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Comprehending Great Power Relations Today: The Hegelian- Rankean Legacy

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Abstract

The current great power stand-off between China and the USA that has resulted from Chinese expansionist aims in the South China Sea and the threat to absorb Taiwan has little to do with the ideology of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism but rather more to do with the perceived need to expand Chinese power and economic-cultural influence throughout the world.

There is a long archaeology of ideas of imperial expansion going back to GWF Hegel, Leopold von Ranke and their German followers. This paper illustrates the continuity of Hegelian-Rankean ideas during the 19th and 20th centuries down to the present as a contribution to understanding current Chinese aggression..

The Author

John Moses completed post-graduate study for five years in West Germany during the Cold War. His Professors both in Munich and Erlangen were at pains to account for the threat of Soviet expansionism and how to contain it. In doing so they drew on the historical-philosophical legacy of Hegel and von Ranke. The following paper reflects this training. John Moses has taught European history at the University of Queensland until retirement and published widely on Labour history, German colonialism, German historiographical traditions and the church struggle both against National Socialism and Real Existing Socialism in Communist ruled East Germany as well as on the ANZAC movement.

Article

A valuable thing I learned from my post-graduate studies in Germany, 1961-1965, was never to overlook the historical roots of present day international conflicts. – The origin of that recommendation goes back to 1833 when a rising German scholar named Leopold Ranke (1795-1886) published in Berlin a 50 page paper in the then brand new journal (which he edited) named *Die Historisch-Politische Zeitschrift*. The article was entitled *Die grossen Mächte*, (The Great Powers).¹ What Ranke had to say then, it will be argued, has outlived anything that his

¹ English translation in, *The Theory and Practice of History* by Leopold von Ranke, edited and introduced by Georg G. Iggers & Konrad von Moltke (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co inc, 1973) pp.65-101.

contemporary Karl Marx (1818-1883) had to say about the root cause of human conflicts. For Marx all political conflict was attributable to the on-going class struggle; for von Ranke it was rather the Great Power rivalry for hegemony.

This had begun to fascinate Ranke already as a boy in 1806 when Napoleon's army marched through his home town of Wiehe from where he could actually hear the guns of the battle of Auerstadt on 14th October that year when the French overwhelmed the Prussian army. So early in his long life Ranke had witnessed "world history" unfolding on his doorstep. As an analysis of the rivalries between states, The Great Powers has never been surpassed. In fact in 1900 a pair of Ranke's former students, Professors Max Lenz and Erich Marks in Berlin published an up-dated version of The Great Powers in which they applied Ranke's insights to the rivalry of imperial powers of their time.² Furthermore, these ideas were given an extraordinary boost in Germany in 1913 by the young Kurt Riezler with his highly influential book, *Grundzüge der Weltpolitik in der Gegenwart* ("Basic trends in world politics of the present",³ that has never been translated).

A contemporary example of the on-going relevance of Von Ranke's ideas is documented in a study by the late Professor Waldemar Besson (1929-1971) on the foreign policy of Konrad Adenauer's Federal Republic of West Germany located as it was between the two great power blocs of the Soviet Union in the East (Warsaw Pact states) and the NATO states led by the USA.

At that time Professor Besson memorably said that West Germany had to dance at three weddings simultaneously: One in Moscow, one in Washington and one in Brussels (Common Market). Under-pinning Besson's analysis was the original thought of von Ranke about the behaviour of Great Powers.

Leopold von Ranke was raised to the nobility by King Wilhelm I of Prussia in 1865 in recognition of his prodigious output on the history of Europe since the Reformation. These extensive works qualified von Ranke to be acknowledged as the veritable founder of the discipline of Modern History.⁴ Why? The answer is because von Ranke saw that the existence of States was the result

² Hans-Heinz Krill, *Die Ranke Renaissance: Max Lenz & Erich Marcks* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1962).

³ J. J. Ruedorffer (pseudonym for Kurt Riezler), *Grundzüge der Weltpolitik in der Gegenwart* (Stuttgart & Berlin, Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1915).

⁴ J.E.E.D Acton, "German Schools of History" *English Historical Review* , Vol 1, (1886): 7-42.

of the presence on Earth of a variety of national tribes who he designated as “ideas of God,” all striving to establish their identity and ultimately hegemony in a permanent rivalry with each other. One must not forget that von Ranke was a devout Lutheran who acknowledged the sovereignty of almighty God over His Creation. This insight was not, however, entirely original; Ranke had inherited key concepts from predecessors, especially Johan Gottlieb von Herder (1744-1803) and G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) which we will rehearse briefly here before highlighting von Ranke’s input and then those of his epigones, the Neo-Rankeans and Kurt Riezler (1882-1955). The paper will conclude with a comment on the Great Power rivalries currently dominating world politics.

In the 18th century there was no united Germany but a condition known by historians as *Kleinstaaterei*, that is “petty state particularism”. “Germany” then consisted of a multiplicity of mostly tiny principalities, dukedoms and city states, the largest being Austria and Prussia who vied with one another for predominance in central Europe, as situation known as the “German Dualism.”⁵ There was no national political German identity, but the German pastor and scholar, Johann Gottfried von Herder from his parish in Riga (1764-69) had begun to make some influential observations about the nature of racial identity. In that Baltic city Herder had noticed how the local inhabitants consisting of both Teutons and Slavs strove to preserve their national identity in relation to one another. Each guarded their tribal language, religion, literature, legal system and customs, in short, their unique culture as sacrosanct. That is, each racial group spontaneously resisted being absorbed by the other. Indeed each manifested a unique national spirit which Herder called the *Volksgeist*. Bearing in mind that Herder was a Lutheran pastor it is not surprising that he incorporated this insight into his theology. In brief, almighty God had intentionally peopled His creation with different tribes which emerged all over the world (Creation) taking on characteristics that resulted from the different nature of the environment across the globe.

For a ready example, a people who inhabited an island such as the English developed predominantly into seafarers while a land locked people became more dependent upon the continental nature of the climate and geography. People there developed into herdsmen and

⁵ *Kleinstaaterei* more particularly characterises the nature of “Germany” in the era when “Germany” was more of geographical description of the multiplicity of petty princedoms and dukedoms which comprised the then map of central Europe. As Goethe reportedly had observed there was a German language and culture, but there was no German country that he knew of.

farmers, and so on. Environment, then, affected everything: folklore, poetry, music, political system, the law and especially religion. In short, the Kultur or culture which every national group produced, combined everything that identified a nation as a unique entity.

Herder, being primarily a theologian and literary scholar had not thought through the political implications of competing national identities. His notion of nationalism was entirely cultural as opposed to political. It took G.W.F. Hegel to spell out the political implications of the Volksgeist. His insight was that if a Volk wished to survive in a world of competing nations, then it had to develop the military capability to do so. Indeed, a Volk had to have the spirit of survival, otherwise it would be overwhelmed by more dynamic neighbours. And here is Hegel's Machiavellian perception: It is in the nature of States to expand at the expense of weaker neighbours. In short, power vacuums will be filled by those powers who can. This was painstakingly spelled out by an eminent German historian of ideas, namely Friedrich Meinecke (1862-1954) in his work, *Die Idee der Statasträson in der neueren Geschichte* in 1924, translated as *Machiavellism: the doctrine of raison d'état in modern history* (Yale University Press, 1957).

In this benchmark work, Meinecke had elucidated very clearly what Hegel's philosophy of history implied, namely what Niccolo Machiavelli had described as the behaviour of states in the 16th century in his treatise, *The Prince* (1532). The crucial insight here was that although all the rival princes in Europe were putatively Catholic Christians and presumably obliged to follow the precepts of Holy Church, the reality was that they engaged in all manner of violence, intrigue, mayhem and, of course, warfare whenever they perceived their interests threatened or wished to expand their territory at the expense of a weaker neighbour. So here was an apparently unresolvable paradox. How could sworn disciples of the Prince of Peace, all of whom believed in the divine right of kings, engage in such inhumane behaviour? The answer was, they did so because of reason of state, *raison d'état*. In short, Princes (Statesmen) had no choice but to act this way in order to protect their realms.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, the German philosopher of history and state craft drew upon Martin Luther to advance a theological solution which he incorporated into his philosophical system. Hegel sanctified the power struggle as follows: All states have a unique national spirit as von Herder had taught, but they are locked in competition with each other in a quasi social-Darwinist struggle for survival. The weaker states succumbed to the more powerful and energetic ones and this was sanctioned by almighty God. How could this be? Did almighty God permit such violence?

In Lutheran terms the Prince at the time of the Reformation in Germany still occupied his position by divine right, as before, but in addition to this he now, after the rupture with Rome, became

summus episcopus or Notbischof, meaning substitute bishop because the authority of the Pope and his Bishops had been finally and permanently rejected.

So the consequence of the Lutheran Reformation was that the Protestant Prince or monarch became supreme governor both of the State and the Church. And here the doctrine of the two realms, one temporal and the other spiritual, was re-formulated to the effect that the Church was directed only to be concerned exclusively with the cure of souls, that is, to preach the Word and to administer the Sacraments and to leave all matters of secular government strictly to the monarch as head of state. Indeed, the monarch's responsibility was to ensure that the "economy of God" was maintained. That meant the monarch was charged by almighty God to "seek the welfare of the city" (Jeremiah 29:7). Of course, this applies to all subjects, but the Princes were supremely responsible for seeing that the administration of the realm was carried out in accordance with the precepts laid down in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. So, for the realm to flourish, all subjects needed to fulfil their individual tasks for the good of the whole.

St Paul spelled this out very specifically when he wrote in 1 Corinthians 12 that there were a variety of gifts which people received from the Holy Spirit. And here these are listed indicating that for the "city" [read: State] to function in a just and orderly fashion each individual had to fulfil his or her separate task for the common good. So there were a variety of vocations from the Prince down through the bureaucracy, the police, the judges, the hangman to punish evil doers, the various crafts and trades down to the food producers, even the lowly milk-maid. All were part of the "economy of God." And there is one more vital "trade" that is key to the working of any kingdom, namely the profession of arms. If there is not an army to defend the kingdom it could be wiped out by any rapacious neighbouring state. Therefore the monarch was obliged to maintain a viable military striking power able to defend the realm. If the realm is not secure then the "economy of God" is always imperilled. – If it has not been noticed before, that is the reason why the emblem of the German armed forces is still the Iron Cross. It is painted on all armoured vehicles as well as military aircraft. And in the Great War the motto embossed on the buckle of a soldier's belt was "Gott mit uns." It remained in use until 1962 when it was replaced in the Bundeswehr with "Einigkeit, Recht und Freiheit" (Unity, Justice and Freedom).

So the armed forces fulfil a vital function in the "economy of God"; no soldiers, no kingdom! In short, armies, navies and air forces are essential for the "good of the city." As indicated Hegel, as a

faithful 19th century Lutheran, was able to sanctify what the 16th century Papist, Niccolo Machiavelli could not, namely the violence that has to be employed to ensure the security of the realm. So Prusso-German political culture became defined by its frank embrace of what we might

call “militarism” because it prioritised the necessity of military preparedness which, of course, all nations have also always done to a greater or lesser extent.

It is important to note here that in 1878, after the unification of Germany by Bismarck in 1871, the notable English historian, Sir John Robert Seeley published a three volume work which delved into the background of this world-historical achievement, entitled *The Life and Times of Stein, or, Germany in the Napoleonic Age*. Seeley was then acclaimed in Germany and right down to the post Second World War era as the one Englishman who really did understand Germany. At the time of Bismarck Seeley acknowledged that a land-locked State such as Prussia really needed a strong standing army in order to survive, and that it was right and proper that the strongest Germanic State should unite all the other weaker principalities under its hegemony.

It was unusual for a liberal and very pious Englishman to endorse such militarism since standing armies in the realm of England had always been considered incompatible with the constitution ever since the civil war and its Cromwellian aftermath. Of course, Seeley’s 1878 praise of Prusso-German or Bismarckian militarism did not extend to an endorsement of German continental imperialism. Seeley had simply taken up an idea of von Ranke that the peoples of one culture such as the Germans should naturally be united in one nation state or federation. He did not imagine the fateful militarisation of foreign policy that developed under Kaiser Wilhelm II and which was endorsed by the Prussian school of history led by Heinrich von Treitschke until 1898 and then developed by the Neo-Rankean school thereafter. These were all driven by the principle of the Primacy of Foreign Policy, *Der Primat der Aussenpolitik* and the associated growing Pan-Germanism. It was a situation in which the academic elite acted both as a source of political ideas and as a kind of Greek chorus in a developing tragedy endorsing national policy.

Neo-Rankeanism became the German national ideology. The nation, as none other than Max Weber announced in his inaugural address at Freiburg University in 1893, had to regard the settlement of 1871 NOT as the conclusion of the national movement that was confined to the Continent of Europe, but rather as the beginning of world wide expansion. The Neo-Rankeans agreed and got behind the fateful German naval build up which had so alarmed the British especially because it was based on the construction of Dreadnought class battleships. Cruisers for colonial and trade route protection were no problem. But the Kaiser persisted with his so-called Tirpitz program to out build Britain in battle ships.

In 1913 the young Kurt Riezler as new personal assistant to the Reich Chancellor Bethman Hollweg published his take on Neo-Rankeanism. Germany must continue to arm and expand under the twin mottos, *Die Kanonen schiessen nicht aber sie reden mit in den Verhandlungen* and *Deutschland muss so stark sein, um den Frieden zu befehlen*. These two sentences mean that the

nation must be sufficiently armed so as to be able not only to dictate peace to rival powers but also to be strong enough to occupy those as yet unoccupied parts of the world, or to assume control of overseas territories such as the Belgian Congo or Portuguese Angola that were colonised by weaker powers; hence the massive expenditure on armaments on both sea and land, especially from 1912. What could possibly go wrong?

Kurt Riezler had thought of this. He could envisage a situation in which an alliance of rival powers could be formed to resist German expansionism. One simply had to go on arming even more to dictate the peace. He conceded that there was risk involved but in the final analysis one had to rely on bluff. Riezler would most certainly have read Norman Angell's *The Grand Illusion* of 1909 in which it was argued that the nations would not engage in warfare because of the cost to their respective economies. Riezler's answer was that the determination of the most resolute power would win out by its readiness to bluff. Other powers would shrink back from declaring war which would mean if not defeat then the virtual destruction of the national economy. Since no one would want this, peace would be assured. Sadly Riezler's calculation unravelled as he admitted it could if a power had diplomatically over-bluffed (*hat sich fest geblufft*).

But the question remains, given the behaviour of today's great powers, does the Rankean schema still apply, and, more to the point, are the possibilities for meltdown even greater than in 1914-1918? Consider the present constellation of Great Powers: the USA, Russia, China and India. If we take the USA to be a satiated Power with a working parliamentary system that does not want or need war for either economic or prestige reasons we are left with two virtual rogue states, namely Russia and China where the description "rogue" is justified from their behaviour. They are not parliamentary democracies but rather one is an oligarchy ruled by individuals who despise the liberal democratic West while the other is a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist opportunistic dictatorship determined to play a dominating role not only in the Asia-Pacific region. Both powers do more than mere posturing with their huge military potential. They arrogantly and provocatively engaged in bullying tactics outside their own borders on land and on sea. They appear to want to be known and feared as capable of jeopardising world peace. India is also a member of the club because she is determined to demonstrate her capability of matching China in South East Asia and in the Indian Ocean.

Overall there is a dangerously delicate balance-of-power game being played out that would be easily recognisable by von Ranke, the Neo-Rankeans and Kurt Riezler. The strivings of North Korea to become a big player in the nuclear stakes have resulted in a back-down that since the USA would not be intimidated by the bluff and China clearly does not want to let North Korea act as her cat's paw. There exists at present a clear stand-off. In short, there has been no notable advance in ameliorating Great Power relationships since 1918. The modern world is back at

square one where the United Nations has been reduced to a powerless forum in which the Great Powers in the Security Council dictate the agenda. The world awaits with bated breath a peaceful resolution but it rather seems no-one has a clue as to what than might be.