



Book Review

The Global Police State. William I. Robinson. 2020. UK: Pluto Press. 191 pages, ISBN 978-0745341644 Paperback (\$22.95)

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As Brazilian president Bolsonaro did everything in his power to sabotage efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19, protestors took to the streets holding signs that read “Our brother, George Floyd,” seeking to connect the police murder of George Floyd to the racist violence of Brazilian police who kill in the favelas with impunity. In 2019, 1,800 people were killed by police in Rio de Janeiro alone, almost twice the rate of police killings in all of the United States (Gutierrez 2020). The police murder of George Floyd over an alleged \$20 counterfeit bill amid a raging global pandemic resonated with millions of oppressed people all over the world, from the *favelas* of Brazil to the streets of Nigeria. In the United States, the George Floyd rebellion unleashed one of the most militant uprisings since the 1960s, forsaking previous demands of police reform and taking concrete steps towards abolishing the police—tearing down carceral infrastructures that prop up the brutal racial social order. William Robinson’s book “The Global Police State” couldn’t have come at a better time. Policing and the COVID-19 pandemic have forced us to face head on the question of crisis. Robinson has provided us with an important text that makes a powerful case for understanding how the contradictions and crises of the capitalist world-economy are pushing



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ruling class elites to embrace greater repressive measures and policies to ensure accumulation all the while meeting the challenges of managing an increasingly precarious and rebellious global working class. He offers the analytic of “the global police state” and “twenty-first century fascism” to explain the route that the ruling class has embraced to address a dual crisis: the structural crisis of accumulation and the political crisis of capitalist legitimacy/hegemony.

Every year, a new academic book comes out to explain the carceral state and policing, often wrapped up in unnecessary jargon that can push away even the most dedicated intellectual among us. The strength of Robinson’s book is that it’s written in an easily accessible language for a wider public to understand without sacrificing the complexity of the phenomena he is concerned with the contradictory dynamics of capitalism in the twenty-first century that lead the system to embrace punitive solutions. For a new generation politicized by this summer’s rebellion and increasingly interested in anti-capitalist perspectives, his book offers an indispensable overview of the capitalist crisis and horizon that shapes our current terrain of struggles. Robinson does not waste any time getting down to the business of explaining the ruthless dictatorship of transnational capital. The first chapter provides an important overview of the capitalist crisis of accumulation from a Marxist perspective and introduces the key players in capital-labor struggle. Robinson is of course best known for his scholarship on globalization—which he argues is a unique era in global capitalism and which has allowed the capitalist class to transcend the crisis of accumulation through embracing transnational capital (hence Transnational capitalist class or TCC) shaking off the fetters of nation-state regulation and squashing mass struggles demanding higher wages and wider redistribution of goods and resources. Out of this epoch, the transnationalist capitalist class has become “the manifest agent of global capitalism” (11). Robinson focuses his attention on three interrelated dimensions of the capitalist world economic crisis: militarized accumulation or what he terms “accumulation by repression,” a system of mass control and repression and lastly an increasing move towards 21st century fascism. As capitalism is hitting real limits in terms of its ability to accumulate and profit, repression is becoming more and more the norm. Thus, the core of Robinson’s argument is that since the 1970s, the capitalist crisis has pushed the capital world economy to become more dependent on deploying systems of warfare, social control, and repression. From a capitalist ruling class perspective, these forms of repression are not in vain—they do not just repress the rebellious working class and stultify them into submission, but they are also strategic ways to open up new avenues for accumulation and profit. Robinson argues that for “the global police state” the drive for accumulation is just as important as any other political and strategic considerations. As he goes on to argue, “extreme inequality requires extreme violence and repression, that lend themselves to a global police state and projects of twenty-first century fascism” (41).

In chapter two, he explores more deeply how capitalist crises produce “savage inequalities.” In our current moment where social democratic discussions of wealth redistribution pass for serious revolutionary insight into the systemic problems our humanity faces, Robinson’s return to Marx’s general theory of accumulation is a welcomed contribution. Following Marx, Robinson centers inequality in the capital-labor arrangements at the center of capitalist production, which

have been undergoing several transformations since the 1970s. Robinson's contribution in this chapter is to counter sociological explanations of class such as those found in Guy Standing's *The Precariat* and to argue that in fact the precariat is not a separate class; "it is the face of the working class" (43). The growth of surplus populations and generalized experience of precarity are not aberrations but "the result of 'normal' development of global capitalism" (58). In this chapter, Robinson is also attentive how transformations in capitalism have created further divisions in the global working class, namely the savage exploitation of wage workers and the creation of the large swaths of surplus humanity which exists outside of the sphere of production. These divisions he argues also make class unity and hence class consciousness difficult to achieve. Robinson argues that deepening income inequality and rising surplus populations have made overaccumulation worse. Thus the problem facing the ruling class is two fold: "how to control this expanded mass of surplus humanity" (62) and how to continue accumulation?

At this point many of us reading his book may be wondering, isn't it expensive and counterintuitive for the TCC, faced as it is with a looming crisis of legitimacy, to solely rely on brute force and repression when other forms of co-optation can be just as effective? Robinson addresses this question in chapter three and argues that there is a dual logic to the embrace of a "global police state:" social control but also a key economic role for the ruling class—it opens up new opportunities for capital accumulation (74). In recent years, more scholarship from a Marxist perspective has tried to grapple with this question, namely scholars associated with Anti-Security collective (Neocleous and Rigakos 2011) and other American based scholars working on race, class, financialization of debt, and the carceral state. Robinson's intervention is important because it highlights the tensions that exist within the transnational ruling class but also between the TCC and the capitalist nation-state. He modifies Weber's dictum and states "The state attempts to sustain accumulation by contracting out the exercises of this violence to transnational capital" (84). He provides numerous examples of how this is achieved—namely through the expansion of private security forces made possible by advances in digitization and other contemporary revolutions in technology. Criminalization therefore doesn't just play a purely repressive role; it also seeks to create new markets for profit and realization of surplus value. Elsewhere, Robinson (2018) has argued that this has been resolved largely through financial speculation, raiding and sacking public budgets (reconfiguration of public finance) and lastly militarized accumulation.

In the last chapter, Robinson explores the third interrelated development of "the global police state"—the emergence of "twenty-first century fascism." In this chapter, Robinson is more attentive to the crisis of hegemony facing the TCC. He argues that the "challenge to contain and manage surplus populations has led capitalist states to abandon efforts to secure legitimacy" (117). Faced with this contradiction, "the wages of fascism" provide a way out of the capitalist crisis. Robinson sees a lot of similarities between today's fascism and that of the twentieth century, especially in "a violently toxic mix of reactionary nationalism and racism" (118). These similarities are up for debate, especially Robinson's claim that parts of the TCC are more open than ever before to embrace not only global police state but also "twenty-first century fascism" to secure the capitalist order (133). In his view, fascism is the logical conclusion of a more repressive

capitalism. The debate about whether fascism is a dormant force within capitalism or an independent threat outside of it is an age-old debate within the left that deserves our renewed attention in this particular moment of crisis and recomposition (Hammerquist et al 2017). Lastly, while Robinson focuses his entire book mostly on the way TCC relies on repression as a way to secure legitimacy/hegemony, one wonders if this is the only path viable available? It seems that some parts of the TCC, which Robinson alludes to in the last chapter, are more than ever interested in softening their approach to security by embracing reforms to global capitalism. These are important questions that Robinson's book has opened up and which scholars and revolutionaries should take up.

We are living through exciting and uncertain times—but as Robinson reminds us, we shouldn't be squandered this time by putting new wine in old bottles as proponents of the “new” new deal seek to do. Abolishing capitalism is the only solution, he argues, which will be determined through the course of class struggle. Robinson's book is timely and opens up some important debates about the crisis within the TCC over how to best secure the bourgeois social order, the threat of fascist alternatives in the twenty-first century and the stumbling blocks that working class movements face globally to institute utopian liberatory visions.

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