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Book review: William I. Robinson, *Latin America and Global Capitalism: A Critical Globalization Perspective*. Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, MD, 2008, 440 pp., ISBN 080189039X

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Altogether, this edited volume contains some fascinating contributions on the role of China in the capitalist world economy, the implications of its rise (often considered = inevitable) and its potential to transform the modern capitalist world system as we have known it for the last 500 years. The editor should therefore be commended for collecting such a variety of essays dealing with one of the most important issues of our time. I would recommend this volume to comparative sociologists, historical sociologists, social theorists as well as scholars in international political economy and foreign affairs. The only minor shortfall is that only two of the contributors writing about China/East Asia actually reside there (So and Gulick). Perhaps the composition of the list of authors of such a book 25 years from now will look very different. If such a book ever does emerge, it will be interesting to revisit this collection and see who was right about what and why.

William I. Robinson, *Latin America and Global Capitalism: A Critical Globalization Perspective*. Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, MD, 2008, 440 pp., ISBN 080189039X

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William I. Robinson has demonstrated once again his importance as a theorist and socially committed academic with his book *Latin America and Global Capitalism*. His talent lies in his ability to combine levels of abstraction, from cutting-edge theorizing and insightful structural-conjunctural analyses to amassing and summarizing an impressive array of data and research on the region. As a result, this book re-establishes the importance of Marxism as a fundamental, theoretical and methodological approach for disentangling the complexity of contemporary capitalism.

The structure of the argument

In the first chapter, Robinson presents a short version of his ‘theory of global capitalism’ (for the full version, see Robinson, 2004). He argues that world capitalism has made an ‘epochal shift’ to global capitalism, that is, from a ‘*world economy* (in which nation-states are linked to each other via trade and financial flows) to a *global economy* (in which the production process itself becomes globally integrated)’ (p. 25, emphasis in original). Thus, the globalization of production and finance transformed capitalism from a nation-state to a transnational model of accumulation and from national to transnational class relations. This transnational structure is the material basis for the formation of a Transnational Capitalist Class (TCC) and a Transnational State (TNS) in the Gramscian sense. As a result, ‘nation-state centric analyses’ and theories of imperialism have lost their explanatory power.

Robinson examines the globally integrated production system with the following case studies: non-traditional agricultural exports, export-processing zones (EPZs), transnational services, global tourism, and the export of labor. The most interesting of these is the EPZ, given its emblematic status in the new international division of labor (NIDL). Robinson recognizes the EPZs as the re-emergence of enclave economies, but he does not capture their underlying nature as a labor-export platform. Overall, these chapters are some of the best in the book, since they analyze often overlooked features of capitalist development in Latin America.

Robinson then describes transnational processes with an emphasis on TCC formation. These processes in Latin America have integrated fractions of the capitalist class tied to the global circuits of accumulation into the TCC. These fractions are ‘not the comprador class of the dependency school theorists . . . They are local contingents of the TCC . . .’ (p. 172). As a result, ‘global society appears to be increasingly stratified less along national and territorial lines than across transnational

social and class lines' (Robinson, 2010: 11). Class relations are 'deterritorialized' (p. 189) and categories like center-periphery are obsolete (2010: 12).

Robinson also argues that international relations have become transnational relations. For example, the view that US, Chinese, and Latin American relations can be explained as 'tussle' between a declining US hegemony and an expanding Chinese influence 'misses the point' (p. 200). Latin American primary exports to China do not feed "Chinese" capitalism, but global capitalism in China, to fuel transnational accumulation taking place in Chinese territory. These are not nation-state relations; they are global capitalist relations' (p. 200). Such analysis of global politics contrasts sharply with those of scholars like David Harvey (2003), Walden Bello (2005), Samir Amin (2006), Giovanni Arrighi (2007) and James Petras (2010).

Robinson is currently a leading theorist in the school of critical globalization studies (Appelbaum and Robinson, 2005), but his roots are in the neo-Gramscian school of international relations (Cox, 1987). In the concluding chapters, Robinson presents a neo-Gramscian analysis of the Latin American conjuncture, updating the project he started with his book, *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention, and Hegemony* (1996). In brief, globalization resulted in a growing inequality and social polarization 'within and between countries' (p. 230, emphasis in original), which undermined the 'effort to maintain polyarchic political systems that require hegemonic incorporation of a sufficiently broad social base' (p. 281). The TCC's failure to 'construct a global capitalist historic bloc' set the stage for a 'new cycle of resistance' in Latin America (p. 233).

Robinson explores this cycle through an analysis of indigenous movements in the region, the immigrant rights movement in the US, and the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela. Robinson highlights the challenges facing popular movements in the region: the structural power of transnational capital, the counter-revolutionary nature of the bourgeois state, and the movement absorption capacity of polyarchy (p. 340). While the Bolivarian revolution has achieved popular hegemony, the 'primordial question is the extent to which a new popular hegemonic bloc could congeal in the region . . .' (p. 341). Moreover, this potential bloc confronts a US-supported 'resurgent right' and 'rollback strategy' in Latin America (Petras, 2009).

A critique of the argument

Robinson argues that the rise of a globally integrated system of production and finance marks an 'epochal shift' to a new mode of production. According to Marxist theory, new modes of production arise from the development of the productive forces, that is, through technological innovation (Shaw, 1978). Since the overproduction crisis in the 1970s, productive forces have stagnated, as evidenced by slowing multi-factor productivity growth (Petras, 2008). Innovation in information and communication technologies has taken place, but it has not driven the development of the productive forces. Instead, these technologies have been used to restructure capital-labor relations through globalization and flexible accumulation. Thus, rather than an 'epochal shift', globalization shifted power to 'monopoly-finance capital' – a better description of the current 'epoch' of world capitalism (Foster, 2006).

Monopoly-finance capital responded to the overproduction crisis of the 1970s through the globalization, which reduced production costs by exploiting cheap labor in the periphery. The global labor force has doubled since the 1970s as 'workers from China, India and the former Soviet bloc entered the global labor pool' (Freeman, 2006: 1). This absolute surplus of labor undermined labor unions, real wages and effective demand, which only accelerated the overproduction crisis. Robinson calls this the 'most fundamental social contradiction in Latin America and in global society' (p. 228, emphasis in original). Consequently, in the late 1990s, globalization encountered

crises of 'economic stagnation, legitimation problems, and rise of counter-hegemonic movements' (p. 235) and 'stalled' (Bello, 2006: 1346). This stalling 'was accompanied by a deep crisis of legitimacy of the much vaunted multilateral system', which diminished the power of Robinson's TNS (Bello, 2006: 1353). For example, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), a key TNS institution, has been 'reduced to a shadow of its former self', since the 2001 Argentine collapse (Weisbrot, 2006: 5). In fact, no other region symbolizes the loss of the IMF's legitimacy and power more than Latin America, where the rise of anti-neoliberal social movements and center-left electoral victories resulted in many of the region's governments rejecting IMF loans and programs. The decline in the legitimacy and power of the TNS exposes an internal contradiction in Robinson's theory: globalization created the material base for a TCC, but undermined the material base for its 'transnational hegemonic project' (p. 233). This contradiction arises from Robinson's reification of globalization into global capitalism, which conflates conjuncture and structure. As a result, Robinson is forced to make significant theoretical stretches to explain the stalling of globalization, and the rise of the 'new imperialism' (Harvey, 2003).

Class relations are not 'deterritorialized', and theories of imperialism have not lost their explanatory power. To paraphrase George Orwell, 'some transnational capital is more equal than others'. The Korean owner of a textile factory in the free trade zone outside Guatemala City is part of the TCC, but he does not exercise the same power as the transnational capital based in the center for which he contracts. His integration into the TCC changes the power structure as much as the election of a black President ends racism in the US. Without imperialism, Robinson misses the chain of causality. TNS institutions, like the IMF, serve as instruments of US imperialism, not the TCC, otherwise, the US would not have prevented the creation of an Asian Monetary Fund during the 1997 Asian financial crisis. In addition, since France's TotalElf, Russia's Lukoil, and China's national oil company already had contracts to develop Iraqi oil, then the US state could have just supported the lifting of UN sanctions to open up Iraq 'on behalf of transnational capitalist interests' (p. 235, emphasis in original). Instead, the US military invaded and occupied Iraq to open it up on behalf of US monopoly capital, such as ExxonMobil and Halliburton (Klare, 2005). Consequently, US imperialism does not serve 'particular clusters of transnational capital', unless, by that phrase, Robinson meant US monopoly-finance capital (p. 236). Moreover, the exercise of military power by a nation-state over another seems to be irrelevant in Robinson's analysis of class formation and structural power.

Central to the Marxist concept of imperialism is the power of a nation-state, as the manifestation of capital's territorialization, to extract surplus value from others. Robinson presented evidence of this extraction: 'Latin America exported over the period from 1980 to 2006 an annual average of \$42 billion in profits and interests . . . Global capitalism . . . represented a shift in wealth and class power' (p. 256). This shift has a geographic dimension: the transfer of surplus from the periphery to the center, which demonstrates the continuing relevance of those categories. Moreover, Robinson argued that 'this worldwide decentralization and fragmentation of the production process has taken place together with the centralization of command and control of the global economy' (p. 26). This centralization has a corollary: accumulation in the center nation-states.

Conclusion

Robinson synthesizes diverse sources and research with important insights and original propositions, but, on occasion, his analysis overreaches theoretically, forcing the facts to fit into his theoretical framework, as if reality must fit into his Procrustean bed (where most of our critique lies). Nonetheless, this book is a 'must-read' for any scholar interested in the dynamics of contemporary capitalism as well as its specific features in Latin America. In the preface, Robinson emphasized a

Marxist premise, which deserves more serious consideration by most of academia: ‘We need organic intellectuals capable of theorizing the changes that have taken place in the system of capitalism . . . and of providing to popular majorities . . . theoretical insights as inputs for their real-world struggles . . .’ (p. xiii). *Latin America and Global Capitalism* makes a major contribution to that effort.

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Mark Juergensmeyer, *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State from Christian Militias to Al Qaeda*. University of California Press: Berkeley, CA, 2009; ISBN 9780520261570

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The basic argument in this insightful and ambitious new book is that the secular ideology underlying the Western nation-state has come under attack by a decentralized, multi-stranded ‘global