1999), my "World Party"did all it could to ward off World War Three. It recognized that its historic task was to pick up the pieces if all else failed, but its immediate goal was to prevent such a failure. There is a considerable difference between trying with might and main to avoid catching or spreading a deadly disease and having the appropriate pharmaceutical ready at hand to cure it if all else fails.

4. Immanuel Wallerstein, "The Rise and Future Demise of the World Capitalist System: Concepts for Comparative Analysis," in *The Capitalist World-Economy* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 1-36. The same thesis is explored and documented in much greater depth in the three magisterial volumes of Wallerstein's *The Modern World-System* (New York: Academic Press, 1974-1989).

5. See, in particular, David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

6. A compact narrative and technical analysis of the all-important Eastern Front in World War Two is available in David M. Glantz and Jonathan House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1995).

7. "Political communities have rarely–if ever–existed in isolation as bounded geographical totalities, and they are better thought of as multiple overlapping networks of interaction. ... These networks crystallize around different sites and forms of power, producing patterns of activity which do not correspond in any straightforward way to territorial boundaries." David Held, *Democracy and the Global Order: From the Modern State to Cosmopolitan Governance* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 225.

8. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), and Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld* (New York: Times Books, 1995).

9. For an introduction to world-system thinking on this subject, see Giovanni Arrighi, Terence

K. Hopkins, and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Antisystemic Movements* (London and New York: Verso, 1989).

10. I have examined Wells's visions in W. Warren Wagar, ed., *The Open Conspiracy: H.G. Wells on World Revolution* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2002), pp. 3-44; and Wagar, *H.G. Wells: Traversing Time* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), especially chs. 8 and 11. See also John S. Partington, *Building Cosmopolis: The Political Thought of H.G. Wells* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2003).

11. Wagar, *The City of Man: Prophecies of a World Civilization in Twentieth-Century Thought* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963; Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967); *Building the City of Man: Outlines of a World Civilization* (New York: Grossman, 1971; San Francisco: Freeman, 1972); and *A Short History of the Future*, as cited above in n.3.

12. See *Building the City of Man*, pp. 57-67.