

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**William I. Robinson**, *Latin America and Global Capitalism: A Critical Globalization Perspective*. Johns Hopkins Studies in Globalization. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008, 440 pp. \$US 55.00 hardcover (978-0-8018-9039-0)

**W**illiam Robinson's goal in *Latin America and Global Capitalism* is to develop a theory of global capitalism, with Latin America as his empirical referent. Because "transnational or global space is coming to supplant national spaces" (p. 7), he treats this system as if it were a world-nation-state: a global, transnational production system, which has generated both a transnational capitalist class and a transnational state. Resistance and counterhegemonic struggles by "popular classes" must now be waged in the same global terrain, he argues. If a theory of global capitalism is the goal, Robinson's chief achievement is more modest: to synthesize a myriad of polarizing social and economic effects of the neoliberal development model behind the promotion of globalization since the early 1980s.

In view of his globalist perspective, Robinson asserts that "[a] sociology of national development is no longer tenable" (p. 43), even if his own case study about Venezuela is about promoting "endogenous development," supplemented with international solidarity networks. He establishes what I will call a globalist causal priority: local and regional economies and social structures must be studied from their point of insertion into global accumulation. This causal priority gets him into a confining analytical straight jacket: globalism does not allow him to properly assess resistance and contestation by subordinate groups and classes, which take place primarily at the local or national level. Suggesting that such struggles must take place in the global terrain posited by ruling classes sets up the virtually impossible goal of constructing a transnational civil society.

Chapters 2–5 provide a fine, if at times repetitive, synthesis of literature on some of the ravages caused by neoliberalism in Latin America. They offer an overview of the rise of nontraditional agricultural exports and agroindustry (including the "supermarketization" of food distribution at the expense of local markets); the huge increase of transgenic crops like soybeans (with increased use of pesticides); the feminization

of labour; subcontracting, transnational services, tourism, and remittances, all of which have increased substantially.

One of the sharp insights in Chapter 3 is the observation that in countries like Mexico there is a “broken Fordism.” While the original Fordist “virtuous circle” consisted of articulating national mass production with mass consumption, by increasing workers’ wages, benefits, and a welfare state, in Mexico wages do not count for the realization of surplus-value contained in the commodities they produce: they are all exported to the United States or other advanced capitalist countries. Robinson generalizes this as a “historically unprecedented separation of the point of production from the point of social reproduction. The former can take place in one part of the world and generate the value — then remitted — for social reproduction of labor in another part of the world” (p. 154).

In Chapter 4, Robinson discusses the reorientation of state policies from import-substitution industrialization to global insertion of local economies, and he critiques the notion of “bottom-up globalization.” The latter would involve, for instance, local communities of artisans in Otavalo, Ecuador, or Oaxaca, Mexico, who tap globalization to advance their life chances. Despite Otavaleños becoming some of the main brokers of native handicrafts from Latin America, Robinson opines that such entrepreneurial success “should not be romanticized as a viable alternative to the depredations of global capitalism” (p. 220). Even so, one could still acknowledge that these artisan-merchants have indeed improved their life chances.

Chapter 5 adds two crucial themes concerning the negative impacts of neoliberalism. The first, on financialization (derivatives, securitization, etc.), is a good discussion of how finance capital has become globalized, unregulated, and largely detached from production. Robinson makes the general and valid empirical point that Latin Americans have increasingly contributed to global capital accumulation, but “have become more impoverished and exploited” (p. 256). He seems unsure about the extent to which finance capital has become decoupled in valuation from actual production, alluding on one page to “the *appearance* of decoupling of financial from productive activity” and asserting on the next that: “finance has in effect become decoupled from production” (pp. 257, 258, my emphasis).

The second main theme, on polyarchy, is the best part of the book. “Polyarchy” was coined by Robert Dahl in 1956 to characterize a democratic electoral system like that in the United States. Robinson redefines the term to signify “a system in which a small group actually rules, on behalf of capital, and participation in decision making by the majority is confined to choosing among competing elites in tightly controlled elec-

toral processes. Democracy, of course, is antithetical to global capitalism, if we understand it to mean power of the people” (p. 273). The concept and substantive discussion are both compelling, as Robinson successfully demystifies the so-called “democratic transition” in Latin America that started in the 1980s. Such “transition” is predicated on a narrow, minimalist definition of “democracy” whose essence is choosing among narrow elite options. Yet, the choice of word — polyarchy — to designate this concept is unfortunate: its Greek roots mean “rule by many” (not to mention that several of Dahl’s conditions for polyarchy do not hold in Latin America). There are also the left-of-centre parties that have won elections in several countries since the early 2000s, which Robinson dismisses as the “pink tide,” incapable of transcending global capitalism. The most troubling sections are the final ones, which document the growth in US domineering and militaristic impetus during the Bush administration. Obama’s ultimate support of the perpetrators of the 2009 Honduras *coup d’état* and the illegitimate elections they organized could be a significant indication of how US imperialism will ultimately respond to the crisis of global capitalism.

The final chapter is insightful about the political economy of possible futures. It offers sharp questions and insights on state-society relations and political parties (pp. 342–344), which can be used to advance what I have called a “bottom-up linkages approach.” Provided that strong mechanisms for democratic accountability are guaranteed throughout, social movements and civil society cannot install themselves in an autonomist stance (as Mexico’s Zapatistas since 1994 or in Argentina at the turn of the 21st century). Instead, “popular classes,” argues Robinson, must build political instruments to win over political society. But to prevent political parties and the state from becoming “instruments of hierarchy, control, and oppression,” state power must be won over by “popular forces and classes.” They must then use such power to transform relations of exploitation and domination “without subordinating their own autonomy and collective agency to the state” (p. 344). A most critical insight, which is unfortunately not followed up given Robinson’s globalism, is contained in this sentence: “A confrontation with the global capitalist system beyond the nation-state, moreover, requires national state power” (p. 344). I could not agree more with this formulation: rather than focusing on building a transnational civil society — the globalist implication — the main priority for subordinate groups and classes is to firmly root their struggles locally, while promoting internationalist solidarity: an internationalist nationalism.

Gauged at such an abstract and “global” level, Robinson’s prospective exercise misses the opportunity for a more nuanced and realistic an-

alysis. Robinson makes a maximalist assumption about any future change: whether “progressive,” or “terrifying,” any change would have to involve the entire “global society.” Such maximalism oscillates between structuralist pessimism, on one end; and voluntaristic optimism, on the other, with phrases such as: “The future is not predetermined; we are all its collective agents” (p. 359). While the first clause is true enough, the second is patently false: only organized groups, classes, and/or states are actually “agents” who can affect the future, often in unintended ways.

*Latin America and Global Capitalism* would have been an easier book to read if it had undergone careful copyediting. I identified an average of at least one typographic mistake on every-other page. I cannot recommend this book for undergraduate courses, as it takes for granted a very good familiarity with the work of Marx. Given its many fine insights, however, this book could be used fruitfully in graduate courses on globalization and contemporary capitalism.

*Simon Fraser University*

Gerardo Otero

**Gerardo Otero** is Professor of sociology and Latin American Studies at Simon Fraser University, and Adjunct Professor in the Development Studies Doctorate at the Autonomous University of Zacatecas (Mexico). He is the author or editor of four books — two of them translated into Spanish and published in Mexico by M.A. Porrúa — and about seventy scholarly articles and book chapters. His latest edited book is *Food for the Few: Neoliberal Globalism and Biotechnology in Latin America* (University of Texas Press, 2008). His latest article, co-authored with Gabriela Pechlaner, is “The Neoliberal Food Regime: Neoregulation and the New Division of Labor in North America,” in *Rural Sociology* 75, 2 (2010): 179–208.

Web page: <http://www.sfu.ca/~otero/>. [otero@sfu.ca](mailto:otero@sfu.ca).