

Hartmut MARHOLD – 15 October 2021

Cold War vs. Global Warming

The two dominating narratives of the 20th century

Introduction

7th of July 2021, some 40 international NGOs warned President Biden in an open letter against a revival of the Cold War interpretation of global affairs and urged the American President to recognize instead that other priorities require a fundamental change of paradigm in International Relations. The core of their message is enshrined in the second paragraph of their letter: “We, the undersigned organizations, call on the Biden administration and all members of Congress to eschew the dominant antagonistic approach to U.S.-China relations and instead prioritize multilateralism, diplomacy, and cooperation with China to address the existential threat that is the climate crisis.”¹

What they are pointing at is nothing less than the two dominating narratives of the 20th and the beginning 21st century. The 20th century is largely marked by the antagonism between collectivism (communism, but nationalism, fascism and racism as well) on the one and individualism (liberalism, capitalism) on the other hand. Other conflicts – North-South, after decolonization – emerged in the second half of the century, but always played a secondary role. All these conflicts have something in common: they were and are conflicts between humans, groups of humans, societies, nations, states, alliances (East-West, North-South), struggling for power, mostly by means of exploiting planetary resources (and each other). Only slowly and lately the consciousness emerged that there is another antagonism, another conflict, another relationship, which would become relevant, threatening and potentially overwhelming: the conflict between humanity and the planetary conditions for life.

Narrative 1: Humans against Humans

Two recent books may illustrate how deeply our minds are still shaped by the antagonism between

conflicting projects of human societies: Odd Arne Westad, in his *Cold War. A World History* (2017) offers a broad picture of the 20th century. His thesis is that the whole century – and more! – has been marked by the antagonism between not only the USA and the USSR, but more profoundly by the competition of the two underlying ideologies, collectivist/communist on the one hand and individualist/capitalist on the other (with their respective political systems, party-dictatorship vs. liberal democracy). Two consequences are particularly important of this dominant feature of the 20th century: One is that nobody could finally withdraw from being recuperated by the one or the other camp, despite attempts (like the non-aligned movement) to escape from this binary, bipolar world. Second, the binary antagonism taught us a black-and-white world perception, which still survives the end of the conflict itself and shapes unconsciously our minds, so that we are less open to the multiple other conflicts, challenges and options.²

The other book, equally impressive, is Keith Lowe’s *The Fear and the Freedom. How the Second World War Shaped Us* (2017 as well). Lowe points out that WWII nourished hopes, at least on the American side (Roosevelt) of a post-war “One World” cooperation, enshrined and institutionalized in the United Nations (and Bretton Woods, as to the economy). These hopes failed and gave birth to the bipolar world, two-fold instead of united. Even this world order, as precarious as it might have been, broke down and gave room, together with decolonization, to a multifaceted, ever less organized world of 200 or so “sovereign” states – which, finally, are confronted with an even more fragmented world of multiple sub-national identities. At all moments of the evolution of a new international (dis-)order, fears and hopes, derived from the war experience, shaped our minds (like fear, threats, like freedom, independence ...) and gave birth to a succession of newer attitudes (individ-

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ualistic ...), which all are successors and therefore explicable by the WWII experience.

Whereas Odd's book sustains an unbroken survival of the Cold War mentality, Lowe's approach is more dynamic, allowing for a succession of attitudes and conflicts, ever more diverse, but he, too, sustains that the world is made of antagonistic relations between humans and their societies. International relations, as human relations fundamentally as such, are conceptualized in the framework of 'realism' (be it 'neo-' or not), i.e. driven by (self-) 'interests'.

Narrative 2: Humans against Planet Earth

On the other hand, rising awareness and concerns about the human impact on living conditions on earth led to competing narratives, during the last generation of the 20th century. Now, the concern is about the relationship between humans, their societies and their activities, communist or capitalist, on the one hand and the planetary 'environment' on the other hand. This consciousness started indeed with the perception of all non-human components of the planet as 'environment', placing mankind still at the center. A next step was to conceive of the planet as a system, in which man was one variable among others – the 'ecological' approach. The claim of this narrative is indeed competitive with the older one, as one of the leading historians of environment, J.R. McNeill, points out in his seminal book *Something New Under the Sun* (2001): „The human race, without intending anything of the sort, has undertaken a gigantic uncontrolled experiment on the earth. In time, I think, this will appear as the most important aspect of twentieth century history, more so than World War II, the communist enterprise, the rise of mass literacy, the spread of democracy, or the growing emancipation of women.”

Again, two emblematic publications may serve to illustrate the birth and rise of this narrative: One of them is the first Report to the Club of Rome, itself a child of this growing concern, i.e. the collective work published by Dennis and Donella Meadows and Jørgen Randers: *Limits to Growth*, first published in 1972. It put into question the paradigm of growth, as a means to achieve the goals of human development, by pointing out that exponential growth is simply impossible, in the long run (of the next half century), in a limited system of resources, as is our planet. The book's approach is equally innovative in terms of

lines of thought, of methodology and theory: It pledges the switch to a systemic understanding of the world, turns away from linear causality, promotes the idea of networks of variables interacting with each other.³

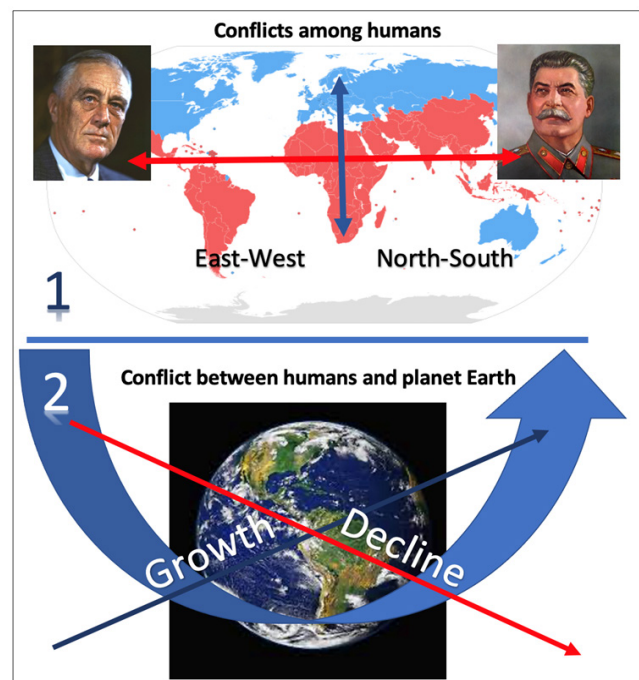
The other book, which reveals a change of paradigm, is the UN report of the UN Commission on Environment and Development, the so-called Brundtland-Commission (after its chairwoman): *Our Common Future*, which definitely escapes from the Cold War antagonism by struggling with the conflicting interests of two other binary factors: (a) the 'Third World' of 'developing' countries, or the 'Global South' on the one hand and the industrialized, advanced, "rich" Northern countries on the other (after decolonization, which had set this dynamic free); and (b) – second binary relation – the desire for more material wealth, for growth, goods, resources on the one hand and the limited "carrying capacity" of the Earth on the other hand. The compromise between these crosswise interests is the concept of 'Sustainable Development', with the classical formula enshrined in the report: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

Concluding considerations

Sustainable Development was an attempt to reconcile at least parts of the two paradigms of 20th century narratives (the humans-vs.-humans one with the humans-vs.-planet one): Part of the first in so far as the conflict between Global North and Global South was addressed, and even dominated the debates of the Brundtland Commission. It was this aspect of the conflicts among and between humans, which was integrated, together with the 'environmental' dimension (i.e. beyond humans) into the concept of Sustainable Development. Therefore, Sustainable Development bridges the gap between the two paradigms. But it has one decisive weakness: From the human-human side, it integrates only the *secondary* conflict, not the dominant one – only the North-South, not the East-West divide. Sustainable Development failed to become the dominant pattern of thought and action, partly because it dismissed the dominant conflict of the 20th century, the Cold War conflict, the antagonism between communism/collectivism and liberalism/individualism.

The consciousness of the decisive importance human activities' impact has on living conditions on Earth, already now and much more so in the near future, has deep historical roots; it is not an entirely new response to an entirely new problem. It has always been an alternative even in Western civilizations, founded on Christian roots and sometimes accused of being fundamentally disrespectful of other living beings, of the 'biosphere' and the material 'resources' on Earth. But, just as in nearly all other civilizations, there is a spiritual dimension in Western culture, derived from Christianity, which urges humans to consider all other living beings as brothers and sisters, as creatures in the same rights. Environmental movements excavated these roots, planted them anew and pushed them until irrational extremes like the Gaia movement, considering and treating the Earth as our 'Mother'.

Whether the Gaia romanticism, diluting humanity in a pantheistic world, is more illusionary than the concept of 'rational choice', reducing humans to choices, which can be calculated since always driven by material self-interest, may remain an open question. One thing is for sure: the relationship between humans and their planetary living conditions plays a rapidly



increasing role in International Relations and can no longer be neglected as a decisive factor. That is why those 40 NGO's, urging President Biden to free himself from 'old thinking', end their letter with this statement: "Nothing less than the future of our planet depends on ending the new Cold War between the United States and China."

References:

- 1 <http://foe.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Cooperation-Not-Cold-War-To-Confront-the-Climate-Crisis-129.pdf>. Among these NGOs are many which are not environmental in the first place: women, academics, local communities, catholics ...
- 2 One who urged us to develop this openness was Samuel Huntington, with his "Clash of [a multifold variety of] civilizations"
- 3 Donnella Meadows, one of the authors of *Limits to Growth*, focused in her ensuing research on this aspect; see e.g.: *Thinking in Systems*. London 2008, by Sustainability Institute.