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THE PITFALLS OF SUBSTITUTING REALIST FOR MARXIST ANALYSIS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

It is hard for me to read David Chen’s article (2021) in the pages of this journal and not wonder if there is another William I. Robinson whose work he discusses. What surprised me is not that I have critics, for there are many, but that Chen’s misrepresentations and caricatures of my arguments are so egregious. Chen starts with the claim that “mounting imperialist rivalry” between China and the United States “has urged a consideration of the thesis of transnational capitalist class (TCC) [*sic*] and the theory of globalization in general” (83). As I will discuss, it is not self-evident what “imperialist rivalry” means and Chen at no time indicates what he understands this to be. Nor does he define what he means by “*the* theory of globalization” (my emphasis), given that there are as many theories of globalization as there are theories of economics or of politics. Here I will first point out a handful of these caricatures and misrepresentations (space precludes me from addressing all but a small portion of them). I will then discuss what I see as the key theoretical weakness in Chen’s construct, namely his twin conflation of state with capital and of transnational class relations with interstate relations, which reflects in turn his reification of the state and his realist approach to relations among classes and nations in the global system.

Chen claims that my thesis on the TCC, which in any event cannot be separated from my theory of global capitalism of which it forms one element (which he mistakenly refers to as “the Robinson-Harris strand”¹), is

1 I have nothing but respect and appreciation for Jerry Harris’ work. However, we co-authored one single article 21 years ago. We don’t speak with one voice and we don’t necessarily agree on all matters related to global capitalism. Among our differences important for the present discussion, I do not see a “Chinese statist capitalist class” but rather a private capitalist class dependent on the state and a state-party elite dependent on both state and private enterprises that are themselves cross-invested with each other and with transnational capital from abroad. These levels of complexity are simply lost on Chen.

“Kautskyian.” Relatedly, he says I disregard the “heterogeneity, internal frictions, and fragility” of the TCC and that I “lionize a homogenous TCC.” It is not clear to me why Chen cited a scattering of my articles but *none* of my many books, which is where the full theoretical and empirical exposition of my theory of global capitalism and the TCC is developed (see, *inter alia*, Robinson, 2003; 2004; 2008; 2014; 2018). But even at that, in one of the articles that he *does* cite, I state unambiguously that “the TCC is heterogeneous and is not internally unified; its only point of unity is around the defense and expansion of global capitalism” (2017, 179). In fact, I have stressed in virtually everything I have written on the topic in the past 25 years that any real internal unity of the global ruling class is impossible. The TCC is wracked by fierce competition, internal conflict, conflicting pressures, and differences over the tactics and strategy of maintaining class domination and addressing the crises and contradictions of global capitalism. I have insisted as well that the TCC is one fraction within the totality of global capital, the hegemonic fraction on a world scale, in competition with local, national, and regional capitalist groups, all of whom struggle among themselves to advance their interests in and through states’ apparatuses. The only thing that unites the TCC is its shared interest in an open global economy and in suppressing challenges to its rule from below.

As I have made clear repeatedly (*inter alia*, Robinson, 2004; 2014), my approach shares nothing with that of Kautsky. According to Kautsky’s “ultra-imperialism” thesis, world capital would remain *nationally organized*, and these national capitals would eventually come to peacefully *collude internationally* instead of competing. Here is what I stated, for instance, in 2014 in reply to an earlier Kautsky charge: “In sharp distinction to Kautsky, conflict among capitals is endemic to the system, yet in the age of globalization that conflict takes on new forms not necessarily expressed as national rivalry. There is conflict between national and transnational fractions of capital as well as fierce rivalry and competition among transnational conglomerations that turn to numerous institutional channels, including multiple national states, to pursue their interests” (Robinson, 2014, 27). As I will discuss momentarily because it is so central to understanding U. S.–China tensions, mounting crises of overaccumulation and state legitimacy have heightened the splits and infighting within the ruling groups.

Then there is this bizarre claim that I simply cannot decipher: “Under the cloak of Marxian dialectics and conflict theory, what we have found is really the Kautskyian talk of peace and capitalist internationalism. Robinson’s concept of transnationalized fascism represents the vertex of this undialectical dialectic and a complete break from capitalist reality” (105). I haven’t the foggiest idea what an “undialectical dialectic” is, much less what Chen means by “a complete break from capitalist reality.” And at no time have I used the phrase

or referred even indirectly to a “transnationalized fascism” in the article he cites that I published in the pages of this journal (2019). Far from “Kautskyian peace,” I warned in that very same article that “there is a built-in war drive in the current course of capitalist globalization” (Robinson, 2019, 162). Moreover, in that article I referred to neofascism (*not* “transnationalized fascism”) as *one particular* response to capitalist crisis and specifically stated that in order for a fascist project to come to fruition it would require a fusion of the TCC with fascist projects in the state, something that we do not see at this time.

Chen goes on to attribute to me the claim that the TCC is “completely deterritorialized from nation–states and potentially replacing state apparatus with a supranational governance” (105). This assertion exists in Chen’s head but not anywhere in anything I have ever written about global capitalism, and certainly not in the articles of mine that he cites. I have expounded on my theory of transnational state (TNS) apparatuses in my books (see, *e.g.*, Robinson, 2014, chapter 2, “Transnational State Apparatuses”) and made quite explicit in all my writings that national state apparatuses are not going anywhere and are central to understanding global capitalism and the TCC. Here is what I stated in my 2017 article that Chen references: “The TCC is lodged within multiple states; more so, it operates through dense networks of national states, international and supranational institutions that in analytical abstraction can be conceived as transnational state apparatuses” (2017, 184). Elsewhere, Chen characterizes my approach as a “postmodern deconstructionist strand which depicts contemporary capitalism as decentered, deterritorialized, and post-statist” (92). It is hard to make heads or tails of this. In the first place, my theory consistently and unambiguously emphasizes the centrality of the state to global capitalism. Second, maybe he means by “postmodern” that I analyze the global economy as characterized by the global fragmentation and decentralization of production, simultaneous to the concentration and centralization of power and control in the TCC? This worldwide fragmentation and decentralization of production is in plain sight for all to see. What observer of global capitalism would suggest otherwise, and how does this observation become “postmodern deconstructionist”? Chen adds throughout that I view the state as “*laissez faire*.” But far from it, I have consistently observed that states are “proactive agents” of capitalist globalization that take numerous actions to promote the interests of transnational capital and to generate the conditions for global accumulation (see, *inter alia*, Robinson, 2014, 2018, 2014).

In discussing the TCC, Chen follows Carroll (2010) in focusing on one single indicator of transnational class formation: transnationally interlocked boards of directors. Those of us who have researched a TCC, however, have provided a substantial and still growing body of empirical evidence for the transnational interpenetration of capitals that goes well beyond interlocking boards of directors, which in my view is among the weakest among these

indicators and of limited political significance. These include, among others, the exponential expansion of foreign direct investment, cross-border mergers and acquisitions, strategic alliances, cross-investment among TNCs, and the transnational ownership of shares. Most recently, Peter Phillips has documented that in 2018, just 17 global financial conglomerates collectively managed \$41.1 trillion dollars, more than half the GDP of the entire planet, and that these conglomerates are so transnationally entangled among themselves that separating them out into national boxes is simply impossible — in his words, they constituted “a self-invested network of interlocking capital that spans the globe” (Phillips, 2018, 35). As we pick apart the structure of global capital it becomes clear that the notion of “national corporations” is too amorphous to be meaningful. The underlying theoretical and analytical question we must examine with regard to U. S.–China relations, therefore, is the relationship of the TCC to states, and the relationship of states to different class groups within the totality of global capital. It is here where Chen runs astray. Due to space constraints, what follows is a synopsis of his theoretical flaw.

The pandemic has heightened international geopolitical tensions, most spectacularly, between China and the United States. International tensions derive from the very dynamics of global capitalism and they will escalate dangerously in the post-pandemic world. However, the nation–state/inter-state realist mode of analysis that attributes such tensions to national rivalry and competition among national capitalist classes and their respective states for international economic control is of limited utility, as I have analyzed at length elsewhere (see, *e.g.*, most recently, Robinson, 2018; 2020; and also see below). U. S. policy towards China in recent years, including during the Trump years, sought to open China up to transnational capital — to break with continued state control over the financial system, to allow foreign investors more than a 49% share in corporate ownership, to remove trade restrictions, and so on. Cox (2019) observes, and I concur, that the Chinese state acts to mediate the political and economic conditions necessary to expand global capitalism into a vast global value chain network, and that the key battle within transnational conglomerates is over the extraction of surplus value from the China market. Far from a decoupling, U. S.–China financial integration actually accelerated during the Trump years and even in 2020 in the midst of the pandemic. In that year, U. S.–based investors held \$1.1 trillion in equity issued by Chinese-based companies (Rhodium, 2021). The fight over the distribution of surplus value does not pit “Chinese” and “U. S.” capital against each other but transnational clusters against one another and in relation to a Chinese state that mediates this competition in such a way as to advance the interests of those clusters closest to it.

Geopolitical frictions, including U. S.–China relations, justify rising military budgets and stoke conflicts that open up opportunities for militarized

accumulation. However, there is another dynamic at work. International tensions derive from an acute political contradiction in global capitalism: economic globalization takes place within a nation-state-based system of political authority. That is, there is a contradiction between the accumulation function and the legitimacy function of national states. The national state — in this case the U. S. state — faces a contradiction between the need to promote transnational capital accumulation in its territory and its need to achieve political legitimacy and stabilize the domestic social order. Attracting transnational corporate and financial investment to the national territory requires providing capital with such incentives as downward pressure on wages, deregulation, repression of workers, low taxes, privatization, investment subsidies, and on so. The result is rising inequality, impoverishment, and insecurity for working and popular classes, precisely the conditions that throw states into crises of legitimacy, destabilize national political systems, and jeopardize elite control. International frictions escalate as states, in their efforts to retain legitimacy, seek to sublimate social and political tensions and to keep the social order from fracturing. This sublimation may involve channeling social unrest towards scapegoated communities such as immigrants in the United States or towards an external enemy such as China or Russia.

The larger theoretical backdrop to this discussion is how politics, including geopolitics, may *overdetermine* economics. The state's efforts to resolve the crisis of legitimacy and stabilize the social order runs up against the accumulation strategies pursued by the TCC and capitalists' efforts in each country of the world to shift the burden of the crisis onto working and popular classes. In its attempt to secure legitimacy and assure the reproduction of the social order as a whole, the capitalist state can and often does impose restraints on capital or push the process of capital accumulation in certain directions, such as we see with clarity in the case of China. Yet such imposition runs up against the self-same capitalist state's drive to promote (transnational) capital accumulation. Most observers, fixed as they are in a state-centrism and a nation-state/interstate framework of analysis that attribute global political dynamics to capitalist competition among nation-states, fail to see how the political contradictions generated by the legitimacy crisis feed back into economics. For instance, in the face of the Trump administration's anti-China stance, U. S.-based transnational corporations were hesitant to swap board seats with Chinese-based firms with which they were cross-invested. Their hesitancy was not due to inter-corporate competition but because they feared that Trump's political rhetoric over China would bring them political difficulties (*The Economist*, 2019). In this way, *politics becomes overdetermined*.

On the other hand, global capitalism pits nationally constrained workers against one another and sets up the conditions for the TCC to manipulate crises of state legitimacy and the international tensions generated by this

contradiction. The problem of the relationship between capital and the state in the capitalist system is rooted in a more expansive theoretical matter, that of the relationship of the political to the economic, that I cannot take up here. Suffice it to observe that the relationship between economics and politics, between capital and political operatives and elites is mediated in complex ways and is often tension-ridden. The capitalist state is not a mere instrument of capital and its policies may contradict those of specific capitalist groups or of capital as a whole. The capitalist state does form a unity with capital, but we cannot collapse the two into one, just as the political and the economic are a unity that cannot be collapsed into one. Capital has the sole objective of maximizing accumulation, but capitalist states have the contradictory mandate I mentioned above, and moreover, bureaucratic state and political elites may be interwoven with capitalist groups but form distinct strata whose interests do not necessarily coincide with those of various capitalist groups in competition. U. S.–China inter-state relations simply cannot be collapsed into transnational capital relations, as Chen does. When Chen writes that the Chinese state replaces “class conflict with nationalist sentiment to avoid civil war at home” (91) he is in fact *confirming my thesis*, namely that both countries face crises of state legitimacy and restive populations, and that China’s “ultra-nationalism,” Trump’s “America first” and bipartisan support in the United States for a policy of hostility towards China have as much to do, or more, with externalizing internal class and political tensions and responding to the crisis of legitimacy than with *inter-national* capital competition.

Marxists too often abandon Marxist analysis for realism in attempting to explain inter-state dynamics (Chen defines his approach as “critical realism”). If we are to understand global capitalism we must in the first instance train our focus on constellations of contradictory social and class forces in struggle, a focus that is analytically prior to the ways in which they become institutionalized and expressed in political (including state), cultural and ideological processes. Realist international relations theory by fiat trains our attention on the relationships among institutions, specifically, among states. The hallmark of this realism is the assumption that world capitalism in the 21st century is made up of “national capitals” and distinct national economies that interact externally with one another and a concomitant analysis of world politics as driven by the pursuit by governments of their “national interest” in political and military rivalry with one another. In place of offering an ontology of agency and how it operates through historically constituted institutions such as the state, realism reifies these institutions as having existence or agency independent of social forces. There can in theory be a historical materialist approach to international relations and to the inter-state system that sees these relations as ultimate derivations. Yet the inclination to reification is very great indeed when the object of inquiry is

these relations in and of themselves and when the political noise of interstate tensions drowns out underlying structural analysis; the template cannot be modified without some type of epistemological break with the extant logic of international relations as relations among states in an interstate system. In contrast, a social class–centric approach takes the state and geopolitical conflict into account without reducing transnational class analysis and transnational class struggle to interstate competition. It sees the state itself and interstate competition as a derivation *in the first instance* from social and class forces, as these forces develop globally, historically and in struggle.

This takes us back to Chen’s evocation of “imperialist rivalry” without ever defining what this means. In his hands, the term appears meaningless in the literal sense that he has not assigned to it a meaning. The closest we come to a definition of imperialism is pursuit by a state of “its own geopolitical interests” (95). Such an approach is a sharp departure from the classical theory of imperialism and inter-imperialist rivalry. Lenin was clear that the rivalry among states was *derived* from the rivalry among capitalist groups that were in his day nationally based. Following Hobson and Hilferding, he actually provided empirical evidence of the affinity between nationally based capitalist groups and states. On the other hand, the notion that a state has “its own geopolitical interests” is outright reification associated with realism, in which the state thinks and acts as a self-conscious macro-agent.

Near the end of his essay, Chen refers to “growing tension between different national capitals” (106) as the putative explanation for the U. S.–China conflict. The irony here is that his essay actually presents significant data on the transnational nature of China-based capital and on its increasing integration into TCC networks. Nowhere does he (or the majority of my critics) present actual *empirical counter-evidence* to support the claim that the commanding heights of world capital remains organized along national lines such that it is meaningful to talk about a distinct “U. S. capitalist class,” a “French capitalist class,” a “German capitalist class,” and so on, whose national competition drives geopolitical tensions. It would be helpful to have a serious debate with Chen and those who share his realist analysis of global capitalism and of U. S.–China relations. But that is hardly possible on the foundations of misrepresentation, caricature, and strawmen.

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