

Interview – Quinn Slobodian

Written by E-International Relations

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Quinn Slobodian is the Marion Butler McLean Professor of the History of Ideas at Wellesley College and will join the Pardee School of Global Studies at Boston University as a professor of international history in January 2024. He is also an associate fellow at Chatham House and co-director of the History and Political Economy Project. He is also a frequent commenter on contemporary politics in the *New York Times*, *Guardian*, and *New Statesman*. His most recent book is *Crack-Up Capitalism: Market Radicals and the Dream of a World Without Democracy*. Previous publications include *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* and *Foreign Front: Third World Politics in Sixties West Germany*.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

I think we are at an exciting moment for the conversations between neighbouring disciplines, even if the reasons are not always cheerful. From the discipline of history, the move is motivated partially by necessity. As the conventional arenas for scholarly production and exchange begin to dry up with the decline of enrollments, majors, and new tenure-track lines in our field, we are compelled to find new arenas of engagement.

There's also a political background. The moment's local or global challenges force us to draw on different skill sets and work collaboratively. My micro-version of this is concocting an initiative with Johns Hopkins University sociologist Christy Thornton to create more space and resources for something that we call History and Political Economy borrowing from the successful example of Law and Political Economy.

What can be done in this space is wide open. We are supporting early career scholars returning to local intellectual histories of nearly forgotten knowledge producers in the Global South from earlier in the 20th century, inquiries into the dynamics of sexuality and gender in the process of welfare reform, projects about how large asset managers and institutional investors operate globally, to name just a few of the ongoing projects. The history of political economy is a moving target in the best way: it spits out new topics and fields of inquiry as conditions change.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

My books have been a record of my encounter with broader political events. The book that started as my dissertation, *Foreign Front: Third World Politics in Sixties West Germany* (Duke UP, 2012), was about the encounter of young West German students with political actors from Africa, Asia, and Latin America in the 1960s. It emerged from the sense of anger and futility around the efforts at international solidarity during the US-led invasion of Iraq in the early 2000s. It came out of despair at the disconnect between broad-based social movements and the world's most powerful actors.

Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism (Harvard UP 2018) was concerned with this problem of elites differently. It was an artefact of the Obama years, which were themselves—sometimes self-consciously—a rerun of the Clinton years. In the 1990s, as in a few years after 2008, there was a kind of complacency around the effects of economic globalization on the organization of people's everyday lives. I was interested in finding the origins of what had become a commonsense notion that global economic competition was a force of nature that politicians

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could not control. As it turned out, this common sense was radically challenged when I wrote the book, first by the Occupy Movement and later by the events of 2016. By the time the book appeared in 2018, delayed by the happy occasion of the birth of a child and time spent raising him, there was a growing host of critics of the status quo from both the left and the right. What had begun as a history of the present became a history of the near past.

Crack-Up Capitalism is a sequel to *Globalists*. It seeks to make sense of the political developments of the years since 2016 in a way that dispenses with the overly tidy binary division between globalization and nationalism that has dominated commentary. I felt that the popular debate would be enriched by being reminded of the many ways capitalism works through processes beneath the envelope of the nation. This approach also helps lay bare the hypocrisy of the so-called populists of the right who, more often than not, end up preserving all-too-familiar arrangements of the plutocratic imbalance of influence and the unevenly distributed precarity of labour.

In your 2018 book *Globalists*, you explored the relationship between democratic systems and neoliberalism. Can you briefly summarize your scepticism about neoliberalism in a democratic society?

To address the titanic challenges we face as a species intimately dependent on the rest of the planet's species, we must preserve some sense of the possible. What angers me about neoliberalism as an intellectual project and a political philosophy is its investment in distancing people from a sense that they can transform the conditions of their own lives. It is a philosophy of surrender and even an injunction to obsequious capitulation to the supposedly spontaneously emergent forces of competition and the stresses, strains, traumas, and inequalities they bring in their wake. Neoliberal institutions are designed to insulate market processes from individual influence and use the apparatus of law to preserve a quality of what I call in the book "encasement" to make possible some versions of the future and make others impossible. At a basic level, we need more of the politics of the possible, and neoliberalism stands in the way of this.

What are the links between *Globalists* and the Crack-up capitalism? How have your ideas developed since publishing *Globalists*?

The main point of *Globalists* was to insist on something that I thought was often overlooked: the centrality of law, and especially international economic law to the normative neoliberal idea of world order. Although other scholars had made the same point for decades, it still had not yet sunk in that neoliberals did not believe in diminishing the state but repurposing it for specific ends. The new book came, in a way, out of a sense of boredom with my own earlier point. While it is true that most neoliberals believe in using the state rather than doing away with it, it is also the case that certain more radical actors in that tradition insist on eradicating states and representative government altogether. Their influence has also, interestingly, been growing even as most people would have said the neoliberals had "won" in the decades since the Second World War. Hyper-conscious, one could even say paranoid about the new threats posed by ecological thinking, feminism, and calls for racial justice, some market radicals proposed that rather than simply taming democracy, they needed to eliminate it.

While relatively marginal, the existing intellectual histories had poorly served this group of so-called anarchocapitalists. So part of my goal with the book was to flesh out what had been a thin story until that point. I was also keen to show how many supposed right-wing populists were happy to use different forms of perforating sovereignty on the Zone model, even as they used a misleading language of national self-determination. Bringing in the third term of the Zone alongside the globe and nation by mainstreaming much of the fascinating work in geography, anthropology, sociology, and area studies for decades, I hoped to tell a new intellectual story and cast current debates in a new light.

In your latest book, you emphasized the role of Asian city-states like Singapore and Hong Kong in creating free market-based areas with limited political freedoms. What are the weaknesses of this model, and what are the differences when compared with China's special economic zones (SZE)?

As a historian, I am always interested in the stories we tell about the past, both recent and distant. As the Cold War conflict fades from memory, it seems essential to figure out a narrative of the past that accounts for the rise of China

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and how this has changed political expectations and values. The book sets out a recent alternative history of global political economy by reminding readers that Western actors were attentive to East Asian economic successes by the 1970s.

The exceptional performance of small showcases of non-democratic capitalism like Singapore and Hong Kong were as enchanting to Milton Friedman as they were to Deng Xiaoping. Drawing on the work of legions of Sinologists and other experts, I recount the way that Zones—or Portable Hong Kongs, as I call them—were perceived as an alternative model of economic organization to be reassembled elsewhere, stripped of their particularity, frictions, and local histories. However, this fact did not mean that Special Economic Zones (SEZs) were laboratories of anarcho-capitalism in miniature. The Chinese state was very canny at using SEZs for its public purposes. As I make clear, despite the hopes of some of their ideologues, Zones are as often tools of the state as they are against the state.

Are free trade zones an effective tool for attracting investment and fostering economic growth?

Whether free trade zones are effective at attracting investment is perhaps less interesting than how free trade zones became the only proposal left for attracting investment. The viral nature of the policy idea of the Zone and the way it has crowded out other alternatives is one of the subplots in my book. However, because the book is not primarily a study of political economy and is more devoted to how ideas about the economy move, I did not want to leave the reader with a blanket assessment of Zones, which are diverse in their design and their effects. What is unquestionable—and in need of explanation—is how the sheen of the Zone remains undimmed by its many failures. The idea that economic success must come through some surrender of territorial evenness is an interesting phenomenon.

How do you see the future of neoliberalism after the COVID-19 health crisis and the Russian invasion of Ukraine? Do you think it is in a phase of expansion or decline?

I think I can answer in two parts. The second most recent proclamation of the death of neoliberalism came after 2016 with the election of Trump and the victory of Brexit. At that time, I was sceptical about the eulogies because it seemed that despite some notable ruptures—especially the trade war with China and others—there was also more about the world economy that was business as usual. The recent rupture of 2020 has made me take the reported death of neoliberalism more seriously. The willingness to use legal and political measures on the part of the United States in its attempt to contain China as an economic actor is a departure from the script in the years prior. Even if an industrial policy is being rolled out that uses financial intermediaries in ways that seem familiar from recent years, the subordination of supposedly universal market prerogatives to openly national ones is explicit enough to describe it as beyond neoliberalism.

And yet even as one can see a move away from legalized multilateral trade under the oversight of an arbiter like the World Trade Organization, the persistence of the dollar system with the U.S. Federal Reserve at its centre shows that the architecture of unipolar economic organization still exists. The rollout of the comprehensive sanctions regime against Russia after the Ukraine invasion was unprecedented in scope but also showed the limits of exercising American power through economic means. The survival of Russia's economy despite sanctions and the support it has found in the Global South suggests that the geoeconomic realignment still has some surprises left.

What are the possible solutions to fix the problems of capitalism you have raised in both books?

Historians are notoriously bad at two things: predictions and policy recommendations. I would present that disclaimer first before offering anything to the debate. I think historians can provide a sense of the openness of the future by reminding us of the openness of the past. With that in mind, I would say that I don't think the question is how to fix capitalism because I don't believe that capitalism is the fix.

We need to figure out ways to decommodify everyday life and larger institutions. That means we must work against the flow of political commonsense and the economic momentum of the last several decades. How and where that process will begin cannot be predicted in advance and will be determined by the spark of collective action. If the

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pandemic years have shown us anything, it is that people are capable of sudden breaks with routine and are prepared to pivot to drastically new ways of life if they believe that these things are necessary for shared survival.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

As a professor, I teach many current and future students of international relations. I have two messages in the classes I teach to them. The first is to remember history. It's amazing how presentist the IR field can be. The second is to remember the rest of the world. In its American form, IR developed as a discipline to guide the hand of the world hegemon. To see international relations from beyond the United States requires long and often uncomfortable immersion in histories, realities and geographies very different from those familiar to most, but not all, of my American students. In that sense, I suggest remaining aware of the connections, interests, mutual dependencies and class positions that link people across territories, even when they are not immediately visible. Then write accordingly.