

## FEATURE REVIEW

### **A Theory of Global Capitalism: Production, Class and State in a Transnational World**

William I. Robinson

(Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004)

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William Robinson has made a name with key writings on democratic struggles in Latin America, on the propagation of electoral democracy as a tool of US contemporary foreign policy and, more recently, with a range of articles on the transnational capitalist class. In *A Theory of Global Capitalism* he presents his core argument on the process of globalisation of class and state in the contemporary period. The book is set up with a didactic purpose, 'in a manner accessible to the student of globalization and to concerned members of the lay public' (p. xiii). In this aim the author succeeds admirably, for the book is a model of accessibility and clarity, a pleasure to read.

Robinson develops his argument in three steps. First, it is not ideas, or politico-military factors which underlie globalisation, but the rise of a global economy (p. 10). Second, 'transnational capital has become the dominant, or hegemonic, fraction of capital on a world scale' (p. 21). Third, this entails the formation of what Robinson terms the *transnational state*. States in his view are not actors as such. 'It is classes and groups acting in and out of states [that] do things as collective historical agents.' 'State apparatuses are those instruments that enforce and reproduce the class and social group relations and practices embedded in states' (p. 98). The transnational state is merely the highest form of this configuration of forces, with the transnational capitalist class in the driver's seat.

This in a nutshell is what the book is about. As with all of Robinson's writings, it is well-documented, well-written and very persuasive. If I make a number of reservations about the argument of the work reviewed here, it is in the spirit of constructive engagement and of the commitment to progressive politics that William Robinson has made the hallmark of his writing. My main criticism is that we have to allow, in the analysis of any process of social development, a much greater latitude for people's mental make-up and ideas as they are shaped by the complex interactions between the dominant mode of production and the

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historical process by which distinct social groups of widely varying backgrounds become integrated into the expanding 'Western' world of capital. More specifically, I would argue that the unique trajectory of each ethno-national entity's absorption into this expanding capitalist world is what truly makes the process of globalisation global, not the inherent drive to globality which can be projected from the expansion itself.

If we acknowledge that the West and the non-Western societies are not just class societies in the sense that they are structured around historically specific patterns of exploitation of labour, but also have developed unique ways of enveloping such patterns into forms of daily life and shared belief systems ('culture'), we may begin to suspect that 'globalisation' and the 'transnational state' are still today facing a world that is far more diverse, complex and intractable than these terms suggest. The terms therefore remain *abstract* whereas they claim to denote concrete realities. Let me briefly expand on the methodological aspect of this. Robinson writes that his 'theories are generative theories... intended to reveal that things that appear to be disparate and complex are actually part of the same underlying process' (pp. xv–xvi). This method goes some way towards the method applied by Marx, but remains formal. In *Capital* Marx applies a method of abstraction that selects and isolates a core structure from society, which then supposedly holds the key to deciphering society's specific real complexity. Hegel already outlined the argument behind that method in his *Encyclopedia* as follows: 'The dialectic has a positive result because it has a *determined* content... The rational, although it is something in thought and [hence] abstract, is therefore simultaneously *concrete*, because it is not a simple, formal unity [of ideas], but the unity of different determinations.'<sup>1</sup>

Marx echoes this in the *Grundrisse* when he claims that from the most abstract determinations, to which an initial, analytical procedure has taken him, the journey must be retraced, 'until I had finally arrived at the population again, but this time not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations'.<sup>2</sup> Of course, Marx added to Hegel's 'thought-concrete' a 'real concrete', which exists in its own right and not just as an objectification of (divine) spirit. But what counts here is the method.

The 'abstract' core structure of *Capital* is the commodity, the good or service which, on account of the property right imprinted on it, can be freely disposed of in an exchange relation (Robinson gives an excellent summary description of the process of commodification early on in the book (p. 7)). In the successive volumes of *Capital*, 1 to 3, 'many determinations' are added to the analysis of the commodity, so that we arrive at a more complex, *if still 'abstractly' economic*, understanding of the capitalist mode of production as the 'anatomy of civil society'. There (at the point where the description of the classes of which society is made up begins) the notes left behind for Engels to edit end. Now the original plan for *Capital*, as is well-known, included volumes on the state and the world market that were never written. Robinson's book broadly follows this structure, and *does* include an analysis of the state and the world market. But Marx towards the end of his life also began to read and produce notes that took him well beyond the still abstract economic processes developed in *Capital* into the area of ethnography and social anthropology; the field of the

real historical differences between peoples and civilisations, their forms of family life, religion, authority, and forms of defining and dealing with the foreign. Anyone who thinks back to the ‘concrete’ as the ‘rich totality of many determinations and relations’ that in my view captures the essence of the method that Marx inherited from Hegel (and, as the well-worn phrase has it, ‘turned on the head’ by acknowledging the real concrete of material life), will understand that we can never be generous enough when allowing the concrete to be really as ‘rich’ as possible. Certainly, in the study of globalisation, which is the thought-concrete and the real concrete taken to their limit, we cannot settle for a reductionist account which remains on economic ground, taking certain abstract determinations and then adding them up in what in Hegel’s words would be ‘a formal unity’.

In the end, the method determines how we deal for instance with the ‘Clash of Civilisations’ which today (however we may want to reject the phrase and the idea) is being turned from Huntington’s fiction into fact with frightening momentum. And yet this too, in my view, is connected to processes of social change, driven, ultimately, by the exploitation of labour by capital on a global scale; an issue dealt with by, for example, Dieter Senghaas in his *The Clash Within Civilisations*<sup>3</sup> or Amy Chua in *World on Fire*.<sup>4</sup> There is a real materiality to ethnological and cultural differences as a way in and through which society reproduces itself on the basis of its original natural substratum and the climatic and topological conditions under which it formed itself as a sedentary or nomadic, pastoral or commercial community. If we do not adequately acknowledge this, we cannot account for the fact that, to name but one aspect, capitalist individualism wreaks havoc in many non-Western societies and tends to trigger responses that can easily lead to violence; the same for attitudes to women, and so on.

But also, equally importantly, we cannot hope to conceptualise properly a society *beyond* capitalist exploitation. Such a society, as the Soviet example has demonstrated, will always become trapped in the ‘Not by bread alone’ predicament – which ultimately means that it is a reductionist society based on a reductionist theory, one that maintains that what ‘appears to be disparate and complex’ is in reality part of the same underlying process. I would argue that what appears as disparate and complex is exactly that, and not a collection of epiphenomena hiding a deeper reality.

Let me indicate where a formal unity between concepts leads us astray here. Robinson discusses at some length the fiction of the nation-state, indicating that the combination between the two elements is historically specific and of limited applicability (p. 91). Now to account for the fact that the supposedly globalising world turns out to engender fierce conflicts not just between capital and labour, but also ‘laterally’, in geopolitical space so to speak, he writes that this goes back to:

specific nation-states captured by [subordinate] groups; and [to] dominant groups that are less integrated into, or even opposed to, global capitalism, such as the Baath Party/Iraqi state elite prior to the 2003 U.S. invasion, sectors among the Russian oligarchy, or Chinese economic and political elites. The uneven development

of the transnationalization process is an important source of conflict. *Distinct national histories, regional experiences, and political cultures shape how particular countries enter the global system...* The emerging global order, we should bear in mind, is unevenly hegemonic. *Hegemonic power does not operate in a uniform manner around the globe* (pp. 133–4; emphasis added).

I would entirely agree with these statements, but Robinson rejects them to the extent they would suggest that regional alternatives could ever be based on them. Claiming that such a thing as ‘US’, ‘German’ or ‘Japanese’ interests can only be identified on the basis of a reified understanding of them, he emphasises rightly that when the International Monetary Fund or even the US ‘opens up a country through liberalization measures, it is opened up not exclusively to “Anglo-U.S.” capitalists but to capitalists from anywhere in the world’ (p. 135). This, I would argue, is true and it is not true, because, whilst there is a convergence in this direction, specific ruling classes have also built up, over decades or longer, specific transnational networks which offer them competitive advantages. Thus the US and the UK have used (in Iraq for instance) their military ‘comparative advantage’ to trump the Russian and French willingness to strike oil deals with the Saddam Hussein regime when it appeared that UN sanctions were unravelling. Now that the US and the UK are *in* Iraq, it turns out that, whilst Saddam Hussein may have already begun a privatisation programme years ago, the society in which they find themselves as occupiers bears little resemblance to a civil society in the Western sense. Tribal, regional and religious loyalties in many sections of society hold sway over the modern urban, secular and contractual considerations, which also play a part but not the dominant part.

Globalisation can only be understood if the analysis of the world-wide extension of capitalist market discipline is enlarged by an awareness of the materiality of ethnic and cultural diversity, which includes the realisation that the ‘state’ has different connotations everywhere. Therefore, the ‘transnational state’ must be either almost empty in content, or tied to one social formation more than to others. If ‘the empire of capital’, as Robinson writes (p. 140), ‘is headquartered in Washington’, those resisting that empire cannot be just the working classes of the world. They will also include, to varying degrees, all the regional mediating instances, states, cultures and classes within them, in a structure which is infinitely more complex than suggested in this book. Thus I would maintain, for instance, that ‘Brussels’ is more than a local office of ‘the empire of capital headquartered in Washington’, and perhaps even a rival centre. Also the attempt by Brazil’s Lula to form a Group of 5 with China, India, South Africa and Russia suggests that there are forces at work which are structurally relevant but which cannot be dismissed as subordinate to capital or Washington, or alternatively understood as emanations of ‘subordinate groups’.

The notes on *A Theory of Global Capitalism* offered here cannot do justice to the wealth of separate arguments, critical discussions of alternative positions, and empirical detail with which it develops the three-step argument I summarised at the beginning. But, then, this is a work of a quality that invites any reader to

engage with its core arguments and the method that lies behind it. I do feel the analysis of globalisation has to be fundamentally broadened beyond the primarily economic analysis offered in this book. But Robinson does offer a powerful starting point that deserves to be widely read.

### **Notes**

1. G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopädie der Philosophischen Wissenschaften* [3rd Lasson edn] (Felix Meiner Verlag, 1923), Part I, p. 106, para. 82 (my translation).
2. K. Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. M. Nicolaus (Penguin, 1973), p. 100.
3. Dieter Senghaas, *The Clash Within Civilisations* (Routledge, 2002).
4. Amy Chua, *World On Fire: How Exporting Free-Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability* (Heinemann, 2003).

