

Interview - William I. Robinson

Written by E-International Relations

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William I. Robinson is a professor of sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he is also affiliated with the Latin American and Iberian Studies Program and with the Global and International Studies Program. Among his many books are *Promoting Polyarchy* (1996), *Transnational Conflicts* (2003), *A Theory of Global Capitalism* (2004), *Latin America and Global Capitalism* (2008), and *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity* (2014). He has published some fifty articles in academic journals such as *Sociological Forum*, *Theory and Society*, *International Studies Review*, *International Sociology*, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, *International Relations*, *Global Society*, *Globalizations*, *Race and Class*, *New Political Economy*, *Third World Quarterly*, and *Radical Philosophy* and hundreds of essays, book chapters, and articles in the popular press. Professor Robinson can be followed on Twitter @w_i_robinson.

Where do you see the most exciting research and debates occurring in your field?

Actually I think we need to go *afield* in this time of rapid worldwide change if we are to understand our individual fields in the broader context. What has most concerned me in recent years is the crisis of global capitalism. There has been a proliferation of critical research and debates related to the crisis that acquire ever-more relevance as the world moves full steam towards a breakdown of the post-WWII order, the rise of right-wing populist and also neo-fascist movements (Trumpism, Brexit, the far right revival in continental Europe, the likes of such strongmen as Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines), a new nuclear arms race and the threat of major international military conflagration. In such times of social upheaval and political breakdown it is critical for us to move beyond our traditional area of studies if our research is to remain relevant.

Research on the crisis and on related transformation in the global system has led me to bodies of literature and debate that are for the most part new to me. These include military journals to research how warfare and conflict is changing through the so-called “revolution in military affairs” and “fourth generation warfare.” I have been reading works on the “fourth industrial revolution” to comprehend yet another massive restructuring of the global economy now underway through digitalization, financialization, and automation. I have found a new generation of urban studies and radical geography to be indispensable to understanding and debating the rise of megacities and their networks, the restructuring of space, and new systems of transnational social control (the surveillance state, the rise of a global “homeland security” industry, the new urban militarism, and so on). Of course the debates around globalization and transnational relations continue to be exciting and cutting edge in the face of current global developments. This includes intense debate on the rise of China and the BRICS, the new digital capitalism, the transnational capitalist class (TCC), the revival of aggressive nationalisms, resurgent global revolt, and so on. The post-WWII paradigms—for instance, the triad in IR theory: liberalism, realism and traditional Marxism—are not equipped to explain these developments (neither is constructivism). And this is where I return time and again to the explanatory power of analysing and theorizing global capitalism as a qualitatively new moment in modern world history.

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

I came of age politically and intellectually in my late teens as a student in East Africa. I came to Marxism through African Marxists who had participated in the anti-colonial and anti-neo-colonial struggles of their day. This was my

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route as well to theories of imperialism, underdevelopment, dependency and world-systems. Later as a participant in the Nicaraguan revolution of the 1980s and its aftermath in the 1990s I attempted to make sense of the cycle of national liberation and anti-imperialist revolutions that would come to an end in the face of *fin de siècle* capitalist globalization. The shift in my thinking away from the predominant post-WWI radical theories of Third World liberation and development (but not away from an *unorthodox* Marxism) and towards my theory of global capitalism took place in the 1990s. In that decade I sought explanations for the end of this cycle and for the rise of neo-liberalism in the profound transformations of the world political economy and the global system that had become more and more apparent. I undertook extensive readings in IR theory and global political economy and also turned to a second reading and reconsideration of Marx's political economy. I began to reflect on what seemed to me to be a qualitatively new stage of world capitalism —global capitalism—and came to see as historical what others saw as fixed or immanent structures of world capitalism, such as the nation-state form of world capitalism and the great Center-Periphery, or North-South divide. Along with this reflection came a reconsideration of the validity and utility of taking the nation-state and the inter-state system as the primary units and categories of analysis in place of social and class groups in a transnational/global setting. These considerations were evident in my first major theoretical work, *Promoting Polyarchy*, published in 1996 and became more fully developed in my 2004 book, *A Theory of Global Capitalism*.

You have been a vocal proponent of a transnational theory of global capitalism for much of the 21st century, yet within Marxist IR scholarship the key tenets of this theory remain contested. What would you say are the main misconceptions about your theory of global capitalism, and have there been any critiques which led you to reconsider any of its aspects?

I appreciate this question because a response requires that we distinguish between criticism based on a misreading of what I have actually argued and disagreement by those who have seriously engaged with my work. For over 20 years now some critics have charged that according to me the nation-state is becoming irrelevant. These critics also say that my theory of the transnational state (TNS) posits a collection of entities that “bypasses” or “replaces” the nation-state and that I “do not take the state seriously.” This is of course utter nonsense, as anyone who takes the time to study my work knows I have never even remotely suggested such a thing. I no longer bother responding to such gibberish. In my 2014 book, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, I responded in considerable depth to these and other criticisms, including clarifying and expanding my theory of the TNS.

Another charge that is hard for me to take seriously is that I have not empirically grounded my claims and have ignored local processes that lead to transnationalization. These critics often cite my 2004 book, *A Theory of Global Capitalism*, or even worse, a single article or a secondary source, yet seem oblivious to my empirical and case study books, such as *Latin America and Global Capitalism*, that operationalize the theory of the TCC and the TNS and show just how valid and explanatory these concepts are.

On the other hand, some critics have pointed out gaps and weaknesses in my arguments and have forced me to think things through, in some cases to qualify more carefully my claims. Critics, for instance, pointed to the difficulty in my theory of accounting for continued *inter-national* (distinct from transnational) tensions, the return of aggressive nationalisms, and the relative autonomy of military institutions. I have recently focused, in response to these critics, on crises of state legitimacy that derive, at least in part, from the contradiction generated by the disjuncture between a globalizing economy and a nation-state based system of political authority.

Another set of critics charge that I ignore uneven and combined development and the global Center-Periphery divide. In my 2014 book, in response, I elaborated considerable on how I view spatiality and uneven and combined accumulation in global capitalism. I am calling for a break with the self-same paradigms whose logic and assumptions much of the criticism is based, so that there is truly a Kuhnian problematic here. I have never argued that there is no longer a Center-Periphery divide. We cannot comprehend this divide in the 21st century through nation-state paradigms. I conceive of development and underdevelopment as population groups in a transnational setting, so that there are underdeveloped/peripheral social groups in Los Angeles where I am based and core social groups in Mexico City and Mumbai. The unit of analysis cannot be the nation-state, notwithstanding the disproportion in national-level development indices that is very real and can be explained historically rather than as a fixed

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structure of world capitalism.

The theory of global capitalism emphasizes the diachronic, in the sense that I am identifying historical movement underway and showing how my theory helps us to understand the direction of change, whereas many critics focus on the synchronic. There are too many anomalies in the accounts of 21st century global society based on outdated paradigms. My critics rarely if ever respond to me when I point out the anomalies in their argument. This is especially so for the orthodox and often dogmatic Marxists. The dogmatic Marxists operate as if world capitalism remained frozen in its 20th century form. They dismiss the notion of a TCC as “Kautskyist” even though I have pointed out repeatedly why and how my theory shares nothing with the “superimperialism” argument on the early 20th century German Marxist Karl Kautsky.

Writing in 2008 you seemed to hold out some hope for the counter-hegemonic and anti-capitalist potential of Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution. Given the current malaise facing the Bolivarian government, do you see any viable paths forward for ‘21st Century Socialism’ in Venezuela?

The Bolivarian revolution is in crisis and its survival is uncertain. It is unbelievably hard to make a revolution. In Venezuela the easy phase came to an end following the collapse of high oil prices. There are many levels of explanation for the malaise in the revolution. It is certainly true that corruption has alienated part of the revolution’s social base. It is true as well that government policies such as the dual exchange rate have undercut the revolution. These policies reflect an alliance between the revolutionary bloc and so-called “patriotic” bourgeoisie (the “Boli-bourgeoisie”) and a consequent unwillingness to challenge fundamental class and property relations. The government has done virtually nothing to break the country’s dependence on oil. And all of this has unfolded to the drumbeat of a U.S.-supported counterrevolution.

While these factors are relevant the key point in relation to my theory of global capitalism is that no country in the 21st century can extricate itself from global capitalism, including the power of global financial markets, and from its influence on what takes place inside a country, as the Greeks will tell you. The Venezuelan government attempted to develop regional and international counterweights to neo-liberal global capitalism. This strategy was entirely correct but much of it was rolled back when commodity prices collapsed in the wake of the Great Recession and the right-wing counteroffensive in the region. The revolutionary Left in Venezuela (for instance, *Marea Socialista*) have long called for a more radical challenge to class and property relations inside Venezuela and I share this view. Any attempt to push forward a 21st Century Socialism, in Venezuela and elsewhere, would certainly need to be grounded in such a challenge. In the long run national struggles from below must be linked and synchronized with transnational struggles. Despite all the problems, intellectuals committed to global social justice need to cut through the story we are hearing about Venezuela from the corporate media that cheerleads the right-wing opposition. We need to defend the Venezuelan revolution notwithstanding all its problems.

Crises of capitalism and claims that they will mark an end to the system have come and gone. What makes the current crisis different?

There are several factors to the global crisis that suggests it may be systemic, meaning that only a supersession of the system can resolve the crisis, rather than merely structural, meaning that a restructuring of the system can resolve it. One is that global capitalism is reaching the ecological limits to its reproduction. Another are limits to extensive and intensive expansion. The capitalist system is like riding a bicycle. If you stop pedalling you fall over. If capitalism stops expanding it collapses. Each major crisis in the history of world capitalism has resulted in a new round of extensive expansion through colonialism and imperialism. With the incorporation of the former Soviet bloc and Third World revolutions into global capitalism following the Cold War there are no longer any countries that remain outside of the system or new territories to conquer and incorporate. We have seen in recent years a massive new round of primitive accumulation around the world through capitalist globalization but there are limits to this intensive expansion. A third is that nation-states no longer have the ability as in the past to offset capitalism’s chronic problem of over-accumulation. Given the global mobility of capital, especially of transnational finance capital, nation-states find it difficult to capture and redistribute surpluses downward. Only a global Keynesianism could accomplish this but the TNS does not have such a policymaking or enforcement capacity. All of this points to a possible collapse.

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Civilizations that were unable to overcome their internal contradictions have collapsed throughout history. Such an outcome is not inevitable. But it is not clear at this point under what circumstances the system can resuscitate itself. Wars have often been the defibrillator to capitalist crisis. My greatest fear is that the tensions generated by the crisis lead to a new global military conflagration.

Scholars such as Patrick Bond have conceptualised the BRICS as ‘sub-imperialist’, while others like Radhika Desai have posited that the BRICS are challenging ‘western supremacy’. What can a ‘critical globalization studies’ perspective tell us about the role of the BRICS in world order?

The notion that the BRICS are a progressive alternative to global capitalism has been thoroughly debunked. Bond co-edited a collection of essays on the matter, *BRICS: An Anti-Capitalist Critique*. As those essays showed, the BRICS capitalist classes and a majority of state and institutional elites within the BRICS countries are seeking not a withdrawal but greater integration into global capitalism and a heightened association with transnational capital.

However, the global capitalism perspective differs sharply from Bond’s concept of sub-imperialism. According to Bond, sub-imperialist countries seek markets and outlets for capital export in neighboring countries as junior partners with transnational capital. By this definition almost every country in the world could be categorized as sub-imperialist given that almost every country has transnational capitalist groups that are expanding abroad and that transnational capital produces goods and services in virtually all countries. The rise of the TCC in the former Third World is incontrovertible. Thai capitalists seek markets and capital outlets in Vietnam. Nigerian capitalists do so around Africa, including in South Africa. Jordanian capitalists do so in Egypt and Egyptian capitalists do so in Jordan. Are they sub-imperialist to each other?

Bond sees the world economy as boxed into national economies and capitals, yet the extent of global economic integration and the transnationalization of capital in the 21st century undermines any significant analytical purchase to dividing the world’s countries into imperialist, sub-imperialist, and imperialized. Bond sees surpluses as transferred from hinterlands to sub-imperialist capital cities and from there to imperialist headquarters in the North. This is nearly identical to Andre Gunder Frank’s classical dependency theory approach in which the world system is constituted by a string of satellite-metropolis relations through which surpluses flow from peripheral hinterlands through semi-peripheral cities and towards core regions.

The BRICS politics represents a challenge to “Western supremacy” (but *not* global capitalism) insofar as the effort to construct a more expansive and balanced global system and to open up further the global system for transnational capitalists and elites in from their respective countries. Some of these efforts do clash with the G7, but BRICS proposals would have the effect of extending and contributing to the stabilization of global capitalism, and in the process, of further transnationalizing the dominant groups in these countries. Here there is a progressive kernel in the BRICS project. The existing political scaffolding of world capitalism, a legacy of the crumbling post-WWII international order, is hopelessly out-dated. The leading capitalist groups from the BRICS countries have joined the ranks of the emerging TCC and have acquired a stake in the stability and wellbeing of global capitalism. But all this has occurred within the framework of an increasingly arcane international political order. If the BRICS do not represent an alternative to global capitalism and the domination of the TCC they *do* signal the shift towards a more multipolar and balanced *inter-state* system *within* the global capitalist order.

Throughout your academic career much of your research has focused on developments in Latin America. As accusations of intellectual colonialism are still very much alive, how can scholars from the ‘developed’ world account for the position of relative power and prosperity that they approach their research from?

This is a crucial point. The scholarly agenda set by universities and think tanks in the former First World is financed and heavily shaped by foundations such as Ford that in turn are tied to transnational corporate capital and for that matter to the US state department or other state entities. These research agendas and conceptual frameworks become hegemonic globally. They frame the research and the university curriculum in Latin America and elsewhere in the former Third World. Yet these agendas are often liberal and even progressive rather than conservative, for

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hegemony works best when more left and radical elements are not repressed but brought into hegemonic projects.

We have seen how such “intellectual colonialism” works to help defuse more radical demands for system change and the mass mobilization from below that push these demands. As I showed in *Promoting Polarchy*, the mass movements against the Latin American dictatorships in the 1970s demanded not just a restoration of elite civilian rule and formal political rights but a transformation of the whole social order. The foundations and think tanks they financed jumped on board, producing a veritable academic cottage industry on “democratization” that redefined democracy as process (e.g., procedurally free elections) rather than content (substantive equality through far-reaching change) and provided the intellectual and ideological scaffolding for transitions to neo-liberal civilian governments that then pushed capitalist globalization. Prior to that, in the 1970s, the Ford Foundation jumped on board the mass human rights movement, providing financing, organizing conferences, bringing Latin America scholars to study in the U.S., and in this way effectuated a shift in the notion of human rights, purging it of social and economic rights—the right to a decent wage, to health care, education—to a liberal conception of formal civil and political rights.

Later on in the 1990s the same thing happened with “global civil society.” As mass struggles for radical change broke out in an emerging global civil society from the 1960s into the twenty-first century, transnational elites came to see the conquest of civil society, beyond mere control of the state, as the key to constructing the hegemony of global capitalism. TNS agencies, corporations, and corporate-funded foundations poured billions of dollars into financing vast transnational networks of NGOs. This strategy has helped the transnational elite to secure *its* hegemony in global civil society by channelling the demands of mass social movements into institutional arenas that do not transgress the logic of the system. Even when their stated mission is to be oppositional, NGOs tend to be less mobilizers than service providers replacing mass struggles and social movements with professional bodies that *administer* programs and *advocate* rather than to organize. They do not, for instance, encourage strikes, demonstrations, or civil disobedience, much less revolutionary movements, and they eschew organizing along class lines. As the intellectual and ideological counterpart to this NGOization, the academy in First World churned out new theories of “global civil society” conceived not as sites of class antagonism and fierce struggles around hegemony and counter-hegemony but as a unified site opposed to the state, just at the time that neo-liberalism sought to downsize and privatize the state.

Some academics are intellectual mercenaries, pure and simply. And others are counter-hegemonic. But most wittingly or unwittingly become absorbed into intellectual production in function of system maintenance or renewal without transgressing the logic of global capitalism. In this way academics in both the former Third World and First World become organic intellectuals of the prevailing social order. The counterhegemonic intellectuals, if they cannot be co-opted, are not funded and face a host of informal sanctions by academic gatekeepers.

If Hegel’s claim that “the truth is the whole” is correct, then are interdisciplinary approaches essential for valuable research? Do you see any value to maintaining siloed disciplinary fields within the Social Sciences and Humanities?

Absolutely, interdisciplinary approaches are essential. They always were essential, and even more so at a time of rapid social change. I echo Wallerstein’s call for a unified historical social science. The only thing we achieve with disciplinary closure is to undermine the ability to understand any dimension of the social world since each dimension can only be comprehended as part of and in relation to the whole.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of sociology, political economy and international relations?

Young scholars should not become fixed on paradigms imparted by their mentors. Don’t develop a stake in or rigidity around a particular paradigm that later prevents you from identifying and explaining social change at a time when our traditional points of reference are fast becoming overtaken by developments and out-dated. Think beyond the box.

Perhaps more importantly, humanity is in deep crisis. In such times of crisis it is incumbent upon us to explore the

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relevance of academic research to the burning political and social struggles of our epoch. As scholars must choose between legitimating the prevailing social order and providing technical solutions to the problems that arise in its maintenance or exposing contradictions in order to reveal how they may be resolved by transcending the existing order. Being a counter-hegemonic academic is difficult, especially for young ones who need to secure employment and tenure. Nonetheless, if we do aspire to become organic intellectuals in the service of the poor majority of humanity, we need to become capable of theorizing the changes that have taken place in the system of capitalism, in this epoch of globalization, and of providing to popular majorities these theoretical insights as inputs for their real-world struggles to develop alternative social relationships and an alternative social logic—the logic of majorities—to that of the market and of transnational capital. It is nonsense to say that the social scientist should be “value free” because *all* social science is value-laden. It cannot be otherwise.

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This interview was conducted by Laurence Goodchild. Laurence is Deputy Features Editor at E-IR.