

## Analysis

# Global Capitalism: Crisis of Humanity and the Specter of 21st Century Fascism

By William I. Robinson



World capitalism is experiencing the worst crisis in its 500 year history. Global capitalism is a qualitatively new stage in the open ended evolution of capitalism characterised by the rise of transnational capital, a transnational capitalist class, and a transnational state. Below, William I. Robinson argues that the global crisis is structural and threatens to become systemic, raising the specter of collapse and a global police state in the face of ecological holocaust, concentration of the means of violence, displacement of billions, limits to extensive expansion and crises of state legitimacy, and suggests that a massive redistribution of wealth and power downward to the poor majority of humanity is the only viable solution.

## The New Global Capitalism and the 21st Century Crisis

The world capitalist system is arguably experiencing the worst crisis in its 500 year history. World capitalism has experienced a profound restructuring through globalisation over the past few decades and has been transformed in ways that make it fundamentally distinct from its earlier incarnations. Similarly, the current crisis exhibits features that set it apart from earlier crises of the system and raise the stakes for humanity. If we are to avert disastrous outcomes we must understand both the nature of the new global capitalism and the nature of its crisis. Analysis of capitalist globalisation provides a template for probing a wide range of social, political, cultural

and ideological processes in this 21st century. Following Marx, we want to focus on the internal dynamics of capitalism to understand crisis. And following the global capitalism perspective, we want to see how capitalism has qualitatively evolved in recent decades.

The system-wide crisis we face is not a repeat of earlier such episodes such as that of the the 1930s or the 1970s precisely because capitalism is fundamentally different in the 21st century. Globalisation constitutes a qualitatively new epoch in the ongoing and open-ended evolution of world capitalism, marked by a number of qualitative shifts in the capitalist system and by novel articulations of social power. I highlight four aspects unique to this epoch.<sup>1</sup>

First is the rise of truly transnational capital and a new global production and financial system into which all nations and much of humanity has been integrated, either directly or indirectly. We have gone from a *world economy*, in which countries and regions were linked to each other via trade and financial flows in an integrated international market, to a *global economy*, in which nations are linked to each more organically through the transnationalisation of the production process, of finance, and of the circuits of capital accumulation. No single nation-state can remain insulated from the global economy or prevent the penetration of the social, political, and cultural superstructure of global capitalism. Second is the rise of a Transnational Capitalist Class (TCC), a class group that has drawn in contingents from most countries around the world, North and South, and has attempted to position itself as a global ruling class. This TCC is the *hegemonic fraction* of capital on a world scale. Third is the rise of Transnational State (TNS) apparatuses. The TNS is constituted as a loose network made up of trans-, and supranational organisations together with national states. It functions to organise the conditions for transnational accumulation. The

TCC attempts to organise and institutionally exercise its class power through TNS apparatuses. Fourth are novel relations of inequality, domination and exploitation in global society, including an increasing importance of transnational social and class inequalities relative to North-South inequalities.

### Cyclical, Structural, and Systemic Crises

Most commentators on the contemporary crisis refer to the “Great Recession” of 2008 and its aftermath. Yet the causal origins of global crisis are to be found in *over-accumulation* and also in contradictions of *state power*, or in what Marxists call the internal contradictions of the capitalist system. Moreover, because the system is now global, crisis in any one place tends to represent crisis for the system as a whole. The system cannot expand because the marginalisation of a significant portion of humanity from direct productive participation, the downward pressure on wages and popular consumption worldwide, and the polarisation of income, has reduced the ability of the world market to absorb world output. At the same time, given the particular configuration of social and class forces and the correlation of these forces worldwide, national states are hard-pressed to regulate transnational circuits of accumulation and offset the explosive contradictions built into the system.

Is this crisis cyclical, structural, or systemic? *Cyclical crises* are recurrent to capitalism about once every 10 years and involve recessions that act as self-correcting mechanisms without any major restructuring of the system. The recessions of the early 1980s, the early 1990s, and of 2001 were cyclical crises. In contrast, the 2008 crisis signaled the slide into a structural crisis. *Structural crises* reflect deeper contradictions that can only be resolved by a major restructuring of the system. The structural crisis of the 1970s was resolved through capitalist globalisation. Prior to that, the structural crisis of the 1930s was resolved through the creation of a new model of redistributive capitalism, and prior to that the structural crisis of the 1870s resulted in the development of corporate capitalism. A *systemic crisis* involves the replacement of a system by an entirely new system or by an outright collapse. A structural crisis opens up the *possibility* for a systemic crisis. But if it actually snowballs into a systemic crisis – in this case, if it gives way either to capitalism being superseded or to a breakdown of global civilisation – is not predetermined and depends entirely on the response of social and political forces to the crisis and on historical contingencies that are not easy to forecast. This is an historic moment of extreme uncertainty, in which collective responses from distinct social and class forces to the crisis are in great flux.

Hence my concept of global crisis is broader than financial. There are multiple and mutually constitutive dimensions – economic, social, political, cultural, ideological and ecological, not to mention the existential crisis of our consciousness, values and very being. There is a crisis of social

polarisation, that is, of *social reproduction*. The system cannot meet the needs or assure the survival of millions of people, perhaps a majority of humanity. There are crises of state legitimacy and political authority, or of *hegemony* and *domination*. National states face spiraling crises of legitimacy as they fail to meet the social grievances of local working and popular classes experiencing downward mobility, unemployment, heightened insecurity and greater hardships. The legitimacy of the system has increasingly been called into question by millions, perhaps even billions, of people around the world, and is facing expanded counter-hegemonic challenges. Global elites have been unable counter this erosion of the system’s authority in the face of worldwide pressures for a global moral economy. And a canopy that envelops all these dimensions is a crisis of sustainability rooted in an ecological holocaust that has already begun, expressed in climate change and the impending collapse of centralised agricultural systems in several regions of the world, among other indicators. By a *crisis of humanity* I mean a crisis that is approaching systemic proportions, threatening the ability of billions of people to survive, and raising the specter of a collapse of world civilisation and degeneration into a new “Dark Ages.”<sup>2</sup>

### Global capitalism now couples human and natural history in such a way as to threaten to bring about what would be the sixth mass extinction in the known history of life on earth.

This crisis of humanity shares a number of aspects with earlier structural crises but there are also several features unique to the present:

1. The system is fast reaching the ecological limits of its reproduction. Global capitalism now couples human and natural history in such a way as to threaten to bring about what would be the sixth mass extinction in the known history of life on earth.<sup>3</sup> This mass extinction would be caused not by a natural catastrophe such as a meteor impact or by evolutionary changes such as the end of an ice age but by purposive human activity. According to leading environmental scientists there are nine “planetary boundaries” crucial to maintaining an earth system environment in which humans can exist, four of which are experiencing at this time the onset of irreversible environmental degradation and three of which (climate change, the nitrogen cycle, and biodiversity loss) are at “tipping points,” meaning that these processes have already crossed their planetary boundaries.

2. The magnitude of the means of violence and social control is unprecedented, as is the concentration of the means of global communication and symbolic production and circulation in the hands of a very few powerful groups. Computerised wars, drones, bunker-buster bombs, star wars, and so forth, have changed the face of warfare. Warfare has



become normalised and sanitised for those not directly at the receiving end of armed aggression. At the same time we have arrived at the panoptical surveillance society and the age of thought control by those who control global flows of communication, images and symbolic production. The world of Edward Snowden is the world of George Orwell; *1984 has arrived*;

3. Capitalism is reaching apparent limits to its *extensive* expansion. There are no longer any new territories of significance that can be integrated into world capitalism, de-ruralisation is now well advanced, and the commodification of the countryside and of pre- and non-capitalist spaces has intensified, that is, converted in hot-house fashion into spaces of capital, so that *intensive* expansion is reaching depths never before seen. Capitalism must continually expand or collapse. How or where will it now expand?

4. There is the rise of a vast surplus population inhabiting a “planet of slums,”<sup>4</sup> alienated from the productive economy, thrown into the margins, and subject to sophisticated systems of social control and to destruction - to a mortal cycle of dispossession-exploitation-exclusion. This includes prison-industrial and immigrant-detention complexes, omnipresent policing, militarised gentrification, and so on;

5. There is a disjuncture between a globalising economy and a nation-state based system of political authority. Transnational state apparatuses are incipient and have not been able to play the role of what social scientists refer to as a “hegemon,” or a leading nation-state that has enough power and authority to organise and stabilise the system. The spread of weapons of mass destruction and the unprecedented militarisation of social life and conflict across the globe makes it hard to imagine that the system can come under any stable political authority that assures its reproduction.

## Global Police State

How have social and political forces worldwide responded to crisis? The crisis has resulted in a rapid political polarisation in global society. Both right and left-wing forces are ascendant. Three responses seem to be in dispute.

One is what we could call “reformism from above.” This elite reformism is aimed at stabilising the system, at saving the system from itself and from more radical responses from below. Nonetheless, in the years following the 2008 collapse of the global financial system it seems these reformers are unable (or unwilling) to prevail over the power of transnational financial capital. A second response is popular, grassroots and leftist resistance from below. As social and political conflict escalates around the world there appears to be a mounting global revolt. While such resistance appears insurgent in the wake of 2008 it is spread very unevenly across countries and regions and facing many problems and challenges.

Yet another response is that I term *21st century fascism*.<sup>5</sup> The ultra-right is an insurgent force in many countries. In

broad strokes, this project seeks to fuse reactionary political power with transnational capital and to organise a mass base among historically privileged sectors of the global working class – such as white workers in the North and middle layers in the South – that are now experiencing heightened insecurity and the specter of downward mobility. It involves militarism, extreme masculinisation, homophobia, racism and racist mobilisations, including the search for scapegoats, such as immigrant workers and, in the West, Muslims. Twenty-first century fascism evokes mystifying ideologies, often involving race/culture supremacy and xenophobia, embracing an idealised and mythical past. Neo-fascist culture normalises and glamorises warfare and social violence, indeed, generates a fascination with domination that is portrayed even as heroic.

The need for dominant groups around the world to secure widespread, organised mass social control of the world’s surplus population and rebellious forces from below gives a powerful impulse to projects of 21st century fascism. Simply put, the immense structural inequalities of the global political economy cannot easily be contained through consensual mechanisms of social control. We have been witnessing transitions from social welfare to social control states around the world. We have entered a period of great upheavals, momentous changes and uncertainties. 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 along the lines of a 21st century democratic socialism, in which humanity is no longer at war with itself and with nature. 

## About the Author

**William I. Robinson** is professor of sociology, global and international studies, and Latin American studies, at the University of California-Santa Barbara. Among his many books are *Promoting Polyarchy* (1996), *Transnational Conflicts* (2003), *A Theory of Global Capitalism* (2004), *Latin America and Global Capitalism* (2008), and *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity* (2014).

## References

1. William I. Robinson (2004), *A Theory of Global Capitalism: Production, Class, and State in a Transnational World*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press; William I. Robinson, *Latin America and Global Capitalism* (2008), Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, see esp. chapter 1.
2. Sing C. Chew (2007), *The Recurring Dark Ages: Ecological Stress, Climate Changes, and System Transformation*, Landham, MD: AltaMira Press.
3. Elizabeth Kolbert (2014), *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, New York: Henry Holt.
4. The phrase is from Mike Davis’ study, *Planet of Slums* (2007), London: Verso.
5. See in particular, William I. Robinson (2014, in press), *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.