

Scales of time and human freedom in world history: a personal account

Heikki Patomäki

I am truly honoured to receive this award, though I have doubts about whether I have accomplished that much to deserve it, or whether it is really true that I am a central figure in Finnish and European zone politics (“a marginal figure” is probably a more adequate term). It is an nonetheless a great honour to be placed among such distinguished scholar-activists as Susan George, Walden Bello, Richard Falk, and David Graeber, to name but a few.

I may not be particularly interested in medals, awards, or any such, but to be selected as the IPE Outstanding Activist Scholar is a form of recognition that I do appreciate. I would like to thank my friend Stefano Guzzini, who has been keen on this nomination.

Now, what is this present moment of trying to make the world a better place? The present is a moment of becoming, and refers to an on-going process. Number of processes may not only occur simultaneously but also coalesce and interact in various ways. The duration of the present depends on the event or context, which is happening. Because “now” is relative to the relevant processes, its meaning and characteristics depend on these processes and how they turn out.

For example, in 2020, the annual cycle of ISA conferences was interrupted by a global pandemic. As a minor effect, this panel of ours was postponed. More importantly, the pandemic has caused a global recession, the depths of which have been surpassed by only the two world wars and great depression. This economic crisis has shown that when there is political will, macroeconomic discipline and austerity can be quickly put aside, as compliance with them would be detrimental.

Our “now” may be a turning point, but this is contingent on which story will arise as hegemonic, which in turn depends on learning and argumentation as well as on political struggles in the context of structures of domination, exploitation, subjugation and control. Although the era of “the era of big government is over” may be over, the newly founded powers of the state may be used for many purposes. Only some of them are progressive or emancipatory in any sense.

On a wider time scale, the present moment involves the process of neoliberal globalisation, which has gone through several phases since the late 1970s and early 1980s. After a tipping point in the 1980s, and as further augmented by the collapse of the Soviet Union, neoliberalisation became a self-reinforcing process. At the same time, it has also strengthened various tendencies that are inherent to capitalist market society and world economy. While neoliberalism has succeeded in transforming social contexts through agency, practices and institutions, with far-reaching effects, the prevailing economic and social policies have also had manifold causal effects such as rising inequalities, progressively more insecure terms of employment, and recurring economic crises.

The effects of neoliberal globalisation instigated a Polanyian moment in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The World Social Forum was established as a dialectical counterpart to the World Economic Forum. Amongst many others, I participated in this moment for example through the worldwide campaign for a global currency transaction tax. This moment turned out to be short-lived. After years of campaigning, when the Belgian parliament approved a law in summer 2004 partly based on our Draft Treaty on Global Currency Transaction Tax, the moment was already over. The impact of the Asian crisis had been fading away for some time. Global civil society turned out to be vulnerable to the changing financing practices of neoliberalised states. Soon 9-11 and the global war on terror, including wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, reset the agenda of world politics.

When the next crisis hit in 2007-9, it turned to be a saddle point, inducing stasis and regression. At first the crisis prompted some neo-Keynesian measures, but without any significant deviation from the substantive path of neoliberalization in most dimensions of policy. No new worldwide transformative movement emerged, and global civil society remains more marginal for high politics than it was in the aftermath of the Asian crisis (1998–2002). The responses to the 2008-9 crisis and its repercussions have remained national and contradictory. The crisis was contained, and an arduous recovery of the world economy started in 2010, but was soon further and significantly complicated by the euro crisis. Since then, the main responses have become ever more liable to contradictions and further disintegration, as exemplified by Ukraine 2014, Brexit and Trump. Since 2007, we have seen also moments of deglobalisation, strengthened by the current pandemic.

On a still wider time scale, the planetary-nuclear era of jet airplanes, rockets and missiles, satellites and nuclear explosives continues. The World Wars sped up military-technological developments toward Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, even in the absence of the World Wars, this era is likely to have begun at some point in the

twentieth century. The Cold War as we know it was only a contingent episode in this wider process. As anticipated by H.G. Wells already before the First World War, this era would have come about sooner or later anyway, independently of the evolution of leading ideologies within states, or of the precise location of the shifting centres.

In terms of the planetary-nuclear era, the full meaning of what we conventionally know as the Cold War remains open. The Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal was passed on to the Russian Federation. At the present moment, more states possess nuclear weapons than during the Cold War. Whether the destructive powers of the existing (and future) nuclear weapons will ever be released is contingent in the same way as many past events and episodes have been contingent.

Already when I was a teenager in the 1970s, many global problems were widely discussed, also at home and school. In 1982-3, I was a conscript in the Finnish army, stationed on the border of the Soviet Union, during the most dangerous moment of the Second Cold War. In our training, we were told that in case of a nuclear explosion, we should rely on our magical rain cape, cover ourselves, and continue fighting after the fallout has cleared. I joined the European peace movement immediately after my release from the army. At a small local site where I took part in the European-wide peace demonstrations in October 1983, I saw several friends from my artillery unit.

In autumn 1983, I started to study physics, inspired by a vision of completing Einstein's unfinished revolution. However, in the context of the rise of the Green movement and a sense of imminent threat of a nuclear annihilation, I soon shifted from studying physics to economics, philosophy and social sciences, seeing the latter more acutely important for humanity's immediate concerns.

I gravitated toward a non-reductionist realist philosophy theorising things in terms of historical processes of their formation out of 'simpler' things. Emergence in this sense means that higher-order principles such as those constituting our mental processes cannot be completely explained in terms of lower-order ones. Critical realism involves a theory of emancipation, including the idea that the tendential rational directionality of history is towards an increasing collective self-determination on this planet and perhaps way beyond it. This idea has evolved over time, but in one form or another, it has guided my activism since the 1980s until the current decade, 2020s.

During this era, it has started to become increasingly obvious that in many important ways human freedom is decreasing more than increasing. Closely associated with the

process of neoliberal globalization and further expansive though uneven and crisis-ridden growth, we have been living through an era of new subjugation to the demands of commodity production and profit-making. Now we are seeing various, often-regressive responses to the consequences of this process. The rise of nationalism and authoritarian populism is, in my analysis, can be, to an important degree, explained in terms of the process of neoliberalisation and its effects.

When the brief Polanyian moment of the late 1990s and early 2000s was already coming to an end, I started to think about the future in a different way. Until that point, my thinking and activism had been preoccupied with concrete eutopias about global taxes, world domestic economic policy and global democracy, as exemplified by my work through the Network Institute for Global Democratisation, NIGD, and my activism in the international ATTAC movement.

From that point on, however, I started to write political economy based scenarios about different possible futures, some of which involve a global catastrophe, possibly a nuclear war. So instead of a mere radical reformer with occasional Pollyannist inclinations, I became a weather forecaster warning about major storms ahead, often feeling like Cassandra, who was cursed by Apollo. This is the basis of the approach of *The Political Economy of Global Security* and many follow-up works.

This conjuncture in my life overlapped with the global financial crisis and the Euro crisis. There were also various other coinciding events and processes – for example major transformations of the local universities, as part of a worldwide process – that prompted a spell of activism in the Left Alliance in Finland and led to candidacy in national and European parliamentary elections.

However, the prevailing lack of perspective and vision has frustrated me time and again, both in Finland and more widely in the EU. During the 2000s and early 2010s, discussions were often narrowed down to national-European axis – with equally limited temporal horizon – even among the leftist European parties and civil society organisations. Increasing awareness of the climate change and, to a degree, the emergence of movements and parties such as DiEM25, indicate the gradual rise of wider forms of reflexivity, yet the process seems rather slow.

The present moment consists of still wider processes. As political economists, we often talk about capitalism as a singular system that emerged as a specific moment in world-historical time. There has been a long-standing debate, ranging from the contributions of Theodor Mommsen, Max Weber and Karl Marx to Andre Gunder Frank and Barry K.Gills, about whether capitalism or at least aspects of it have

existed already in the ancient societies. Another debate has focussed on how close the Song Dynasty China was to capitalism and Industrial Revolution in the early second millennium CE. A third major debate, originating in Immanuel Wallerstein and World-Systems Analysis, has focussed on whether a capitalist world economy emerged in the “long 16th century”.

These are important debates, and it is clear that money, commodities, long-term trade, and bookkeeping, and in some form also wage labour, banking, and shares in commercial ventures, pre-date the developments in the 17th and 18th centuries Western Europe. My understanding, however, is that capitalist market society emerged incrementally, layer by layer over long periods of time, as the previously exceptional, subsumed or peripheral features became increasingly acceptable and central (e.g. profit-seeking, wage-labour and commodity production for world markets). Moreover, these features evolved (e.g. new practices of finance based on probability calculus, new forms of governance based on ideas emanating from political economy); and new practices emerged such as credit-based financing of investments and new legal ways of forming a corporation.

We can plausibly talk about “capitalism” when, a quarter of a century after the original publication of *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), the champions of self-regulating markets and the freedom of commerce started to adopt Adam Smith as their symbol. During Polanyi’s “great transformation”, the tendency to legitimise the increasingly central gain-seeking commercial *habitus* by means of universalising and naturalising it, grew stronger. It did not take long before also the critics of economic liberalism started to use Smith as a symbol for instance in France and Germany.

Half a century later Karl Marx theorised capital and wrote about capitalist mode of production. Yet Marx himself used the word “capitalism” only five times and each time only in passing. He did not use the term to refer to a system but to the propensity of capitalists to accumulate capital beyond all limits. It was Werner Sombart’s *Modern Capitalism* (1902) that popularised the system-meaning.

Too often, political economy has fallen victim to deep-structuralist essentialism. The era of “capitalism” has in fact been relatively short in world-historical scales of time. Complex open social systems that evolve historically do not form indivisible deep structures that emerge all at once and remain intact until the next deep-structural transformation. The other side of the coin is that the currently prevalent system is more malleable than what is often thought. What makes it look so strong and enduring is the discrepancy between our territorial political systems and the spatio-temporalities of the world economy. It precisely in that context that ideas and

conceptions such as global taxes, world domestic economic policy, and global democracy are so important.

Another layer of the present moment is still deeper. From a critical realist and Big History viewpoint, we humans and our minds are not separate from the world but an integral and emergent part of it. Emergence means that when lower-level entities are combined, integrated, and organized in a particular way, new higher-level qualities and causal powers come into being, opening possibilities for still new forms and levels of emergence. With new levels of learning and social complexity, and related population growth, the human impact on the earth system was certain to grow over time. In the course of human history, this has already led to many local disasters.

From this perspective, it is relatively easy to connect the development of capitalism and the crisis of the planetary system of life. The fossil-fuels based Industrial Revolution led to rapid acceleration of the human impact and thereby to the Anthropocene. It was also the origin of the planetary era. As Karl Polanyi explains, “the old world was swept away in one indomitable surge toward a planetary economy” and to “the new and hazardous planetary interdependence.”

It was around this time that modern industrial growth – enabled by increasingly rapidly cumulating scientific and technical learning – started to take off. Slowly the new potential for sustained per capita growth spread elsewhere in Europe, Latin America, European colonies, Japan, and so on. During this time, market-generated cyclical crises started to affect everyday lives to an unprecedented degree. That is, the cycles of growth and slumps and related market-generated crises became central to the perceptions, concepts and dispositions of a multitude of actors and, simultaneously, an increasing concern for theoreticians. Moreover, the process has been characterised by growing inequalities. Thomas Piketty argues that “we can now see those shocks as the only forces since the Industrial Revolution powerful enough to reduce inequality”.

The point in this context is that it is the process of modern economic growth that has taken out planet to a new geological era, the Anthropocene. From plutonium fallout and the depletion of the ozone layer to global warming and the mass extinction of species, it is the huge growth of human activity that has been spelling disaster to the wider systems of life on planet Earth.

During the neoliberal era, per capita growth has slowed down and shifted geoeconomically, but nonetheless this period has been characterised by a magnificent further expansion of humanity and human activities. When the neoliberal era started,

I was a teenager, turning eighteen just five days before Ronald Reagan became the President of the US. While the rate of world population growth has slowed down significantly since then, the world population has grown by 3.3 billion people. The size of the world economy is in dollar terms now three times bigger than it was in 1981. In dollar terms – however unreliable those figures may be for the purposes of understanding real causal processes – the world GDP per capita is now 1.75 times higher than it was in 1981.

In W. Warren Wagar's story *A Short History of the Future*, we are currently living the last age of capital. This is the era of Earth Inc.. In Wagar's single-path scenario, the World party starts to flourish around the world just before the catastrophe of summer 2044. The World party advocates a socialist and democratic world republic. I find it unlikely, however, that somehow, miraculously, a planetary catastrophe will be of exactly the right size and kind to reverse world population growth and global warming, eventually resulting in the establishment of a democratic and socialist world commonwealth. Rather I think that the Anthropocene is here to stay unless humanity succeeds to destroy itself, whereas the profit motive and capital accumulation may well cease to play a dominant role in world-historical developments in the coming decades and century.

Planet Earth has been alive for a long while. Its life-systems have been disturbed several times by massive events and changes. Now it is us humans who are causing disturbances on a catastrophic scale. Under these circumstances, there is no positive alternative to reflexive self-regulation aiming at maintaining life-friendly climatic and biogeochemical conditions. Reflexivity resonates with learning for instance about various macroeconomic possibilities during the current pandemic.

This learning occurs in the wider and deeper context of the Anthropocene. Reflexive self-regulation may simultaneously also contribute to improving the very conditions of ethico-political learning and reflexive self-determination itself. Learning to co-determine, in a democratic fashion, the direction of world history means that the sphere of human freedom can be gradually widening. This is the essence of human emancipation conceived as a historical process.

We, and our consciousness, constitute a causally efficacious layer of the world and cosmos, and this layer can co-determine future history within the confines of real compossibilities and impossibilities. The feasibility of alternatives depends also on the degree of human freedom, which it is the task of critical social sciences and transformative movements to increase.

Wagar was right in stressing the importance of a new form of world political agency, namely a world party. We can distinguish between three moments of transformative global-democratic action: (1) activities within the confines of established institutions; (2) advocacy to transform global institutions and create new ones such as global taxes and regulations, public investment programs, and a world parliament; and (3) participation in the newly formed global institutions.

There is no end to history, and not all new institutions will have to be planetary in scope. Global institutions can, and characteristically should, increase the contextually overlapping, multi-layered autonomy of local actors. This is a vision that can inspire optimism and ambition about our future possibilities. Without hope, we can have no aspirations for better futures.