

Chapter 1 Regional Blocs, World Order and the New Medievalism

The end of the Cold war and the reunification of the world economy fuelled debate on the future shape of world order. Many of the changes that have taken place since then appear contradictory. There has been a marked trend towards globalization.

The financial crash in 2008 precipitated a long-drawn out recession in the advanced Western economies and raised new questions about what kind of world order was possible or desirable (Gamble, 2009).

This chapter examines **4 different futures for world order**, based on contrasting perspectives on the forces which are currently shaping it.

- 1) **Borderless world** - a cosmopolitan global economy, in which states wither away, and a benign global governance is instituted through markets and democracy;
- 2) **Regional blocs** – division of the world into protectionist sphere of influence and rival civilizations controlled by a few great powers;
 - a) Hegemonic breakdown. One of the implications of E.H. Carr's analysis was that the breakdown of the world order in the 1930s and the formation of regional blocs followed inevitably from the collapse of British hegemony. This argument became the main theme of the hegemonic stability school which developed in the 1970s. The Great Depression in the 1930s was explained by the lack of a state capable of providing world leadership (Kindleberger, 1973b).
 - b) Regionalism and globalization. Regionalism as a set of state projects intersects with globalization. The relationship between the two has come into particularly sharp focus with the end of the Cold War. The global economy in the 1990s developed not two but three cores: North America, the European Union and East Asia.
- 3) **American Empire** - a world dominated by a unilateralist United States. The third perspective does not accept that the growth of new regionalism in recent years indicates that the US is in decline or that the world is fragmenting into regional blocs. Instead it sees a world in which the US is currently extending its power and transforming itself into an empire (Rapkin, 2005; Cox, 2004). The huge military preponderance of the US since the demise of the Soviet Union means that no other power is capable of challenging the US militarily.
- 4) **New medievalism** - a world in which there is no single source of legitimacy,

but a complex set of levels and networks and jurisdictions shaping governance and identities. All previous 3 perspectives so far seem inadequate in various ways to grasp the implications of globalization and regionalization for the changing shape of world Hedley Bull (1977). New medievalism is best thought of as a metaphor which draws attention to some similarities between contemporary developments and certain features of the medieval political system in Europe. No one suggests that there could be a return to the medieval era. Rather what the concept highlights is whether the principle of exclusive territorial sovereignty so typical of the modern era will turn out to be a unique and aberrant phase in political development (Kobrin, 1996). New medievalism involves contrasting the modern with the medieval state system and arguing that some of the features of the latter are becoming salient again (Tanaka, 1996).

New medievalism focuses attention on the implications of the evident weakening of states in the last 25 years.

Critics of the idea of a new medievalism point to major differences between the medieval and the contemporary world order. For example, European medievalism was only one, local, political and cultural order in the world at that time.

Hedley Bull identified 5 major trends which gave support to the idea of a new medievalism:

- 1) Regional integration – the European Community (EC) being the most prominent example at that time.
- 2) Disintegration of existing states – principally as a result of new secessionist movements (Nairn, 1981).
- 3) Revival of private international violence – Bull was thinking primarily of the growth of international terrorism, but others have also talked about corruption. Business mafia
- 4) Growth of transnational organizations – Bull detected an explosion in such organizations, ranging from companies, political movements and religious associations to international and intergovernmental agencies
- 5) Technological unification of the world - particularly in communications, transport and cultural networks, captured in ideas such as the global village.

Conclusion. ‘**New medievalism**’ is at best a metaphor but, used properly, it can provide insights into the changing forms of governance of the world system. One of the key tests for this perspective is whether the EU is a peculiar and unique phenomenon, as unique as Holy Roman Empire; or whether it is a new unified regional bloc, a United States of Europe.

One of the paradoxes of the current debate is that there is a double movement. On the one hand there're trends toward globalization in finance, production and commerce. On the other, the legitimacy of the nation-state as the preferred locus of political rule has never been stronger, and many nations, as in Eastern Europe, still seek self-determination and the creation of their own independent state. The fears about regionalist projects and the revival of fears about the formation of blocs is in part the anxiety that the pluralism and overlapping authorities so characteristic of the present time will not last, and that there will be a swing