

## Global Capitalism and its Anti-‘Human Face’: Organic Intellectuals and Interpretations of the Crisis

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**ABSTRACT** *This article analyzes and theorizes the global crisis from the perspective of global capitalism theory. The 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. If we are to avert disastrous outcomes, we must understand the nature of the new global capitalism as well as its crisis. The system-wide crisis will not be a repeat of earlier such episodes of crisis in the 1930s and the 1970s precisely because world capitalism is fundamentally different in the early twenty-first century. Among the qualitative shifts in the global system this article highlights are: (1) the rise of truly transnational capital and the integration of every country into a new globalized production and financial system; (2) the appearance of a transnational capitalist class; (3) the rise of transnational state apparatuses; (4) and the appearance of novel relations of inequality and domination in global society. The current crisis shares several aspects with earlier structural crises of the 1970s and the 1930s but also several features unique to the present: (1) the system is fast reaching the ecological limits of its reproduction; (2) the unprecedented magnitude of the means of violence and social control, as well as the concentrated control over the means of global communications and the production and circulation of symbols; (3) limits to the extensive and intensive expansion of capitalism; (4) the rise of a vast surplus population inhabiting a ‘planet of slums’; (5) the disjuncture between a globalizing economy and a nation-state based system of political authority. The discussion draws on theories of over-accumulation and legitimization crises. It shows how in the face of stagnation pressures, the system turned to three mechanisms at the turn of the century to sustain the global economy: militarized accumulation, frenzied worldwide financial speculation, and the raiding and sacking of public budgets. The article discusses how diverse social and political forces are responding to the crisis, explores alternative scenarios for the future, and warns of the danger of a ‘twenty-first century fascism’. Finally, the article*

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*examines the role of organic intellectuals in public interpretations of the crisis and possible solutions.*

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I have been writing about world capitalism since the 1980s, about globalization since the early 1990s, and about the notion of a transnational capitalist class (TCC) and transnational state (TNS) apparatuses since the late 1990s, as part of a broader collective research agenda in what some of us have referred to as the *global capitalism school* (see, *inter alia*, Robinson, 1996a, 1996b, 1998, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008; Robinson and Harris, 2000). This work has put me in touch with a network of friends and colleagues also researching these matters, among them Leslie Sklair, Bill Carroll, Jerry Harris, and Georgina Murray. My thoughts on globalization have congealed over the past decade into a more synthetic theory of global capitalism as a new epoch in the ongoing and open-ended evolution of world capitalism, characterized by novel articulations of transnational social power, as laid out most explicitly in Robinson (2004) and Robinson (2008, ch. 1). Here I want to place the matter of such social power in the context of the global crisis. The fact is, *our world is burning*; we are facing a global crisis of unprecedented scale and proportions. In my view *our very survival is at risk*. The most urgent task of any intellectual who considers him/herself organic is to address this crisis—in our intellectual production and in our social activity.

This crisis, I reiterate, 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. The stakes have never been higher. We have entered a period of great upheavals, momentous changes, and uncertainties, fraught with dangers if also opportunities. We now confront the growing threat of ecological collapse and of what I refer to as twenty-first century fascism as one of several political responses to crisis. If we are to avert such outcomes we must understand both the nature of the new global capitalism and the nature of its crisis. I aspire here to analyze and theorize the global crisis from the perspective of global capitalism theory. This perspective offers a powerful explanatory framework for making sense of the crisis. Following Marx, we want to focus on the internal dynamics of capitalism to understand the crisis, and following the global capitalism perspective we should look for how capitalism has qualitatively evolved in recent decades. The system-wide crisis we face will not be a repeat of earlier such episodes in the 1930s or 1970s precisely because world capitalism is fundamentally different in the early twenty-first century.

How specifically, is world capitalism different now than during previous episodes of crisis? There have been several qualitative shifts in capitalism that I have highlighted elsewhere (see, *inter alia*, the works referenced above) that here we can summarize as follows:

- (1) The *rise of truly transnational capital* and the integration of every country into a new globalized production and financial system. This represents a transition 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*, characterized by global circuits of accumulation, that is, transnational production and a single globally integrated financial system. This is a *new global economic structure*.

- (2) The appearance of a *new TCC*, a class group embedded in new global circuits of accumulation rather than national circuits. As a class group the TCC 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 represents the *hegemonic fraction* of capital on a world scale.
- (3) The rise of *TNS apparatuses*, loose networks composed of supranational political and economic institutions and of national state apparatuses that have been penetrated and transformed by transnational forces. The TNS functions to organize the conditions for transnational accumulation and through which the TCC attempts to organize and institutionally exercise its class power.
- (4) The appearance of *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 that are geographically or territorially conceived.

I have been focusing in recent years on the occurrence and significance of *accumulation* and *legitimization* crises in the global system. It is clear that the collapse of the global financial system in 2008, what some called the Great Recession, was merely the straw that broke the camel’s back. This is not a cyclical but a structural crisis, a ‘restructuring crisis’, such as we experienced in the 1970s and before that in the 1930s (and even before that, in the 1870s). *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. *Structural crises* reflect deeper contradictions that can only be resolved by a major restructuring of the system. The crisis of the 1970s was a structural crisis that was resolved through capitalist globalization. And prior to that, the 1930s was a structural crisis that was resolved through the creation of a new model of Fordist–Keynesian or redistributive capitalism. This twenty-first century crisis has the potential to develop into a *systemic* crisis. 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 civilization—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 a historic moment of extreme uncertainty, in which collective responses to the crisis from distinct social and class forces are in great flux.

The twenty-first century global crisis shares a number of aspects with earlier structural crises of the world economy of the 1970s and the 1930s, but there are also several features unique to the present. One is that the system is fast reaching the ecological limits of its reproduction. The world capitalist system is a truly global system and the transformations in natural systems brought about by human activity have now begun, in the words of ecologist Peter Vitousek, to ‘alter the structure and function of Earth as a system’ (as cited in Foster et al., 2010, p. 35). The ecological holocaust underway cannot be underestimated: peak oil, climate change, the extinction of species, the collapse of centralized agricultural systems in several regions of the world, and so on. 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 (see Foster et al., 2010, p. 14).

Another is that 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 in the hands of a very few powerful groups. Computerized wars, drones, bunker-buster bombs, global surveillance, biometrics, data mining systems, star wars, and so forth have changed the face of warfare. Warfare has become normalized and sanitized for those not directly at the receiving end of armed aggression in this age of warfare as spectacle and asymmetric warfare, in which one side has overwhelming superior strength and the also the ability to control public perceptions of conflicts. 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 and symbolic production (for discussion on these matters, see, *inter alia* Barkawi, 2005; Gilliom and Monahan, 2012; Graham, 2010; Hirst, 2011; Mattelart, 2010).

A third is that 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-ruralization 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?

A fourth is the rise of a vast surplus population inhabiting, to use the phrase coined by Mike Davis (2007), a ‘planet of slums’, dispossessed yet locked out of 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. Proletarianization worldwide has accelerated through new waves of primitive accumulation as billions of people have been dispossessed and thrown into the global labor market. The global wage labor force doubled from some 1.5 billion in 1980 to some 3 billion in 2006 (Freeman, 2005). Yet those uprooted and dispossessed have not been absorbed into formal employment. The International Labor Organization (ILO, 1997) reported that at the end of century one-third of the world’s economically active population was unemployed—that is, *idle labor*, or what Davis terms the ‘outcast proletariat’ found in the world’s megacities; by the late 1990s, as Davis points out, for the first time in human history the urban population of the earth outnumbered the rural population.

Fifth, there is a disjuncture between a globalizing economy and a nation-state based system of political authority. TNS 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 organize and stabilize the system (Robinson, 2004, 2007, 2008).

### Development of the Crisis

Let us review how the crisis has developed and what it tells us about global capitalism and global society.

Emergent transnational capital underwent a major expansion in the 1980s and 1990s, involving: hyper-accumulation through new technologies such as computerization and informatics; neoliberal policies; and new modalities of mobilizing and exploiting the global labor force, including the flexibilization and casualization of labor and a massive new round of primitive accumulation, displacing hundreds of millions of people, especially in the Third World countryside, who became internal and international migrants. But hyper-accumulation was followed by renewed stagnation in the late 1990s as the system faced a new round of crisis. Sharp social

polarization and escalating inequalities worldwide fueled the chronic problem of over-accumulation of capital. The concentration of the planet’s wealth in the hands of a few and the accelerated impoverishment and dispossession of the majority has been extreme under capitalist globalization.<sup>1</sup> This pauperization of broad majorities has meant that transnational capital cannot find productive outlets to unload the enormous amounts of surplus it has accumulated; *ceteris paribus*, global output has expanded as the global market has contracted. By the twenty-first century the TCC turned to several mechanisms to sustain global accumulation in the face of over-accumulation.

What were these mechanisms? One is *militarized accumulation*. Making wars and undertaking interventions 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 beyond such ‘hot’ wars as in Iraq and Afghanistan. A second is the *raiding and sacking of public budgets*. The TCC uses its financial powers to take control of state finances and to impose further austerity on the working majority. It employs its structural power to attempt to accelerate the dismantling of what remains of the social wage and welfare states. And a third is *frenzied worldwide financial speculation*. This involves turning the global economy into a giant casino. The TCC has unloaded trillions of dollars into speculation in housing and real estate markets, food, energy, and other global commodities markets, into bond markets worldwide (that is, 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. The extent of such speculation in fictitious value defies logic and the imagination: in 2006 financial markets were trading more in a month than the annual gross domestic product of the entire world (Graham, 2010, p. 4)!

Elsewhere I have discussed at some length how these three mechanisms have played themselves out since the turn of the twenty-first century (see, *inter alia*, Robinson, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, forthcoming; Robinson and Barrera, 2012). The key questions I want to pose here are: Where is this crisis headed? What are the possible outcomes? What does all this tell us about global capitalism and also about the prospects for confronting global capitalism?

How has the TCC responded to the crisis, both in terms of its direct class interests, and in political terms, that is, in terms of its relationship to political processes at the national and transnational levels? In fact, the TCC has used the crisis to pursue its class interests aggressively. Historically, dominant groups attempt to transfer the cost of crisis onto the mass of popular and working classes and in turn these classes resist such attempts. This appears to be the global political moment. Transnational capital and its political agents have attempted to resolve the structural crisis by effecting a vast shift in the balance of class and social forces worldwide in its favor, in an effort to deepen many times over and to consummate the ‘neoliberal counterrevolution’ that began in the 1980s. Here, ‘resolved’ does not mean that things get better for the mass of humanity but that there is a resumption of sustained accumulation. Europe and the United States now face the same neoliberal policies that have been imposed on the Global South since the 1980s.

While transnational capital’s offensive against the global working class dates back to the crisis of the 1970s and has grown in intensity ever since, the 2008 financial collapse and the ‘Great Recession’ that followed was, in several respects, a major turning point. The multi-billionaire Warren Buffett, chairman of Berkshire Hathaway, and one of the richest men in the world, famously stated in 2006 that ‘There’s class warfare, all right, but it’s my class, the rich class, that’s making war, and we’re winning’ (as cited in Carroll, 2010, p. 1). In fact, the global

crisis provided the TCC with an opportunity to intensify this war. As the crisis spread it generated conditions worldwide for new rounds of massive austerity, including a greater flexibilization of labor, slashing the social wage, speed-ups, and so on. The crisis allowed the money mandarins of global capitalism and their political agents to squeeze more value out of labor—directly, through more intensified exploitation, and indirectly, through state finances. Social and political conflict escalated around the world in the wake of 2008, including repeated rounds of national strikes and mass mobilizations in the European Union, uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East, and so on.

Although TNS apparatuses failed to intervene to impose regulations on global finance capital they *did* intervene to impose the costs of devalorization on global labor. Crises, moreover, provide capital with the opportunity to accelerate the process of forcing greater productivity out of fewer workers. According to one press report, the largest employers in the United States, for instance, ‘have emerged from the economy’s harrowing downturn loaded with cash thanks to deep cost-cutting that helped drive unemployment into double digits. . . . and [resulted in] huge gains in worker productivity’ (Petrino, 2010, p. A1).

Apart from the massive devalorizations of 2007 and 2008, the crisis has therefore involved less a devalorization of capital than a further transfer of wealth from labor to transnational capital and has set the stage for a new round of deep austerity. The crisis has in part been displaced to state budgets—bailouts, austerity, deficits, etc.—yet this needs to be seen in terms of class relations. The bailouts of transnational capital represent in themselves a transfer of the devaluation of capital onto labor. The budgetary and fiscal crises that supposedly justify spending cuts and austerity are a matter of political decisions; they are contrived, literally. They are a consequence of the unwillingness or inability of states to challenge capital and their disposition to transfer the burden of the crisis to working and popular classes. Mass unemployment, foreclosures, the further erosion of social wages, wage cuts, furloughs, the increased exploitation of part-time workers, reduced work hours, informalization, and mounting debt peonage—including capital’s claim to the future wages of workers through public debt—are some of capital’s transfer mechanisms. Unless there is effective resistance, global capital is likely to make permanent the further flexibilization of labor and other concessions it is wringing out of workers through the crisis.

It seems clear that transnational finance capital was able to privately appropriate state bailouts and turn them into super profits. In 2009 Wall Street reported a resumption of massive profits, even in the midst of severe recession and low levels of consumption, a decline in productive investment, and a sharp rise in unemployment. By 2010 global corporations were registering record profits and corporate income escalated. After suffering losses in 2008, the top 25 hedge-fund managers were paid, on average, more than \$1 billion each in 2009, eclipsing the record they had set in pre-recession 2007 (Freeland, 2011, p. 4). The Dow Jones, which had dropped from 14,000 to 6,500 in late 2008 and early 2009, rose to 13,000 in early 2012. In the United States, corporate profits in 2011 hit their highest level since 1950. Between 2008 and 2011, 88% of national income growth in the United States went to corporate profits while just 1% went to wages. In comparison, in the recovery from the 2000–2001 recession, 15% of income growth went to wages and salaries while 53% went to corporate profits, and in the recovery that began in 1991 50% of the growth in national income went to wages and salaries while corporate profits actually fell by 1% (Greenhouse, 2011). According to Federal Reserve data from late 2010, companies in the United States held \$1.8 trillion in cash, more than it had at any time since 1956 (at adjusted prices) in uninvested cash—a powerful indicator of the persistence of over-accumulation (as cited in Parenti, 2011, pp. 228–9).

Here I want to comment further on a new structural feature of global capitalism, the rise of ‘surplus humanity’, a mass of hundreds of millions, if not billions, of people who constitute a group distinct from the earlier ‘reserve army of labor’ about which Marx wrote. This rise of such a mass has major implications for political projects, both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic. As I have noted, the process of achieving greater productivity with fewer workers has accelerated under globalization. The newfound mobility of transnational capital and new forms of spatial organization has allowed it to break free from earlier nation-state constraints to unbridled accumulation—that is, the power and ability of working and popular classes to impose those constraints within the bounds of the nation-state. Spatial reorganization helps transnational capital to break the power of territorially bound labor and to impose new sets of capital–labor relations based on fragmentation, flexibilization, intense discipline regimes, and the cheapening of labor, together with new forms of social control and reproduction. This is combined with a massive new round of primitive accumulation and displacement that has given rise to a global army of superfluous labor, to the marginalization of some one-third of humanity that has been dispossessed from the means of production, locked out of productive participation in the global economy, dehumanized, and subject to new forms of social control and repression—what I referred to earlier as a mortal cycle of *dispossession–exploitation–exclusion*. I will come back momentarily to the matter of surplus humanity.

### Responses to the Crisis

Apart from the TCC, how have social and political forces worldwide responded to the crisis? Clearly, the crisis is resulting in a rapid political polarization of global society. Both left- and right-wing forces appear to be insurgent. There are three identifiable responses that are in dispute:

The first is *reformism from above* aimed at stabilizing the system, at saving it from itself and from more radical responses from below. Transnational reformist-oriented elites have proposed regulating global financial markets, state stimulus programs, fomenting a shift from speculation to productive accumulation, and limited redistributive measures. Elites such as George Soros, Jeffrey Sacks, and Joseph Stiglitz, as well as representatives from the international financial institutions and some governments are now guided less by neoclassical than institutional economics and pursue a ‘global neo-Keynesianism’.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, in the years following the 2008 collapse it seems that these reformers have been unable, or unwilling, to prevail over the power of transnational finance capital. Moreover, such powerful transnational capitalists as Warren Buffett and Carlos Slim have advanced reformist–redistributive discourses, but their eagerness to take advantage of the crisis to make profits prevents them from playing a significant reformist role.

A second response is *popular, grassroots, and leftist resistance from below*. This resistance appears to be insurgent in the wake of 2008 yet spread very unevenly across countries and regions. Reflecting this insurgency are: mass uprisings in EU countries in the wake of the sovereign debt crisis and the imposition of draconian new austerity programs; uprising in North Africa and the Middle East; the turn to the left in Latin America; the revival of labor militancy in the United States and the Occupy Movement; a major escalation of strike activity in China; and so on (on the global revolts, see *inter alia* Mason, 2012; and on Latin America in particular, see Robinson, 2008).

A third response is *twenty-first century fascism*. The ultra-right is an insurgent force in many countries. In Latin America, a neo-fascist right is present in Colombia, Honduras, and Mexico. In

the EU and the United States, such groups as the Tea Party, Christian fundamentalism, skin-heads, the anti-immigrant movement, and so on are on the rise. My fear is that if reformism from above fails and popular and leftist forces are not able to seize the initiative then the road may become open for a twenty-first century fascism. The proto-fascist right seeks to fuse reactionary political power with transnational capital and to organize 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. The proto-fascist response has involved militarism, extreme masculinization, racism, the search for scapegoats (such as immigrant workers and Muslims in the United States and Europe), and mystifying ideologies, often involving race/culture supremacy and xenophobia, embracing an idealized and mythical past, as well as racist mobilization against scapegoats. We should recall that fascism is a particular *response to capitalist crisis*, one that seeks to contain any challenge to crisis that may come from subordinate groups (for further discussion, see Robinson and Barrera, 2012, and Robinson, forthcoming, ch. 5).

It is in this regard that we must now return to the matter of surplus humanity. What has taken place through capitalist globalization is the severing of the logic of accumulation from that of social reproduction. Central to the story of global capitalism and crisis, as well as to the specter of neo-fascism, is the mass of humanity that has been expropriated from the means of survival yet also expelled from capitalist production as global supernumeraries or surplus labor, relegated to scraping by in a ‘planet of slums’ and subject to all-pervasive and ever-more sophisticated and repressive social control systems. From the vantage point of dominant groups, the challenge is: *how to contain the mass of supernumeraries, the marginalized, and the resistance of downwardly mobile majorities?*

We are witnessing transitions from social welfare to social control states. The need for dominant groups around the world to assure widespread, organized, mass social control of the world’s surplus population 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, that is, through hegemonic domination.

There is an explosive growth of social inequality and intensified crises of survival for billions of people around the world. This involves the breakdown of the social fabric at the same time as the state’s ability to function as a ‘factor of cohesion’ (Poulantzas, 1968) within the social order breaks down to the extent that capitalism has globalized and the logic of accumulation or commodification penetrates every aspect of social life—the ‘life world’ itself. As a result, ‘cohesion’ requires more and more social control in the face of the collapse of the social fabric.

The inability of national states to meet the contradictory functions of accumulation and legitimization means that economic crisis intensifies the problem of legitimization for dominant groups, so that accumulation crises appear as spiraling political crises; ‘governability’ becomes more and more elusive. States resort to a host of mechanisms of coercive exclusion, among them: legal changes to criminalize the excluded—often racialized—and to subject them to mass incarceration and the punitive whip of prison–industrial complexes; repressive anti-immigrant legislation; manipulation of space in new ways so that both gated communities and slums are controlled by armies of private security guards and technologically advanced surveillance systems; ubiquitous, often para-militarized policing; mobilization of the culture industries and state ideological apparatuses to dehumanize victims of global capitalism as dangerous, depraved, and culturally degenerate; ideological campaigns aimed at seduction and passivity



through petty consumption and a flight into fantasy. This last aspect is crucial: the culture of global capitalism attempts to seduce the excluded and to channel their frustrated aspirations into petty consumption and fantasy as an alternative to placing political demands on the system through collective mobilization.

All this provides fertile bases for projects of twenty-first century fascism. Images of what such a political project would involve span from: the late 2008/early 2009 Israeli invasion of Gaza and its ongoing ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians; the scapegoating and criminalization of immigrant workers in the United States, Europe, Australia, and many other countries; genocide in the Congo; the spread of neo-Nazis and skinheads in Europe; the UN/US occupation of Haiti and the Indian occupation of Kashmir; the trashing of Somalia; and the explosive spread of the Tea Party and far-right Christian fundamentalism in the United States.

With regard to the TCC, I believe we can identify three sectors of capital in particular that stand out as most aggressive in pursuing accumulation strategies that make them most prone to supporting or even promoting neo-fascist political arrangements. These are: speculative finance capital; the military–industrial–prison–security complex; the extractive and energy complexes. Capital accumulation in the military–industrial–security complex, for instance, depends on never-ending conflicts and wars, including the declared wars ‘on crime’, ‘on drugs’, and ‘on terrorism’, and the undeclared wars on immigrants and on gangs (and poor, dark-skinned, and working class youth more generally), among others, as well as more generally on the militarization of social control. Financial accumulation requires ever greater austerity that is hard, if not impossible, to impose through consensual mechanisms.

If the imperative of social control gives a powerful impetus to the militarization of global capitalism, this militarization has another key function, that of *sustaining global accumulation in the face of stagnation*. Militarization as response to the crisis of global capitalism achieves the simultaneous objectives of social control and repression and of coercively opening up opportunities for capital accumulation worldwide, either on the heels of military force or through the state’s contracting out to transnational corporate capital the production and execution of social control and warfare. The examples abound: the invasion and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan; the transnational intervention in Libya’s internal conflict; the above-mentioned wars on drugs, terrorism, and immigrants; mass incarceration, including in prisons and detention centers constructed and often run by private corporations; the building of border walls (in Palestine, between the US and Mexico, in green zones in Iraq and elsewhere, between South Africa and several of its northern neighbors, and so on). Hence the generation of conflicts and the repression of social movements and vulnerable populations around the world becomes *an accumulation strategy independent of any political objectives*. This type of permanent global warfare involves both low and high-intensity wars, ‘humanitarian missions’, ‘drug interdiction operations’, ‘anti-crime sweeps’, and so on.

The US state as the most powerful component of the TNS has mobilized vast resources and political pressures, taking advantage of the dollar’s role as the global currency and therefore of the extraordinary power of the US Treasury, to absorb surpluses and sustain global accumulation by militarizing that accumulation and creating a global war economy under the pretext of a ‘war on terror’ and a ‘war on drugs’ (note also that wars accelerate the turnover time of the circuit of militarized accumulation).<sup>3</sup> In sheer monetary terms, the escalation of US state military spending in the wake of September 11, 2001 is stunning (Table 1).

A twenty-first century fascism would not look like twentieth century fascism. Among other things, the ability of dominant groups to control and manipulate space and to exercise unprecedented control over the mass media, the means of communication and the production of symbols,

**Table 1.** US military spending, 1997–2012 (\$billions, 2005)

Year	Amount
1997	325
1998	323
1999	333
2000	360
2001	366
2002	422
2003	484
2004	544
2005	601
2006	622
2007	654
2008	731
2009	795
2010	848
2011	879
2012	902*

\* Projected

Source: [http://www.usgovernmentspending.com/spending\\_chart\\_1997\\_2012USb\\_13s1li111mcn\\_30t\\_30\\_Defense\\_Spending\\_Chart](http://www.usgovernmentspending.com/spending_chart_1997_2012USb_13s1li111mcn_30t_30_Defense_Spending_Chart).

images, and messages means that repression can be more selective and also organized ‘juridically’ so that, for example, mass ‘legal’ incarceration takes the place of concentration camps. Such caging removes surplus labor from society and turns that surplus labor into a source of ongoing profits (see, *inter alia*, Alexander, 2010; Gilmore, 2007). The ideological and policing processes involved in the mass warehousing of ethnically oppressed groups and the poor have the effect of displacing social anxieties over crisis, economic destabilization, and downward mobility into the population targeted for marginalization, police repression, and caging.<sup>4</sup> In this regard, vast new powers of cultural hegemony open up novel possibilities for atomizing and channeling grievances and frustrated aspirations into escapism and consumerist fantasies. Fashion and entertainment industries market anything that can be converted into a commodity. With this comes depoliticization at best, if not the ability to channel fear into flight rather than fight-back. The ideology of twenty-first century fascism often rests on irrationality; the promise to deliver security and restore stability is emotive, not rational. Twenty-first century fascism is a project that does not—and need not—distinguish between the truth and the lie.

### Interpreting the Crisis

In conclusion, barring the overthrow of capitalism, any resolution of the crisis from the vantage point of the vast majority must involve a global redistribution downward of income. This, in turn, would have to involve establishing a measure of state intervention, regulation, and redistributive capacities that state elites, so far, have been unable or unwilling to undertake. It would mean reining in transnational finance capital—the most globalized and most globally mobile fraction of capital. We see here the contradiction between globalized capital and a nation-

state based system of political authority. We see the structural power this disjuncture gives to the TCC, especially to transnational finance capital, as well as the obdurate penetration of national state apparatuses that the TCC has achieved in pursuit of its interests. In the United States, let us recall, corporations are legally considered ‘people’ and can now provide unlimited funding to political parties and campaigns. As never before, economic power translates into political control, or the power to determine political outcomes.

The most enlightened among transnationally oriented political and economic elites have been clamoring for TNS apparatuses with a transnational regulatory and interventionist capacity as a requisite for restabilizing the system. It remains to be seen if such efforts will come to fruition. Even if they do, it is unlikely, in my view, that a global capitalism ‘with a human face’ is possible—indeed, an oxymoron. A transnational neo-Keynesianism can do little to resolve the ecological holocaust. The reformist interpretation of the crisis as resulting from a lack of institutional regulation together with the unfortunate greed of the wealthy ignores, as it must if it is to remain true to its defense of capitalism, the contradictions of accumulation that generate the underlying causes of the crisis. Yet this reformist interpretation which is quite compatible with global capitalism may become hegemonic in the absence of an alternative anti-systemic interpretation put forward by organic intellectuals identified with the global popular and working classes and their interests.

Now from the viewpoint of those from below, the objective is not merely a project of redistribution within the prevailing global power structure and socioeconomic system; it is to redistribute power downward and *transform* the system. What type of a transformation? In my view, any transformative project would need to place democratic socialism back on the agenda. It would require new forms of production, collective laboring, and consumption that is in harmony with nature. We would want to—and must—develop new modalities of political organization in which the grassroots base and social movements are empowered to exercise democratic control from below. And any emancipatory project must involve building cultures of solidarity and transnational resistance.

Times of crisis open up space for collective agency and for contingency to influence the course of history in ways that are not possible in times of relative stability, and in ways that are less predictable than in such times. How the masses of people understand the nature of global crisis becomes itself a critical battleground in the struggle for alternative futures. Hence crucial to any struggle in global society to resist the war unleashed against the global working and popular classes is putting forward a coherent explanation of the crisis and of possible solutions from a working class, leftist, ecological, and democratic socialist-oriented perspective.

This is where organic intellectuals and socially committed scholars come in. In my view, and in conclusion, the only viable solution to the crisis of global capitalism is a massive redistribution of wealth and power downward to the poor majority of humanity along the lines of a twenty-first century democratic socialism, in which humanity is no longer at war with itself and with nature. Otherwise, humanity may be headed for what Chew (2007) has termed a *new dark age*.

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16–19, 2011, Prague. The ideas on global crisis developed here can be found in further detail in Robinson (2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, forthcoming), and Robinson and Barrera (2012). I would like to thank *Globalizations* special issue editor Jason Struna and two anonymous reviewers for their suggestions.

## Notes

- 1 One of the most notorious outcomes of globalization is an alarming widening of the gap between the global haves and have-nots, as, among countless studies, the annual Human Development reports of the United Nations Development Program show (UNDP, 1992–2011). The annual *World Wealth Report* published by Merrill Lynch and Capgemini identifies what it terms High-Net-Worth Individuals, or HNWIs, those people who have more than \$1 million in free cash, not including property and pensions. The 2011 report identified some 10 million of these HNWIs in 2010, concentrated in North America, Europe, and Japan, but with the most rapid growth among the group taking place in Asia-Pacific, Latin America, Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. The collective wealth of the HNWIs surpassed \$42 trillion in that year, well over double of what it was 10 years earlier, and 10% higher than the previous year (Merrill Lynch and Capgemini, 2011). Beyond the growth of the superrich, however, is social polarization between some 20% of humanity that has been able to enjoy the fruits of the global cornucopia and some 80% that has experienced downward mobility and heightened insecurity and lies outside what McMichael (2007) refers to as ‘global consumer networks’.
- 2 On such reformist, institutionalist, and neo-Keynesian thinking, see *inter alia*, Soros (1998), Stiglitz (2003), and Sacks (2006). These three are neither anti-capitalist nor anti-globalization; they speak of a capitalist globalization ‘with a human face’.
- 3 I cannot here expand on the matters of militarization and intervention as accumulation or on the role of the US state, but see *inter alia*, Robinson (2007, 2012, and forthcoming, esp. chs 3 and 5).
- 4 On these themes, the modern classic 1970s’ study by Stuart Hall and his colleagues, *Policing the Crisis* (1978) still bears remarkable pertinence.

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