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9/11 and the makers of history

Ten years after 9/11, the West will have to retreat from political and military efforts to control the global South.

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The US' tentative approach to Libya marks a transition to a future of reduced Western ambition in the global South [GALLO/GETTY]

After 9/11, the administration of US President George W Bush initiated the era of the global war on terror. For many, this was a misguided response to terror attacks. But before the decade was over, US forces invaded two countries and are now fighting shadow wars in Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan, while an air war continues in Libya. Pentagon commands cover the entire planet, and US military assistance programmes are active in almost every country.

Wars reorder politics and values. They remake that which is taken to be true and right. They render the world unrecognisable from what it was when the balloon went up. That is why epochs of world history are so often marked off by the dates of wars. How should we understand the era of 9/11? In what historical timeline does it belong?

It is useful to begin by recalling some of what seemed true on September 10, 2001. The US enjoyed the unquestioned global supremacy of the "unipolar moment". The "end of history" beckoned, in which liberal democracy and free markets promised peace and prosperity everywhere for all time. The West and its international organisations

managed the world, ultimately for the general good. Globalisation was bringing people closer together.

Today, each of these verities lies broken. The failure to understand the 1990s and the significance of the end of the Cold War has left us unable to understand what has been happening in the decade since 9/11.

Renewed global military commitments have hastened an inevitable US decline. The unrestrained power of finance capital is wrecking economies and societies across the Western world. Europe lies prostrate, bereft of anything approaching serious leadership, mired in the divisive politics of austerity and racist, anti-immigrant populism. The great international institutions have sat on the sidelines of the crises roiling the world. The communications technologies that were supposed to lead to mutual understanding instead assist revolts and terrorism, rioters and financial speculators, when they are not being used by states to spy on their own citizens, or by corporations to increase the number of consumer products people desire.

How is it that the received wisdom about the nature of world politics was so badly wrong? What did we fail to see and why?

The great conceit that blinds us is the idea that the powerful make history just as they please. We are particularly prone to this error when thinking about international politics. Assisted by opinion columnists and think tank gurus, we tend to view the world from the perspective of decision makers in the great powers. What should the West do about Libya? How should the US respond to state failure in Yemen or the Iranian bomb? What should the G-20 do about the debt crisis?

'Like cowboys at the rodeo'

In the domestic politics of our own countries, it is easy for us to see that politicians are like cowboys at the rodeo: hanging on for dear life before a force of nature tramples them underfoot. The "bull" that throws them could be a long-simmering social crisis, a downturn of the business cycle, or some series of events over which no one exercises control. The skill of the politician determines how long they can hang on, but we are left in little doubt as to where the real power lies.

We are forced to confront the underlying social structures, historical legacies, and economic relations that determine our fates. Human agency, too, has its say, but it is not only that of the great leaders that matter. Ordinary people and the social and political movements they create can drive events and force the "policymakers" to respond. But fate usually works against human purposes. Rarely do either the powerful or those who resist them achieve quite what they intended.

A wonderful example of the impoverished vocabulary with which we think about international politics is the idea that "Reagan won the Cold War". The vast apparatus that is a modern state is reduced to its leader - "Thatcher", "Gorbachev". Agency, the power to shape events, rests firmly in the hands of this leader, who is located in the global North. A range of violent struggles, fought almost entirely in the global South, are subsumed under one term which denies there was even a war at all. Most of all, a tidy end - 1989 - is imagined in which, needless to say, the good guys won.

Epoch-defining dates like 1989 or 9/11 invoke various imagined histories and geographies. But too often the dates with which we order *world* politics are curiously Eurocentric. It is European exploration, the French revolution, a Congress in Vienna, and German invasions, for example, which mark out the globe's historical eras: 1492, 1789, 1815, 1914, 1939.

We are thus singularly unable to grasp the global histories and social relations that delivered us to 9/11. Within the conventional terms of analysis of international relations, it is almost impossible to see the great social, political and economic struggles between the global North and South that have driven modern world politics. European imperialism and the prodigious efforts to incorporate ever more peoples and places, ever more domains of life, into the capitalist world system lie at the origins of these global histories.

It is crucial to underscore that imperialism, capitalism and the modern world they together did not simply emanate from Europe. They were joint productions with the non-European world, albeit amid unequal power relations. Imperialism requires collaborators, while capital needs labour. The first factories were not built in England, but in the Caribbean, producing sugar with African slaves.

The World Wars gutted European imperial power and unleashed struggles for independence across the global South, led almost everywhere by the anti-imperialist left. For over forty years revolutionaries and insurgents, death squads and soldiers, carried on a deadly combat.

The fall of the left

The global significance of 1989, broadly speaking, was the defeat in both the North and the South of the political left, of those political movements that sought to replace, contain, or redirect the expansive energies of capital in accordance with humane values.

During the Cold War, Western powers had to maintain social welfare systems at home lest communism begin to look attractive. The Soviets, meanwhile, tried and failed to demonstrate that they too could produce washing machines, refrigerators and other consumer items. With the collapse of the USSR, neoliberalism was unleashed and could begin in earnest to do away with welfare states in the West. "Shock therapy" was delivered to the former Soviet bloc countries, while the debt crisis was used to control many economies in the global South. No longer did the West have to secure Third World allies with lavish aid.

The defeat of the left produced two outcomes which have defined the last twenty years and will continue to make history over the next twenty.

The end of the Cold War did not mean the end of the dire social consequences of unrestrained capitalism. The grievances, the injustices, the poverty, the anger, the continued reduction of everything human to the bottom line, to something that can be bought or sold, all this remained, even intensified. But now it was not the left that would make political lemonade out of these lemons, but the right; not communists, but religious fundamentalists, both Christian and Islamic. This is where the Tea Party belongs, feeding on the misdirected resentments of those devastated by unregulated capitalism.

The second outcome of 1989 is a dramatic increase in the political power of capital. Across the Western world, but most especially in the US, politicians are in hock to Big Money, while corporate media fundamentally shapes political debate.

Blinkered worldview

The problem with this, as Karl Marx would have told us, is that while capitalists know what is in the interest of their specific business, they are unable to cooperate for the good of the system as a whole. To maintain a capitalist society of a kind anyone would want to live in requires tremendous public investment and infrastructure; a neutral, professional and active civil service; and a strong framework of effective, lawful regulation.

Few capitalists want to pay taxes for all this, or subject their industries to significant regulation. Give capitalists as a class too much political power, and they will enfeeble government with their special interests, lobbyists, and kept politicians. The consequence is the drama currently on display: the self-destruction of the West and its economies. It is plainly obvious that Western societies are in dire need of modernisation, investment, and strategies for growth and employment. But the political forces that might fight for these have long since been vanquished. Anguished experts like Paul Krugman are left accurately to foretell a doom that the political systems of the West willfully do nothing to avoid.

It is this self-inflicted crisis that drives the timing of the scale-down of the global war on terror currently underway. After all, nation-building at home or abroad requires taxes. Rather than occupying countries in a "forward strategy for freedom", as Bush termed the invasion of Iraq, the war on terror will transform into the police, spy and special operations war Western liberals had originally called for in 2001.

Unifying the eras of the Cold War, the 1990s, and the decade following 9/11, are reinvigorated efforts to control the politics, economies and populations of the global South in the wake of the collapse of formal empire in 1945. Wars of tremendous folly and human cost have marked this entire period, in Korea, Vietnam, Algeria, Mozambique, and across Central and Latin America, among others. Bush's travesties in Iraq and Afghanistan will likely bring this series to an historical close. The tentative approach to Libya is a transition to a future of reduced Western ambition in the global South.

The retreat of the West from extensive and effective political and military efforts to control the global South - a history which began in the 16th century - rings the death knell of Western world power. The decade since 9/11 is the penultimate chapter in this history.

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