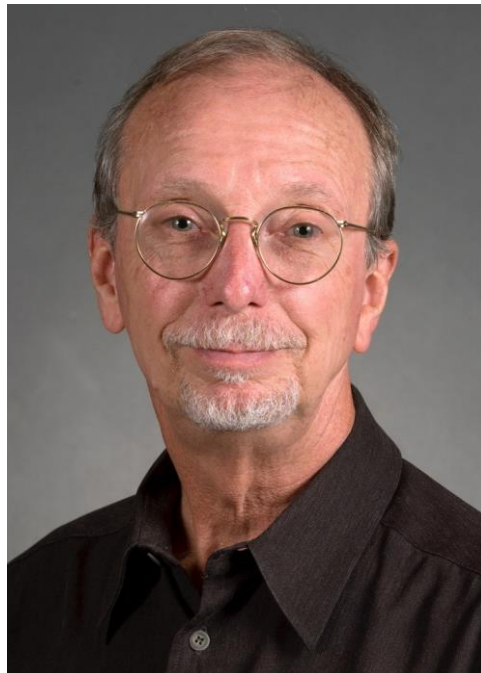


# Is a New Multilateralism Transitioning into Global Politics?

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## Is a New Multilateralism Transitioning into Global Politics

### *Abstract*

Audrey Kortunov, Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council of Moscow, has authored an insightful essay, “Why the World Is Not Becoming Multipolar”, depicting what he believes to be a contemporary global transition into an era of *multilateralism*, a move away from Great-Power balancing and onto regional and global community involvement.

Since shifting to a more appropriate theory appears to hold relevance to his article, this essay will settle on a broader discussion about comparing an array of international relations models, including his multilateralism (or liberal/functionalism) but also of other theoretical approaches as well, to locate appropriate paths for an enhanced understanding of the present transitions in world politics as introduced by Kortunov.

This review will find multilateralism or liberal/functionalism not to be among the best ways for describing this transition. Indeed, a variety of other models will be suggested as more suitable for this analysis.

Below, an introduction will feature several points that should ground the reader on theory itself, this followed by four separate parts: (1) Kortunov’s reasons for this global transition within his vision of multilateralism; (2) an evaluation of his reasoning; (3) a narrative on different theoretical approaches; and 4) a selection of the better predictive models as conclusion. Enlisting multiple models for a more complete study of international-relations happenings will represent a strong thesis of this review.

A caveat here might be useful: this reviewer assumes Kortunov’s “multilateralism” equates to the model of liberal/functionalism, as based upon the various descriptions he has raised in his essay.

**Key Words** – *theories/models, multilateralism/functionalism, balance-of-power, dependency, geopolitics, realism, condominium*

### **Introduction – Theories and models**

Most studies find the two concepts, *theory* and *model*, as identical and interchangeable, the one equal to the other. Yet, in this review, the two will differ. To this reviewer (Kelly 2016), theories come as simple sentences of probability. If “A” happens, a good likelihood holds that “B” will result because of “A.” *The more borders a country has, the more war involvements it probably will suffer* (Kelly 1992). In contrast, models function as passive repositories of theories that fit that model’s definition. “Heartlands” correspond to geopolitics, but not to realism, whereas the “security dilemma” attaches to the latter but not to the

former (Kelly 2019b). Hence, the two theories will enter their own respective models. This gathering of like theories represents the sole purpose of a model.

Among the extant international-relations models, this review will examine nine: liberal/functionalism (multilateralism), balance-of-power, realism, geopolitics, dependency, systems, constructivism, cyclic, and imperial thesis. These nine reflect a strategic level-of-analysis, that is, for countries, a wider breadth of involvement either global, continental, or regional. Decision-making case studies and gaming designs are not included in this analysis since these transpire at lower levels of involvement. Once more, all nine should be of value and thus utilized within a study of foreign affairs, and in many cases, several should be used together.

The number of theories attached to each model varies, with perhaps classical geopolitics containing the most. In its case, the author has located over sixty premises that would fit the spatial design of the model (Kelly 2016). Realism would show less than ten and balance-of-power fewer still.

One difficulty lies in determining a high level of probability, or precisely in how much “A” really affects “B”, so essential to defining a theory. Some use of hypothesis testing in statistics does connect to proving theories viable, for example, *distance can statistically link to a state’s behavior* (Kelly and Boardman 1976). But in most cases, actual numerical tabulations are not available for testing international events, so an approximation of probability must come from other avenues: history, frequent usage, rationality and common sense, and so forth.

Each model begins with assumptions, or underlying beliefs that stay unproven but are accepted as essential to defining the model. Cyclic patterns assume a predictable rotating order, often a rise-and-fall phenomenon. Constructivist scholars describe conspiracies of capitalist greed constraining foreign affairs. Geopolitics relies on a geographical placement and realism on a rational management of power.

Most models are cyclical and systemic. Many shift in relevance over time and in relationships impacted by events or policies. Also, some overlap with others, for instance, dependency could reflect geopolitical patterns, and balances-of-power could conform to realism, relative to states’ power, and to geopolitics, relative to regional configurations. Models can be kept separate or, instead, tucked into other models. But, a word of caution here – geopolitics inherently differs from realism (Kelly 2019b), and other such instances of models’ distinctiveness could be located as well.

Theories are timeless. They continue over decades and centuries without change. One could see similar geopolitical structures and theories assisting interpretations of the Peloponnesian War of ancient Greece as well as of contemporary diplomacy of South America (Kelly 2011). Henry Kissinger (1957) could compare the Napoleonic era with the Cold War a century and half later by enlisting a common realist terminology. Nonetheless, to Kortunov, it seems that balance-of-power as a model simply has disappeared due to historical changes from one century to another. This should be opposed because, while models come-and-go in relevance to the occasion, they do not disappear. His

suggestion of multilateralism rising to erase balancing structures, his primary thesis, should not mean balance-of-power utterly has ended as a reliable model. Most premises are unbiased and neutral, lacking any taint of ideology and partisanship. Yet, a few do emit a morality -- the post-modern critical geopolitics and constructivism being two exceptions, both taking normative and emancipatory stances. Realist advocates recommend a pragmatic management of power as a solution to international anarchy. Liberal/functionalism reflects a liberal tie to community, countries joining for a common good in trade and communications. Nonetheless, it would be difficult to find an ethical standard within classical geopolitics and certain other models.

Some relate more closely to immediate policies and actions; others tend to be more general in time and purpose. For instance, geopolitics contributes a geographical framework for studying foreign affairs, but its contributions to immediate policy making are more remote, for example, in the centuries-old Monroe's Doctrine and in the long-term need for naval supremacy within US security policies (Kelly 2019a). Just the opposite for realism (Kelly 2019b); it will seek wise states persons to construct an immediate common peace to protect against international anarchy.

Some models, Marxism and most theologies, for instance, require just one "Truth" and nothing more, a "single belief fits all." But, usually, one must enlist several models jointly for a complete IR study because one path will not satisfy a full perspective. This would certainly seem contrary to Kortunov, who appears to rely on just his multilateralism to explain historical global transitions. Below, fully eight of the nine models described are felt helpful to a good explanation of current global affairs.

In sum, all models and theories assist the student and scholar toward extending more deeply into international political happenings and policies. We would be remiss to ignore them.

## **Part One -- Why this transition to multilateralism?**

Our world's international environments surely are transitioning into different foreign-affairs structures, their parameters yet to emerge clearly. Reflective of repeating cycles, a characteristic of many models, this movement should be expected, away from one international setting and onto others that would be a normal transition.

In balance-of-power terms, it appears to be agreed (except perhaps to Kortunov) that the world's political system at around 1990 changed from a bipolar Cold War formation into a "unipolar moment" following the Soviet Union's demise, this a temporary or generational phase of United States global hegemony that in several decades will be replaced by some different sort of balance constellation. This future path divides into various directions, but two primary routes would serve the reader:

One, a shift back to a bipolar configuration of rivalry or of accommodation between China and North America, the former perhaps a "Thucydides trap" of

inevitable war between a rising China and a resisting America, or the latter, a condominium of partnership between the two nations to setting aside their contest and to legitimating their own regional spheres of influence. John Mearsheimer is a leading advocate of the more conflictual path (2001: 35, 82); William Thompson (2018) agrees to the second example.

Or two, a turn to a multipolar balance among the larger states, possibly China, Germany, Russia, Japan, and the United States, together assembling, once more, into a friendly or hostile formation similar to the above, a condominium of a common security or an armed strife between some of the members.

In contrast, Kortunov rejects this balancing progression, instead providing what he believes in multilateralism to be a better interpreter of the present debate over models: (1) instead of states' power, a wide recognition of common "interests;" (2) instead of "privileges of leaders," a creation of "opportunities for underachievers;" (3) instead of power blocs among nations, a world "built from complementary regimes;" and (4) instead of "periodically adjusting the balance of power, a mutual dependency [amidst] new levels of integration."

The general idea with functionalist integration, or what this reviewer assumes should parallel Kortunov's multilateralism, is to progress toward a solid regional cohesion in the years ahead, the three current examples being the European Union (EU), the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA), and the South American Southern Cone Free Market (Mercosur). Yet, all three presently are not reaching these earlier objectives after promising beginnings, but this should not indicate ultimate failure, as the world hopefully could swing to more cooperation and stability and not to less.

This a liberal approach, integration assumes a regional cooperation for removing barriers to trade, reducing or eliminating tariffs and other restraints to commerce. Certain agencies will be erected to facilitate this traffic, for instance, administering common governmental subsidies, currencies, transport regimes, and so forth. If commerce expands successfully, such agencies will grow or "spill-over" into the political realm, often a confederal governing structure of courts, bureaucracies, and parliaments. The ultimate aim, again, would be a series of successful regional governments, and perhaps a global federation arising at some future time. Once more, this portrait should approximate Kortunov's intention.

Kortunov lists several explanations for this coming transition from balance to integration:

- The classical balance-of-power thesis is no longer viable as a predictor of current foreign affairs. The post-Cold War unipolar structure has not manifested as predicted: a "multipolarity should have evolved from a hypothesis into a full-fledged theory. . . Yet something clearly went wrong. The world is not behaving as the [multipolar] founders had

predicted.” In sum, it does seem that Kortunov erases the balancing thesis itself in his favor of multilateralism.

- Since the original balance traits have shifted, they should be replaced by the tenets of multilateralism. The Nineteenth Century Concert of Europe does not equate to the current political environment, since the players have changed in their power distributions, the United States weighted well-above the others. A new environment of flexibility has ended the former static competition. Likewise, local governance now shows more fluctuations, and thus, more confusion and less stability and predictability. Multilateralism can better adjust to this new era of uncertainty.
- The Great Powers (“gangsters”) have lost their leverage over the lesser states (“molls”). Thus, the present environment has become more fluid and complex and less controllable. Even a return to bipolarity would lack certainty because the Manichean Cold-War duality is missing.
- State power is “diffusing” in that traditional components of power have shifted to new sources: trade, technology, and common interests instilling cooperation and not competition. The concept of “community” best depicts this new multilateralism, one of common “interests,” “opportunities for underachievers,” “complementary regimes,” and “mutual dependency and new levels of integration.”
- Ultimately, relations among states have turned to “equal rights” with no “privileged” elite above the others. Power has become so diffused as to make a new balance-of-power impossible. “When the number of power parameters bends to infinity, the task of building a stable multipolar balance becomes impossible to solve.” Accordingly, the “future world should be sought in multilateralism instead of multipolarity.”

In sum, this future will be “far more complex and contradictory,” a place of “diverse participants in global politics interacting in various formats,” and a reaction to the “arrogance, haughtiness, and various excesses of the hapless builders” of the former balances. Such a landscape is more attuned to a community of nations at peace and in prosperity, joining in regional pacts and possibly later in global governance that will end the previous contests of the powerful reigning over the weak.

Yet, is this portrait of transition, from balanced poles to multilateralist communities, reasonable?

## **Part Two -- Likely problems with Kortunov’s forecasts**

One could counter many of Kortunov’s contentions with these suggested alternatives:

- Global relations have retained a structure of balancing among the powerful: The Great Powers (basically the United States, China, Russia,

Germany, and Japan) have stayed dominant within strategic Eurasian competition, and the weaker states remain dependent, constrained, and not influential. Military might and economic wealth continues to translate to national power and reward. It could be surmised that these conditions are broadening and not narrowing.

- Successful Integration among nations has not transpired: Perhaps, just the opposite, because the United Nations has shown only slight growth to federalism, and regional communities including the European have struggled. Again, the Great Powers (except Germany) have not strongly endorsed integration.
- Even were a successful integration to appear, it would yet be dominated by the more powerful members: This result seems evident in all such cases: Germany in the European Union, the United States in the North American Free Trade Area, and Brazil and Argentina in the Southern Cone Common Market. All fit an Orwellian pan-regional design.
- The global powers dominate world trade, investment, and control of wealth (technology, capital, and so forth): The lesser countries, particularly for those of the Global South, have not shared in this wealth. Indeed, the separation between rich and poor is heightening at faster paces.
- International turmoil is expanding as well. Strife in the Middle East, South Asia, and elsewhere is growing. China may be heading to war with North America. Putin's Russia is emerging on the global stage, set to disrupt. The Western Alliance may be fragmenting, not strengthening and with some democracies fading. A less stable international system has risen, one more uncertain and pessimistic toward the future. This does not correspond to Kortunov's cooperative functionalism.
- The ravages of climate change, of diminishing resources, and of wealth polarization will further punish the lesser states. Altered northern heartlands are emerging, ones fixed upon environmental stability in addition to the traditional variables to continental placements of leverage (Kelly and Claridge 2020). The Global South will suffer in the coming years more than it suffers presently, prompting attempts at migrations to the more prosperous North.
- Whereas both Kortunov and this reviewer forecast a coming chaos and instability for Earth, Kortunov concludes this plight still leading to stability and cohesion among nations. But just the opposite is seen for this review. A glimpse of future tides, of course, is difficult. Still, a reasonable prediction would appear to reveal low odds for a sudden upturn to stability. No evidence is available to show a shift to a global community. Instead, violence seems the better guess.



- Above all, the balance-of-power thesis has stayed a reliable template for understanding international relations and for guiding states persons for conducting contemporary foreign affairs. Global politics is transitioning from unipolarity back to bipolarity or multipolarity, with theorists debating the timing and alliances of these transformations, but a majority still attest to this inevitable coming.

In sum, this reviewer cannot envision strong indicators within the contemporary environment of a global move to integration and away from balancing among the Great Powers. Alas, we see more the opposite!

### **Part Three – Analysis**

First, several comments about theory. Kortunov suggests multipolarity has not appeared within the current foreign arena because its form differs from the classical Nineteenth Century version. Hence, in its absence, multilateralism naturally replaces the former structure. Yet, as has been suggested above, theory is timeless and ubiquitous – conditions may change but theory stays unchanged. Whether unipolarity has morphed into two or multiple-state configurations, it still retains its presence.

His case is not convincing, as attested to in Part Two above. If this review contains any thesis, it would be to emphasize that to accomplish a thorough study of foreign affairs, one must enlist a variety of models because one alone will usually not be sufficient for a full explanation. Accordingly, this third part's analysis will turn to several international-relations models, the first two contained in the original essay and seven more added, all of which should shed further light on this subject of global transformation.

The balance-of-power thesis is very simple, its basic strength expressed in just two variables: number of participating countries or “poles,” whether many, two, or one, and relations among the members, whether friendly or hostile. Roughly, historic eras can be identified by utilizing this framework. And better, the portrait suits in academic study and in policy making; it is remarkably accurate and unbiased.

This balancing model, likewise, shows good flexibility, being timely at locating in an approximate sense the number of participating states and roughly their relationships. For instance, most scholars would agree to a post-World War Two configuration of two opposing alliances, the Soviet and the Western, within a bipolar structure. This image tended to fit the times, its simplicity probably helping to stabilize the system because it was predictable and because it reflected the competitive positions of either antagonist. Although the hostility shifted from cool to warm and back again during the forty-five year period, the structure

clearly remained two-fold between the alliances, a conclusion not difficult to visualize. And this constellation ended in *detente* and without war.

With the Soviet demise of the early 1990s, the agreed-upon configuration among scholars concluded at unipolarity, a hegemony of North America with some believing it long-termed, others merely a “moment.” That debate continues, but the transition probably already has begun after a generation has passed. Whether that transition aims toward bipolarity or multipolarity, or toward accommodation or hostility, remains to be seen.

But the point being made is that the balance-of-power thesis continues useful and accurate in the study of international-relations tendencies. Again, its simplicity, flexibility, and accuracy subscribe to a utility for students of foreign affairs. To state for emphasis, the model should be kept!

Liberal/functionalism as a competing thesis is similarly simple – a recognition that regional trade requires expanded consumer markets, this done by reducing tariffs and other restraints to trade and constructing agencies to facilitate this expanded commerce. With successes in trade expansion, these agencies would require strengthening such that a “spillover” into political facilities would be needed. Hence, regional, and perhaps global, integration and governance would be the outcome.

Admittedly, the world has turned to “globalization,” a complex network of faster communications, a dependency upon inter-twined manufacturing and technology, an international banking and lending facility, and other such specialized agencies among nations. Yet, this feature has not diminished the leverage of the Great Powers. That stays, and perhaps their authority and prosperity are further enhanced by these transactions, for the polarization for power and wealth is expanding between the rich and the poor countries.

Once more, it appears in the present era that the balancing thesis is more appropriate than the common-market thesis, for reasons again expressed in Part Two. But, to repeat, this is unfortunate because many would favor community over struggles among nations.

Two additional international-relations models, classical realism and geopolitics, intersect to assist the reader in this discussion. The two approaches inherently differ, but each complements the other (Kelly 2019b). It should prove worthwhile to describe briefly their basic premises.

Realism: Four parts combine to outline this model: (1) A problem of anarchy or international lawlessness confronts our world, one that can never be resolved but temporarily the system can be made safer if a substantial peace among the leading nations can be erected. Since a peace will inevitably revert to anarchy and war in a generation or two, the stability will not be lasting. (2) A “security

dilemma,” that of single states seeking safety by themselves and not in community, will stimulate more anarchy and lead to costly arms races that will disturb security, a station that must be averted. (3) The best solution to the instability would arrive in a solid collective security among the primary states, joining in a community to establish a peace that would subdue the dangers within anarchy. (4) Finally, wise and insightful states persons would orchestrate this structure, bringing moderation within and among individual countries and isolating or destroying any radical and reckless intrusions threatening to the stability.

One point further: neo-realism can equate to balance-of-power configurations as well, measured in terms of power. These structures evolve from one pattern to another, and they are cyclical, reflective of the rising and declining power of states and regions. The present “unipolar moment” shows an inevitable movement from unipolarity or United States hegemony to a present or near-future shift to bipolarity, a Chinese-US contest, or to multipolarity, a possible peaceful or hostile configuration of basically five leading states, some assembled in contrasting checkerboard patterns: the United States, China, Germany, Russia, and Japan. That debate among scholars continues to the present and will not be resolved soon.

Geopolitics: This approach guides students and leaders to an awareness of geographical positions and locations of states, regions, and resources as affecting international relations and foreign policies. Geopolitics serves two primary purposes as a theoretical model: first, it establishes a geographical framework or backdrop for guiding scholars, students, and states persons to a better understanding of global affairs, albeit, one that is longer-termed and normally not immediate toward policy making, i.e., again, Monroe’s Doctrine and global sea power for guiding centuries of United States foreign policy; and second, it supplies a multitude of theories for asserting this longer-term guidance.

In this latter case of multiple theories in classical geopolitics, the reader might note the following located just within this essay: heartlands and rimlands, checkerboards and core/periphery places of leverage, climate change and natural resources, migrations, borders, and territorial expansion, spheres of influence, pan-regions, and condominiums, and migrations, distances, and sea power, all assisting a deeper understanding of international events.

Dependency: A configuration of contrasting wealth and power levels, a core of capitalist plenty astride peripheral margins of poverty and weakness. The Northern latitudes enjoy greater resources, healthier climates, and stronger pivotal locations. The South cannot compete and may steadily be falling behind the richer nations, certainly not an environment for stability and peace (Kelly and Claridge 2020).

Correcting the dangers of a widening polarization will prove difficult if not unsurmountable. The Marxian path to revolution against such “imperialism” may have become obsolete due to elites’ power against the peripheries’ weaknesses. A moderate transfer of wealth, reflective of the New International Economic Order (NIEO), also has not proven capable of reform, either.

Constructivism: This post-modern and radical path seeks to erase this dependency of the poor against the rich via deconstructing or revealing a perceived exploitation. Once successful, revolutionary force will bring about an emancipation of the depressed.

Historic cycles: A good example of these rotations would be George Modelski’s (1978) one-hundred-year-cycles, a hegemonic state rising and falling in global authority, its rise based upon leading technologies and sea power and its fall upon the rivalries of competitors and bankruptcy. If his thesis is correct, the rotation has turned to the last stages of the hegemon’s fall, the United States succumbing to failure in meeting the challenges of global leadership.

Imperial thesis: A need for security and revenue prompts a country toward territorial expansion, but once dominant over an expanse of space, its eventual weakening comes from hostile neighbors and hinterland rebellions that will bring bankruptcy and eventual imperial extinction. Ancient Rome and the Soviet Union, as empires, faced this contraction of lands once conquered, but later freed, folding back against the original center.

Systems: This approach connects with most other models, an action-reaction play of stimulations. For instance, Russian involvement in Syria prompting Middle East migrations to destabilize Europe, or the waning importance of Cuba and Nicaragua to North America with the demise of the Soviet Union.

Once more, all nine models with their attached theories perform at strategic, continental, and regional levels of involvement. Each should be valued for providing good interpretations for foreign affairs happenings, although their worth will vary according to time, place, and circumstances.

#### **Part Four – Conclusions**

Fully eight of the nine models portrayed above appear particularly useful toward predicting what might be emerging in world politics in the decades ahead. But, Kortunov’s multilateralism/liberal functionalism would not be among these nine for reasons stated in Part Three, for it seems increasingly clear that our globe is heading in the direction opposite his vision, not toward unity and peace but toward fragmentation and violence.

Briefly, examples within each model will indicate this conclusion of fragmentation and violence:

- Balance-of-power: To repeat from the above, our present global configuration seems to be evolving from a US hegemony to a bipolar or multipolar transition, with probable patterns of competition, arms races, and regional turbulence. Balance transitions may encourage these outcomes, uncertainty releasing prior restraints to lawlessness. One example could be strategic naval challenges from Russia and China against the American armadas patrolling the rimland waters encircling Eurasia (Kelly 2019a).
- Realism: A return to anarchy, so feared by realists, has brought forth Chinese and Russian rivalries against US hegemony and the “unipolar moment.” The prior stabilizing consensus among the major powers is disappearing and the security dilemma arising, seen for example, in the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty between Russia and the United States now abandoned and its demise releasing a likely arms race among an array of opponents. Other instances of such fears could be added as well.
- Geopolitics: A “geopolitics of scarcity” (Kelly and Claridge 2020) has arrived, of growing global populations amidst diminishing global resources, surely a calculus for political upheavals, resources wars, and significant migrations of starving peoples forcing themselves onto resisting healthier neighborhoods. New heartlands may feature prosperous northern environments as well as the classical instances of continental leverage.
- Dependency: The capitalist/technological core regions are advancing in wealth and power over those of the increasingly destitute marginal peoples, certainly a recipe for revolution and strife. Accumulating wealth comes naturally to capitalism, but the accompanying polarization of riches between the contrasting regions may create unsolvable difficulties in creating a stable world order.
- Constructivism: Advocates of this model seek an exposure of supposed exploitation of this dependency and a plan of violence, the best approach toward emancipating suffering peoples from the greed and suppression of the rich. Such stances reflect revolutionary conflict.
- Systems: Global warming seems inevitable, our world moving towards disaster particularly in the middle and southern latitudes that already are over-populated and without sustaining resources to avoid mass suffering. A gated world may be arriving, with the wealthy walling themselves off from the destitute.
- Historic cycles and the imperial thesis: For both models, the rotation points downwardly to strife. For the Modelski cycles, the contraction of US power indicates eras of decline and instability into international

warfare, these reflective of the diminishing US global hegemony of previous decades.

In sum, this review offers one primary conclusion about Kortunov's multilateralism. That most evidence, at least that posted above, rejects his belief that Earth currently is transitioning toward a peaceful and stabilizing integration and away from the alleged problems inherent to power balances. That to the contrary, this reviewer has argued with some confidence the accuracy of the balance-of power thesis and of the other seven models toward predicting a growing potential for violence in the approaching era. The eight together, to repeat, all appear to predict sufferings, dislocations, and conflicts arising in the coming years, just the opposite of that posed in Kortunov's multilateralism.

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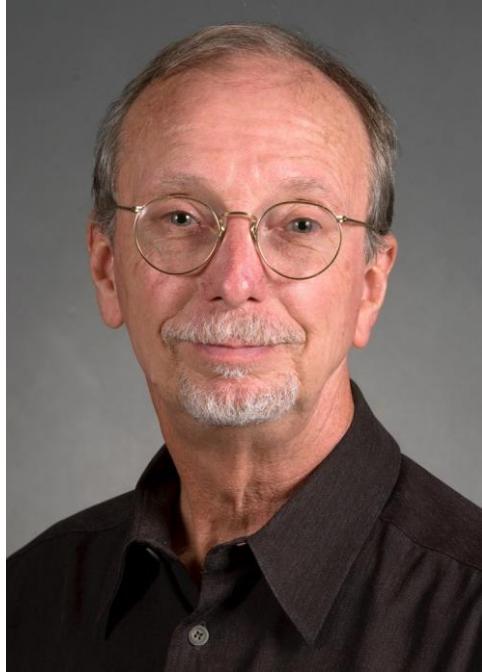
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