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Christopher Chase-Dunn über die Zukunft der Weltgesellschaft

von Res Marti (im Gespräch mit Christopher Chase-Dunn)

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“There is something wrong with capitalism.”

Christopher Chase-Dunn über die Zukunft der Weltgesellschaft

Weltsystem-ForscherInnen untersuchen langfristige globale Veränderungen. Sie analysieren verschiedene historische Prozesse und versuchen, diese in ihrem Zusammenspiel zu verstehen. Ein Hauptvertreter der Weltsystem-Perspektive, Christopher Chase-Dunn, wagt im folgenden Beitrag auf pointierte und erfrischende Art und Weise einige Zukunftsprognosen. Der Soziologieprofessor an der ‚University of California-Riverside‘ und Direktor des ‚Institute for Research on World-Systems‘ über die US-Hegemonie, den Irak-Krieg und die EU als ein mögliches Beispiel für eine zukünftige Form von Weltregierung.

Gesprochen mit Christopher Chase-Dunn hat Res Marti

“The actual world system will not change very rapidly. We probably will end up with a global democratic government – which could help to solve several major problems – but this is not going to happen in the near future. Therefore we need to think about alternatives first. Later we will have more time to form global institutions and get things set up in a way that allows more people to live in peace.

I’m talking about politics on a global scale. Not social science, which is always something that has to be done with regard to the past. But politics can be informed by social science. The world-systems perspective that we have developed can be useful for making the world better and solving the major emerging problems.”

U.S. hegemony and financial crisis

“If things develop in the way they used to in the past we might well end up in another world war, but I can see several differences: There is more global governance now than there was in the first half of the twentieth century. Political globalization has actually made considerable progress since World War II, and U.S. hegemony relied on multilateralism up until recently. Now the economic hegemony of the United States is declining, so they are doing what Great Britain did at the end of the 19th century, which is using its remaining advantages – finance capital and military capability – to try to prop up its global power.

However, finance capital is very fragile. The United States is mainly exporting bonds and importing manufactured goods, primarily from China. At some point the world will become saturated with U.S. fictitious capital, and the game will collapse. It’s like a huge pile of paper and electronic “value” on top of the real world economy of goods and services. There is a global economy of people producing and trading real goods and services, and then there is this huge mountain of fictitious capital stacked precariously on top of the real economy that just keeps getting bigger and bigger. In the past it always collapsed at a certain point. Something which would have happened in the 1980s debt crisis if the financial institutions in the United States, Europe and Japan had not stood together and prevented it. This allowed the financial bubble to keep growing, but it cannot keep growing forever and it is only a matter of time before it comes down.”

The war in Iraq as an imperial overreach

“With the war in Iraq the United States is doing now the same thing Britain did a century ago when it started using its military power in order to sustain a declining hegemony – a process which George Modelski and others have called impe-

rial overreach. It is abandoning multilateralism and pursuing global power by means of force. U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney said “give war a chance”. They’ve got the military capability, and they are going to do it their way. They don’t really care what others think. But this produces opposition and alienates friends of the United States. In a pre-capitalist world, in a pre-modern world, it might have been a winning strategy. A conquering state could set up a world empire and make it work. But this is not going to work anymore in the modern world-system, because we have institutionalized an economic and political system based on the idea of human rights. The majority of the people believe that equality is good and that these rights are justified. So it is impossible to go back on all that. Acting that way in the modern world just creates resistance, legitimate resistance. The United States cannot be a legitimate world government, because its leadership is not elected by the people of the world.”

American exceptionalism – no chance for a global NATO?

“All this leads eventually to a potential scenario that happened before, which is hegemonic rivalry and world war. Of course not in the immediate future, because there is only one real super power. There aren’t any real military powers that can contend with the United States. But countries that economically can afford it might strengthen their militaries, and ironically the United States, the Pentagon is encouraging them to do it. Simply because it is very expensive to be the world’s policeman. It is expensive to have an army that can cover the whole world, so they are trying to get Japan and Germany to become military powers once again. And China too is coming up, so there is an eventual potential for a geopolitical situation that is more multipolar, and then we may have the possibility for world war. Well, this is not going to happen right away and we can prevent it from happening. What needs to be organized is a multilateral global control over military power in which the United States plays an important role – a kind of global NATO. This is one of the requisites of a world government – to have enough military power to prevent warfare and to outlaw warfare. In order to do this the major powers would have to give up a considerable share of their sovereignty. I don’t think this is going to happen very soon. The United States has its own ideology of America the Great and this relates not just to the ruling class, but as well to the common people. They love it. They’ve got their cars, they’ve got their houses, they’ve got their movies, beer is cheap, and gasoline isn’t too expensive. They don’t want to know about global problems. And the U.S. regime has

been able to provide significant rewards for a large number of middle class people. Not for everybody, for less people than earlier, but still for enough people. That's why I don't see a major movement of opposition emerging in the United States that will really challenge the current approach any time soon. The people that are going to be most motivated and capable of really challenging the contemporary world order are not primarily citizens of the United States. That's why I focus on the semi-periphery and the transnational social movements."

Toward global democracy and global socialism

"In my book <The Spiral of Capitalism and Socialism: Toward Global Democracy> we are trying to imagine the idea of global democracy and global socialism based on the world-systems perspective and its understanding of earlier world revolutions. What it means and how this could actually be done on a global scale.

We don't want to ally with all of those people who are against globalization. There are a lot of people who don't like the powers that be, but they have different reasons for that and what they want is different, so we need to be a little picky about our allies. There are two different kinds of movements. On one hand there are people that see problems in the capitalist system. For them we just need to fix these problems, eliminate the bad guys in capitalism. On the other hand there is the structural camp – in which we consider ourselves – in which people think there is something fundamentally wrong with capitalism. Just a little fix won't do it, major restructuring is needed. Capitalism is basically not rational, it under-

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mines collective rationality by its very nature, and in order to be made rational we need to organize collective rationality, which means making institutions at the global level. Institutions that can deal with the real problems of inequality and violence.

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The reason I've been talking about these rises and falls, these cycles of concentration of power in world history, is simply because there's another cycle to come, but hopefully next time we can get to a point where major problems are solved. Once we get passed that, we won't need a global state anymore. If we can get people to understand the rules well enough and have a normative system, a moral system in place, we probably don't need a state in the sense of a monopoly of legitimate violence any more. But before we get there, we have to go through this global state phase where the state is democratic and represents the majority of the people."

The European Union as a model and the need of a unifying global threat

"The European Union is an interesting experiment in international state formation that is not based on conquest. International state formation has taken place a lot in the past, but usually it was one state conquering other states. Doing it without conquest is an interesting experiment, because that's what we need to do on a global scale. One advantage that the EU has is that it is part of a larger state system where it is competing with the United States, and that's an important reason in favor of European integration. But at the global level you don't have this advantage. And there are other reasons why it is harder. The Europeans have a lot in common. On a global scale, however, the differences and inequalities are much greater.

Having a threat would force us to cooperate. The threat can be us, we can be our own enemy. Ecological catastrophe is a threat and that's us doing it to our own planet. We need to

figure out how to relate to our own biosphere in a way that doesn't destroy it and how to do it in a just way and do it so that people don't feel screwed over. Less developed countries don't feel so good about being told that they can't use their own environmental resources to develop and I don't wonder why. So those issues have to be faced and can't just be swept under the rug. That's exactly what global institutions can be set up to do."

Communication as a crucial factor

"Eventually, communication plays an extremely important part in the whole process. What we need to do is to communicate these ideas to a large number of people by using popular language and the media. If it is limited to academics having arguments with each other about the definitions of hegemony, it is not going to be any good. I am mainly a social scientist, not a politician or a journalist. But I am also a world citizen with some ideas that I think can be useful. We need to take these ideas on the road and get them out there so that they can be used for the building of a better world society."

Christopher Chase-Dunn is Professor at the 'University of California-Riverside' and Director of the 'Institute for Research on World-Systems'. He does research on long-term large-scale social change and social evolution focusing mainly on the last 12'000 years, although lately he has expanded his research area on world systems composed solely of nomads.

Boswell, Terry /Chase-Dunn, Christopher (2000): *The Spiral of Capitalism and Socialism: Toward Global Democracy*. Boulder, CO: Lynn Rienner.

