Chapter Six

Historical Phases of the World Order and the Periodisation of Socio-Economic and Geopolitical Power Relations

In my earlier discussion about the four structural features of capitalism, I noted that it is important to consider how their global development and their inherent interconnections vary over time. Further, I argued that there is no single relation underlying them that determines how they vary. In this chapter, I build on that discussion to make the following claim: in order to grasp the complex relationship between economic and geopolitical competitive relations, it is necessary to understand their historical transformations on multiple levels.

In pursuing this claim, I first describe historical phases of the world order, that is, specific phases that are neither synonymous with conventional descriptions of economic developmental phases nor with phases of statehood or state interventionism. In a second analytical step, I differentiate the phases of the world order in their socio-economic and geopolitical forms according to the various distinguishing characteristics that each phase presented. Because there are different criteria that govern the reproduction of individual capitals and individual states, these socio-economic and (geo-)political phases do not proceed coterminously, despite their mutual interdependence.

Any theory of inter-societal social conflict must acknowledge the importance of the conscious activity of collective actors, even if it is ‘structurally’ conditioned. Because the goal of this study is to analyse the structural features of capitalism in their historical transformation, I introduce some theoretical considerations at the beginning of this chapter.
about the relationship between ‘structure’ and ‘agency’, as well as the terms historical ‘phase’ and historical ‘constellation’. Following my GPE perspective, I then attempt to periodise the phases of global power relations at the broadest conceptual level, which thus allows for an analysis of ‘world orders’ and their hegemonic and non-hegemonic character. I follow up on this with a periodisation that focuses more specifically on socio-economic development. Finally, I look more closely at the transformation of statehood and state competition.

1. Structural features, phases and constellations

Describing the constitutive structural features of capitalism is a necessary, if also insufficient foundation for developing a theoretical framework for studying geopolitical phenomena. The ongoing mutation of capitalist societies in space and time challenges theoretical analysis and empirical-historical research to draw connections between the constitutive structural features of the capitalist world system (that is, wage relations, competitive relations, monetary relations, and the individuation of the ‘political’ and the related plurality of individual states) and the various historical phases of capitalist development. In other words, the task is to identify the ways in which these key structural features manifest themselves as relatively stable, typical hallmarks of a specific historical epoch (that is, with respect to a hegemonic or non-hegemonic world order). This theoretical framework should facilitate the study of specific constellations, which encompass additional factors such as strategic projects, resource dependencies, specific inter- and intra-societal power relations, and normative dimensions. Thus, the entire idea of developing ‘a’ general theory of capitalist imperialism is problematised, because such a theory must account for the variability within different geopolitics. In order to avoid confusion, in the following discussion I use the terms ‘constellations’ and ‘phases’. Subsequently, I build on earlier models of periodising capitalist development, as well as ‘mid-range’ theoretical approaches and other studies in order to develop a typology for periodising global power constellations.

In studying an historical constellation, the task is to grasp the real paradoxes within societies at a specific moment in their development. A concrete historical constellation describes the totality of development and social forces in a specific historical situation. Capitalist development is always mediated by social forces that operate within specific institutional contexts. Thus, a constellation can be understood as the intersection of a theory of capitalist development at specific phases with a theory of structure and agency (above all, the agency of collective actors). For the purposes of this study, moreover, a constellation can be understood as the crystallisation of international, inter-societal, and intra-societal processes.

Methodological imprecisions can creep in when studying concrete historical constellations, for example by taking static ‘snapshots’ of historical reality that blur our