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## **“Poly Crisis or Organic Crisis? The Crisis of the United States and the US-Led World Order”**

(Lightly edited transcript of an Inaugural Lecture by Professor Inderjeet Parmar, City, University of London, to the students and faculty of the Department of International Relations, PUC Minas, Belo Horizonte, Brazil, 13 April 2023)

It's a pleasure and an honour to be here, to share and develop ideas about the world crisis and how the United States might 'fit' into our analyses. It is a privilege to be given this opportunity to think through some of the biggest issues in the world today, a chance to think about what is happening in the world and to try to make some kind of sense of it in its historical and contemporary contexts, but also in regard to ways of thinking about and explaining how the world is changing.

### INTRODUCTION

The title of my talk today is **Poly Crisis or Organic Crisis?: The Crisis of the United States and the US-led World Order**. You, as students and scholars of international relations, interested in the world and how it works, won't be surprised that when you look around, read any news website or watch a news programme, open a newspaper or look at Twitter or any other social media platform, the news reporting and discussions are awash with words like 'crisis', 'disorder', 'chaos', the end of a 'rules based order', decline of the West, the 'rise of the rest', systemic or strategic rivalries, existential threats from China, from climate change, from pandemics, even from nuclear warfare. And people say there are existential and other threats from Russia, as well as a new Cold War and the 'return of geopolitics'. That is to say, we live in what looks increasingly like, and is thought about increasingly as, an *age of disorder and of crisis*.<sup>1</sup>

And in this age of disorder and crises, which I think is simultaneously an objective reality and also open to very differing forms of interpretation as to meaning and causation, the United States is a world-pivotal state. It may not be 'exceptional' in the way in which many American elites consider their nation's mission and role in the world. But it is *extraordinary*, given the amount of power that it exercises in a number of different domains in the world. It's a superpower, but it's no longer alone. The world is much more crowded with more voices, more ideas, and more assertions of power than it has been in many, many decades, perhaps ever before.

So, the United States may be less significant in the world compared with before because of the rise of other powers, but it remains nevertheless central to serious analysis of the crisis of world order and world affairs. It is the most comprehensive power that exists in the world today in terms of economic, financial, military, diplomatic, cultural and ideological, as well as being a *knowledge superpower* in terms of the production, the sheer volume, the quantity, and reach of its knowledge power.<sup>2</sup>

And at the center of this great comprehensive power is a relatively small set of people, which I would refer to here as the US foreign policy establishment, which is a distillation of several elites - military, academic, diplomatic, state policymaking, corporate, think tank, foundation, corporate-media and so on. It's a distillation of all the key elite elites that hold the levers of power in that society. So, at the center of American power is this American foreign policy establishment.<sup>3</sup> And in a way, it is a perfect embodiment of what Antonio Gramsci referred to as a hegemony or as a hegemonic bloc underpinning US power. That is, it embodies both tremendous coercive power, military war-making, economic and financial power, but it also wields a great deal of consensual power, a persuasive power, what some people call cultural or ideological power.<sup>4</sup> Harvard's Joseph Nye has famously called it 'soft power', but there is little that is soft about US

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<sup>1</sup> Milan Babic, "Let's talk about the interregnum: Gramsci and the crisis of the liberal world order," *International Affairs*, Volume 96, Issue 3, May 2020 <https://academic.oup.com/ia/article/96/3/767/5712430>; Aaron McKeil, "On the concept of international disorder," *International Relations* 35, 2 (2020); <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0047117820922289>.

<sup>2</sup> Inderjeet Parmar, *Foundations of the American Century: Ford, Carnegie and Rockefeller Foundations in the Rise of American Power* (Columbia University Press, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Godfrey Hodgson, "The Establishment," *Foreign Policy*, 1972-73; Inderjeet Parmar, "The 'Big 3' foundations and American power," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 74, 4 (2015).

<sup>4</sup> Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith, eds., *Selections From the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).

power especially when exercised in large parts of the global South – just count the bodies.<sup>5</sup> But in combination, it makes the United States very different from other states in the world today.

Consequently, what happens in the United States still continues to impact the world. And what happens in the world impacts greatly the United States itself, because the United States is embedded in, is an architect of, and a manager of the international system. A crisis of the United States and of world order is really also a crisis of this American foreign policy establishment.

With that backdrop, I want to do four things in today's remarks.

The **first** thing I'd like to do is provide an outline of key aspects of crisis and change in the world and in the United States.

**Secondly**, I want to look at three ways in which we might think about the nature of the world crisis and the crisis of American power. I'm going to talk very briefly about "Poly Crisis", as a kind of liberal order theorizing; "Organic Crisis" as a Gramscian perspective; and finally another view which is more metaphorical, which may be called a "Singularity", which derives from the field of mathematics.

The **third** thing I would like to do is to provide some empirical, historical and political details of American power and its journey to the position that it finds itself in today at home and abroad, and **fourthly** draw some tentative conclusions and make some speculations about where the United States is heading, and where the world may also be heading, in the next few years or so.

#### *A complex world*

As you know the level of complexity in the world is genuinely mind-blowing. The number of powers and forces which are acting in the world today is probably greater and more significant than has been the case as far as anyone can recall reading and certainly living through. That is to say, the complexity, the sheer amount of empirical knowledge anyone needs in order to understand actually what is going on in the world is too vast for one person alone. This makes analysing the situation quite difficult, almost impossible, for scholars. It means that there are far more questions than there are answers. As I say, this is very interesting for scholarship, but it's very disturbing and causes a great deal of anxiety for us as human beings trying to navigate our way through the realities of the way in which the world is going and the dangers which are appearing, which have already appeared in many countries and parts of the world.

So internationally, there are, as you know, long term power shifts, a changing global distribution of power, status, economic influence, but also a kind of psychological revolution, a revolution in levels of confidence. The distribution of confidence in world affairs has or seems to have shifted from the West to the South and other powers, as has the rise of 'resentment' as a global force. And this is a resentment felt in post- and neo-colonial and global South regions and states about the way in which the last 500 years have actually gone, in the way in which colonialism and neo-colonialism has impacted their lives in their countries, economies, political and social development and so on and so forth. And this resentment is felt in world politics today because those global South forces now have increased ability and willingness to assert themselves. And this is when the resentment and nationalism and other forces come more closely to the fore in world politics. To be sure, Global South elites manipulate and use such sentiments for their own ends, rather than in the interests of the broad masses. But this force of resentment is real enough.<sup>6</sup>

The key thing, of course, is that we all know that these global power shifts are going on. We all know that there's a lot of movement and flux. I think the big problem really is knowing or evaluating how fundamental are these power shifts? Are these power shifts durable? Are they going to last a long time or are they fleeting and likely to grind to a halt? History is rarely a linear or gradual process; it often has zigzags, setbacks and crises, etc. as well. So, we don't know how permanent or durable these shifts might be. Are these shifts and changes existential threats to the United States-led order or are they just indicating a greater level or intensity of competition and rivalry *within the system* that the United States has established? Because many of the global South powers, and their elites, if not all of them, are actually doing very well, significantly if not

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<sup>5</sup> Inderjeet Parmar and Michael Cox, eds., *Soft Power and US Foreign Policy* (Routledge, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Elisabetta Brighi, "The globalisation of resentment, *Millennium* 44, 3 (2016).

exclusively as a result of the fact of that US-led system is the context of opportunity within which emerging powers' economic, financial, trading and other powers increased.

More questions: Is there really a new Cold War? And would you agree that this is a *new* Cold War? Because many in Asia would argue that the *old* Cold War has never ended for them. That is, the old Cold War continues to have its impact on the way in which they live their lives in that part of the world, that the Cold War was particularly bloody and there was no Eurocentric 'long peace' as far as they were concerned.

Now, the Ukraine war in the last one year or more has thrown a lot of global tendencies into very sharp relief. Western unity and self-confidence has increased as a result of Russian aggression in Ukraine. But how long lasting is that likely to be? How durable or stable is that? In particular, we have seen many demands for 'strategic autonomy' from France and Germany and other powers as well, and a weakening of public opinion within Western countries in regard to the Ukraine war and the arming and supply of the Ukrainian armed forces. We have also seen a high degree of global South alienation from the kind of sanctions regime which the United States and its allies have established, a kind of realignment of many global South powers with Russia, with China, or with one another. And we see that practically every day. Just in the last few weeks, Beijing brokered a rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which nobody thought possible and which completely blindsided the United States diplomatically. And there are many other kinds of dislocations which are going on in regard to the global South and the West.

But at the same time as this relative 'pulling away' from one another, there is also the key fact of globalization - of world economy, world finance, world investment and trade flows, etc.. For many people, globalization was a source of interdependence, which would guarantee a degree of stability and order and peaceful competition. But on the other hand, many people have seen also that globalization is not a perfect process, that nationalism continues to play a very major role in world affairs. We saw at the height of the Covid-19 global pandemic, vaccine nationalism and medical nationalism played major roles in the way in which the distribution of pharmaceutical and drug power played a key role in the hoarding of vaccines and so on in the global North.<sup>7</sup> So, people nowadays talk about de-globalization, that there is a degree to which the world is de-globalizing. And what do we know about that? How long is that process going to last and what impact will that have on the way in which world power redistributions take place?

The other thing, of course, that is important is that, as I mentioned before, that many of these countries from the global South - China, India, Brazil and many others have grown up to where they are economically and diplomatically in this American-led world order. Their economies and currencies and so on have become *inter-penetrated* with one another, not just interdependent but inter-penetrated such that it is very difficult to have a crisis in one country alone, and for that crisis not to spread into many, many other countries, which is to say that China, for all the issues about a new Cold War, China's so deeply integrated into Western economies that interpenetration means that you cannot separate out these particular kinds of powers without massive global repercussions. Interpenetration of economies and of their economic elites is a very important factor that should be borne in mind.<sup>8</sup>

So just as a brief outline, that is a range of problems and questions which arise as a result of international power shifts that are also going on domestically in the United States and in other countries as well. You've seen in Brazil, in your own country in the last couple of months, that there is a crisis of democracy itself. Hence, this crisis of democracy is not limited to the United States. It is more far more widespread. And this crisis of democracy is so serious that it features threat of civil war, indicating a degree of polarization and factionalization within the body politic of the United States and some other countries as well, which has created a crisis of legitimacy, a crisis of democracy and a fear of civil war. In a very recent book, Barbara Walter, *How Civil War Starts*,<sup>9</sup> applied her knowledge of civil wars and their various origins, trajectories and

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<sup>7</sup> "How Bill Gates and partners used their clout to control the global covid response – with little oversight," *Politico*, 14 September 2022; <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/09/14/global-covid-pandemic-response-bill-gates-partners-00053969>.

<sup>8</sup> Shuhong Huo and Inderjeet Parmar, "'A new type of great power relationship?' Gramsci, Kautsky and the role of the Ford Foundation's transformational elite knowledge networks in China," *Review of International Political Economy* 27, 2 (2020).

<sup>9</sup> Barbara F. Walter, *How Civil Wars Start* (Viking, 2022); Inderjeet Parmar review of Walter: <https://thewire.in/books/book-review-barbara-walter-america-civil-war-fascism>.

stages of civil wars in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, and applied it to the United States. And her argument is that the United States, on the 6th of January 2021, was on the brink of a civil war, and that this threat of civil war and factionalism, which she called factionalization, remains very significant.

When we look at the midterm elections in November 2022, therefore, they did not resolve any of the big issues of American democracy, even though the Democratic Party and President Biden did extremely well and bucked the historical trend in terms of not being routed, and actually only were very marginally defeated in the House and retained the Senate. It nevertheless did not resolve the problem of the future of the political career of Donald Trump, nor of Trumpism without Trump. This is to say that one half of the American political party system, the Republican Party, is no longer committed to free and fair elections in which they happen to lose. That is the Grand Old Party. The Republican Party is a European style, far right political party in a system that only has two political parties to choose between. The US is mired in a deep-seated legitimacy crisis of the party establishments.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to that, the continuation of deaths and hospitalizations from the COVID-19 pandemic has reached well over 1 million. There's mass-scale demand for an end to enduring wars, forever wars or permanent wars, mass uprisings against racist police violence, against rising inequality, the biggest strike wave by organized labor and unorganized labor in many, many decades. That is to say that the level of street protest, which is what has occurred recently in the United States, has surpassed levels of the 1960s 'rights revolution'. A survey by Princeton University showed that in 2020, in the wake of the murder by police of George Floyd, Americans protested in all 50 states on the streets in that particular year, in numbers resembling the civil rights protests of the 1960s. Anti-police and solidarity protests went global – with over 8000 demonstrations across over 70 countries.<sup>11</sup>

What happens in America impacts the world.

In the middle of all these tumultuous crises and power shifts and threats to constitutional power, these massive crises of democracy and power, the contestations of the establishment inside the United States, we have President Joseph Biden. And people would ask the question, is there such a thing as Bidenism which might look at and resolve some of these global issues and some of these domestic issues? That is to say, can the United States, does the United States have the authority, leadership, ideas and the imagination to actually come up with a new grand bargain which would resolve some of the problems of American democracy and inequality at home, but also link up with how that might fit with a new kind of global order which recognizes the reality, the objective reality of multipolarity as the description of the way in which the world works. Many people are very pessimistic on this particular question, but I would think that there are some moves made by the Biden administration in that kind of a direction, that is there is a movement among the more far-sighted, thoughtful forces toward post-neoliberalism for domestic renewal and political stability in that context.<sup>12</sup> The Democratic Party talks about a foreign policy for the working class, a foreign policy with an industrial policy at its heart, an infrastructure policy worth over a trillion dollars to create more higher paying jobs in order, in effect, to renew American domestic strength and stability in order to be able to launch a new global offensive. The 2022 National Security Strategy would suggest this.

So, on the one hand, we have the development of what Trump called 'America First', but which Biden is far more quiet and more sober about, a very different kind of political style. But Biden's overall strategy remains a very US-centered policy of increasing domestic, economic, political and financial strength in order to renew, stabilize, but also to engage in far stronger competition with what they see as the Chinese threat.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.insightturkey.com/commentaries/trumps-coup-and-insurrection-bidens-challenge-and-opportunity>; <https://www.insightturkey.com/commentaries/the-legitimacy-crisis-of-the-us-elite-and-the-rise-of-donald-trump>; <https://thewire.in/world/the-trump-coup-detat-and-insurrection-was-long-in-the-making-and-will-continue>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://acleddata.com/2020/09/03/demonstrations-political-violence-in-america-new-data-for-summer-2020/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://thewire.in/world/joe-biden-crises-radical-agenda-corporate-opposition>.

<sup>13</sup> Inderjeet Parmar and Thomas Furse, "The Trump administration, the far right and world politics," *Globalizations* 2021;

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14747731.2021.1991660?needAccess=true&role=button>

They are also talking about the consolidation or the re consolidation of a global democratic bloc as opposed to the autocratic powers.

But I would ask some questions about the Biden policy, and that is at home, Biden does not appear or, at least, his administration does not appear to be a reliable ally against the extreme right or even the fascistic elements of the Republican Party.<sup>14</sup> Donald Trump has not been taken to court for the most serious offences especially the 6 January 2021 coup and insurrection attempt, as well as the attempt to steal the election in Georgia. In addition to that, we have the Ukraine war crisis in which the United States is spending billions of dollars diverting funds to that particular war at the same time as millions of American people experience very tough economic and other conditions. And the other thing about the Ukraine crisis, of course, is that Biden himself, of course, and his son are deeply implicated in Ukraine domestic politics. Hunter Biden is alleged to have leveraged his father's influence as US vice president to get a very high position in an energy corporation in the Ukraine.

So what we have here, if you like, is a great deal of turmoil at home and abroad. We have a domestic administration which is still beleaguered by very right-wing forces, which it is unwilling or maybe even incapable of adequately taking on. And this means that the situation in the United States remains very volatile, very unstable. And it makes the United States an unreliable ally. It sends a signal to many other powers, including its allies, that you cannot necessarily rely on the United States to stand with you should any further crises come. And as a result of that, that liberal order at the center of which is the United States has loosened, appears to be unravelling from within, because the United States, as the architect of order, and Britain, its junior partner in its construction, have more and more opted out of elements of that particular post-1945 settlement. The unifying effects in the West of the Ukraine war are real – but they may not be long-lasting. Cracks are appearing, for example in the role of President Macron calling for a more independent European global role, one that does not bend to US interests, during his recent visit to Beijing.<sup>15</sup>

*Organic crisis, poly crisis or singularity?*

The world is in a period of hybridity, transition or changes the direction of which is difficult to know. And hence, three concepts which I would like to now talk about may help us to frame or think about ways to explain the current crisis of the United States and of the world order.

So as I said, I will talk about Organic Crisis, Poly Crisis and the so-called Negative Singularity.

First, I'm going to talk about Organic Crisis or the idea of the organic crisis. Nowadays, a lot of people who are not Marxist are quoting Antonio Gramsci's work because he wrote a great deal about crises of order and disorder around 100 years ago when he was a free man, and then later on when he was illegally incarcerated through his *Prison Notebooks*.<sup>16</sup> In 2019, the Munich Security Conference report cited and quoted Antonio Gramsci on organic crisis. If you don't know it, the Munich Security Conference is not an organization of international Marxism, but an organization focused on Western powers and designed to analyse and uphold their security. The Report argues, "In his *Prison Notebooks*, the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci wrote, 'The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born. And in this interregnum, a great variety of morbid symptoms appear...' An apt description of today," it concludes.

So what is an organic crisis? What Gramsci meant when he talked about organic crisis is that an organic crisis very different from a narrow conjunctural crisis in one particular area of the economy or broader society. To Gramsci, an organic crisis is a comprehensive crisis which encompasses the totality of a system or an order. And in that system or order, the ruling elites and ruling classes are no longer able to generate any consensus behind their material, ideological, or political ideas or plans. And an organic crisis really exposes a fundamental crisis of hegemony. It's a crisis all at once in the economy, in politics and society and ideology, in morality, the very identity of a society and state. And that these crises of hegemony, that is the crisis of the ruling elites underneath that hegemony, means that the established political parties no longer

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<sup>14</sup> <https://thewire.in/world/establishment-liberals-far-right-extremism>.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/10/emmanuel-macron-sparks-anger-europe-vassal-us-china-clash>

<sup>16</sup> Hoare and Nowell-Smith, 1971; <https://theroadsinitiative.org/one-year-of-war-more-to-come-rooted-in-global-crisis-of-imperial-power-politics/>.

have the full support of the electorate and citizens, that their economic policies no longer command mass support and nor do their value systems.

On the other hand, Gramsci argued that even though you have this organic crisis, that is a system, if you like, which is unraveling from within, the system doesn't necessarily collapse. It has a huge amount of resilience built in as well, protective layers, which are really important in periods of crisis. But these protective layers, and their active leaders, are not only seeking to reverse the crisis. An organic crisis is also, in Gramsci's view, a moment of reconstruction. It's a moment of renewal as well. It's a moment when other ways of seeing the world, other ways of organizing the world, organizing power and its organizing concepts also come to the fore. So the most farsighted history makers, as Gramsci called them, those who live on the terrain of politics, economy, society as it is today, but also have a vision of what the future might look like, a refueled future might look like, are also very active in the world. That is to say they're trying to renew, restabilize, reconstruct, a new hegemony which may have more inclusive elements of the population and of the world, society and state and global zone within it, but which will also have elements of the past deeply embedded, including the centrality of forms of corporate power suited to the organizing concept.

The key problem, however, for the mass of ordinary working people, and for Gramsci, in regard to the organic crisis and this renewal and reconstruction from an organic crisis is that reconstruction is not always peaceful. Reconstruction is accompanied by large-scale conflict, domestic political violence, as well as international warfare and military violence. Now, this global situation is complexified even further when we look at and apply a concept called "ultra-imperialism" from the work of Karl Kautsky about 100 years ago,<sup>17</sup> where we see that the world as it is today, and particularly the rise and position of China today, was partly assisted by US strategy and investment. That is, the Chinese ruling class' integration into the world economy occurred in a manner in which has made it not just interdependent but inter-penetrated into Western economies and the American economy. It is simultaneously interpenetrated, competitive with those economies, and has shared global challenges and strategic rivalries with those economies and states. Everything, all at once.

This complexity means there is going to be a lot of tension and turbulence and possibly violence in the transitional period. But it's not like the old Cold War. It is not necessarily an ideological competition, even as there are differences in the politics of national capitalisms. There is no Chinese Warsaw Pact against Nato. There are not large numbers of political parties in the world allied with the Chinese Communist Party, as there were with the Soviet Communist Party. This is a very different kind of situation. And, we see this in the reactions of the United States and Britain. In regard to China, it is not a full-throated rejection like it was regarding the Soviet Union, a power requiring "roll back" and ultimate destruction, in effect, because it was an existential threat. Hence we see this in the selective decoupling in which the United States is engaged from China and in the British case, the policy of so called 'robust pragmatism'.<sup>18</sup> That is to say that China is a benefit and an opportunity, but it is also a threat, a decoupling of security from investment, finance and trade, etc.. And how might we conceptualise what this new reality might be? It's a very difficult problem, but a clumsy formulation might be to call it a "disarticulated transnational historic bloc". That is to say, it is not a perfect historic bloc. It has many significant rivalries, but it appears to be a transnational historic bloc with in-articulation or dis-articulation built-in, and which has some special racial, ideological and geopolitical features. And it is these special racial, ideological and geopolitical features, if you like, which constitute a source of danger and strife in world politics today.<sup>19</sup>

But, thankfully, the above formulation suggests that the danger may not be an existential conflict, but certainly a period of turbulence, instability, because very often great change comes along with a great deal of violence. So a diagnosis of organic crisis, I would argue, points us towards this transitional moment, which is full of danger of political violence inside the United States, possibly in other countries too, as well as in the international system.

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<sup>17</sup> Karl Kautsky, "Ultraimperialism"; <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kautsky/1914/09/ultra-imp.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/our-position-on-china-speech-by-the-foreign-secretary>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/20/business/economy/yellen-us-china-relationship.html>

<sup>19</sup> Inderjeet Parmar, "Racial and imperial thinking in international theory and politics: Truman, Attlee and the Korean War," *British Journal of Politics and International Studies* 18, 2 (2016).

### *Negative Singularity*

The second way I'd like to suggest we might think about the American crisis in particular is this concept called The Singularity. It's a very interesting mathematical concept, actually. But I think it may sum up to some extent what 2016 might represent in American politics and how it develops from there. And because I believe we're still living with the impact of 2016 and that is going to continue for some time. So this term, The Singularity refers to a dramatic statistical discontinuity, if you like. It's the point where a gradually rising trend line on a graph turns completely vertical.

For the person who came up with this particular application to world politics, James Bennett, was writing about the power of the Anglosphere in world politics. His argument is that the Anglosphere is the dominant and should be the dominant bloc in world politics because of its superiority in various kinds of ways. And his argument is that for a long time that Anglosphere was developing in a relatively stable and linear manner. However, the Singularity refers to a number of changes and revolutions that occur in society, in politics, economy and technology, which all come together and coagulate at a particular point. And the point at which there develops a vertical rise is the time of the dominance of the Anglosphere in world politics. And for him, that is the way the world ought to be. For him, that's a positive thing.<sup>20</sup>

Now, I use the term to reverse it and consider it in a much more in a negative way, not as progress, but as describing reaction and reversal across domains, which represents the deepening of crises and polarizations and factionalization, a process of greater violence, restrictions, and reversals of rights and the movement towards dictatorship, possibly an elective dictatorship, but full of sham elections as mere opportunities to endorse dominant party candidates.<sup>21</sup> So this, to me, is a kind of gradual decline of American society, politics, economy, ideology and so on, which becomes a cliff off which it falls. 2016 therefore represents The Negative Singularity, not a positive singularity. And when we put this in world context, in the crisis of global power shifts, hegemonic instability and transitions with strategic rivalries and systemic rivalries, Ukraine, military tensions in East Asia, trade tariff wars and decoupling strategies, everything points to great danger.

Therefore, like organic crisis, the moment of change, that moment of negative singularity suggests a great deal of tension, rivalry, instability, and great danger domestically as well as globally.

### *Poly Crisis*

The third concept I'd like to introduce, though I'm sure you know it already, is Poly Crisis, the liberal buzzword of today. The London *Financial Times* declared 2022 the year of the poly crisis, which effectively refers to the overall effects of the co-mingling, the gathering together of a series of separate crises such as COVID 19, climate change, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the attendant food and energy crises in its wake. But, fundamentally, poly crisis is caused also the simultaneous decline of unipolar power and the unipolar world order alongside a move to multipolarity which has multiplied the drivers of crises and led to a multitude of crises everywhere, all at once. That is to say that the world order has a far greater diversity of powers and that greater diversity has introduced more forces, more drivers, therefore, of global crises than there used to be.<sup>22</sup>

So what we see in this view is multiple *subsystems* which represent world order, and in those multiple subsystems there are separate crises which have now causally interconnected with one another and created dangers greater than the sum of their parts. And qualitatively, together, they're far more dangerous than they were if they were in isolation. So there is a focus here on subsystems, which neglects agency and the unequal distribution of powers and the actors and agencies at the top. But nevertheless, this poly crisis perspective has now become the consensus approach, the technocratic consensus approach, in and of the Bretton Woods system, among those who manage the Bretton Woods system financially, economically and in other ways as well. And that includes, if you like, a recognition that there is a crisis of the Western world order. But there is

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<sup>20</sup> James C Bennett, *The Anglosphere Challenge* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Inderjeet Parmar and Mark Ledwidge, "Anglo-American power in the wake of Brexit and America First: a crisis at the heart of the liberal international order," in Elaine Fahey, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Transatlantic Relations* (Forthcoming, Routledge, 2023).

<sup>22</sup> Adam Tooze, Yale University historian, has popularised the term, which has caught on as the key paradigm for the panoply of Bretton Woods institutions: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/03/polycrisis-adam-tooze-historian-explains/>.

overt recognition too that there needs to be a renegotiation and a renewal to reconstruct that very same order. But under new conditions. That is not a major radical restructuring of power or a significant redistribution of that power. The aim is to reconstitute the order on more legitimate terms, maybe slightly more diversified, but certainly not a more thorough-going or authentic multipolar order.<sup>23</sup>

But, again, what this poly crisis concept also suggests, there are crises and tensions, rivalries, resentments, contradictions, as well as interpenetration. That is, great dangers.

Each of the three approaches outlined above to consider how the world works and how the United States works suggests that there is tension and, in the transitional moment, that there is likely to be violence and other forms of conflict, possibly dictatorship or authoritarianism, as a rising force. The key issue really is how does the United States see itself in this kind of maelstrom of crises and tensions and so on? Can the United States see itself and survive as one of several world powers? That is to say, will it accept such a status without conflict? Major questions remain unresolved.

### *America's journey to the present*

I want to now go to the third part of my remarks, which has to do with how the United States ended up where it is today. To try to address that, I go back to the 1960s and in effect, the relative containment and rollback, by organized corporate power of many of the anti-racist, women's and organized labour's and democratic movements gains for society in economic and other conditions.<sup>24</sup> The rollback of those democratic political, racial and economic gains of the 1960s, was achieved through conscious and sustained concerted attack on state programmes, democratic rights and the anti-war and other liberation movements for radical reform amid campaigns for law and order, and the simultaneous development and embedding of neoliberal order from the 1970s, into the era of Ronald Reagan and the Washington consensus. What effectively happened was the massive growth in the power of the new right. The right wing, the new right of that particular time, was underpinned by remobilized, resurgent corporate power leading to the rise of a powerful right wing establishment that sought, in their own terms, to 'rival' the influence and institutional forms of the 'liberal' establishment. In truth, the two establishment's are joined at the hip on several fronts, including their primordial attachment to the military-industrial complex.<sup>25</sup>

It is at that moment we see the origins of many of the elements of a right wing establishment, which we now see as very well organised indeed. That is, for example, evidenced by the level of organization and influence of a Christian evangelical establishment, a cultural right wing establishment, media, by right-wing commentators and intellectuals, the influence of think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, and a panoply of foundations to fund them. The latter underpin the institutionalized power and influence of the right in America.

This development powerfully influences a new politics of the two main political parties, both underpinned by corporate money and each of them engaging in a different kind, but nevertheless a kind, of identity politics. The Republican Party focuses on the racist identity politics of white loss, the diminishing power and status of the white male breadwinner, heterosexual loss, and loss of established male, white power to minorities, immigrants and women. The Democratic Party more or less coalesced around minority identity politics, around women's rights, the new Black politics, and so on. But, and herein lies the sleight of hand at root of modern US politics, both parties' strategies were premised upon the sovereignty of corporate power and interests – in lower taxes, de-regulation, and roll back of legal protections for workers and of social programmes.<sup>26</sup> It was a war on the workers and poor that used the battering ram of racist divide and rule strategies. So, in effect, what we get then is party political messaging and competition around culture, race and gender, far more than around economic redistribution of income and wealth and so on. And that underpins the neoliberal programme inaugurated from the 1970s into the 1980s and which continued apace for many, many decades and in effect, more and more created the sources of inequality in American society and economy and among the people in income, wealth and power.

<sup>23</sup> Farwa Sial, "Whose polycrisis?" <https://www.resilience.org/stories/2023-02-13/whose-polycrisis/>.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/democracy/the-lewis-powell-memo-a-corporate-blueprint-to-dominate-democracy/>

<sup>25</sup> For a thorough and up to date detailed assessment of this, see the website of the Security Policy Reform Institute - <https://www.securityreform.org/news-and-analysis>.

<sup>26</sup> <https://thewire.in/world/establishment-liberals-far-right-extremism>.

And it more and more alienated the American electorate and people from the two main political parties as well, as social, economic and other conditions deteriorated while the rich got ever richer. By the 1990s and the end of the Cold War, the division among American ruling elites focuses largely on by how much to cut welfare programmes and roll back the state, within a neoliberal consensus that now pushes globalization as a silver bullet, while largely maintaining the power of the military-industrial complex.<sup>27</sup> But the shrill volume of partisan divisions reaches new heights, decreasing apparent bipartisanship. And then after 9-11, the global war on terror, the Iraq war and the delegitimization of elites as a result, further fueled by the 2008 financial crisis' profound effects on people's lives. The bifurcation of American politics between right and liberals became overtly visible in the form of the 'Tea Party' as well as in the Occupy Wall Street movement.<sup>28</sup>

By 2016, then, we see the playing out of this process at the highest levels of US politics - in the presidency, with the rise of the candidacy of Donald Trump, a complete outsider, as well as in Bernie Sanders, another outsider to the Democratic Party, to its left. So this long term movement, if you like, was very critical to the construction of the way in which politics developed and works today.

I further argue that the presidency of Barack Obama from 2008 onwards played a very powerful role in this bifurcation as well. One was unwitting. That is, he was the first African-American president. But the right-wing framing of the politics of that particular presidency around culture wars, of loss of power and status or 'real' Americans - the white male breadwinner, white heterosexual power, used Obama's victory to unleash and harness a 'backlash'. Donald Trump recognized that as a key moment, mobilised 'birtherism', challenged Obama's Americanness itself, challenging where he was born, whether he's an authentic American, and then linking that with a broader white anxiety about loss. The idea that by 2042 or 2050, the United States would be a majority-minority nation fueled and mobilized white fear and cultural loss and so on, crystallizing it in political campaigns.<sup>29</sup>

But, Barack Obama own policies contributed strongly to the process too. His political playbook emphasized the interests of Wall Street, not Main Street.<sup>30</sup> Corporate power sat at the heart of his administrations' preoccupations. In 2008 and the wake of the financial crisis, the Obama administration's economic and financial policies were far more dedicated to corporate bailouts than they were for shoring up the lives of ordinary American people, including African-Americans. The latter were worse off in 2017 than they had been in 2007, the year before Barack Obama became president. Obama embodied the perfect result of the 1960s liberal programme of incorporation into the power elite the best and brightest of racial and other minorities, as the radicalism of the mass movements for freedom and equality rocked American power.<sup>31</sup>

That is to say, there is a *politics of identity*, but *policies* which are related to corporate power and so on. And Obama also played a key role in defanging the Occupy Wall Street movement as well. In sum, despite the great symbolic achievement of the first African-American presidency, we see many different key factors coming together which created the conditions for 2016, for Donald Trump and therefore, of what happened on the 6th of January 2021. And that process remains unconcluded as the Biden administration has, up to now, appeased the far right GOP and failed to bring Trump and his elite network to book.<sup>32</sup>

### *In Conclusion*

To conclude, the US and world situations, separately and in their interdependencies and interpenetrations, are incredibly complicated, difficult to think about, and it is difficult to know where exactly things are going. So, in this context, where would I say the United States is headed? I would argue that it is incredibly confusing,

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<sup>27</sup> <https://thewire.in/books/book-review-america-militarism>.

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.insightturkey.com/commentaries/the-legitimacy-crisis-of-the-us-elite-and-the-rise-of-donald-trump>.

<sup>29</sup> K. Verney, M. Ledwidge, and I. Parmar, eds., *Barack Obama and the Myth of a Post-Racial America* (Routledge, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope* (Crown, 2006), summed it up.

<sup>31</sup> Inderjeet Parmar and Mark Ledwidge, "...a foundation-hatched black': Obama, the US establishment, and foreign policy," *International Politics* 54 (2017). See also, Richard L Zweigenhaft and G William Domhoff, *Elite Diversity in the Power* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2018, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition).

<sup>32</sup> <https://thewire.in/world/establishment-liberals-far-right-extremism>.

so I'm not going to make any predictions. But I would argue that it is very messy, turbulent, unstable and, therefore, dangerous.

Domestically, there's great and continuing danger of political violence on a large scale, particularly from the extreme right. And some of these extreme right wing, far right forces are now embedded in the Republican House of Representatives and in the Senate. They're going to be running for election in 2024. And Donald Trump is, at least for now, the leading candidate nationally for the Republican Party. But even had Trump been defeated decisively within the Republican Party, we still have the issue of Trumpism without Donald Trump. And we only have to look to Florida with Ron DeSantis as governor, to see what a laboratory of Trumpism without Trump looks like in the hands of someone who is actually administratively competent and politically capable. And it is clear at the moment that President Biden, who has recently announced his decision to run for a second term in 2024, would prefer another face off with Trump than with DeSantis.<sup>33</sup>

But I would also argue and urge people to keep in mind that the United States has been in dire situations before – though perhaps not so extreme at home and internationally. It has faced many, many dangers domestically as well. In addition, it is important to bear in mind that where there's 'an iron law of oligarchy' there's also 'an iron law of democracy'. Despite 6 January 2021, the US system held together. It survived. There was mass street level mobilizations in various ways to oppose Trumpism. There was mass electoral mobilization to defeat Trump. Although Donald Trump increased his vote in 2020 from 2016 by many millions, there were many more millions galvanized to vote against him, in record numbers, and for Joseph Biden.

The deep structures of American politics, the courts, the states and the cities also held firm in not allowing the election results to be in any way tainted by various kinds of pressure from the Trump administration as well. And at the same time, there are if we look at some of the elements in the American body politic today, particularly in some of the think tanks and foundations, some moves towards what they are calling 'post neoliberalism', that is moving beyond market fundamentalism and global corporate power and untrammelled globalization toward something a lot more manageable, which might then deal and heal some of these ruptures as well.<sup>34</sup>

But at the same time, we have a very 'messy multipolarity' – what someone called 'distributed hegemony' - internationally with increased risks of conflict and war, a realignment or dealignment which is really puzzling and confusing. And we don't know which direction this is going in. But one of the greatest tendencies now, which we've seen over the last 12 months in particular, is a kind of bifurcation between states sources of security and their sources of trade, finance and investment, that more and more states are refusing to see the world today, in Cold War terms, but receiving their security from the United States and other Western powers, but their financial, economic and commercial prosperity and standards of living from China and other emerging economies. And the consequence of that is a greater bifurcation of the powers and a degree of realignment or non-alignment in the world. This could be a very different kind of emerging world power distribution, more diverse and democratic, at least at the level of inter-state politics.<sup>35</sup>

However, the birth pangs of a new order in the world are often accompanied by war, dislocation, and strife. So that is to recognize the dangers pointed to by the three approaches I talked about. Yet, this could also be a moment of reconstruction. But all too frequently, reconstruction is accompanied by war. It follows massive amounts of destruction. That is what poly crisis, organic crisis and negative singularity all appear to point towards.

But I would like to finish on a more optimistic note. Antonio Gramsci said many things about crisis and strife, but also the latent power of the masses of people and organized workers. One of the things he stood for was the idea of the "pessimism of the intellect, and optimism of the will". That is to say, that we are not powerless in all this maelstrom of crises, that there is always hope in mass action and the struggle against

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/us-news/democrats-want-donald-trump-republican-29629383>.

<sup>34</sup> <https://hewlett.org/library/beyond-neoliberalism-rethinking-political-economy/>

<sup>35</sup> Amitav Acharya, "After Liberal Hegemony: The advent of a multiplex world," *Ethics and International Affairs* Fall 2017; and Inderjeet Parmar, "Global power shifts, diversity, and hierarchy in International politics," *Ethics and International Affairs* 33, 2 (2019).

war and racism, for peace, justice and democratic rights. And I would urge you strongly not to be negative, despite the very pessimistic tone of my analysis. Power lies in a lot of people's hands and is more diversely distributed now than ever. And we see forces at home and abroad, internationally and in domestic political systems far more diverse, far more assertive in fighting for their lives than we have for many, many decades. And I'd say that is where the future hope may actually lie.

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