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What is This?

Promoting polyarchy: 20 years later

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It has been nearly 20 years since I finished the research for my 1996 study, *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, U.S. Intervention, and Hegemony*.[1] Here, I want to summarize that study and discuss what has happened over the past two decades, in particular, as concerns the global crisis and the future of global polyarchy.

I first became interested in the topic of U.S. polyarchy promotion in the late 1980s. I had served as an advisor to the Nicaraguan foreign ministry on elections and U.S. policy as that country underwent an electoral process in the midst of war and U.S. intervention. The U.S. government had supported the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua for over four decades and then organized a counterrevolutionary movement against the Sandinista government in the wake of the 1979 insurrection that overthrew the dictatorship. But Washington switched its strategy in the second half of the 1980s, from pursuing the military defeat of the Sandinistas to internal political and electoral intervention in the name of 'democracy promotion'. The change in strategy towards Nicaragua formed part of a more general shift in U.S. foreign policy, from supporting dictatorships and promoting authoritarianism in the post World War Two era to promoting what it referred to as 'democracy'.

In attempting to make sense of this policy shift, I turned to a combination of world-systems theory, global political economy – especially an analysis of globalization – and neo-Gramscian perspectives in international relations. I concluded, in a nutshell, that capitalist globalization generates escalating conflicts, large-scale social displacement and political instability. Globalization has involved new rounds of primitive accumulation worldwide that have shaken up existing power arrangements everywhere, not only by disrupting the popular classes but also by undermining the terms of intra-elite accommodation. Prior to this new epoch of globalization, dictatorship and authoritarianism constituted the predominant form of international social control – modalities of control that had replaced, in turn, earlier colonial and oligarchic modes of political domination in the international system. But dictatorships could not manage the tensions generated by neo-liberal restructuring and integration into the emergent global economy. Mass movements from below for democratization sought not just elections and civilian rule but fundamental change in the socio-economic order. These rebellions against the depredations of capitalist globalization threatened to snowball into revolutions that challenged the social order itself in the latter decades of the twentieth century.

As capitalist globalization advanced, global elites forged consensus around what I referred as the *transnational agenda* of neo-liberalism and polyarchy ('democracy'). Neo-liberalism is a policy model for establishing the conditions that allow for transnational capital mobility and globalized circuits of production and distribution. In turn, global elites hope that polyarchic ('democratic') political arrangements will prove to be a more resilient form of social control than authoritarian and dictatorial rule. As countries and regions have integrated into global capitalism, they have seen the rise of new transnationally oriented elites organized in business associations, political parties, civic

groups, the mass media and so on that are supported by the United States' and Western political intervention programmes conducted under the rubric of 'promoting democracy'. 'Democracy promotion' programmes seek to cultivate these transnationally oriented elites who are favourably disposed to open up their countries to free trade and transnational corporate investment. They also seek to isolate those counter-elites who are not amenable to the transnational project *and also to* contain the masses from becoming politicized and mobilized on their own, independent of or in opposition to the transnational elite project by incorporating them 'consensually' into the political order these programmes seek to establish.

From Managua to Manila and back to Managua

The 1980s thus began a season of elite transitions around the world. The shift in US policy can be mapped from 1979 to 1985. As the Nicaraguan revolution brewed in 1978 and 1979, the Carter White House debated whether to continue its support for Somoza or to back the non-Sandinista elite opposition. In the end, Washington chose to back Somoza up to the bitter end and could not avert a revolutionary outcome to the crisis of dictatorship. Several years later, in the Philippines, a similar revolution was brewing as the Marcos dictatorship began to crumble. Inside the Reagan White House, a repeat debate gripped policymakers: whether to shore up support for Marcos or shift it to the elite opposition. This time, policymakers chose the latter course at a decisive moment in the 'People's Power' uprising, and as a result, power was passed from the dictatorship to the anti-Marcos bourgeoisie, in the form of Corazon Aquino, and a popular revolutionary outcome was adverted. As dictatorships and authoritarian regimes continued to falter around the world in the face of popular democratization movements, from Chile, to South Africa and Eastern Europe, the lessons of Nicaragua and the Philippines were not lost on policymakers.

These lessons came full circle at the end of the 1980s, when Washington shifted the strategy of counterrevolution in Nicaragua, from a military overthrow to internal political intervention culminating in an electoral coup d'etat in 1990. As I documented in my 2002 book, *A Faustian Bargain*, the US funders provided tens of millions of dollars to the internal anti-Sandinista opposition as operatives poured into the country, pushed the unification of these anti-Sandinista forces, forged elite consensus and designed and guided their media and electoral campaigns. They adroitly used the leverage of years of military attrition and economic sanctions against an exhausted population to turn the vote into a referendum on endless war and economic hardship if the Sandinistas were to win at the polls, or peace and US aid if the opposition emerged triumphant.[2] With the success in Nicaragua, policymakers learned that these new modalities of internal political intervention could be wielded to remove leftist regimes just as effectively as they could be wielded to nudge out recalcitrant pro-capitalist dictatorships.

In conclusion, it became clear that authoritarian forms of social control and international order are not viable in the age of globalization. Dictatorships are unstable, and their crony capitalism is not compatible with free market capitalism. Fluid global accumulation requires flexible political systems that allow for competition and circulation

among elites and the consensual incorporation of masses; polyarchy facilitates *hegemonic incorporation* (*as opposed to coercive exclusion*). In this regard, there was a certain elective affinity in the late twentieth century between capitalist globalization and polyarchy. Dictatorships and authoritarian regimes open up crises among elites and space for popular classes to contest the elite order. Theoretically, the turn to United States' 'democracy promotion' constituted a shift from coercive to consensual mechanisms of domination in the international system.

Passive revolution and the battle for global civil society

In the ensuing two decades, polyarchy as a policy has transnationalized and become integrated into international relations. The EU is now deeply involved in such programmes, as are regional organizations such as the Organization of American States, and international organizations such as the United Nations and the IFIs (in the 1990s, the World Bank made lending conditional on 'democracy'). But *what is it* that the United States and transnational elites *actually promote*? Democracy, we should recall, is an essentially contested concept. Like all such concepts, the definition itself is part of ideological and political battles. I have borrowed the term 'polyarchy' from Robert Dahl and modified what I mean by its invocation. What the United States actually promotes when its policymakers speak of 'democracy' is elite rule by transnational capitalists and agents or allies, in which the participation of the masses is limited to choosing among competing elites in tightly controlled elections. As we entered the era of globalization, the key challenge for transnational elites was how to make the world safe for transnational capital (hence polyarchy) and available to transnational capital (hence neo-liberalism)?

Polyarchy claims to be a process conception of democracy – procedurally free elections. But the claim is antinomious, since social and economic democracy is explicitly excluded yet implicitly included. Policymakers and their organic intellectuals are quite clear that 'capitalism is necessary for democracy'; that to qualify as 'democratic', a country must be capitalist and pursue the neo-liberal programme; and that a challenge to capitalism is a threat to democracy. Thus, the conception behind United States' 'democracy promotion' is not really process (procedurally free elections) but outcome – neo-liberal global capitalism. This is the political and the ideological sleight of hand in 'democracy promotion'. What is crucial is that the ability to translate economic power into political influence and to determine political outcomes. The structural power of transnational capital is deeply at work in the United States' polyarchy promotion.

In *Promoting Polyarchy*, I observed the actual mechanisms of the new political intervention through six case studies: Nicaragua, Chile, Haiti, the Philippines, South Africa and the former Soviet Bloc countries. The United States' strategy was to intervene in the civil society of these countries. This intervention sought to fund and guide more moderate organizations attuned to the United States and transnational elite agenda, or to create such organizations from scratch if they did not already exist, including student, youth and women's organizations, trade unions, peasant federations, community and civic groups, business councils, media organizations and so on. These distinct sectors and their organizations were brought into civil society networks, while more radical groups were

scorned and marginalized. Simultaneously, elites were organized and helped to achieve leadership positions in civil society organizations. Those transnationally oriented elites that could take the reins of the transnational agenda were cultivated and bolstered while more nationally oriented and/or authoritarian elites were subordinated. As these case studies showed, elections often play a key role: United States' political intervention programmes are organized around elections. Elections allow transnational elites and their internal agents to *harvest* and channel legitimate grievances into a change in regime and a project of neo-liberal integration into global capitalism.

As became clear in these case studies and in other instances of United States' political intervention over the past two decades, 'democracy promotion' and electoral intervention programmes are combined with overall US and transnational elite policy, including coercive and other forms of diplomacy, economic aid or sanctions, international media and propaganda campaigns ('public diplomacy' and psychological operations or Psy-Ops), military or paramilitary actions, covert operations and so on. These diverse strands of the US policy are woven together into a coherent unitary strategy, often mounted around key conjunctures. The countries targeted for such operations fall into three categories:

1. Removal of revolutionary, leftist and nationalist governments. This category would include Nicaragua under the Sandinistas, Cuba, Venezuela and Bolivia, Honduras prior to the 2009 coup d'etat and so on. Here, the goal is *destabilization* of these regimes.
2. Removal of dictatorships and authoritarian or crony capitalist regimes. This category would include Chile under Pinochet, South Africa under white minority rule, the Philippines under Marcos, the countries of the so-called 'colored revolutions', Iran and so on. Here, the goal is *controlled destabilization* of the regime and transition to a new set of elites that embrace neo-liberalism.
3. Bolstering weak neo-liberal states and elites, such as United States' programmes in recent years in Mexico, Thailand, Jordan, Kenya, Peru, in Iraq after the removal of Saddam Hussein, Honduras following the 2009 coup d'etat and so on. Here, the goal is *stabilization* of the elite order – warding off threats through 'political development programs' and strengthening the underlying stability of these regimes.

The objective is a deep penetration of the civil society and political system of the intervened country – in Gramscian terms, of the *extended state* ('political society + civil society'). Neil Burron has cogently shown how escalating struggles from below by popular classes for more thoroughgoing democratization in recent years have been countered from above with a strategy of 'capillary power' and greater flexibility. United States and transnational elites have fine-tuned their strategies to bring popular sectors into the administration of their own domination through what he calls 'inclusive neo-liberal governance'.[3] The goal is to prevent any radical (leftist or otherwise) outcome to popular struggles for democracy, to shape the outcome of political transitions, preserve neo-liberal policies and to be open to global capitalism – in a nutshell, to assure that there will be no alternation of fundamental class and power relations during political crises and transitions.

In the broader picture, what was taking place was the battle for global civil society. In this battle, US policymakers and organic intellectuals became good Gramscians. They came to understand that hegemony is constructed in civil society, beyond what groups or individuals are in charge of the state apparatus. They attempted to carry out a global *passive revolution* in the wake of the breakup of dictatorships and authoritarian arrangements around the world. The Italian socialist Antonio Gramsci developed the concept of passive revolution to refer to efforts by dominant groups to bring about mild change from above in order to undercut mobilization from below for more far-reaching transformation. Integral to passive revolution is the co-optation of leadership from below, its integration into the dominant project.

US policymakers and transnational elites have attempted to carry out passive revolution in Egypt, by way of example, as a response to the Arab Spring. In January 2011, the Egyptian people began a popular uprising against the dictatorial regime of Hosni Mubarak – the so-called Papyrus Revolution – inspired by a similar uprising weeks earlier in Tunisia that sent the president of that country into exile. Thus began the Arab Spring that soon spread to Yemen, Bahrain, Jordan, Syria, Libya and elsewhere in the volatile Middle East. In the days following the February 11 resignation of Mubarak, the United States convened the Western powers to put together a multi-billion dollar 'aid' package to post-Mubarak Egypt. The package was to include tens of millions of dollars to 'promote democracy'. For over three decades, the United States had propped up the repressive Egyptian state and its backbone, the military, with billions of dollars each year and unflinching political support. The 'democracy promotion assistance' was intended to contain the popular rebellion within manageable boundaries. Political regime change could be tolerated – actually encouraged – so long as Egypt's popular masses did not challenge the pillars of the Egyptian social order itself – domination by an increasingly transnationally oriented civilian–military elite and a neo-liberal programme of integration into global capitalism.

Global crisis and the future of polyarchy promotion

Eighteen years have passed since I completed the draft of *Promoting Polyarchy* in 1994. On the one hand, capitalist globalization has deepened many times over in these past 18 years, and 'democracy promotion' intervention campaigns have been undertaken in one or another form in most countries around the world. On the other hand, in these 18 years, the transnational elite has moved from the offensive – with its confident 'The End of History' proclamation – to the defensive as global capitalism has spiralled into an ever-deeper crisis. This crisis is unprecedented, given its magnitude, its global reach, the extent of ecological degradation and social deterioration and the scale of the means of violence. We truly face a crisis of humanity in this second decade of the twenty-first century. We have entered into a period of great upheavals and uncertainties, of momentous changes.

Facing this crisis calls for an analysis of the 'big picture' of the capitalist system, which underwent restructuring and transformation in recent decades. The current moment involves a qualitatively new transnational or global phase of world capitalism that can be traced back to the 1970s, and is characterized by the rise of truly transnational capital and a transnational capitalist class (TCC).[4] Transnational capital has been able to break free

of nation-state constraints to accumulation of the previous epoch, and with it, to shift the correlation of class and social forces worldwide sharply in its favour and to undercut the strength of popular and working classes around the world in the wake of the global rebellions of the 1960s and the 1970s. Emergent transnational capital underwent a major expansion in the 1980s and 1990s, involving hyper-accumulation through new technologies such as computers and informatics, through neo-liberal policies and through new modalities of mobilizing and exploiting the global labour force – including a massive new round of primitive accumulation, uprooting and displacing hundreds of millions of people, especially in the Third World countries, who have become internal and transnational migrants. We face a system that is now much more integrated, and dominant groups have accumulated an extraordinary amount of transnational power and control over global resources and institutions.

But by the late 1990s, the system entered into chronic crisis.[5] Sharp social polarization and escalating inequality helped generate a deep crisis of over-accumulation. The extreme concentration of the planet's wealth in the hands of the few and the accelerated impoverishment and dispossession of the majority even forced participants in the 2011 World Economic Forum annual meeting in Davos to acknowledge that the gap between the rich and the poor worldwide is 'the most serious challenge in the world' and is 'raising the specter of worldwide instability and civil wars'. Global inequalities and the impoverishment of broad majorities mean that transnational capital cannot find productive outlets to unload the enormous amounts of surplus it has accumulated. By the twenty-first century, the TCC turned to several mechanisms to sustain global accumulation, or profit making, in the face of this crisis.

One is militarized accumulation: making wars and interventions that unleash cycles of destruction and reconstruction and generate enormous profits for an ever-expanding military–prison–industrial–security–financial complex. We are now living in a global war economy that goes well beyond such 'hot wars' in Iraq or Afghanistan. A second mechanism is the raiding and sacking of public budgets. Transnational capital uses its financial power to take control of state finances and to impose further austerity on the working majority, resulting in even greater social inequality and hardship. The TCC has used its structural power to accelerate the dismantling of what remains of the social wage and welfare states. And a third is frenzied worldwide financial speculation – turning the global economy into a giant casino. The TCC has unloaded billions of dollars into speculation in the housing, food, energy and other global commodities markets; in bond markets worldwide (i.e. public budgets and state finances); and into every imaginable 'derivative', ranging from hedge funds to swaps, futures markets, collateralized debt obligations, asset pyramiding and Ponzi schemes.

I concluded *Promoting Polyarchy* by observing the irresolvable contradiction of promoting polyarchy and promoting neo-liberalism. The widening inequalities generated by capitalist globalization generate conflict and instability that break down the bases for consensual mechanisms of social control. The 2008 collapse of the global financial system triggered a global rebellion that has been simmering for many years. Under these conditions, consensual domination is increasingly difficult to sustain. Hegemony is breaking down. The rise of an ultra right in many countries and the spectre that it will

pursue a project of twenty first–century fascism points to the dangers of more generalized coercive forms of social control.

Central to the story of global capitalism and global crisis is a mass of humanity involving hundreds of millions, if not billions, of people who have been expropriated from the means of survival, yet also expelled from capitalist production as global supernumeraries or surplus labour, relegated to scraping by in this 'planet of slums' and subject to all pervasive and ever-more sophisticated and repressive social control systems. The state responds to those expelled from the labour market and locked out of productive labour not with expanded social welfare and protection but with abandonment. In this transition from social welfare to social control or police states, the state resorts to a host of mechanisms of coercive exclusion: mass incarceration and prison–industrial complexes, pervasive policing, manipulation of space in new ways, highly repressive anti-immigrant legislation and ideological campaigns aimed at seduction and passivity through petty consumption and fantasy. From the vantage point of dominant groups, the challenge is how to contain the mass of supernumeraries and marginalized and the resistance of downwardly mobile majorities. This need for dominant groups around the world to assure widespread, organized mass social control of the world's surplus population and of rebellious forces from below gives a powerful impulse to a project of twenty-first-century global fascism.

Simply put, the immense structural inequalities of the global political economy cannot easily be contained through consensual mechanisms of social control and through hegemonic domination. The future of global polyarchy is uncertain. The only viable solution to the crisis of global capitalism is a massive redistribution of wealth and power downward towards the poor majority of humanity. And the only way such redistribution can come about is through mass transnational struggle from below to achieve popular democratization against the mechanisms of domination imposed in the name of 'promoting democracy'.

1   William I. Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, U.S. Intervention, and Hegemony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
2   William I. Robinson, *A Faustian Bargain: U.S. Intervention in the Nicaraguan Elections and American Foreign Policy in the Post-Cold War Era* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992).
3   Neil Burron, *The New Democracy Wars: The Politics of North American Democracy Promotion in the Americas* (Williston, VT: Ashgate, 2012).
4   In particular, see William I. Robinson, *A Theory of Global Capitalism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); chapter 1 of Robinson, *Latin America and Global Capitalism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).
5   On the crisis of global capitalism, see William I. Robinson, 'The Great Recession of 2008 and the Continuing Crisis: A Global Capitalism Perspective'. *International Review of Modern Sociology*, 38(2): 169–198, 2012.