



Dialogue: Race in the Capitalist World-System, Review of Robinson's *Into the Tempest*

Into the Tempest: Essays on the New Global Capitalism. William I. Robinson. 2017. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books. 270 pages, ISBN 978-1-6084-6966-6. Paper (\$21.95)

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Into the Tempest: Essays on the New Global Capitalism provides a call to action and an opportunity for readers to examine the continuities and modifications in the thinking of William I. Robinson, a sociologist at the University of California Santa Barbara, on the topic of the new global capitalism. The chapters of this book are based on previously published essays that have appeared in various forums between 1996 and 2017. According to the introduction, its stated goal is to “offer a theoretical framework and analytical inputs into understanding the nature of the new global capitalism *as a critical requisite for us to engage effectively in the struggle against it*” (2, italics original). Heavily influenced by the writings of the Italian Marxist thinker and activist Antonio Gramsci, Robinson asserts that only by having more detailed knowledge of shifts and transformations within capitalism itself can its opponents (he among them) be better able to make theoretical and political contributions that can empower people to undertake transnational collective action.

Topics and concepts that have formed the core of his scholarly and ethico-political preoccupations recur across ten chapters: capitalism, hegemony, the nation-state, imperialism, the transnational capitalist class, transnationalism from below, critical globalization studies, migration, education and, of course, globalization itself. In addition to the elaboration of his



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concepts and theoretical propositions, Prof. Robinson takes the opportunity in several essays to respond to critics who have contested his concepts of the transnational capitalist class and state, neo-liberalism and the “new” in the new globalization. One of the key takeaways from this collection is his call for theories and concepts that move beyond the nation-state as the primary unit of analysis for analyzing capitalist modes of production, as well as the circulation of both commodities and labor. *Capital no tiene patria* (capital has no homeland), a catchphrase among certain segments of the Latin American left during the 1970’s and 1980’s, comes to mind in Robinson’s deterritorialization of late 20th and early 21st century capitalism.

Robinson asserts that “globalization changes the relationship between capitalism and territoriality, and with it the relationship between classes and the nation-state” (15). There are several examples across these chapters that illustrate how capitalism is no longer centered in individual nation-states, in which governments and capitalists compete with one another for a greater share of a market, and depend on labor pools that are strictly national in scope.

Chapter 1, “Globalization: Nine Theses On our Epoch”, outlines via nine theoretical assertions how “the globalization of capitalism and the transnationalization of social, political, and cultural processes it entails, is the world-historic context of developments as the twenty-first century progresses” (9). Later, he asserts, “a new global social structure of accumulation is becoming superimposed upon, and transforming, existing national social structures of accumulation” (12).

Chapter 2, “Critical Globalization Studies,” is a thoughtful account of the role of knowledge and its producers in institutions (state, academic or employment) that do not encourage critical thinking, technological literacy, or the benefits of education more generally. He writes that Critical Globalization studies is ideally a space that encompasses “a diversity of approaches and epistemologies,” with the qualification that they all emerge from critical left modes of thought. Robinson’s cohort of knowledge producers in a revitalized Critical Globalization Studies closely resembles Gramsci’s organic intellectual for the 21st century, but with the recognition that the transnational capitalist class (TCC) has its own cadre of organic intellectuals that must be acknowledged and confronted. The capitalist version of organic intellectuals is more coherent, better funded, and more unified in their approach to accumulation, labor exploitation, and their overall dominance within financial and political institutions in both national and transnational spheres. The key political challenge for a properly transnational left in this chapter and throughout the collection is to forge a truly transnational movement from below. Such a movement would combine academic knowledge with informed activism and alliances involving environmental and racial justice activists, as well as women’s, labor and migration right’s activists. Their collective task would be to demystify institutions of socialization that essentially train the elite for positions of power within the global capitalist system and, conversely, the working classes for low-skilled, poorly remunerated labor.

Chapter 3 addresses “The New Global Economy and the Rise of a Transnational Capitalist Class.” Here he revisits criticisms of his earlier explication of global capitalism as a “qualitatively new stage in the evolution of the system based on the rise of a transnational capitalist class.” At

stake here is whether the new global capitalism is actually new, and whether the period in question (the 21st century) is in fact the period in which such seemingly unprecedented activities, actors, and institutions emerge to transform global capitalism into transnational capitalism. For Robinson, the transnational capitalist class is a new sociological formation with a distinctive set of political and economic practices. The TCC operates as a transnational class precisely because the distinctions between Global North and South, developing and developed, and the First, Second and Third Worlds no longer apply as correlates for understanding the dynamics between capitalist elites across national and regional boundaries. Robinson asserts that economic and political transformations by the TCC are already visible in the contemporary global political economy.

Chapter 4 further elaborates on his definition of the transnational state. For Robinson, the transnational state's function is to facilitate the development and hegemony of the transnational capitalist class, not to facilitate the agenda of a particular nation-state and certainly not the poorly remunerated, underemployed and unemployed working classes within a national society. These laboring classes have also been transnationalized, that is, encouraged or coerced (through lack of options) into the migrant's quest for employment across the world. This leads to a phenomenon that Prof. Robinson argues can be identified in many parts of the world: "the rise of the newly superfluous masses" caused by "a reduced demand for labor as new technologies raise productivity and as these technologies replace human labor" (85). The transnational state emerged in the context of the dismantling of Keynesian social and economic policy and the outright flouting of the Bretton Woods agreement. Scuttled was the idea of a social contract between state and citizen in countries such as Britain, the United States, and subsequently many nation-states in both the Global North and South. In sum, a capitalism without much of a safety net for its working class, the elderly, and marginalized is what Robinson characterizes as capital's liberation from the nation-state. This became fertile ground for the birth of neoliberalism, the privatization of previously public goods and services (such as health care), and, according to Robinson, the transformation in many nation-states of a capitalist economy into a capitalist society.

In Chapter 5, "Beyond the Theory of Imperialism," Robinson further elaborates on the implications of the TCC and the newly transnational state for theorizing about imperialism and capitalism. He reminds us here of Marx's emphasis that capitalism began not as a national phenomenon but as a world phenomenon (208). The TCC, starting in the Global North, created political and economic institutions that ultimately transcended national economies and industries, in effect operating under their own set of rules and thereby transforming a world phenomenon into a global one. In this chapter, Robinson takes aim at "new imperialism" approaches that continue to emphasize national capitals and international competition between them rather than recognize the interlocking, interdependent character of intra-capitalist development that links disparate nation-states and capital formations in the production of single commodities. Instead, Prof. Robinson emphasizes the analytic distinction between territoriality and the state, one a material/political phenomenon and the other an apparatus with what Timothy Mitchell (1991) has referred to as a structural effect. In this chapter, he takes issue with several noted scholars in this field, focusing mostly on David Harvey, for reifying both state and territory as if they were

autonomous agents rather than material forms and/or instruments utilized by actual political actors, social forces, and capitalists themselves to achieve particular objectives. Readers familiar with Harvey's scholarship, along with Ellen Meiskins Wood, Walden Bello and others should compare and contrast Robinson's account with their own interpretation of these authors and come to their own conclusions.

The most novel chapter in this collection in my view is Chapter 6, "Global Capitalism, Migrant Labor and Social Justice," where Robinson's merging of theoretical insights with empirics provides a useful template for understanding the current condition of migrant labor in the world system. He emphasizes the ways in which immigrant labor, more specifically non-citizen labor, operates in various parts of the world without either the citizenship rights of a nation-state or a human rights regime to shield them from the privation, low wages, or repression implemented by transnational labor contractors working for transnational corporations and nation-states. The link to the criminalization and feminization of poverty is crucial here, whether we are examining the so-called migration crisis in Europe or the militias working in tandem with the Immigrations and Customs Enforcement at the southern border of the United States.

Undocumented immigrant labor has become at once fundamental to the accumulation of profit and rock bottom production costs while at the same time feeding into the prison-industrial complex that, in the United States, serves as a container for black and brown residents and migrants deemed redundant in the contemporary U.S. economy. The deployment and transfer of what was once ostensibly national labor pools into larger assemblages of labor from multiple national sources can be observed in a variety of sites across the world: The United Arab Emirates, Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Italy, among other places. Corporations, together with restrictive citizenship and residency regimes, violate workers' rights in the above-mentioned places. These workers, nevertheless, bolster the economies of their national societies by sending remittances back to their families and loved ones, thereby compensating, in economic and social terms, for the absence of social welfare policies, resources, and infrastructure in their home countries. Robinson's remedy is to replace national citizenship law with a universal human rights regime.

Chapter 7 echoes some of the arguments explicated in Chapter 2, but applied to education more broadly in capitalist societies; "Global capital needs a mass of humanity that has basic numeric and literacy skills and not much more, alongside high-tech educational training for high-skilled knowledge workers." As in Chapter 2, Robinson calls for activists, scholars, and intellectuals who identify this new educational reality operating in the service of a transnational capitalist class to operate in a counterhegemonic manner and educate the popular classes about the limits and pitfalls of a serviceable education.

Chapter 8, "Davos Man Comes to the Third World," uses the annual Davos meetings in Switzerland to underscore how integrated and non-oppositional the political economies of the BRICS bloc of nations are in relation to the dominant transnational financial institutions (e.g. the World Bank, the IMF). He provides examples from China, Brazil, Mexico, and NAFTA to illustrate his often-made point that elites of the Global South are generally supportive of—not

opposed to—to the policies of austerity, neoliberalism, and market-centric logics proffered by countries of the Global North as the means to alleviate poverty and inequality.

Chapter 9 reiterates the core argument put forth in Chapter 6, namely the rise of a global police state, the combination of criminalization and militarization by states of laboring classes, which again include migrant workers, the poor, and non-white women who often exist without the rights and benefits of a citizen-elite. Robinson calls the emergence of a global police state and 21st century fascist movements the TCC's response to capitalism's recurrent and constitutive economic crises; the creation of "outsiders", especially non-white migrants, descendants of the formerly enslaved, and indigenous populations.

The final chapter, "Reflections on a Brave New World," revisit the most significant claims in his book and, by extension, the developments in globalization studies over the course of his career, reminding critics that he was never proclaiming the death of the nation-state or suggested that capitalism was always global.

Given the range and scope of this collection, there are many avenues to consider its strengths and weaknesses. I will focus on three topics: political variation, normative assumptions, and the absence of the transatlantic slave trade in his periodization of the Industrial Revolution.

First, largely absent is an account of political variation among members of the transnational capitalist class. National chauvinism, invariably racialized and ethnicized, throws a wrinkle into Robinson's macro-level analysis, suggesting, at a minimum, that while a TCC might be relatively uniform in its economic objectives and interests, class-interest alone cannot account for the emergence of neo-fascism, or what Stuart Hall (1988) referred to in his study of Thatcherism as authoritarian populism.

Regarding contemporary fascist and neo-fascist movements, Robert Paxton's *Anatomy of Fascism* demonstrates the ways in which fascist movements and more specifically fascist regimes have come into being with more than just a pact between the state and a national (or in Robinson's argument, transnational) capitalist class. Coalitions involving conservatives (political and religious) liberals (yes, liberals), large industrialists, and a demoralized working class (especially veterans returning from wars in which their side lost) constituted the fascist/Falangist/Estado Novo stewards of Spain, Italy and Portugal, with varying degrees of success and consolidation.

From my reading, Robinson's account presupposes that the economic objectives of capitalism almost always determine politics, rather than inform the range of political opportunities and foreclosures that can and often occur as the result of such conflicts. It is difficult to identify, much less trace, temporal variation in his account of the TCC; its short-term versus long-term interests, divergences among the TCC often operate at national and regional levels and explain why certain political parties, and their supporting ideologies, are the most persuasive in an epoch (Gramsci's historical bloc). For example, the virulent and xenophobic reaction to African, Chinese, and Middle Eastern immigration, especially from Muslim countries, reflects some internal dissension within the European Union (EU) about how to address the so-called "migrant problem." In reality, this "problem" is more often than not racist reactions to the presence of non-white immigrants who purportedly are taking away jobs from hard-working Europeans, along with the perceived indelible

imprint that Islam, Africans and Middle Easterners would leave upon the fiction known as European civilization.

Italy, Germany, but also Poland and Hungary, are examples of altered national immigration law that in a sense re-territorializes and nationalizes what should ultimately be considered part of Schengen and human rights laws concerning the movement of migrant populations across Europe. These tensions, which represent threats to the internal coherence of the EU through secession and diminution, are a response to Europe's internal and external imperial history. Ironically, the current threats of secession and diminution by EU member states serve as a reminder that the EU was, first and foremost, a bureaucratic-administrative organization designed to facilitate the movement of capital, technologies, and labor, and not the summation of a movement led by popular support to replace national identification with regional identification and the surrender of full sovereignty.

Another example is his treatment of Robert Dahl's (1973) theorization of polyarchy, elaborated more fully in an earlier book. Robinson characterizes polyarchy as a political system in which "a small group actually rules, on behalf of capitalism, and participation in decision making by the majority is confined to choosing among competing elites in tightly controlled electoral processes." For Dahl, however, polyarchy also created political conditions under which distinct modes of administration and management were deployed to manage distinct populations within national societies (for example the indigenous, Japanese, and African Americans in the U.S.). Some populations, like African Americans, were treated to more domination and coercion than consensual persuasion, making their experiences closer to authoritarian or totalitarian rule than participation in a nominally democratic polity. Would it not be helpful to have a more comprehensive view of how politics and economics interact in polities structured in part by capitalist prerogatives, rather than attribute it all to capitalism itself? Why do certain polities influenced or driven by capitalism take certain political roads and not others?

Second are the normative assertions. Despite his ambition to distance his theoretical insights from his predecessors, his normative assertions are decidedly Third International, in its call for the unity of theory and practice, i.e. the philosophy of practice, as if such unity among laboring classes and their allies on its own would produce the desired overthrow of the TCC and capitalism itself. Comments are dispersed throughout the book disparaging what came to be known as post-modernism. While at times the author urges readers to utilize Foucault as a complement to Marx, he neglects where Foucault intersects with several thinkers associated with post-modernism: Derrida, Nancy, Jameson among them. None of these thinkers were optimistic about the prospect of a transnational movement in the last quarter of the 20th century uniting the entirety of what Fanon (2007) referred to as the "Wretched of the Earth." The global revolution predicted by Marx and Engels and subsequent positivist Marxists has, at minimum, been postponed until further notice.

In the 21st century, the call for a philosophy of praxis to unify a densely heterogeneous assortment of laboring classes (many of whom, as Robinson himself points out, are currently engaged in slave labor, not wage labor) is, at best, inadequate for the enormity of the task. I

examine Euro and Black Marxist trajectories of history in relation to actual efforts at liberatory politics in my book *Party/Politics: Horizons in Black Political Thought* (2016). Robinson, however, does acknowledge the failures of the left to become transnational in the ways that approximate the transnational bourgeoisie.

In the section “Transnational Mobilization from Below to Counter Transnational Mobilization from Above,” Robinson asserts “the universal penetration of capitalism through globalization draws all peoples not only into webs of market relations but also into webs of resistance” (97). He then names resistance movements such as the Zapatistas in Mexico, South Africa’s Shack Dwellers Movement, Brazil’s MST, and The National Alliance of Peoples Movement in India, among others, which exemplify the webs of significance. Yet none of these webs of resistance, as Robinson refers to them, these valiant and disparate movements against various forms of oppression, amount to a unified, transnational movement from below. Robinson’s observation here also leads us to the political realities regarding the relative powerlessness of the left in the contemporary moment. How can globalization from below (28) be enough to overcome the institutions of socialization (schools, sites of religious worship, popular culture and the overwhelming array of media outlets) which discourage and repress the very forms of critical thinking and political engagement called for by Prof. Robinson? As in the past, we must contend with the absence of a single common language (literally and politically) and unifying organizing principle to cohere laboring classes differentiated by structured norms, distinct relations of production and often divergent opportunities for resistance.

Here is where methodological insights from Gramsci’s (1992) “Methodological Criteria for the Study of the Subaltern” would have helped—specifically, Gramsci’s recognition that the histories of subaltern populations are fragmented and episodic. I am not suggesting here that Robinson or any other thinker concerned with global social justice and increasing inequality should abandon the hope of actually improving or transforming the condition of marginalized populations around the world. But if previous calls to action have not brought about desired outcomes, shouldn’t there be a transformation in political thought to accompany the transformation in our thinking about imperialism and globalization?

Third is the role of the transatlantic slave trade, not mentioned in Robinson’s periodization, specifically in the age of the Industrial Revolutions in France, Britain, and the U.S. Rather than treat slavery as linked to the period of primitive accumulation and rendered obsolete by the Industrial Revolution, there is evidence demonstrating how profits from commodities produced by slave labor provided the capital for investment in new forms of technology (the cotton gin, for example), financial institutions, and emergent industries in Europe and the Americas. In part eight of *Capital*, Marx refers to slave hunting and child abduction as two among several sources of coerced labor, part of the stage of primitive accumulation of the industrial capitalist. Eric Williams (2014), C.L.R. James (2001), and Joseph Inikori (2002), however, demonstrate how fundamental the transatlantic trade was to capitalist development. The British economy in the 17th and 18th century was not robust enough to sustain demand for locally produced goods. Economic stagnation in the domestic economy led the British government and entrepreneurs to seek larger markets

outside of Britain and ultimately outside of Europe, consistent with the expansionist logic of capitalism more broadly. Two of those burgeoning markets were on the West Coast of Africa and in India. Additionally, slave labor in the Americas provided free labor central to the production of sugar, one of the most profitable commodities in global markets in the 18th and 19th centuries. Finally, the transatlantic slave trade also helped circulate the semiotics of anti-black racism (consider slave auctions and their related advertisement as two examples), just as English caricatures of the Irish helped disseminate anti-Irish sentiment from the 12th to the 19th century.

Why is this relevant here? First, it suggests at a minimum that what Robinson considers the new in the new global capitalism may have prototypical dimensions in earlier eras of capitalism. Wasn't this trade and the industries it helped create, both primary (e.g. cotton and textile production) and ancillary (e.g. insurance) both global and transnational well before the cusp of the 20th and 21st century? What would strengthen Robinson's argument on this point is linking the transatlantic trade to the emergence of Western capitalism, as well as to the dissemination of a semiotics of anti-black racism, thereby linking the emergence of racism within capitalist processes of production to the contemporary criminalization of black peoples.

Into the Tempest is aptly titled, a nod to both the times we are living in as well as the lively debate that Prof. Robinson's work has generated over the course of his career. His critics will not be dissuaded by this most recent, in some ways retrospective, work. Supporters of his approach to the phenomenon of globalization will be very familiar with the analysis offered therein. Regardless of one's perspective on this collection and its theoretical and normative claims, Prof Robinson has undoubtedly given his readers much to ponder, even argue with, a sign of a provocative and substantive thinker.

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