Every Day I Write the Book

Geoculture as Dominant Ideology in the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract

The article examines the concept of geoculture understood as a form of dominant ideology in the twenty-first century. It situates this in the context of the attempt by conservative and liberal elites in the core states to frame a coherent understanding of the post-Cold War world with which to guide, justify, and legitimize policies and actions. The dominant geoculture has come to be framed by two contrasting grand narratives which establish a framework for legitimate intra-elite debate and understanding of the post-Cold War era: Neoliberalism and the Clash of Civilizations. The significance of these two intra-elite grand narratives is that they represent a break with what Wallerstein has called "centrist liberalism," which has tended to dominate the geoculture of the modern world-system.

Keywords: Geoculture, Dominant Ideology, Market Society, Clash of Civilizations

> "… A geoculture of the world-system—that is, a set of ideas, values, and norms that were widely accepted throughout the system and that constrained social action thereafter."
> Wallerstein, (2011: xvi)

The concept of geoculture has played an underdeveloped role in the work of scholars associated with world-systems analysis. Although it first appears in Wallerstein's work in 1991 it was not until the fourth volume of his *Modern World-System* series (Wallerstein 1991, 1995, 2011; Gelis-Filho 2019) that it was the subject of an extensive examination. This lack of development of the concept has been noted by scholars such as Winter (2019, 2021, 2022) who have sought to utilize it as an understanding of China's Belt and Road Initiative as an example of a contemporary geocultural strategy. However, it has also been subject to debate and criticisms as to its precise meaning and its place in the structures of power that help to organize the modern world-system. Lee (2011) persuasively argues that structures of knowledge (including geocultures and forms of discrimination such as gender and race) are one of the three structures of the modern world-system, along with capitalism and the inter-state system (Wallerstein 2000a, 2000b; Smith 2005; Lee 2011; Robinson 2011).

This article will describe and explain the emergence of two geocultural grand narratives in the core of the world-system in the twenty-first century that have combined to form a powerful geocultural framework for understanding the post-Cold War world. Although these grand narratives are often viewed as conflicting with each other this paper will show that, in fact, they serve as part of a broad framework of geocultural understanding that has been shaped, initially, by economic, intellectual, and political elites in the states of the core. These two geocultural grand narratives are part of a revised imperialist strategy by the core states, largely shaped by U.S. elites and governing institutions: neoliberalism and the end of history, which has presented a largely utopian view of the post-Cold War world; and the clash of civilizations, which emerged shortly after the neoliberal grand narrative and was offered as a dystopian counterpoint to it (Krzysztofek 2000; Charron 2010). The significance of these two grand narratives for the core states of the world-system is that in geocultural terms they serve as a dominant ideological framework for governing elites, which helps to underpin geopolitical and geoeconomic developments in the post-Cold War era. In short, ideologies serve as a framework to guide policy, action and understanding of the post-Cold War world for political elites governing imperialist and sub-imperialist states alike (Quinton 1967; Hannerz 2009; Wallerstein 2011). In this respect, and in contrast with Wallerstein's definition, a geoculture not only constrains action and choices but also enables them. By this I mean simply that it encourages actors to make certain choices rather than others as that is the logic of the system.

Geocultural grand narratives offer a version of the true and the good both of which are integral to political discourse. Conceptions of the good society are central to political discourse, alongside questions of power and authority, and they tend to provide accounts of the good which rest upon ideas about human nature that are themselves taken to be true (Waltz 1959; Spragen 1973; Fukuyama 2017). Every political ideology puts forward a conception of human nature, even if it

wishes to deny that there is such a thing (Jagger 1983; Berry 1986). As such, all geocultural grand narratives offer a vision of a good society and of human nature from which they build their particular understanding of the world, the good society, and how power and authority should be exercised within it (Plant 1991).

In practice the merging of the true and the good in geocultural grand narratives has often led to a form of political theology which assumes a sacred, infallible, and unchallengeable status, often with socially destructive consequences (Connolly 1987; Chirot 2020). This has been the case, for example, with Marxism as a political movement riven with competing orthodoxies and the persecution of heretics. This creates a good society which is intolerant of pluralism when the latter challenges the foundations of the system and authority within it. This tendency towards becoming a form of political theology persists with the two post-Cold War grand narratives that are the focus of this article, as will be shown.

The article will proceed by setting out the meaning and controversies behind the idea of geoculture understood as a dominant ideology and how a critical social science, including world-systems analysis, might defend this concept. It will then offer a description and explanation of the two post-Cold War grand narratives as examples of twenty-first century geoculture. It will draw out the meaning of the two grand narratives, understood as an elite-driven dominant ideology, and their functionality for the governing elites of the core states in the modern world-system.

Geoculture and Ideology

The importance of ideology as a concept is well established in critical social science and is a central part of its contribution to the discipline (Fay 1987; Eagleton 2007). It is also, as Weberian critics such as Hammersley have argued, often formulated in a way which is seen as problematic for a rational social science (Mannheim 1936; Hammersley 2020). By contrast world-systems analysis shares much in common with other critical social sciences including feminism, critical theory, critical race theory, and Marxism. World-systems analysis wants to utilize the concept of ideology as having two distinct and related meanings, first as a description of a coherent worldview but also as a way of illuminating the relationship between knowledge and power in a world-system structured by divisions of class, gender, and race. The distinct contribution of world-systems analysis to the development of ideology as a concept is two-fold: first, it situates ideology at the global level through its account of geocultural grand narratives as frameworks for understanding the modern world (Grosfoguel 2002). Second, it sees the colonial expansion of Europe from the C16 onwards as being the material and ideational foundation of the modern world-system. By this it is meant that dominant ideas underpinning the institutions, laws, and norms of the world-system have largely been shaped by the core states as they have sought to find ways to legitimize and maintain their dominance of the rest of the world.

So, in this respect the critical views of ideology put forward by world-systems analysis scholars in their accounts of geoculture tend to view it as a manifestation of the power of the dominant classes and elites of the core nation-states in creating a grand narrative which describes

and explains the world-system. In this respect it has a functional role in helping to organize intra-elite relations and to coordinate their strategies and activities, where possible. The emphasis is placed upon "where possible" as intra-elite disagreement has been sharp even during lengthy periods of apparent consensus such as the Cold War. The Suez crisis in 1956 is a good example of this intra-core elite disagreement.

Following on from this idea established by world-system scholars the account of a dominant ideology that I want to set out here is one that focusses upon an elite-level ideological framework. Thus, it is a geoculture established by governing elites and institutions which helps to organize and guide their actions and policies in the post-Cold War era. It is not an account of ideology which is measured in terms of its impact upon subordinate social groups. As we will see, this is not to discount the idea that such dominant ideologies are important in building a wider common-sense view of the world that can divide and disadvantage subordinate social groups (racism, sexism), merely to note that its primary function operates at the level of intra-elite relations. This idea of a dominant ideology has long been subject to intense criticisms by many writers, especially Weberian, who want to draw out the limitations and problems of what they see as functionalist (and related) type arguments for understanding social order. As Abercrombie and Turner (1978) argued, dominant ideological frameworks are often guilty of exaggerating the degree of consensus amongst dominant classes and ignore the tensions and disagreements within them. For this reason they went on to argue that in the complexity of contemporary capitalism a dominant ideology was no longer tenable as a way of understating intra-elite relations and power.

Taking this point further, Michael Mann (1986) has developed an account of the historical evolution of social power that is largely in opposition to that put forward by world-system scholars and other critical social sciences. The key issue here is around the concept of a social system and the role of a dominant ideology within it. Mann says that,

> Societies are not unitary. They are not social systems (closed or open); they are not totalities… Because there is no system, no totality, there cannot be "subsystems," "dimensions," or "levels" of such a totality. Because there is no whole, social relations cannot be reduced "ultimately," "in the last instance" to some systematic property of it. (Mann 1986: 1; Hollis 1994)

Thus, his four forms of power (ideological, economic, political, and military) are classically Weberian in that they cannot be seen as being part of a broader social system but are to be understood as discrete historical variables. So insistent is Mann's wish to disavow the concept of a system that it is difficult to describe his model of power as being structural, let alone systemic (Robbins 2011; El-Ojeili 2015).

There are a number of objections to this type of critique of dominant ideology and from the perspective of world-systems analysis I want to focus upon one major point here. The concept of geoculture as set out by Wallerstein and others has often been viewed in functionalist terms. For its critics it is guilty of reducing a dominant ideology to an all-conquering instrument of ruling class power (El-Ojeili 2015). But in truth the account developed by Wallerstein (2011) in the fourth

volume of his modern-world system series is much more complicated and nuanced than this. In particular he wishes to draw out the ideological conflicts as well as agreements that have shaped different periods of the modern world-system since the French revolution. What becomes clear in this view is that this is not a simple reading of ideology derived from static class interests. Rather, it is one which recognizes significant differences amongst governing elites and subordinate social groups as to the ways in which the world-system should be organized and power exercised within it, differences that have led to all manner of conflicts including intra-imperialist world wars, civil wars, and colonial era genocides (Wallerstein 2011).

The two dominant grand narratives that structure contemporary geoculture are both rooted in the core but present contrasting pictures of the world. What they share is that they both attempt to provide an account of the modern world-system which justifies and legitimizes the power and authority of the core, but from different starting points. This ideological division reflects ongoing political and social conflict in the core between liberal and conservative elites and illustrates the period of uncertainty and transformation that the world-system has been going through since the emergence of the neoliberal counter-revolution in the 1970s, and the collapse of the Soviet bloc and of social democracy, which followed it. Wallerstein (2002) has described the current period as an interregnum within which the struggle for ideas would become more important than ever as the structural and ideological power of the core began to wane and to be challenged. The extent to which this decline in power is accurate is, of course, an intense and ongoing debate.

Thus, the concept of a geoculture is an important one for social science not because it provides a reductive account of ideas and interests leading to a simple dominant ideology that reproduces a stable social system, but because it provides a long-term historically rich and ongoing account of the struggle to establish dominant ideas within the core and in its relations with the colonized. As Troulliot (2015) notes the persistence of colonial ideologies is a part of the manner by which the core continues to dominate the global South, rooted in its dominant institutions and the structures of politics, economics, and culture that have shaped the post-colonial period.

Geoculture has evolved, adapted and been transformed since the French revolution, driven by debate and conflicts between three broad forms of political ideology: liberalism, conservatism, and socialism. As Wallerstein (2011) observes it is what he terms centrist liberalism that has been the dominant force in the geoculture of the modern world-system, with its commitment to capitalism, markets, representative democracy, individualism, reform, and progress, forcing competing ideologies to adapt to its ideas. The nature of ideology on this view is described by Wallerstein as follows:

> An ideology is more than a set of ideas or theories. It is more than a moral commitment or a worldview. It is a coherent strategy in the social arena from which one can draw quite specific political conclusions. In this sense, one did not need ideologies in previous world-systems, or indeed even in the modern world-system before the concept of the normality of change, and that the citizen who was ultimately responsible for such change, were adopted as basic structural principles of political institutions. (Wallerstein 2004: 61)

It is therefore a distinctive feature of the modern world-system, the first truly global system of social life, that it requires a geocultural framework for popular understanding of the system and how it functions, and a citizen's place within it. As the French revolution saw both God and the King lose their absolute authority over society, so a secular story emerged to replace it. In practical terms it is more important that a grand narrative as part of the geoculture is effective than that it is true. But its power and authority certainly stem in part from its capacity to persuade enough people to build a large enough social coalition, that its claims are taken to be both true as well as good.

Framing the Post-Cold War Geoculture I: The Utopia of Market Society

The Cold War period is itself not straightforward to determine historically. It was formally announced with the Truman doctrine in 1947, but for many world-systems scholars and others it has its roots in the Russian revolution of 1917. It was that event which triggered the new global structure of power and ideological conflict that was to run throughout the course of the twentieth century. This ideological conflict can be seen as being between state capitalism and state socialism, both doctrines shaped by authoritarian worldviews.

In the current era of challenges to the power of the core the Cold War is often presented as a period of relative stability in international relations (Maynes 1990). This, of course, is a view which overlooks the vast suffering engendered across the world-system in this period, largely driven by the U.S.-led core and the Soviet bloc (McMahon 2013). In terms of geoculture this produced a powerful grand narrative in the core which framed the conflict in terms of the free world versus totalitarianism. By contrast, in the Soviet bloc it was a question of socialism versus imperialism. Two world wars saw the contest to become the hegemon of the world-system decided in favor of the United States with its major opponent, Germany, reduced to a dependent satellite status. This system solidified two blocs within which contrasting ideologies provided a largely unchallengeable geocultural framework which served to legitimize the actions of the dominant states in global affairs. In the Soviet bloc, Stalinism produced a form of Marxist political theology which over the long term proved to be inflexible and inefficient in its ambition to produce a form of state capitalism that would theoretically lead to state socialism under worker's control. Although the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the late 1980s was not inevitable the choices of the reformers led by Gorbachev only served to expose the problems of the system and open them up to popular condemnation. The collapse of Soviet communism as a form of political utopia led to the rapid spread of a voracious form of global capitalism under the popular name of neoliberalism. Communist utopia was to be replaced by the utopia of the market society as the geoculture of the world-system shifted decisively away from leftist political movements and ideologies (Hodgson 1995).

The roots of neoliberalism have been chronicled by a number of critical voices and they precede the end of communism (Slobodian 2018). In the post World War II period proponents of neoliberalism were to be found scattered across the core of the world-system from the ordoliberalism of West Germany to Austrian school thinkers such as Hayek (1976, 2013) and Von

Mises (1972, 1985a, 1985b) and finally through to the Chicago school economists, most prominent of which was Milton Friedman (Plant 2010). There were significant differences between these movements and figures as to the way in which they thought the market worked and the extent to which it could be perfected, but what they shared was a defense of the idea that the market works best when it is open, unregulated, and competitive. In the so-called golden age of capitalism (1945–1971) these figures were seen as being outside a dominant Keynesian framework which had shaped mainstream economic thinking in the core since the Great Depression. But the great advantage they enjoyed over Keynesian thinkers was their unbridled commitment to markets and corporate profit which garnered strong corporate support and funding for the promotion of their ideologies (Häring and Douglas 2012; Slobodian 2018).

When capitalism in the core ran into a succession of economic and social crises in the late 1960s and early 1970s the neoliberal movement offered governing elites in the core a powerful analysis and solution (Jones 2014; Slobodian 2018). For neoliberals these crises had been caused by the state's intervention in the economy which was viewed as being synonymous with Keynesianism, and by excessive demands placed by citizens for higher pay and more public services. State intervention undermined the workings of the market with its excessive regulation and taxation of economic activities, its protectionist approach to markets, and its uncompetitive ethos. This had produced a citizenship demanding ever more from the state which further fueled the social and economic crises as the state was unable to deliver on these demands, leading to what figures associated with the core elite think-tank, The Trilateral Commission, called *The Crisis of Democracy* (Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki 1975). By the late 1970s the Carter administration in the United States had begun to embrace these ideas and was joined by the Thatcher governments in the UK and the Reagan presidencies, all of whom were fervent followers of neoliberal ideas. The success of neoliberalism has been driven by a number of factors: the role of intellectuals in universities and influential corporate funded think-tanks, sympathetic right-wing political movements, and a corporate mainstream media whose owners were in sympathy with the idea of a market society. By the end of the Cold War (1989–1991) neoliberalism was seen by its proponents and critics alike to be the only global ideology that had not been falsified by history (See Callinicos 1999; Anderson 2015). What Fukuyama called the "end of history" was a mantra repeated by politicians across the core and large sectors of the world-system who saw the triumph of the market as inevitable (Fukuyama 2006).

The end of the Cold War had proven to be disastrous for social democracy in the core, as former West German chancellor Willy Brandt acknowledged (Pelz 2016). Whilst communism in the Soviet bloc existed, it posed a potential threat to capitalism in the core and the promise to its working classes of a different form of life under socialism. Thus, this helped facilitate both welfarism and the social compact that shaped the politics of the core from the Great Depression until the late 1970s. The role of the state on this understanding was to provide free public services to enhance the quality of life of the working classes, a fact grudgingly accepted by capital. However, the collapse of communism removed this support for social democracy which very quickly saw itself floundering in the wake of neoliberal reforms which were direct attacks on the

idea of welfare and the public sector. This led to fierce social conflicts in the core and attacks on those movements that defended the working class, most obviously trade unions. It is important to note that in the 1970s in parts of the core workers involvement in the running of industries and works councils had seen an extension of workers control of industry that held out the promise of further development in this direction, most obviously in Sweden with the Meidner plan (Erixon 2010). The emergence of the neoliberal market society rapidly dismantled these fragile gains for workers and replaced them with very clear lines of authoritarian workplace rule by managers.

In terms of the geoculture neoliberalism provided a new scientific and normative framework which claimed universal validity as being the only conception of a good society that could guarantee people what they truly wanted: peace, prosperity, and freedom; as manifested in democracy, the market, and individual liberty (Taylor 1996; Wolf 2004). As neoliberal ideas became embedded in regional and global institutions (NAFTA, the EU, the WTO) so the world would be transformed in this direction, guaranteeing a global version of capitalism and a good society (Crouch 2013). All states would effectively become liberal, capitalist democracies. The idea of upholding individual liberty against the state had massive appeal across the communist world and in other authoritarian states where citizens had long been subject to arbitrary state rule. It also proved attractive to sections of the electorate in the core who had grown to resent the idea of the "nanny state," which was seen as being not so much a public servant as a public enforcer. This latter point was repeatedly made by neoliberal think-tanks and political movements across the core who were using it as a means of legitimizing the privatization of public services (Slobodian 2018). Only in private hands would services be truly accountable to the public, understood as consumers rather than citizens.

In terms of politics neoliberalism has produced a discourse presenting politics as a technical activity where big debates about the good society are largely settled. A technocratic politics sees an economy managed by central banks themselves largely staffed by expert individuals taken from the world's major private banks such as Goldman Sachs, Citibank, and so on (President Macron in France, PM Rishi Sunak in the UK, for example) (Häring and Douglas 2012; Adolph 2013). Politics under neoliberalism was reframed around the idea of an end of ideology, ideological debates having been settled in favor of liberal capitalist democracy. The key electoral test was to be one of competence, a competence most acutely judged by the neutral arbiter of the market, reified as though a god-like thing-in-itself, which would cast a vote on political programs put forward by competing parties to inform the electorate of their credibility (Kwak 2018). For critics this represented a diminution of politics into a mediated spectacle to be consumed through the mainstream media rather than an activity for engaged citizens to participate in (See Wolin 2017; Kellner 2018). On this view successful politics depended upon the construction of the right image for a politician as much as it did the right polices. The successful Obama Presidential campaign of 2010 is a good example of this, winning as it did the PR industries annual award for best PR campaign (Levenshus 2010). This process of the personalization and mediatization of politics divided its critics who were unsure of the extent to which it undermined democracy or was merely a logical extension of the process of representative government understood as democratic elite rule

(Best and Higley 2010; Lakoff 2014). Thus, the market became reified in neoliberal politics as the mechanism that was somehow above the political process and able to cast an impartial judgment on competing political parties. In short, "the market" held a *god's eye view* of society. Those movements and ideologies that fell outside this framework would be subject to withering criticisms in the media and financial attacks from capital. As Hudson (2015, 2021) has argued, this was a class-based political transformation that saw representatives of the ruling classes assume the role of policy makers and advisors under the guise of technocratic neutrality.

The triumph of the market as presented in neoliberalism became embedded in policies which were integral to the idea of "Good Governance" across the core and in most parts of the world-system (Demmers, Fernández Jilberto, and Hogenboom 2004). These were policies that, in theory, were meant to produce a functioning free market by removing restrictions on market activity, allowing producer and consumer to form a direct relationship increasingly facilitated by digital technologies. The three key planks of the neoliberal agenda have been policies of privatization, liberalization, and deregulation of the economy. Privatizations rested on the assumption that only a privately run company would be responsive to the complex and changing demands of consumers, whereas public services, by definition, were de-commodified and shaped by unaccountable and inefficient producer interests. A key strategy for the promotion of public support for privatizing the public sector, as Hudson (2021, 2022) notes, has been to persistently underfund public services and allow them to run down. This, in turn, generates public dissatisfaction which neoliberal politicians can use to build support for privatization. Attacking welfare has been a central part of neoliberal ideology which views it as a part of an unhealthy dependent relationship upon the state which both disempowers recipients and drains the income of working people through an ever expanding tax burden (Mendes 2003).

A liberalized economy in theory opened up industries to competition which would make them more efficient, at the same time allowing companies to seek out the optimal locations for producing their goods, all to the advantage of the consumer. However, neoliberal ideology tends to ignore the fact that consumers are also workers. This latter identity is largely occluded in this model of a liberalized market and the consequences of liberalization of the economy for the workers of the core has been the deindustrialization of the United States and the UK, with other parts of the core more mixed (Hudson 2022). This deindustrialization has been driven by companies seeking to offshore their factories to those parts of the world-system where cheap labor, authoritarian governments, and limited or no worker rights exist. This development suggests that neoliberal capitalism works best where democracy is constrained or hollowed out, such as China.

Third, neoliberals advocate the deregulation of the economy to remove unnecessary financial burdens from businesses. In practice this means the removal or watering down of workers' rights, the right to join trade unions, health and safety rights in the workplace, and environmental protection, all things regarded as an unnecessary cost for the company. More profoundly, deregulation opened up the global expansion of the financial services industries (banking, insurance, investment, real estate) whose activities have proven to be fundamental to the neoliberal world order. These are industries that in Hudson's (2015) term are parasitic and drain the

productive economy by simply imposing fees for access to essential services: education; health care; transport; water; energy. All of these generate monopolistic or oligopolistic market conditions which enable the companies behind them to make money not by producing goods but simply by imposing fees that have to be paid by citizens and industry if they wish to have access to these goods and services. The current global energy and food crisis generated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought this problem to a head as the states of the core struggle to manage energy and food supply chains. At the same time this process of deregulation has produced levels of private debt in the core which are historically unprecedented and by extension, literally unpayable, as governments have begun to concede (Hudson 2015; Vague 2019). The conflicts between creditors and debtors fueled by neoliberalism has been a deliberate policy that can be traced back to the early years of the first Thatcher government in the UK. In this period the deregulation of credit was crucial as a mechanism for fueling consumer-led social transformation. Access to cheap credit for the working classes was presented as the viable alternative to increases in real wages. The sting in the tail was that liberalized access to credit has left many core states with populations facing historically unprecedented levels of household debt (Oren and Blyth 2019). The global student debt crisis is the most profound illustration of this as a generation of young people have to endure futures shaped by debt repayments before they have even begun to start work. The consequences of this in terms of the spread of mental illness amongst the young has been confirmed across the core (Wahlbeck 2012).

Because of its universal pretensions the neoliberal ideology has also helped frame a geoculture that justifies and legitimizes the core states as the sole arbiters of legitimate acts of violence in the world-system. This part of the narrative is most powerfully embedded in the idea that the core states intervene to build democracy in countries ruled by authoritarian governments (Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, Serbia). This is further underpinned by the establishment of the Hague International Criminal Court which has seen political figures from 17 countries held to account for their actions (Bosco 2013; ICC 2023). These institutions have no jurisdiction over military and politicians from the core, whose governments have secured exemption for their armed forces and politicians. This form of authority is generally supported in the core by its main political and cultural institutions, despite often deep public protest in opposition to wars undertaken by its Armed forces. Humanitarian Intervention by the core states and their armed forces is framed as being a defense of human rights on behalf of the "International Community." The latter is taken to be synonymous with the positions of the core states who are presented as defenders of universal values and international law (Pearson 2016).

A final central plank to neoliberalism has been the valorization of wealth and celebrity presented as a manifestation of meritocratic success (Giroux 2015; Littler 2017). Entrepreneurial wealth accumulation and celebrity lifestyles are lauded in global popular cultures as a measure of the success of a good society, whether it is wealth accumulated by chance in national lotteries or through monopolistic or oligopolistic control of markets. Mainstream media institutions, whose content has become increasingly shaped by public relations industry activities (so-called *churnalism*), focus upon the importance of wealth and celebrity on a daily basis, even when some

individuals are deemed to have overstepped the mark in their activities (Lewis, Williams, and Franklin 2008; Kristensen 2018). This form of conspicuous consumption, as Veblen (2005) described it, has taken to new levels in a digital age with the 24/7 coverage of wealth and celebrity (Littler 2004). This is not a trivial issue as it serves to provide a strong ideological justification for neoliberal policies as holding out the possibility of a utopian life of extreme luxury for potentially any individual who merits it. Every individual taken from obscurity to this form of life is an important illustration of the truth of meritocracy: only the best succeed.

As noted, the neoliberal vision of a good society rests upon a specific idea about the rational individual consumer as being best placed to determine their own life choices. Human nature is viewed as being driven by self-interest understood in the narrowest sense. This is presented as a radically libertarian view which gives individuals maximum freedom within the rule of law. The reality is that in a market economy shaped by massive inequality and entrenched social privilege this becomes a form of social Darwinism, a survival of the fittest which pits worker against worker. In its claims to being anti-statist neoliberalism is more accurately viewed as being anti welfare and public services. In other respects, it has shown itself to be radically statist with its support for war and public subsidy for companies and the financial services industries (Blyth 2013). Neoliberalism is state capitalism without social constraints, a form of global class war in which the working class are to be exploited to the maximum level by capital freed from public control. Any social compact established during the "golden age" of capitalism has been dismantled over time and replaced by the logic of the market as a "war of all against all." The financial services industries have been central to this process in both pushing for these policies and providing the staff to advise governments, write policy, and run central banks to ensure that the technically correct policies are enacted (Dorling 2015; Slobodian 2018). As Nancy Fraser (2016) has noted neoliberalism also has a progressive face (Macron, Blair, Clinton) which can embrace a form of social equality and civil rights for minorities. Divisions and discrimination based upon race, class, gender, and sexuality can all be rhetorically condemned by progressive neoliberals. What they cannot do is eliminate these divisions as material factors in the reproduction of social hierarchy and inequality in the modern world-system.

The neoliberal ideological contribution to post-Cold War geoculture has been central to the transformation of social life across the world-system, then; but forms only one strand of the grand narratives produced by the core to describe and explain the post-communist era. This view was challenged very quickly by those who wanted to criticize the idea that a good society could be one built through reason in favor of the idea that the true and the good could only be situated in an understanding of culture.

Framing the Post-Cold War Geoculture II: From Utopia to Dystopia—The Clash of Civilizations

"Yes, Europe is a garden. Everything works. It is the best combination of political freedom, economic prosperity and social cohesion that the humankind has been able to build—the three things together… Most of the rest of the world is a jungle, and the jungle could invade the

garden. The gardeners should take care of it, but they will not protect the garden by building walls. A nice small garden surrounded by high walls in order to prevent the jungle from coming in is not going to be a solution. Because the jungle has a strong growth capacity, and the wall will never be high enough in order to protect the garden."
Josep Borrell, High Representative, European Commission, 2022. (Borrell 2022)

The challenge to the utopian neoliberal grand narrative of a market society in the post-Cold War era came to be framed under Samuel Huntington's (2007, 2011) phrase of a "clash of civilizations" (henceforth, the clash). There was nothing especially new in this idea; civilizational conflicts had been a longstanding theme of historical grand narratives. However, the significance of Huntington's concept was twofold: first, it situated the concept as the meta explanation for conflict in the post-Cold War world (a dystopian counterpoint to neoliberal utopianism). Second, it has come to be an ideological framework across the world-system for conservative, nationalist, and neo-fascist political parties and social movements, many of whom have sought to utilize the concept as a means of scaring and dividing populations and mobilizing them behind increasingly authoritarian forms of government (Wallerstein 1993; Ross 2017). This shift towards illiberalism and outright authoritarian government is nothing new to the periphery and semi-periphery where militarism, theocracy, and various forms of dictatorship have tried to hold social movements and democracy in check, often with the support of the core states (Chomsky and Herman 1979; Ahmed 1981). But the spread of anti-democratic and authoritarian political and social movements across the core states has raised alarm amongst liberal commentators and political parties who view such developments as a threat to Western civilization (Henley 2019). Right-wing populist movements are often seen as being intrinsically a part of this clash of civilizations grand narrative with their embrace and promotion of conspiracy theories, a denial of facts and the possibility of objective truth, and the attempt to make race the central issue of politics. Thus, Huntington's (2007, 2011) original idea has been embraced and transformed by numerous social and political movements across the core of the world-system who view the major post-Cold War threats as coming from a mixture of anti-Western enemies: terrorism, Islamic fascism/fundamentalist, uncontrolled migration, and the loss of state sovereignty.

In essence the Huntington thesis posits the idea that the foundation of social order is culture and, by extension, civilization, meaning social groups connected through shared norms, values, habits, and beliefs, of which religion appears to be primary (Huntington 1993, 1996, 2011). On this view culture is the essence of human life and the means by which the true and the good are established. Although in apparent opposition to the neoliberal grand narrative what the two share in common is an implicit idea that the West (in this sense the core of the world-system) is the most advanced area of the world whether viewed in terms of scientific progress, technological innovation, economic power, or democratic forms of government. The difference between the two grand narratives lies in their explanation for Western divergence from the rest: for neoliberals the advanced nature of the West lies in its commitment to universal values and knowledge built through the use of reason and scientific methods; for the clash of civilizations thesis Western

divergence is rooted in its unique culture which has generated the innovations that neoliberals describe. For Huntington (1996) the West is different because of its culture/civilizational qualities, not its alleged revealing of universal values and truths. Huntington's idea of unique Western values has been taken up and advanced by social and political movements across the core who advocate xenophobic forms of nationalism in defense of white, Christian civilization (Carr 2002; Stanley 2020).

In contrast with neoliberalism the clash thesis is most clearly a defense of *national* rather than *global* capital. Allied to this is the idea of sovereignty itself as something rooted in the nation-state rather than the people in that a good society will be one shaped by sovereign nation-states that control their own territory, populations, and resources (Wallerstein 1993). This was a central theme in the UK right-wing Brexit campaign and is also part of the Make American Great Again agenda of former President Trump. These types of illiberal political figures see a strong and increasingly authoritarian state as the means to impose order on populations facing the challenges of globalization and cosmopolitanism. The latter two developments are viewed by such movements as a fundamental threat to the basis of a good society: family, nation, and god (Marzouki 2016; Haynes 2020).

As part of the post-Cold War geoculture the clash thesis is important because it defends a political realist view which argues that power is the fundamental concept in political life. The struggle for power and domination that has shaped world history has always been rooted in the practices of distinct cultures/civilizations and the significance of the Cold War on this view is that it represented a temporary hiatus in this conflict. Although the Soviet Union and the United States were in a state of permanent readiness for conflict, this was largely played out through proxy wars and civil conflicts. On this view the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet bloc has had the impact of opening up a world order that had been dominated by two competing states who were constrained by the threat of mutual annihilation. In the post-Cold War era the West is in retreat, facing competition and challenges from many emerging states in the semi-periphery (Dahl 1999). These challenges have the potential to spill over into overt warfare as has been evident from the Second Gulf War in 1991 onwards. The clash thesis posits war and violence as an inevitable part of human society and has served to legitimize Western violence in the post-Cold War era from Iraq to Serbia, and Afghanistan, usually framed in terms of the war against terror (Salter 2003; Cloud 2004).

The clash thesis presents a vision of human nature that is shaped by culture and which, more broadly, produces distinct and incommensurable forms of social identity. This resembles nothing more than the Nazi legal theorist Carl Schmitt's friend/enemy distinction, updated for the twenty-first century (Schulman 2012). Hence the thesis has also criticized the concept of multiculturalism, particularly in the core, as being a fundamental threat to Western democracy and identity (Huntington and Dunn 2004). This theme has cut across political ideologies to some extent and is not just a factor of the political right. If a good society is one that is culturally homogeneous and which is able to control its own boundaries then on a global level the clash thesis presents a world shaped by cultural Darwinism and cultural determinism, an endless conflict between cultures

which determine social identity and render peoples as pre-determined members of incommensurable groups struggling for power and survival (Chang 2008). This theme has found recent inspiration in Hazony's (2018) work on nationalism.

The criticisms of the clash thesis are well known and run from the reductive framing of the concept of civilization in Huntington's original thesis to the ways in which the narrative opened up the possibility of legitimizing racism as a central part of post-Cold War geoculture (Amin-Khan 2012; Bazian 2018; Mohadi 2020). In practice the clash thesis lends itself to right-wing populists who want to rouse support amongst populations threatened by the economic polarization and debt generated by 40 years of neoliberal transformation of the global economy (Piketty 2013; Dorling 2015; Panitch and Albo 2015). The irony here is that many of these major political figures are themselves supporters of the market which they embrace as a Darwinian mechanism that rewards the successful and effectively punishes the poor. The distinction between those sections of ruling elites across the core who espouse more cosmopolitan values and those who embrace the clash thesis is most clearly a distinction measured in terms of civil rights. Progressive neoliberals tend to support civil rights as a universal ideal (rhetorically at least) while clash proponents tend to view civil rights in terms of ethnicity (rights for whites) and the need to curb individual liberal freedoms (speech, assembly, identity, political affiliation) as the latter are viewed as being a threat to the cultural values that have built the nation. The link between the two grand narratives is that they both support the market and the state as mechanisms to control the working class and to accumulate capital (Jessop 2019). At this intra-elite level this conflict plays out in a number of ways: national versus global capital, regional integration versus national sovereignty, xenophobia versus the need for migrant labor as a cheap workforce, and so on. In the core states the clash grand narrative subordinates class identity under that of nationalism and this manifests itself as a conspiracy theory about the destruction of white Christian civilization (Ekman 2022). The response to this has been a reassertion of white supremacist movements and ideas and the normalization of far right and fascist discourse and political figures across the world-system (Wodak 2015; Rydgren 2017). None of this can be seen as intentional on the part of Huntington's original thesis, but it is a logical outcome of the cultural determinism of his argument.

If neoliberalism became a form of political theology by the mechanisms it has established to attack any political critics of the market, then the clash thesis and its untrammeled truths about culture/civilization/nationalism have become embedded in the truths of reactionary populist movements. In the United States this has meant even physical attacks on politicians of the mainstream Democratic and Republican parties, including far right figures such as former Vice President Mike Pence. Unsurprisingly such far right movements attack the idea of objective truth in favor of truth understood as power, determined by whoever controls the means of communication (Wodak 2021). Thus, far right clash proponents have been vociferous critics of climate change and policies that might curb capitalism's relentless exploitation of the planet and its resources (Forchtner 2019). The fluid relationship between those sectors of the core who embrace the clash thesis and neo-fascism has become very clear and illustrates again the ways in which capital will accept such dangerous and violent political movements if it means protecting

profit from attempts to replace capitalism with social democracy or socialism (Panitch and Albo 2015; Bello 2019).

Thus, the two grand narratives that have come to form the geocultural spectrum for the political elites of the core are best viewed as continuations of the West's ability to dominate the world-system. This dominant ideological geoculture has evolved, adapted and changed over time as governing elites in the core have sought to manage threats to its power and authority.

Meltdown

As the article has stressed the geoculture of the modern world-system has to be understood in the context of a social system which has its roots in colonialism and capitalism. It is through this that the core states and their governing elites and classes have been able to construct coherent and evolving grand narratives about the nature of the modern world-system. These grand narratives are part of an evolving intra-elite dominant ideology which serves to help guide policy choices and which has established a legal and normative framework for political and economic relations. In the post-Cold War period, the geoculture which had dominated the world-system since the French revolution (what Wallerstein calls centrist liberalism) has been successfully challenged by two new grand narratives which assert a more aggressive form of capitalist accumulation (neoliberalism and the market society) and a more aggressive and intolerant form of nationalism rooted in xenophobia (clash of civilizations). These two grand narratives can be seen as representing the increasingly sharp disagreements between the liberal and conservative elites which govern the core states and its political and economic institutions. What once united governing elites and ruling classes in the core, their hostility to socialist ideology, has become less successful in coordinating their post-Cold War relations and compromises as social polarization has deepened across the world-system (Wallerstein 1993; Townsend 2000; Wallerstein, Lemert, and Rojas 2015). Hence the decline of centrist liberalism to be replaced by two grand narratives which reflect sharp disagreements amongst these liberal and conservative elites which can be broadly viewed as nationalism versus cosmopolitanism. The article has argued that the concept of a dominant ideology needs to be used if the geoculture of the world-system is to be understood and if the long-term transformation of the modern world-system is to be seen as the outcome of both necessary and contingent material and ideational factors.

Both *neoliberalism* and the *clash* thesis are grand narratives in the sense that they tell us stories about who we are both individually and collectively, how we got here, and where we are headed. They are ideologies in the sense that they have served as frameworks for ruling elites to guide policy, actions, and rhetoric. In practice they have provided the intellectual and popular justification for the major social developments across the core since the collapse of communism: an intensified attack on the welfare state and worker's rights, which had begun in the 1970s. In ideological terms the greatest ambition of these grand narratives has been to offer a description, explanation, and evaluation of the world-system which reifies the market and consumerism (neoliberalism) or the nation and white Christian civilization (the clash). The consequences of both

have been to help shift the terms of mainstream political discourse to the right and away from the idea of a democratic socialism which espouses values of cooperation, mutual aid, welfare for all and social solidarity. As dominant ideologies they are not all pervasive. The possibilities of a revived form of socialism have shown themselves in both the United States (the Sanders presidential campaigns and the grassroots movement around it) and the UK (Corbyn's election to the leadership of the Labour Party largely promoted by young people). But it can also be seen with social movements such as the Gilet Jaunes in France and the global Occupy movement. How can this be explained? Because ideology is not all pervasive and the reality of people's lives doesn't *necessarily* lead them to accept the conclusions which follow from both neoliberalism and the clash thesis. Challenges to dominant ideologies are more likely to occur when people can meet, discuss, and challenge ideas and received opinions, as has happened in all of the cases mentioned above.

Centrist liberalism had been premised upon the idea of gradual reforms (economic, civil, and political rights) being introduced across the core that would always be (uneasily) balanced against the right of ruling elites to continue in their positions of privilege and power. This was challenged throughout the late nineteenth century and twentieth century across the core by the working classes who made significant gains. So successful was working class activism that ideas of workers control of the economy became a part of radical movements around the world-system. This was the ultimate threat to the power of ruling elites and when it manifested itself in Spain in the 1930s, and it took the combined efforts of communists, fascists, and Western democracies to crush the anarchist inspired Spanish Revolution. In this sense centrist liberalism has always been able to use violence against its opponents when required. But the development of *neoliberalism* and the *clash* thesis have made the use of violence and coercion much more normal and extensive both in international relations (Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Yugoslavia) and in social life (the removal of civil rights of speech, assembly, women's reproductive rights, attacks on minority groups, the embrace of racist anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies). In this respect they are different *forms* of capitalism from the centrist liberalism of much of the nineteenth century and twentieth century. Where the latter sought controlled forms of compromise that would leave hierarchies of privilege and power in place, at the same time they were forced to concede more reforms to the working classes. Both neoliberalism and the clash thesis have sought to reverse these gains. The marketisation of social life which both neoliberalism and the clash grand narrative largely accept has seen a dramatic social and economic polarization across the core of the world-system that has shattered the always fragile social compact of centrist liberalism. Thus, the UK, often measured as the fifth or sixth largest economy in the world now has around one third of all school age children lacking sufficient food daily. Centrist liberals would find this problematic for fear of the conflict it might generate. As the Conservative Party Minister Quinton Hogg said in Parliament in 1943, "If you do not give the people social reform, they are going to give you social revolution" (Lewis 2002: 226). By contrast *neoliberalism* and the *clash* thesis promote a "blame the poor" thesis which says that inequality and social polarization are best understood as the survival and triumph of the fittest and the best. This can feed into the nationalist rhetoric of the *clash* thesis (think here of

President Trump's description of "shit-hole countries") and the social Darwinism of neoliberalism which views inequality as natural and inevitable. In both instances across the core, it has led to massive cuts in welfare, public health care, privatization of public welfare, and the restriction of trade union rights.

What is apparent in the twenty-first century is that challenges to the geocultural grand narratives of the core are emerging around the semi-periphery. The rise of China and the BRICS movements allied with China's Belt and Road initiative are presenting, as Winter (2019, 2021) has persuasively argued, a new geoculture which has the capacity to reorganize the world-system in the twenty-first century. At the same time the spread of populist movements around the world-system, which can be divided into progressive and reactionary, are generating counter-narratives to those of the core which threaten a challenge to the system from below (Wilkin 2021). As world-systems scholars have stressed, there is no inherent reason to think that the evolution of the world-system and its transformation will lead to a more humane global system. The rise of the far right around the world-system allied to ongoing wars, climate change, and militarism illustrates clearly that this need not be the case (Panitch and Albo 2015; Scheidler, 2020).

The task of a critical social science when engaging with the world-system is not to abandon the idea of grand narratives but to build better ones that do not lend themselves towards being a kind of theological statement of a kind that Archer (1998) viewed it as being in her critique of Wallerstein and world-systems analysis (Wallerstein 2005). In short, world-systems analysis needs to produce counter-narratives to the geoculture which are fallible and built upon a framework which aims to eliminate the causes of human oppression. Such a grand narrative can only start from a theory of human needs if it aims to be genuinely universal (Doyal and Gough 1991).

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