

LONG CYCLES IN GLOBAL POLITICS

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Summary

The study of long cycles attempts to capture a critical element of regularity in the operation of world politics in the modern era. In the first place, it offers a description, based on systematic empirical evidence, of the rise and decline of a succession of named world powers since the sixteenth century: Portugal, the Dutch Republic, Britain, and the United States of America. For their time, the global order led by world powers was superior to classical imperial arrangements. But the working of long cycles is also

shown to be closely linked to a series of global wars that have been a marked feature of that period and that were contests between world powers, those aspiring to global leadership and others challenging them. While the world powers constructing and animating the global political system, and successfully responding to priority global problems, have been sea powers of global reach, with open societies and lead economies, the challengers that rose to oppose them were regional powers with substantial land armies, and less open societies and economies. The rise and decline of world powers can be seen to be synchronized with the rise and decline of leading industrial and commercial sectors in the global economy. It also actuates world democratization, in as much as the world powers have constituted the core of the democratic lineage.

Secondly, it explains the observed regularities of long cycles as one mechanism of evolutionary world politics and, more broadly, of world system evolution. In conditions of high evolutionary potential and in response to major global problems, that mechanism activates innovation, cooperation, and selection of global policies. In turn, a sequence of long cycles builds new global structures and effectuates global political evolution. Such evolution tends toward the replacement of the global leadership--global war sequence by increasingly institutionalized forms of world organization. In the third place, the study of long cycles therefore offers a prediction of new institutional developments in global politics.

1. Introduction: The Study of Long Cycles

Long cycles are a pattern of regularity in the operations of global politics that focus in particular on the rise and decline of world powers. In a realm that is sometimes described as anarchic they represent an element of organization and continuity whose understanding offers much to students of International Relations (IR).

The present discussion of long cycles will consist of four parts: methodological, descriptive, explanatory, and predictive.

1.1. What Are Long Cycles?

The concept of long cycle highlights an important pattern of regularity or recurrence in world politics. It does not connote strict cycles, but it is a regularity of *transition*, of the fact that the experience of the modern world has been marked by a *succession* of “world powers” (Portugal, the Dutch Republic, Britain, twice, and the United States) exercising leadership in the global arena. That is, the focus is *not* on a global system that achieves an equilibrium around a particular focus of power but rather on processes that impart movement to politics at this level, movement that is not unlike that observable in a national political system experiencing regular elections. The most obvious and important recent example of such a transition has been that between Britain and United States in the first half of the twentieth century. At a higher level, the transitions are between forms of global political organization (of which global leadership is one).

The following features of that concept might be distinguished: regularity, progressive non-uniformity, global reach in space, and limited reach in time.

The most striking conjecture is that of rhythmic regularity, stemming from the observation that world power transitions have occurred in the modern world at intervals of about 100-120 years. Each transition was, moreover, an occasion for contested challenges, and was inextricably linked to a generation-long bout of major hostilities that will be called global war. In other words, a substantial portion of the content of world politics could be seen to be bound up into a long-range temporal rhythm with a long cycle period of some 100 to 120 years that students of this subject simply cannot ignore.

This postulated regularity of period does not involve the assumption of uniformity. There is no ground for expecting uniform repetition, or identity of agents or transitions. This is not a mechanical clockwork but a social-system transformation that evinces a certain pattern of form over an ever-changing substance. There is strong evidence that each transition brings new elements into play, such that a distinct progressivity of forms of global organization may indeed be arguable.

The long cycle is, moreover, a distinct pattern in planetary space, and not one of regional or national politics. In particular, a clear distinction must be drawn between global and European politics. Much of the conventional knowledge of modern history pertains to the affairs of Europe, without much regard to how the world as a whole was being organized at the global level, through exploration, sea power, trade, and key alliances. It is this transcontinental and oceanic realm that is the prime operational theater of global processes such as this.

Finally, long cycles are not some universal principle of world politics but rather also a time-bound process. It is a process of global politics, and politics has had a global reach basically only in the modern era. The onset of global-level (oceanic and inter-continental) organization may be dated to about 1500, and only from that period onward can global politics be said to operate in a proper fashion, even if the half-millennium prior to that year might be regarded a preparatory run-up.

1.2. Their Place in IR Literature

The study of long cycles may be located among historical-structural approaches to world politics. These types of analysis characteristically present the world system as the result of evolutionary and discontinuous historical development; and assume that the system's past must be systematically taken into account in unraveling that system's present and future. They also attach critical importance to long-term fluctuations in power and value distributions. In other words, they privilege world-wide institutional structures, and highlight processes of historical transition.

Those who like to consult classical texts may wish to refer to Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* and its account of Greek thalassocracy and the rise and fall of Athenian leadership, with the proviso that this is an account of regional politics without a marked element of recurrence. But as a contemporary problem, Historical-Structural analyses rose to full attention only in the 1970s, and while the focus of these discussions has most often been the role of the United States, their net was usually cast wider, and helped to give impetus to the study of long-term processes of change in international

relations. William R. Thompson (1988: Chs.2,3) has distinguished three models of such change, roughly corresponding to the major IR approaches: structural realism, the world-economy approach, and long cycle theory. Each of these gives center place to the role of global leadership (or hegemony), highlights the links between the position of these powers, major wars, and the economy, presents an account of modern history, and each one also offers food for thought about the future position of the United States.

A good example of structural realism is Robert Gilpin's *War and Change in World Politics* (1984) for it combines a strong dose of International Political Economy with an account of the significance of major wars in the modern world. Basic to what Thompson describes as Gilpin's "interpretation of hegemonic stability" are the propositions that hegemony brings stability, and that hegemonic decline undermines world order. Consistent with structural realism is Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers 1500-2000* (1988), that is centered on the interplay of military and economic power in the rise (and decline) of Spain, Britain, and the United States through a trajectory of great coalition wars and economic transformations. Its comments on the dynamics of decline for the United States aroused world-wide attention at its time of publication. Most prominent in the world-economy school have been the writings of Immanuel Wallerstein, in particular *The Modern World-System* (3 vols., 1974-1989) whose central argument concerns the rise of capitalism, and the moving force of which are the three core hegemonies of the Netherlands, Britain, and the United States, and their relationship with their peripheries.

Together with the long-cycle line of analysis that was launched with George Modelski's (1978) paper, all three of these approaches have a great deal in common. By the 1990s, though, interest began to shift from studies of decline to elaborating the role of leadership, primacy, and hegemony.

But because this area of inquiry is of considerable significance it also has room for a variety of treatments. The three approaches just mentioned therefore also differ in their conceptual frameworks, in the data they draw upon, and in various particulars. The distinguishing characteristics of long cycle analyses have been an emphasis on clarity of basic concepts, the regularity of the process and its phased nature, a sustained effort to provide social-science type of data to document it, and its capacity to mesh in with evolutionary explanations. Those exploring long cycles placed their bets on studying rise, rather than decline, and have been in a position to offer some reasoned accounts of future world politics.

1.3. Do Long Cycles "Exist"?

For students of these matters, the "existence" question of long cycles has been of fundamental importance, and unsurprisingly has absorbed much of their attention. They invested a great deal of research effort in demonstrating that long-term regularities can indeed be shown in the historical record of world politics. Table 1 summarizes the principal results of research aimed at showing such regularities, in three realms: those of global political economy, of sea power concentrations, and of acts and occasions of leadership in global affairs of the past half-millennium. (See Table 1)

(1) First K-wave peak (obs.)*	(2) Global war	(3) Occasions for global leadership **	(4) By	(5) Sea-power threshold attained ***	(6) 2 nd K-wave peak (obs.)*
1480s	Wars of Italy and the Indian Ocean	1494 Treaty of Tordesillas 1499 Design for Cape route	Portugal	1510	1500s/ 1530s
1560s	Dutch-Spanish wars	1585 Anglo-Dutch alliance 1609 Truce of Antwerp	Dutch Republic	1610	1620s
1670s	Wars of Grand Alliance	1689 Anglo-Dutch Alliance 1713-4 Peace of Utrecht	Britain I	1715	1710s
1780s	Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars	1793 Britain opposes aggression 1814-5 Vienna settlement	Britain II	1810	1830s
1870s/ 1900s	World Wars I and II	1917 14 Points 1941 Atlantic Charter 1943-5- Summits	USA	1945	1960s
2000s [†]					

* Based on Modelski and Thompson 1996

** Based on Modelski and Modelski 1988

*** Based on Modelski and Thompson 1988

Table 1: Evidence for long cycle regularity

What does it take to establish the existence of long cycles? Basically, it is to show that certain significant events, or clusters of events, repeat themselves at regular intervals. Of course, mere repetition helps but it is also important to establish a theoretical rationale for such recurrences. What is the pattern of return performances that can now be established?

Consider the empirical information reported in Table 1: “Evidence for long-cycle regularity”. Column (1) sheds light on surges in leading economic sectors in order to demonstrate how economic power supports political power: it reports the decade/s in which a leading, global (that is, one whose innovation impacts the global economy), commercial or industrial sector attained peak performance, thus laying the foundation of economic strength for the country of that sector. In the first row, the decade of the 1480s saw the peak of Guinea gold trade (on K-waves, see below). In its turn, that made it possible to launch the oceanic, around-the Cape enterprises that led to the next K-wave of the spice trade (column (6), 1500s/1530s). In the fourth row, the decade of the 1780s is the high point of the cotton-steam K-wave of Britain’s industrial revolution. The peaks of 1870s-1900s are those of the electric power, chemistry, and telephone waves that shifted the center of industrial power from Britain to the United States. A similar high for the information industry might be expected in the 2000s.

Column (2) lists the global wars that have punctuated the modern experience. If it is admitted that these, and only these, were the global wars of that period (which is a matter of debate; for instance John Arquila 1992:26, would add two others: the three Anglo-Dutch wars, 1652-74, and the Seven Years’/American Wars, 1756-83), then a distinct regularity of 100-120 years emerges in the incidence of such major conflicts. William Thompson raises this question and argues that global wars must be shown to have a positive transformative effect on the structure of global politics. His tests (1988:108-110) show that the five choices shown in Column (2) alone have such effect (though his tests also show that effect for the Seven Years’ War).

The global wars of the West European era were in fact the most notable occasions for the exercise of, and for effecting transitions in, global leadership. Column (3) lists a sample of such leadership events, drawn from a qualitative documentary collection spanning the period 1500-1950. The wars highlighted here are the backdrop for displays of leadership qualifications, especially in diplomatic, military, and strategic affairs, and in assembling and maintaining winning coalitions. At the conclusion of such wars, leadership is exercised in fashioning peace settlements that shaped the global structure for the decades ahead. The series Tordesillas, Antwerp, Utrecht, Vienna, and Tehran-Potsdam-Yalta (strongly fashioned by the powers listed in Column (4)) have determined the structure of the system still in play at the start of the twenty-first century.

A final quantitative index of a repetitive regularity concerns sea power and its concentration. This measures the strength of the naval forces at the disposal of powers competing for global leadership. Column (5) shows the year in which the world power (of column 4) attained absolute superiority in global naval forces (50 per cent or more of capital ships). Striking, again, is the regularity with which that threshold has been crossed every 100 years or so by the world powers.

Such is the state of evidence for asserting a pattern of regularity. This is not a mechanical repetition of events affecting a single state but rather a pattern characteristic of the global political system, specifically in its West European and early in the Atlantic-Pacific periods. It lends itself to constructing a story of that system.

2. A Brief History of Global Politics

One clear advantage of the long-cycle approach is that it offers a coherent story of the past millennium of global politics (as do other structural-historical approaches). After all, there has been, and there is to this day, only one global political system and, moreover, that system is a constructed one, with its own beginning, its own path (or trajectory) being followed in the form of co-action of all its participants, and one that continues to change in significant ways. That is why its story matters in its own right, and must continue to matter to all who study this field. By contrast, those who think of IR as preoccupied with the “behavior of states” have no such clearly delimited historical domain; the number of stories of state behaviors that could be told is in fact unlimited, and hence cannot be managed. Nor is there merit in viewing global politics as a series of “world orders” defined by the identity of its lead powers because such view suggests fragmentation whereas the great and overriding fact of this story is continuity.

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Biographical Sketch

George Modelski (Ph.D., University of London), is Professor Emeritus at the University of Washington. He is a prominent researcher in the field of International Relations. He has held teaching and visiting appointments at the Australian National University, University of Chicago, and Princeton and Harvard Universities. In 1987-88, he was Fellow-in-Residence at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NIAS). His recent books include *Leading Sectors and World Powers: The Coevolution of Global Economics and Politics* (University of South Carolina Press, 1996), *Long Cycles in World Politics* (1987), *Sea Power in Global Politics 1494-1993* (1988), and *Documenting Global Leadership* (University of Washington Press and Macmillan, 1988). He also co-edited the special September 1996 issue of *International Studies Quarterly*: Evolutionary Paradigms in the Social Sciences. Topics of current interest include the evolution of global politics, democratization and world politics, and world system history.