

New cold war or ‘world civil war’? *Wertkritik* and the critical theory of capitalism in an age of conflict

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journals.sagepub.com/home/est**Frederick Harry Pitts** *University of Exeter – Cornwall Campus, Penryn, UK*

Abstract

This article explores the contribution of *Wertkritik*, a contemporary tendency in German critical Marxist thought, to the theorisation of capitalism, and in particular its relationship with geopolitical conflict and war. Against traditional Marxist and liberal determinism, *Wertkritik* emphasises how the rationally organised ‘forces of production’ do not motivate the historical development of capitalism, but rather the forces of *destruction*. This article suggests that *Wertkritik* illuminates contemporary capitalist development insofar as it lays bare how the apparent ‘post-neoliberal’ turn to state-driven industrial policy is motivated less by a drive to unleash the productive forces in pursuit of a more dynamic or green economy and more by the management of the unfolding destructive forces represented in the new forms of conflict and competition arising between warring military and economic powers. The explanation this offers of the cultural dynamics shaping a context of authoritarian convergence provides vital materials towards a critical theory of a capitalism conditioned by increasing geopolitical tensions. Offering the concept of a ‘world civil war’ as an alternative to the rationalisations inherent in prevailing notions of a ‘new’ or ‘second’ cold war, this theorisation also offers pointers for an emancipatory praxis attuned to the current context.

Keywords

Capitalism, geopolitics, Marxism, new cold war, political economy

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Introduction: Post-neoliberalism and the ‘polycrisis’

Wertkritik, or ‘value critique’, is a strand of critical Marxian thought emerging from Germany in the late twentieth century (Larsen et al., 2014; Neary, 2017; Robinson, 2018; van der Linden, 1997). Its key thinkers include Robert Kurz (2003, 2009; a rare book-length English translation was published in 2016); Ernst Lohoff (Lohoff, 2013), Anselm Jappe (Jappe, 2017), Roswitha Scholz (Scholz, 2013) and Norbert Trenkle (Trenkle, 2013). Its key themes include a rigorous theorisation of value and labour in production and circulation (see Pitts 2020, Ch. 2; Pitts 2022, Ch. 5), a fierce critique of left anti-semitism, the analysis of the state as an inseparable part of capitalist society and a theory of capitalist breakdown focused on the ever-present capacity for overproduction created by runaway technological development.

Another aspect of *Wertkritik* somewhat less well-documented in its Anglophone reception, however, is its focus on war. Particularly of interest here is Kurz’s account of the origins of abstract labour in the ‘political economy of firearms’ that developed from the ‘military revolution’ decisive to the rise of capitalism, Lohoff’s writings on ‘world civil war’ and Trenkle’s cultural diagnosis of the conflicts that characterise our times. The first part of this article introduces this body of work, applying *Wertkritik* to the understanding of the history, present and future of the relationship between war and how we theorise the development of capitalism against the claims of mainstream and radical commentaries alike. Having introduced this underappreciated strand of modern Marxian thought, the second half of the article explores the potential light *Wertkritik* can shed upon contemporary capitalism in an age of conflict.

The second half begins by considering how *Wertkritik* differs from other approaches that foreground imperialism or coloniality in their accounts of violence and capitalism. According to Lohoff and Trenkle, recent events compound the long-standing sense that the conventional concept of imperialism has exhausted its utility. They argue that the current ‘imperial order’, insofar as there is one, is not marked as in previous phases by a Western hegemony geared towards the realisation of its economic interests. The idea that, for instance, the West is involved in some kind of imperialism by means of EU or NATO expansion in the eastern-lying parts of Europe projects onto the desire of Baltic and Nordic states for security a worldview more at home in the nineteenth century than the twenty-first. Moreover, the military expansionism of countries opposed to the West, like Russia, rests less on any obvious desire to engage in a rush for resources tied to rational economic interests than on irrational national pathologies or will to power impervious to the threat of economic ruin at the hands of Western sanctions.

The absence of traditional economic interests propelling contemporary conflicts – including those in the Middle East to which several global and regional powers are party – calls into question both the ascription of terms like ‘imperialism’ as well as the notion that the current context resembles a ‘new’ or ‘second’ version of the realist, rationally calculating Cold War witnessed in the twentieth-century (Achcar, 2023; Schindler et al., 2023). What we see instead is a complicated terrain of conflict criss-crossed by the vying claims of a range of differently sized powers which act in sometimes contradictory combinations in the context of any given theatre. Some of these powers, the thinkers covered here suggest, pose as an anti-imperialist resistance against a decadent West

whilst simultaneously engaging in expansionist violence abroad, authoritarian repression at home and actively attempting to advance their economies through trade with the West on world markets. Meanwhile, the liberal democracies of the West themselves acquire authoritarian characteristics as they adapt their domestic spheres to deal with the challenge posed by this intensifying rivalry, whilst largely seeking to maintain the same openness to trade that characterised the period of globalisation.

The ‘strange form of cooperation and confrontation’, as Lohoff puts it (2022), inherent in this convergence hardly represents the type of ‘new’ or ‘second’ cold war that some see currently cleaving the world cleanly in two, representing instead precisely the ‘world civil war’ Kurz theorised as occupying the frayed interstices of the global or imperial order itself, as state and non-state actors seek to fundamentally reshape it in their image. Just as with outdated notions of ‘imperialism’, framing the evolving threat landscape around a brewing ‘new cold war’ leads to a view of conflict as a game played by rational actors who can allocate resources to particular apparent problems based on an external relationship between vying forces. Understanding the current conflict as a more complex ‘world civil war’ along the lines theorised by *Wertkritik* thinkers, meanwhile, highlights the complicated relationships between competing powers and the intertwined character of domestic and international factors, as rivals both confront and converge with one another across the fragmented global scene. Interestingly, we see that recent commentary by thinkers in the *Wertkritik* tradition tends towards an ultimately cultural explanation and response of many of these tendencies, rather than the material-economic explanation offered by Kurz and others at an early stage.

An outcome of this is the observation that a misguided ‘externalization of authoritarianism’, as Trenkle (2022a, 2022b) puts it, propels a response in the West that is itself taking on authoritarian, at best nationalistic or militaristic, dimensions of its own, as liberal democracies seek to isolate themselves politically and economically from the perceived alien threat. Trenkle identifies rearmament and greater military spending as examples of how ‘the societies of the so-called West come more and more to resemble their own externalized enemy’. Importantly, the account presented here puts in a different light what has been widely seen as a ‘post-neoliberal’ turn in capitalism (Davies & Gane, 2021) involving greater state invention expressed in strengthened industrial policy, captured in ‘Bidenomics’ – itself a continuation of certain aspects of Trumpism in the United States – which provides a case study of some of these superficially ‘neo-Keynesian’ tendencies (Merchant, 2023).

This apparently post-neoliberal model of capitalism and its commitment to innovation and industrial policy conspicuously appears to be geared towards the development of greener, more dynamic and more inclusive economies based on the stimulation of the productive forces in response to a period of so-called ‘polycrisis’ characterised by financial turbulence, the COVID-19 pandemic and climate catastrophe. However, the popular concept of ‘polycrisis’ can sometimes conceal within a vague sense of everything being connected what really makes things tick. *Wertkritik* draws attention to an alternative explanation for capitalism’s changing character based not in ‘polycrisis’ or the development of the productive forces, but the irrational and destructive forces at play in the intensifying forms of conflict and confrontation emerging within and between vying powers. Rather than economic or ecological shifts per se propelling the

reconfiguration of capitalism in the present time, or conventional modes of ‘systemic competition’, this suggests that something darker and deeper underpins the transformations positively appraised by a cross-spectrum array of political voices.

In this sense, *Wertkritik* adds weight to the claims emerging among some observers – both critical and supportive – that the ‘neo-Keynesian’ or ‘post-neoliberal’ tendency of contemporary capitalism epitomised in Bidenomics represents not a rational economic response to polycrisis so much as a strategic gambit in an intensifying age of conflict (Anderson, 2023; Luce, 2023; Merchant, 2023). The impacts of what some see as a new age of imperialism, and others frame as a ‘second’ or ‘new’ cold war, thus have broad consequences for theorising capitalism. As an alternative to current radical and mainstream approaches to understanding the present moment, these dynamics should be seen as part and parcel of the combination of convergence and confrontation signified by the concept of world civil war, where the authoritarian onslaught increasingly permeates the domestic structure of society and economy in liberal democracies as a salvo in struggles on the international stage. In this process of convergence, states are seeking a solution to a problem constructed in terms of a ‘new cold war’ cutting the world and its countries cleanly in two, rather than what might better be characterised as a world civil war cutting right through those countries themselves and to which a different set of responses might be necessary.

Having noted how, from the Marxian critique of political economy found in Kurz’s explanation of war and capitalism, present-day *Wertkritik* tends to foreground a critique of culture closer in spirit to the tradition of critical theory, we conclude by considering the implications for alternative modes of praxis in and against the current age of conflict. For *Wertkritik* thinkers, we close by noting, any response must centre on an emancipatory social struggle to defend and extend the imperfect rights and freedoms promised but incompletely realised by liberal democracies within and crucially beyond the increasingly inwards-looking societies of the bourgeois West.

From the ‘father of all things’ to the political economy of firearms

Behind the ubiquitous modern compulsion to earn money stands the logic of thundering cannons. (Kurz, 2011a)

For *Wertkritik*, as for Heraclitus, war really is ‘the father of all things’ (Lohoff, 2013). In this respect, as Lohoff demonstrates, *Wertkritik* harks back to thinkers like Hobbes and Hegel. At base, human subjectivity is related to the ability to objectify others, a process that in various times and places takes a more or less violent guise. In this way, the forms of recognition, right and freedom consolidated in the modern state relate back to a common human capacity for violence and a willingness to risk one’s life in combat. Whilst the capacity to kill or be killed must be continually renewed as a condition of human self-consciousness, the modern state represents its suspension and sublimation, life-and-death struggle displaced onto other kinds of social activity – namely, labour. But the striking of such a social peace ultimately only mediates in another form the

underlying content of violence and destruction – a process that can easily go into reverse where decadence and deregulation run riot.

The likes of Lohoff (2013) also take inspiration from classic military thinkers like Clausewitz, who famously saw war as ‘the continuation of politics by other means’. This does not mean that politics poses a solution to conflict, and nor does the placing of the means of violence in the hands of the state mark its rationalisation. Politics is not a form of reason imposed upon war and violence, but wields its own irrationality that rather than extinguishing conflict acts as its spark and accelerant. Being driven by non-material ideological and emotional factors, politics lacks limits, creating a tendency for the wars it creates to attain the ‘absolute’ character Clausewitz feared.

By charting these inescapable connections with war, *Wertkritik* runs against the grain of classic bourgeois thought. In particular, it challenges the idea that capitalist society emerged from, or is synonymous with, peaceful barter, entrepreneurial industriousness or a secularised work ethic. For *Wertkritik*, the idea that war, violence and the free market are incompatible, and that the extension of trade and commerce guarantee a world at peace, is an illusion generated by the fact that capitalism was initially associated with the confinement of violence and war as matters of state. But the latter’s guarantees of Liberty, Fraternity and Equality ultimately rest on what is only a temporary and partial suspension and sublimation of violence, carried over in the marketisation of violence and its regimentation in state hands (Lohoff, 2013).

Alongside such liberal homilies, *Wertkritik*’s other primary target is Marxism’s approach to war and conflict and their role in constitution of capitalism. Whilst Marx, in his masterwork *Capital* (Marx, 1990), emphasised the violent roots of capitalism, and other traditions of scholarship have noted the relationship between forms of colonialism and primitive accumulation and capitalism (Quijano, 2007; Mignolo, 2011), Marxism has often subsequently failed to consider the connection. As Kurz argues (2011a), the ambiguous and uncertain character of social and economic development prior to the rise of capitalism meant that many Marxists simply fell in line behind a fundamentally bourgeois account of history. Marxism has traditionally advocated a historical materialism that emphasises the role of the productive forces – technology, management techniques and so on – in driving history forwards from agrarian to industrial society. The reason Marxists have found it difficult to deal with origins of capitalism that have ‘dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt’, as Marx put it (1990, p. 926), is because it does not sit well with a view of historical development passing seamlessly through successive and necessary stages towards human emancipation – a perspective taken over wholesale from liberal notions of progress.

Still beguiling radical criticisms of capitalist society today, such a view does not fully explain where these developmental forces arose from in the first place. For instance, it is insufficient simply to point to the advent of steam power as the catalyst of the Industrial Revolution. Just as Marx progressively unfolds layers of historical determination in *Capital*, we must excavate the political, social and economic imperatives that drove the development of these forces in the first place. To do this, Kurz suggests, we must focus not on the forces of *production* at the inception of capitalist modernity, but the forces of *destruction*, namely, in the invention of firearms. As Kurz suggests (2011a, 2011b),

history unfolds, and the capitalist labour process arises, through the progressive imposition of the new political economy of firearms upon the old.

Precapitalist wars were limited, ritualistic and sportsmanlike affairs, being largely for the edification or advancement of aristocratic classes. In the Middle Ages, everyday life would be largely unaffected by whether one's social superiors were at war or not. But in the late 1400s and 1500s, all this changed with more sophisticated military machines brought into service to fight Clausewitzian 'absolute wars' waged as the extension of political disputes. This sparked an explosion in military expenditure, earlier economies of plunder and booty replaced by that of taxation funding standing armies and firepower production. As Kurz explains (2011a), the 'state-building wars' of the early modern period, which, through the production of ocean-going navies, saw states engage in colonialist expansion, institutionalised lasting power structures that brought into being politics as a specific and relatively autonomous sphere of activity that represented the administrative complement of an increasingly dynamic economy.

What Kurz calls the 'political economy of firearms' (2011b) was decisive in this military revolution. Firearms neutralised the power of feudal cavalries and thus reshaped society in the image of new and more enterprising class powers. The production needs of cannons and muskets demanded a shift from small workshops to greater economies of scale in a nascent weapons industry. The greater destructive power they represented required new infrastructure like fortresses. Competition between companies and between states propelled technological innovation in the means of destruction, driven by the arms race and the pursuit of market share. As Kurz argues (2011a), the 'best social possibilities' were increasingly 'sacrificed' to the military machine in the form of personnel and knowledge.

Despite advances in military hardware, wars fought by absolutist states in the eighteenth century were limited in their capacity to seek total destruction of enemies by the mercenary and thus expensive and unreliable character of the armies at their disposal. But, increasingly, the growing size and complexity of arms meant that soldiers were no longer self-sufficient in their provision and instead became reliant on supply from centralised stores in the control of nascent state powers. Kurz (2011a) describes how a separate military sphere distinct from civilian life and civil society developed, with a more or less professionalised standing army. The rise of the conscript citizen soldier, compelled not by mercenary interest but by a fanatical devotion to the nation-state, enabled the likes of Napoleon to break the mould of military command up to that point by defeating enemies in decisive battles.

These standing armies, Kurz (2011a) suggests, were the first part of society to move from direct, personal relations between people to indirect, impersonal relations mediated by the market, money and the modern state. The universalisation of the uniformed citizen incorporated formerly excluded groups as equal subjects in the eyes of the law. In prior societies where the means of violence were distributed only among social masters, Lohoff argues, their power commanded a society of 'loyalty and dependence'. It took the concentration of the means of violence in the hands of the state to clear the way for a society of universal right and equality between formally free individuals. The monopoly on violence possessed by the state is thus the precondition of the 'political domination

adequate to commodity society', an abstract equality imposed within the borders of the nation as 'an abstract geographical space' (Lohoff, 2013).

These conditions produced professionalised soldiers who became, in effect, the first wage labourers dependent for their reproduction not on the household but on money and commodity consumption. Their labour prefigured the abstract, emptied-out labour of industrial capitalism insofar as fighting no longer concerned an intrinsic motivation tied to ideals or kinship so much as the command of the state to kill in general. Kurz contends (Kurz, 2011a) that the status of emergent citizen-soldiers as the first wage workers came with the consequences attached to abstract labour through time: immiseration of soldiers and degradation of their work; their separation from independent means of producing and acquiring the conditions of living; and the ever-present possibility of unemployment in its modern guise. The first subjects in history to be 'unemployed' in this formal fashion, when peace broke out between wars soldiers found themselves on the fringes, policed as a social problem and surplus population.

As their charges became the archetype for the working-class, meanwhile, military commanders became the archetype for the capitalist class, seizing the spoils of war and seeking to invest and accumulate from them, and their captains the archetypes of managers. As such, for Kurz, it was war that incubated the new forms of class subjectivity characteristic of capitalist society, and the management techniques and employment relations through which they are expressed.

The scale and spread of the production necessary to arm and sustain standing armies demanded provisioning by a 'permanent war economy' that eclipsed the agrarian ways of life of the old society (Kurz, 2011b). The rise of finance, which filled gaps in state coffers by financing wars in exchange payments, Kurz attributes to the military revolution. War financiers were not sufficient in and of themselves to fund the 'political economy of firearms', however. From the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, there was a steep rise in taxes to make ends meet. Previously taxes were levied, in a somewhat relaxed fashion, on natural factors like agricultural yield. But the taxes that sustained the political economy of firearms were gathered by force by rising absolutist states, and subject to a thoroughly abstract and mediated relationship with the production of wealth.

The wars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries thus saw control concentrated in the hands of a sovereign state commanding a specialised apparatus of violence overseas supported by the taxes of non-combatants at home. Taxes were the price of non-participation and the preservation of stability in the domestic national sphere, but also increasingly linked the fortunes of commodity production at home to the fortunes of armies abroad. States financed wars through systems of taxation that compelled their citizens and companies to make money in order to pay what was owed, accumulating vast administrative and bureaucratic power in order to make collections. In this way, Kurz suggests (Kurz, 2011b), the state's need to raise taxes to fund military expenditure liberated from existing constraints not only the modern state, but an economy based on the production and monetary exchange of commodities in pursuit of expanded value.

As Kurz outlines, agrarian society had provided a poor basis for money to realise its role as 'as the anonymous ruling power' (Kurz, 2011a). Advances in productivity generated a surplus but the logic of productive investment and accumulation did not govern how this surplus was enjoyed or spent. But the consequence of the military revolution

and the ‘political economy of firearms’ was to ‘disembed’ from society a separate ‘functional space for business’ – an ‘autonomous subject’, albeit one with its manufacturing and industrial capacities often coordinated by the state (Kurz, 2016). The ‘abstraction’ of this apparatus from the simple ‘material needs’ of society burnished the power of money as the mediating thread of subsistence and social existence (Kurz, 2011a).

The warfare state

If there is something like an ur-experience for the homo fordisticus, it is the experience of the World War I battlefronts. (Lohoff, 2013)

Modern warfare was characterised by the intensified dependence upon these mediated social relations. Their mediated and impersonal character may have reduced direct aggression and violence in everyday life, but they were guaranteed by, and supported, a more comprehensive capacity for extermination and total destruction concentrated in the hands of the state and its armies. As these social and political conditions developed, the logical conclusion of the earlier absolute wars, based on the total vanquishing and overthrow of an enemy, lay in the ‘total war’ of the twentieth century. With the productive capacity of society set in full mobilisation in support of the war effort, civilian and civilian infrastructure became a military target from the twentieth century onwards.

This produced a permanent defensive and offensive war economy. The modernisation that unfolded from the nineteenth into the twentieth century represented a series of ways of managing this underpinning war economy, whether in the guise of new deal liberalism, social democracy, communism or the kinds of planning characteristic of the so-called ‘developmental state’ (Kurz, 2011b; Kurz, 2011c). These all rested on the massification of production in line with the underlying requirements of the war economy, which extended the abstraction of labour once experienced by standing armies to society as a whole. In this context, Kurz contends, the ‘total national labour’ attained a new status as a central part of the war effort and the forms of ‘recuperative modernization’ and social reform that followed (Kurz, 2016).

Decisive to this greater abstraction of labour, Kurz suggests (2013a), were scientific and technical advances compelled by conflict and competition between states. The labour process was reshaped and rendered more productive by new technologies, scientific management and state support for research and development in dual-use civilian-military technologies like electronics – its result being the assembly line. In the state-directed large-scale production necessitated by the two world wars, together these innovations took the subjective, individualised, arbitrary and immediate cooperation present in production during earlier stages of industrial development and subjected it to an objective, deindividualised, systematic and mediated framework that actively transformed the concrete experience of working life. Following the two world wars, Kurz contends, the development of productivity in the workplace remained contained within the ‘logic of political-military competition’ in the shape of the Cold War.

Whilst there was no return to the sheer scale of violence witnessed in the first half of the twentieth century, Lohoff (2013) suggests the Cold War saw an increase in the

powers of destruction invested in the state with the promise of mutually assured destruction and the development of an ever-greater capacity for killing in West and East. Thus, where the war years had incubated the 'productive forces of the second industrial revolution' in the form of forces of destruction, the Cold War unleashed them (Kurz, 2013b). The Fordist organisation of the labour process having been perfected by the warfare state, the rapid productivity increases it generated in peacetime threatened to overproduce commodities relative to demand, devaluing goods and creating the conditions for economic crisis. But the innovations of the war years resulted in new branches of production that met the new needs unlocked in an age of mass consumption – cars and household appliances, for instance. Hence, just as the war economy represented the scientific application of civilian labour in service of destruction, the subsequent development of mass commodity production and consumption represented the civilian 'continuation of destruction by other means' (Lohoff, 2013).

The stability of capitalism in the context of this rapid productivity drive was superintended by the strong role of the state in the Cold War period. This 'organised capitalism', underwritten by the political command wielded by the state, seemed, to some, to have suspended the law of value itself. Hungry for taxes and the creation of military means, Lohoff (2013) argues, the war economy effectively subordinated production to apparently 'unproductive' state consumption. Rather than market forces, the third industrial revolution resulted from vast state expenditure on research and development in the name of military needs. Having 'dissolved' everything into 'politics' in the name of great-power struggle, the Cold War state was taken to have defied economics and removed any 'objective inner limit' to capitalist production, as Kurz (2016) puts it.

Characteristic of Kurz's work and wider *Wertkritik*, however, is a focus on precisely those inner limits, and the crisis tendencies they generate. As it transpired, the opening of the Western economy to the competitive pressures and manufacturing capacity generated by modernisation tendencies elsewhere in the world eventually weakened the economic position of the West in terms of 'commodity and capital flows'. The ensuing long downturn, however, did little to stymie the expansion of the so-called 'military-industrial complex' that had prospered in the 'permanent war economy' after 1945. With the 'third industrial revolution', microelectronics revolutionised and computerised high-tech weapons systems. Under Reagan, the United States decisively won the arms race against its Soviet rival through a kind of 'weaponised Keynesianism' that racked up public debt entirely against the grain of the Republican assault on Keynesian social spending in other parts of the economy (Kurz, 2013b).

The Cold War, Lohoff argues, represented the peak of the warfare state. The arms race exceeded all existing forms of destructiveness and its scientific and economic implications completely overhauled the terrain of capitalist competition within and between nation states. Up to a point, the Soviet Union remained competitive scientifically and technologically, but a range of factors exhausted this state of affairs: the rise of information technologies; a more globalised economy in the West affording access to labour-intensive production to stave off crisis; and the 'privileged access of the United States to transnational capital', which enabled greater military expenditure. The victory these factors made possible established a historically unprecedented unipolar world order in which any notion of the balance of power was abolished (Lohoff, 2013).

The post-statist age

In the wars of world order of the West, for the first time in military history the missiles are more expensive than the targets. (Lohoff, 2013)

From 1648 to 1989, states of war and peace were temporally clear, distinct and limited. But, in the 'post-statist' age that followed, they blurred. With US supremacy established at the end of the Cold War, there came the emergence of post-statist 'low intensity' wars where any number of actors could engage on the military terrain whilst stopping safely short of the threat of total destruction on which the statist age and its technologies rested. Whereas the warfare state saw vast expenditure on the arms race in order to ensure the capacity to destroy enemy combatants, in the post-statist age, so-called 'new wars' were fought on the cheap, with low budgets and modest means (Lohoff, 2013).

In the space this post-statist age opened up, a war economy based on the reproduction of the productive potential of society as a whole became in many unstable parts of the world a 'looting economy' based on the reproduction of specific 'military players', as Lohoff puts it (Lohoff, 2013). Rather than the destruction of combatants, this frequently took the form of intervention in the lives of noncombatants, whether by intervening in the circulation of goods or everyday life more broadly. Whereas infrastructure and supply lines were always targeted in the age of statist war as a corollary of seeking the destruction of enemy armies, attacks on civilian life and institutions gradually became central to the new post-statist paradigm.

In the capitalist core, meanwhile, the process of neoliberalisation, whilst transforming the role of the state with reference to other areas of economy and society, did not eliminate the state monopoly on violence and military means. Indeed, for the United States and its allies, the end of the Cold War consolidated it not only domestically but across the whole world. This called into question the Westphalian distinction between 'inner-statist' and international violence, as the West increasingly wielded the kind of 'police power' that expressed the monopoly on violence usually wielded internally within states, projected outward to the world as a capacity to apprehend and prosecute enforced on the global stage instead (Lohoff, 2013).

The post-Cold War world still saw the vast majority of research spending in the United States and elsewhere channelled into military or military-related projects and institutions. This produced technological substitutes for the immediate destructive labour performed by conventional expeditionary forces, striking the final blow to the citizen soldier in the same way that new technologies eroded the jobs and conditions of workers over the same period. Ever-more abstract and automated forms of violence marked the culmination of the process by which long-range weapons, from the long-bow to the B-52 bomber, rendered, via successive stages of mechanisation, hand-to-hand combat a thing of the past. The arms-length form of warfare these innovations afforded saw enemies, as kind of passive 'biomass', annihilated by equally passive 'destruction workers'. As with elsewhere in the emergent digitalised workplace, the abstraction of labour associated with the 'political economy of fire-arms' continued apace.

In a contemporary contribution, Lohoff (2023c) situates the current conflict in Israel and Palestine within this post-statist framework owing the specific character of Hamas as a political and military project. At an earlier stage of the long-running conflict, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation maintained a 'Clausewitzian' calculus of violence as the extension of political struggles by other means where the latter had been exhausted. For Hamas, however, excessive antisemitic violence is not just the form taken by the struggle, but its content. It is an end itself that is itself endless insofar as it seeks resolution not in the creation of a Palestinian state, as did the PLO, but rather the annihilation of Israel and the presence of the Jewish people in the Middle East more broadly. Characterised by the centrality of spectacular violence, this campaign is temporally infinite because its grandiose aims will never be completed to the satisfaction of its exponents (Lohoff, 2023c).

In these respects, rather than a coherent state-building project, according to Lohoff, Hamas represents precisely the 'post-state' (geo)politics theorised by Kurz. In its dominion over the people of Gaza, it replicates none of the traditional functions of a modern state, leaving the mediation of social reproduction to international aid organisations which frees up time and resources to devote to terror activities internally against those under its control and externally against communities across the border in Israel. In this way, Lohoff contends, Hamas holds the population of the collapsed Palestinian state 'hostage' in order to advance the interests of its wealthy criminal organisation and its allies and benefactors in the wider region. With respect to this last aspect, Hamas form part of Iran's network of proxies in the Middle East and elsewhere. Similarly, in Lebanon – a country with which it does not share a border – Iran has built up a proxy force, Hezbollah, that fattens itself from the chaos and misfortune that befalls the collapsed state it attaches itself to as it pursues its sole aim of confrontation with Israel, typifying the 'post-statist' archetype Kurz describes.

World civil war

The total rationalization and full economization of social relations creates a greenhouse in which their immanent opposite, irrationality, always already charged with violence, thrives. (Lohoff, 2013)

The 2008 crisis, Kurz argues (Kurz, 2013b), threw into relief some of the stabilising and destabilising elements of the so-called 'post-statist' age. As a common concern of *Wertkritik*, this centred on the expectation that technological development will lead capitalism to overproduce commodities, which therefore decrease in value. Many left commentators saw financialisation as the outcome of overaccumulated capital seeking a return short of other productive routes for investment in an economy characterised by a swollen service sector and manufacturing overcapacity caused by export-led rising powers. But, for Kurz, the idea that the crisis had been caused by a battle of imperialist blocs – posing China against the United State's fading hegemony – seemed stuck in a mindset better suited to history prior to the 'epochal break' of 1989. Whilst during the Cold War years the world really was divided into competing political blocs and their proxy wars,

the US hegemony definitively established in 1989 did not represent the imperial dominion of a specifically national kind of capital. Rather, US capital mediated global value chains as a whole, and thus defined the common character of contemporary capitalism the world over, China included. This meant that the crisis also needed to be located at the level of the ‘interdependence of world capital’, instead of within competitive dynamics between vying powers (Kurz, 2013b).

Up to 2008, Kurz contends, the military–industrial complex in the United States had underpinned its hegemonic role, guaranteeing domestic growth and jobs and projecting American ‘police’ power overseas by acting and intervening anywhere in the world in the name of stability. This was epitomised in the ‘wars of world order’ the West waged against religious terrorism and rogue states in the nineties and noughties in pursuit of a kind of ‘precarious, planetary crisis management’. This power helped mint what Kurz calls an ‘arms dollar’, distributed in bonds, which meant the world’s excess wealth flowed into US coffers in order to reward the military–industrial complex with renewed investment. The centrality of the arms dollar meant that Wall Street saw the eye of the storm in 2008. But, with government support, it also enabled US private and business consumption to stave off an even worse crisis by absorbing some if not all, of the output of global overproduction in the wake of the expansion of manufacturing capacity that followed the rise of globalisation and the third industrial revolution (Kurz, 2013b).

Identifying finance as the culprit for the crisis, as much of the left did post-2008, levels criticism only at the distribution and circulation of value in capitalist society, whilst excusing the conditions under it is produced. This, for Kurz, expressed ‘the desperate desire to flee back to the times of Fordist prosperity and Keynesian regulation’ represented by the Cold War economy. In the absence of a European ‘arms euro’ capable of absorbing global overproduction, Kurz argues, elements of the post-crisis left placed their hopes in a similarly Cold War-era coalition for ‘world reform’ bringing together Putin’s Russia, authoritarian China, the ‘oil-caudillismo’ of Venezuela and the ‘antise-mitic Islamist regime’ of Iran. This representing an undesirable and implausible alternative, Kurz foresees instead a world civil war stemming from the ‘ripening world crisis’ of overproduction caused by the third industrial revolution (Kurz, 2013b).

Ultimately, as Trenkle (2022a, 2022b) has argued more recently, this failing capitalist economy provided poor foundations for any attempt to establish a post-1989 order of democratic and market freedoms, and neoliberal development only compounded the devastation of catch-up modernisation under ‘actually-existing’ socialism in the period of the Cold War. Kleptocratic enrichment of ruling cliques flourished in the ruins, at the expense of the populations over which they rule. This is of course superficially akin to the processes of privatisation and neoliberalisation associated with the West, albeit with no basis for social and political integration save for national, ethnic and religious fundamentalism (Lohoff, 2023c). Where ‘actually-existing socialism’ and Soviet communism had provided cover for many countries combatting colonialism in the Global South during the period of the Cold War, its collapse left a gap that was plugged by these sectarian ideologies, directed against a range of external and internal enemies. This generated a social and political disintegration that, when West governments intervened militarily to bring order, only worsened the unravelling. In response to this unravelling, Lohoff suggests (2022), the West abandoned the ‘liberal-democratic sense of mission’

expressed in the ‘human rights wars’ that saw the United States and others attempt to play ‘world policeman’ in the nineties and noughties.

In this context, for Lohoff (2023b), the current confrontation between Western liberal democracies and authoritarian states does not lend itself easily to an explanation based on the old-fashioned notion of ‘imperialism’, but rather constitutes the expression of a ‘world civil war’ whereby the distinction between domestic and foreign policy blurs. This war, Kurz suggests, will be fought not between ‘national-imperial power blocs for the redistribution of the world’, as in the twentieth century, but within the interstices of the fraying order itself (Kurz, 2013b).

Liquid imperialism and the coloniality of power

As noted previously, in some ways, the *Wertkritik* analysis of the intertwined development of capitalism and conflict towards the current ‘world civil war’ resonates with other analyses within a Marxian lineage such as Quijano’s ‘coloniality of power’ (2007). The latter concept has been extended in a recent intervention by the Syrian Marxist dissident Yassin al-Haj Saleh (2023) which, in a line of argument that challenges the relevance of conventional theorisations of imperialism as the ‘highest stage’ of capitalism, appears superficially likeminded to those produced by *Wertkritik* thinkers in response to the conflicts and crises of the contemporary period.

Saleh charts how past forms of imperialism are both buried and comprehensively reconfigured in the contemporary world civil war, using Syria as a case study in the competing initiatives and priorities of different actors. He describes how the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey and Israel, not to mention the likes of ISIS and the Assad regime itself, carry histories associated in some way with imperialism or colonialism that today shape their regional ambitions. This produces a complex, intersecting set of alliances and rivalries, based on colonial and imperial histories, that Saleh terms ‘liquid imperialism’. Saleh uses Quijano’s concept of the ‘coloniality of power’ to understand how the Assad regime itself occupies a colonial position with reference to the territory it governs, extending this through the invitation to Russia and Iran to intervene on its behalf against Syrian citizens themselves. Russia first established a presence in Syria, beyond its traditional sphere of influence, on the invitation of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Meanwhile, Iran’s so-called ‘axis of resistance’ in the Middle East, Saleh (2023) suggests, deploys ‘anti-imperialist’ rhetoric as a ‘smokescreen’ for the Islamic Republic’s own expansionism, support of regional dictatorships against popular rebellion and destabilisation of governments through sectarian militias like the Houthis, as well as a proxy network which has been put to work against civilian and military targets belonging to Israel and the West in the regional conflict that has recently erupted in the wake of Hamas’s 7th October attacks. The Salafi-jihadist Islamists that derailed the emancipatory struggle against the Assad regime, meanwhile, also represent an outside force with imperial designs to dominate and control Syria as part of a fundamentalist caliphate.

Saleh suggests that the space for this alighting of different ‘liquid imperialisms’ upon Syria was opened up not by processes confined to the authoritarian ‘axis of resistance’ apparently opposed to the West, but by the latter’s own war on terror, which at times saw

the likes of the US and the UK coordinate with Russia to combat the Salafist-jihadist crusaders who had descended upon the region. Even during the worst stages of the joint Assad–Putin–Soleimani assault on the Syrian people, the West engaged in a careful dance of ‘deconfliction’ and a division of labour in the destruction of ISIS. The combination of this calibration with overarching enmity highlights the ‘liquid’ character of the imperial projects at play.

The complexity of the participation of Western and NATO powers in the conflict is highlighted, Saleh suggests, in how the United States has partnered with Kurdish forces as an ally against ISIS in Syria even while the Kurdish forces maintain a strategic entente with Assad’s military forces. Meanwhile, the United States’ NATO ally Turkey intervened in Syria to fight the Kurdish PKK, exporting their own civil war from Turkish Kurdistan to Syrian Kurdistan as part of the broader Syrian civil war following the popular revolution against Assad. The PKK’s Syria branch, the PYD, were US allies in the fight against ISIS, but the United States eventually betrayed the Kurds as part of horse-trading with Turkey over other military and diplomatic issues related to its proximity to Putin’s Russia. Hence there is little coherence or consistency to the strategic interests at play such as that granted by material or economic imperatives in classical imperialism.

As Saleh suggests, the left’s adherence to an understanding of imperialism indebted to Lenin’s conceptualisation of the ‘highest stage of capitalism’ has tended to confine its application only to Western liberal democracies, largely on the basis of the fantasy that today’s Russia and China in some way carry over from their pasts a non-capitalist content, even though in practice capitalist themselves. ‘Liquid imperialism’, in this sense, provides an alternative explanation that captures the complexity and extent of current ‘imperial’ practices as demonstrated in Syria and beyond. The different powers that have alighted upon the country in their sometimes conflicting responses to the popular uprising against a brutal dictatorship are each pursuing strategies that lack ‘solidity or coherence’, collapsing or changing owing to the absence of any ‘civilizing mission’ or underpinning material interests such as natural resources that may have defined their purpose in past periods of inter-imperialist rivalry. Indeed, Saleh suggests that the United States and wider West, far from pushing for ‘regime change’ in Syria as they are often seen as doing in the conspiracy theories of the ‘anti-imperialist’ imaginary, have in effect pursued a policy of ‘regime preservation’ as a means of stabilisation.

In these respects, the concept of ‘liquid imperialism’ resonates with that of ‘world civil war’, describing an increasingly incoherent and complicated global state of conflict where the fundamental antagonism or contradiction permeates the actions and approaches of specific states rather than separating them cleanly one from the other, representing a fracture in the fabric of world society itself rather than the imposition of an external logic upon an otherwise harmonious liberal democratic order.

However, whilst there are affinities between the account of ‘liquid imperialism’ Saleh puts forward as an extension of the ‘coloniality of power’ and the ‘world civil war’ theorised by *Wertkritik*, there are also differences. ‘Imperialism’, Lohoff argues (2023b), does not hold here because it assumes that the behaviour of states is determined by economic interests in the name of national capital. This depiction of world power may have had some plausibility in the age of colonialism, or even the age of bloc-centred

confrontation associated with the Cold War, wherein national economies were largely separate and independent. However, it does not do so today due to the entanglement of national economies in global markets and production networks. Contemporary conflicts impose no integration into processes of trade or plunder on the part of one power over another, precisely because on all sides there is already integration without the need for military intervention to guarantee it – whether Russian resources, Chinese commodities or Western services. Any apparent imperial dimensions to the current ‘world civil war’, Lohoff wagers, relate purely to ‘imperial fantasies’ that stem more from ideas than material interests, in the Russian case, for instance, a ‘legitimizing ideology for the pre-emptive war against the dream of freedom and a better life’.

From ‘new cold war’ to ‘world civil war’

As well as differing from current approaches based on the theorisation of ‘imperialism’, the conceptualisation of world civil war provides an alternative to an emerging academic and policymaker consensus that understands the current period within a realist or rationalist framework of a ‘new’ or ‘second’ cold war, implying the return of a capitalism organised around competing blocs based more on the productive forces than the destructive.

This ‘new’ or ‘second’ cold war is often taken to relate to the rise and centrality of China as the key challenge confronting Western capitalism. This is characterised by some on the left, Lohoff argues (2023a), as either part of a worldwide resistance against Western imperialist hegemony or simply the opening up of a multipolar process of competition between imperial powers old and new – the so-called ‘second cold war’. This latter interpretation can point to the Belt and Road Initiative that represents Xi’s primary gambit for political–economic power in the Global South and beyond. However, *Wertkritik*’s conceptualisation of the world civil war sheds a different light on what is at stake, focusing not on economic competition but what those writing in this tradition today see as a cultural and civilisational struggle being fought across a range of fronts to reconfigure global order and liquidate civil liberties in a way that goes beyond even the duplicitous interference performed by the United States under *Pax Americana*. Against the impressions of some on the left, the notion that China is part of an anti-imperialist constellation confronting US hegemony hardly holds water where China is itself an equally powerful actor in global markets and institutions as the United States and Europe. Against broader analyses, China’s foreign policy positioning is not captured by the category of ‘systemic competition’ conceptualised in accounts of ‘second cold war’ realpolitik. Xi seeks not to replace US supremacy by inheriting an untouched world order, Lohoff proposes, but rather to transform the rules of the game themselves to preserve the Chinese Communist Party regime and, at times, those of allies and clients like Russia and Iran.

According to Lohoff (2023a), China’s increasingly assertive military and foreign policy, focused principally but not exclusively on Hong Kong and Taiwan, is closely intertwined with its government’s more repressive approach to policing dissent domestically. Attempts to stamp out the space for civil liberties close to home, Lohoff suggests, should be seen in the context of China’s wider ‘preventative counterrevolution’ against

what it sees as movements for rights and freedoms imposed by the West – a struggle waged across the international institutions and economic relationships that it shares with the United States and Europe. This combination of internal contradictions and external confrontations is leading China down the path of a direct conflict with the United States and wider West. But, as Lohoff implies elsewhere (2022), the danger of framing the world in terms of the realist calculus of a ‘new cold war’ is that it tends to concentrate minds on great power conflict between the United States and China and their respective spheres of influence, whilst leaving little room for reckoning with the conditions and consequences of a more complex array of ruptures, including most notably Russia’s expansionist campaign of domination and destabilisation in Europe. This complacency was highlighted in the United Kingdom’s so-called ‘Pacific tilt’ set out in recent strategy documents, where, under the influence of realist policymakers in government, British military posture was reset in the direction of a Western coalition against China right on the precipice of the point at which Russia’s plans for a renewed invasion of Ukraine became clear.

As Trenkle (2022b) points out, Russia’s reinvasion of Ukraine took place not in a context where it could plausibly be presented as a reaction to increased Western assertiveness, but occurred at a time where, on the back of the Afghanistan withdrawal and abandoned red lines in Syria, the West was at an unprecedentedly low ebb of military and diplomatic weakness. In the light of this directionlessness, Russia spied an opportunity to steal a march on its geopolitical rivals with little expectation of a substantial response from democracies distracted by internal issues and in a poor position to risk all-out war. From this position of weakness, the West cannot be held responsible for having driven this nationalist revanchism, whether through its purported humiliation of post-Soviet Russia or NATO’s eastwards expansion, Trenkle (2022a) suggests; rather, it is the result of Russia’s internal incapacity to come to terms with the collapse of apparent past glories. Trenkle sees this as the outcome of the failure of state capitalism to keep up with market capitalism in the West and the subsequent exacerbation of the industrial and economic damage by the kleptocracy that followed. The ‘impoverishment and insecurity’ that resulted came accompanied by few of the rights and freedoms that would have made the upheaval worthwhile. What Putin’s authoritarian rule offered in this context was a sense of national identification that shored up the infringed status of the collective and gave some means of stabilisation. The difficulty, Trenkle suggests, is that the ‘fantasies’ of national restoration have been fallen for the more comprehensively the greater Russia’s internal antagonisms and economic weaknesses have become.

In this way, the Putin regime is like a lot of ‘losers’ on the receiving end of processes of ‘capitalist competition’, its vulnerability expressed in the worst sort of ‘regressive energies’. It is driven by desire for restoration or revenge regardless of the risk of internal and external destruction, as it prosecutes its war of resentment on those perceived to represent the rights and freedoms of a decadent West, whether within or beyond its borders. In many of these respects, Trenkle notes (2022a), what drives Russia’s revanchism is not some external phenomenon alien to the fabric of Western societies, but something that lurks also within the latter, on left and right alike. On each side of the conflict between the West and the rest, we see societies receptive to the siren call of an ‘anti-modernist worldview’ posing “‘organic’ cultures . . . against “decadence” and the

“decay of values””. In particular, this sees identitarian politics shore up the ‘positions of social power’ lost to certain groups – especially men – by attempting an ‘unrealisable’ recreation of the world that secured that status in the past. Trenkle associates Putin’s revanchism with a critique of contemporary capitalism common to both the authoritarian right and authoritarian left, which manifests in ‘a return to the world of Fordism or “real socialism”, in which “honest work” still counted, the gender ratio was still clearly binary, and “order” still prevailed’. The impossibility of any return to such a world, Trenkle contends, makes its pursuit all the more destructive, as the ‘regressive forces . . . reduc[e] everything to rubble’.

Arguably, in some form, this dynamic drives at least part of the political–economic shift associated with both Trumpism and Bidenomics alike, populist discontent manifesting in a policy prospectus geared towards pleasing the male voters from the traditional working class whose voting preferences have proved decisive in the electoral patterns of the past decade. This cannot be disentangled from some of the domestic policies of industrial repatriation and so on widely seen as expressive of the ‘second cold war’. In this way, the conceptual frame of ‘world civil war’ enables us to see the character of our contemporary confrontation stemming from a somewhat different dynamic than economic competition alone. The regressive mix of ‘authoritarianism, masculinism, aggressive culturalism and anti-Semitism’ Trenkle (2022a) associates with Putin’s Russia and other powers is not something remote from the free societies of the democratic West, but rather ‘forms their dark backside’, its ‘irrationalism’ the expression of the ‘blindspots’ and ‘exclusions’ inherent to a ‘bourgeois rationality’ that presumes a kind of instrumental, calculating behaviour on both the economic and the diplomatic or geopolitical stage whilst concealing underpinning poverty, violence and domination.

All that glitters: No going back to the golden age?

Wertkritik’s theorisation of contemporary capitalism as being driven down an authoritarian dance of death by the unfolding forces of destruction enables us to more selectively interpret the different determinants being posited for its development at a time of ‘polycrisis’. The financial crisis and the rise of populism were seen as inaugurating a ‘post-neoliberal’ brand of capitalism (Davies & Gane, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic was seen as strengthening existing tendencies towards the greater intervention of the state in the economy. Meanwhile, the environmental crisis appears to have compelled a rebalancing of states and markets to redress corporate failures in combatting climate change.

These shifts have been met with enthusiasm across the political spectrum. ‘Postliberal’ commentators foresee the potential for this agenda to represent a ‘new developmentalism’ updating the corporatist export-oriented ‘developmental states’ of postwar ‘national reconstruction’ in the West and East Asian high-tech economies (Lind, 2020). Others, too, seem to converge on an assessment of this ‘golden age’ compromise of the mid-twentieth century as the archetype for a well-functioning capitalism (see Pitts and Thomas 2024). Even the most futuristic and forward-facing visions of capitalism and its alternatives carry this nostalgic burden, from the ‘entrepreneurial state’-driven ‘mission’ economy promoted by the likes of Mazzucato (2013, 2021) which cites the moon landings, driven by the

Sputnik shock, as its model; to the radical left's shiny dreams of technology-enabled pleasure and leisure that rest on a red plenty indebted to twentieth-century 'real socialism' (Bastani, 2019).

But *Wertkritik* reminds us of the denied condition for the mid-twentieth-century 'golden age' that these visions all in some way seek to recreate. As Kurz tells us, the golden age was an aberration produced under highly specific and contingent conditions laced with the threat of totalitarianism and annihilation, social and material concessions and advances made under the compulsion of a world wrought in two and separated into discrete national economies. Because the situation today is read as such a rationalist, realist 'cold war', some seem struck by the sense that the conditions for new compromises are reassembling themselves today as markets stage a deglobalising retreat within borders. But this is to mistake a world civil war that cuts through the domestic and international alike for a cold war between two neatly separated blocs with their own spheres of influence. What the concept of 'world civil war' captures is that contemporary geopolitical conflicts and competition are characterised by a much greater interconnectedness than that of the twentieth-century Cold War, with military and security policy much more tightly intertwined with domestic concerns, whether social or economic (Leonard, 2021; Pakes & Pitts 2023).

Even if there is no resurrection of the Fordist-Keynesian social and industrial settlement that many political forces seek, then, there is nonetheless a geopolitical rationale driving capitalist development in ways that are not accounted for in most interpretations of the 'post-neoliberal' turn. The policymaker presentation and popular imagination of this 'neo-Keynesian' model of capitalism claims as its motivation the desire to create a more dynamic, inclusive and green mediation of the productive forces so as achieve an equitable recovery from the pandemic and combat the climate crisis (Merchant, 2023). However, the less palatable truth is that the approach to state intervention and industrial policy represented in Bidenomics and other such initiatives in allied countries is propelled by the world civil war, expressed in increases in defence expenditure and efforts to (re)localise supply chains in strategic resources, minerals and materials.

This is understandably seen through the prism of a 'new cold war' centred on intensifying relations between a US-led liberal democratic bloc and a rival authoritarian bloc organised around China and including Russia (Anderson, 2023; Luce, 2023). But, as far as the concept of world civil war is concerned, it might better be thought of not as divergence but as convergence around certain authoritarian dynamics that, at stake both domestically and internationally, come to structure contemporary capitalist social and economic relations. One only needs to read the pronouncements of policymakers themselves to see that the bold industrial policies that underpin Bidenomics possess an ultimately geopolitical rationale based on a 'new Washington consensus' that reacts to the somewhat different stripe of state-directed capitalism that has been pioneered in China and spreads its influence through bodies like BRICS (an economic and geopolitical grouping built around Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and the Belt and Road Initiative (e.g. Ahmed et al., 2020). Through divergence, we witness aspects of convergence as Western countries recognise the necessity of replicating this in their own strategies.

This much-heralded switch from to a post-neoliberal capitalism where the state takes an active interest in industrial policy is thus not merely a rational response to

contemporary political, ecological and economic crises. What *Wertkritik* exposes is that materialist Marxism and idealist liberalism alike impute to changes in capitalism precisely such a deterministic or rationalistic calculus based on notions of historical and technological progress. The acceptance among mainstream and critical scholarship alike of a kind of economic reason or material rationality guiding the decisions made by organisations and institutions of the state, capital and civil society, and a lack of capacity to engage critically with the role of the state in particular seems ill-equipped to comprehend a capitalism shaped by revanchist war and ideological contestation.

Conclusion: Capitalism and the cultural front

The dynamics discussed in the closing section do not necessarily operate on the basis of capitalist profitability or what is rational or reasonable, and what is striking in the analysis presented above is how far *Wertkritik*'s approach to the relationship between war and capitalism has come to return to core themes of critical theory in focusing on the ultimately *cultural* front of the world civil war. Across the transformations it charts at a more material-economic level over previous decades, a stabilising element is identified in an ultimately cultural revolt against liberal democracy, both external and internal to the West itself. This has taken what was, in the Cold War, seen as systemic competition between rival capitalisms centred, respectively, on market and state and translated the fundamental antagonism into one between cultures and civilisations. However, the understanding of Western decadence and decline that unites diverse geopolitical actors is not an external opposing pole to liberal democracy so much as a reactionary anti-modernism that springs from within bourgeois society itself. As Trenkle argues,

this culturalist narrative emerged in Europe in the 19th century... as a reaction to the generalized insecurity that unfettered capitalist dynamics produced... As a counter-image, people constructed visions of ostensibly ancient cultures or religions that were deeply rooted... and need[ed] to be protected... or revived.

As such, the apparently 'anti-Western' orientation and 'culturalist model of invented traditions' that today underpins all 'nationalist, ethnicist and religious fundamentalisms' are themselves the result of these forces and movements consuming a product the West itself created (Trenkle, 2022c).

This 'culturalist' assault on supposed Western decadence underpins the authoritarian dimension of the 'world civil war'. The fact that the rhetorical attack on the West common to Russia, China and Iran in effect carries over cultural conflicts and critiques already central to Western societies themselves means that this world civil war does not simply drive a wedge between states and blocs on the global stage but rather occupies divides within the countries party to it. Among other consequences, this erodes the firewall between domestic and foreign policy typical of other phases of great power rivalry. This dynamic, Lohoff (2023b) suggests, can be seen not only in Russia's reinvansion of Ukraine and Iran's war by proxy with Israel and the United States in the Middle

East but also in the authoritarian turn witnessed within Western democracies as a result of cultural shifts, voter preferences and policies of securitisation against perceived internal and external threats.

The cultural character of the world civil war implies somewhat different responses, including from the left, than a narrower and more economic understanding of a 'second cold war' would suggest. The 'realpolitik orientation' implied by the prospect of a 'new cold war' combining rational calculations of cooperation and confrontation fundamentally discards the possibility of any emancipatory response based on what little is left of the denied and incomplete 'universalism' associated with so-called 'Western values'. Trenkle (2022a) argues that this calls into question universalism as a bulwark against the 'geopolitical offensive of authoritarianism', principally because, in the context of a world civil war where there are few clear boundaries between blocs, the coalition against its enemies contains within it allies hardly themselves exemplars of democracy, freedom and human rights. Meanwhile, there is a similar rejection of this emancipatory path by a vast majority of the contemporary left, who follow Karl Liebknecht in seeing the main enemy at home in the West rather than in Russia, China or Iran, for instance. This is understandable, Lohoff (2022) suggests, insofar as the capitalist 'world society' with which Western countries are synonymous has seen wealth and power distributed in a highly uneven and unfair way across classes and regions and 'only a relatively small part of the world's population can lead a reasonably adequate and safe life and find access to what the Charter of Human Rights promises' (Trenkle, 2022a).

However, these analyses also suggest a responsibility among those conspicuously committed to emancipation to recognise how dangerous the world becomes in the vacuum left by the withdrawal of the West from its previous role as a guarantor of some of these forms of freedom and right. Lohoff (2022) holds that even whilst the promise of its realisation in the post-Cold War 'world society' has been 'miserably embarrassed', it would be a mistake for those interested in emancipation to lose sight of the capacity for 'self-determination and participation in social wealth' to be discarded with it. In the context of a world civil war that runs through the countries party to it and not merely between them, the regressive worldview of the emergent 'authoritarian international', as Lohoff puts it, is not imposed upon Western democracies from outside but springs from within the order they have constructed owing to its failed promise of freedom and rights for all. Lohoff suggests (2023c), then, that the world civil war demands an emancipatory left commit themselves to the defence and further realisation of the incomplete project of liberal democracy at a time where the Western powers and their dubious allies promote it only half-heartedly. In no way should the left desire the defeat of liberal democracy at the hands of either apparently 'anti-imperialist' opposition which is ultimately of an authoritarian character or the creeping authoritarianism of some governments and political movements within the West itself.

Tendencies towards convergence do not imply equivalence, however, and both Lohoff and Trenkle argue that the incomplete yet nonetheless very real freedoms accessible to those in Western liberal democracies must be defended and extended – 'if necessary', as Trenkle puts it, 'even by force' (2022a). But the 'transnational character' of the authoritarian offensive means that this fight cannot be confined only to national units between and against each other, but rather must proceed also within. For Trenkle, this implies an intensification of emancipatory struggles for 'social and ecological

transformation' against the current limits associated with the organisation of 'commodity production and the state', reconnecting the development of *Wertkritik's* account of war and capital with some of the core concerns originally introduced in the early work of Kurz – namely, the hardwiring into capitalist development of the unfolding forces of destruction and the material necessity of their overcoming. This brings us back to a fundamental insight that *Wertkritik* offers those seeking sources of light amid the darkness (see Kurz, 2013c; Lohoff, 2013): the connection of the world civil war with the 'ontological crisis' inherent in the realisation of subjects through the degradation of others as objects, the tendency towards barbarism that this 'ontological crisis' encodes into capitalist society and the incapacity of any form of 'planetary administration' to truly stave it off.

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