

READING SUGGESTIONS:
Robert Gilpin's War and Change in World Politics

Revisiting Robert Gilpin's most controversial book, more than twenty years after its first publication, offers the opportunity to test its heuristic value in a time in which the international system has experienced far reaching changes in the distribution of power between States, especially determined by the unanticipated collapse of the Soviet Union. Written in a decade still dominated by the debate about the decline of U.S. hegemony and its effects on international stability, this book is based on the assumption that United States in the Seventies were facing a hegemon's dilemma between the rising costs of sustaining a stable international liberal order and the expected benefits of these hegemonic efforts in political and economic terms.

As a study of international political change, this book primarily seeks to provide a general framework for thinking about the linkages between the stability of the international system and the differential growth of power between organized groups (domestic groups, States, coalition of States). For this purpose, Gilpin has elaborated a quite original integration of two, at first radically opposite, theoretical explanation of political and social change, the new institutionalist theory of socio-political change and the Marxian approach (re-elaborated from a liberal perspective¹), especially the concept of uneven

development elaborated by Lenin in his polemic 1917 *Imperialism. The Highest Stage of Capitalism*.

Gilpin's approach is an economic approach in the sense that it assumes the economic system as one of the main channels through which the natural environment constraints and influences human action (p. 69). The use of different traditions of analysis provides the author with very powerful, non-deterministic theoretical tools to explain how endogenous economic factors can affect the prospect of international political change.

The strength of economic theory (if and when it is used as a theory of change) is that it explains how individuals (groups, collectivities, and other actors) use their power to create social and political institutions in order to advance their interests. At certain critical points, economic, technological, military innovations and developments promise significant relative gains and losses to one or another actor. Consequently, when interests or the relative power of individuals change, pressures for institutional change increase.



Robert Gilpin

Whereas the new institutionalist account of social change is based on the political action of organized groups that seek to maximize or at least advance their interests basing their decision, and eventually the decision to transform

¹ Gilpin's critical reconsideration of Marx-Leninist approach is influenced by the works of liberal economists like John Harshani, Albert O. Hirschmann and Joseph Schumpeter.

the current institutional framework, on a cost/benefit analysis (p. 72), the contradiction between a given set of political and institutional framework and the forces of production is central to the Marxist theory of political change. The constraints originated by the existing social order on further internal economic growth and the existence of external opportunities to arrest the operation of the inherent law of diminishing returns create strong incentives for powerful States to expand their territorial, political or economic control over the international system. Moreover, the redistribution of power that always accompanies growth tends to bring particular groups with different interests regarding national and international change (stability) into a new position of influence and power (p.81).

In order to apply these ideas to a better comprehension of international relations, the analysis of constraints posed by the development of endogenous economic forces needs to be integrated with the study of the structure of international system that poses further constraints on the choices available to States to advance their interests.

According to Gilpin, sociopolitical change cannot be explained solely in terms of endogenous economic processes. His realist position, primarily derived from Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, is primarily concerned with the ways in which the nature of the system affects the outcome of States' behaviour, regardless of the intention and motives of the States themselves (p. 85). The structure of the system imposes a cost on any behaviour that seeks to change the international status quo and, at the same time, changes the expected costs and benefits of the groups that support more

the existing order (p. 95). Variables like the number of States and the distribution of capabilities between them determine the stability or instability of the international system.

On this theoretical basis lies the most controversial contribution of Gilpin's analysis, the theory of hegemonic wars (see scheme p. 12). Differential, or uneven, growth of power and the subsequent redistribution of power negatively affect the stability of the system, altering the equilibrium of forces that create in the first instance (after the previous hegemonic war) the legitimate international political order. The disequilibrium, above a certain point, reveals itself unsustainable and changes in the institutional, political, economic frameworks are highly probably achieved by military action on a global scale, through which rising hegemons challenge the power and the influence of the former ones; the hegemonic war resolves the systemic crisis and re-establishes the equilibrium in the international system.

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Based on useful insights from world political history that constitute in a very broad sense the empirical foundation of his theory, Gilpin's argument has been frequently criticized and, most of all, has seemed to be radically challenged by the developments in international politics of the late '80s and the '90s.

Susan Strange's (1987) critique of American decline and her re-examination of the sources of U.S structural power demystified the assumptions on which hegemonic stability theory rests. Neoliberals focused on

the lock-in role of regime and institutions and on their contribution to the international stability even in case of declining hegemony (Keohane, 1984).

Most of all, the peaceful end of the Cold War and the unexpected dissolution of the Communist Bloc seemed to be a decisive counter-evidence for the hegemonic war thesis. The idea of the world in search of a new order, authoritatively expressed by George Bush sr., highly accentuates the inconsistencies of the recurrent systemic crisis hypothesis elaborated by Gilpin.

Even if the environment of the '90s does not fit very well with his approach, Gilpin has his own good reason to defend his general theory of international political change. Apart from the rhetoric of the Bush Administration, the new developments took place within the existing international system with the effect of preserving its defining characteristics. Power relations between the big powers changed in such a way to reinforce the existing liberal order based on American economic, military, technological supremacy, producing, at the end, what Gilpin calls a condition of dynamic equilibrium (p. 13).

Moreover, the relationship between wars and systemic change is not the final outcome of Gilpin's theory of international political change. Changes in the distribution of power are inevitable in the long-run and, in absence of a strong will to resist the incentives of self-interested behaviour, peaceful change is not easily achieved. The means to achieve peaceful change rest on a better understanding of the underlying forces that can bring the international system to the brink of highly destructive systemic crisis resolutions. For this reason,

the contributions of Robert Gilpin's *War and Change* to the study of international politics exceed conspicuously some of the possible inconsistencies primarily determined by the contextually-related assumptions on American decline and lost hegemony.

Bibliography:

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