

A New Socialist Movement Must Oppose Both Capitalism and Imperialism

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A review of “Into the Tempest: Essays on the New Global Capitalism,” by William I. Robinson.

Spurred on by the global justice movement of the late 1990s, and the U.S. invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, Marxists like David Harvey and Ellen Meiksins Wood have produced a flowering of theorization about capitalism and imperialism. Author [William I. Robinson](#) has been a key contributor to this new body of work, in particular with his books *A Theory of Global Capitalism* and *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*.

His latest collection of essays, [Into the Tempest: Essays on the New Global Capitalism](#), is a provocative and accessible summary of his argument that globalization — which he calls the “master process of our age” — has ushered in a new epoch of capitalism. He contends that this epoch was born out of the global recession the system underwent in the 1970s.

Up until then, capitalism was a world economy divided up into hierarchically organized national economies, dominated by great imperial powers like the U.S. To overcome the recession, corporations broke out of that national framework in search of cheap labor, resources and markets. Over the subsequent decades, transnational corporations established a new global system of production, finance and services.

In the process, Robinson argues, a new fraction of capital emerged: a transnational capitalist class that is not tied to any particular nation-state. Their corporations run global assembly lines, their boards are made up of executives from many different countries, and they advocate common ideologies and policies of neoliberal globalization.

This fraction of capital, according to Robinson, has created an emergent transnational capitalist state comprised of two components: one, international institutions like the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and the United Nations; and two, the majority of the world’s nation-states, over which the transnational capitalist class has won hegemony.

He contends that the development of this new class and its new state has invalidated the classical Marxist theory of imperialism developed by Marxist theorists and Russian revolutionaries including Rudolf Hilferding, Rosa Luxemburg, Vladimir Lenin and Nikolai Bukharin, among others. They predicted that the great powers were driven by competing interests toward rivalry and war or the division and re-division of the world.

While Robinson notes that the classical Marxists’ ideas were accurate accounts of world capitalism in their time, he argues that they can no longer explain contemporary global capitalism. Today, the transnational capitalist class has brought an end to the tendency toward inter-imperial rivalry between great powers.

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Moreover, the capitalist classes of the Global South have also bought into globalization and benefited from it. Therefore, he makes the case that Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa offer neither an alternative path of development in the interests of the Global South, nor even a challenge to neoliberalism. They are now, in fact, accomplices in generalizing the logic of free trade globalization.

A New Axis of Conflict

Thus, the central axis of conflict within the world system is neither between dominant nation-states, nor between them and oppressed nations in the developing world, but between the transnational capitalist class and the transnational working class. Put another way, this is a conflict between the world's 20 percent — the 1 percent and its accomplices in the professional middle class — and the 80 percent laboring majority.

The conditions for this global working class are getting dramatically worse. In the Global North, several decades of neoliberalism have driven wages down, busted unions and dismantled welfare state programs, introducing unprecedented precarity.

In the Global South, capitalism has plundered whole regions, dispossessing peasants of their land and driving them to become migrants in search of jobs in the megacities of their home countries, or to become criminalized, laboring migrants deprived of the most basic human rights in advanced capitalist countries. Whole chunks of the population, which Robinson calls “supernumeraries,” can't even find employment, but sit on the margins of society in desperate poverty.

Faced with this discontented mass of workers, the transnational capitalist class uses the classic strategy of all rulers — divide and conquer — to pit the masses against one another. They use their immigration laws to set citizens against noncitizens in what Robinson calls a “new rigid caste system.”

They have also intensified and institutionalized racism, Islamophobia and other forms of bigotry to further split up workers. And, they have ramped up sexism through neoliberalism's privatized system of social reproduction, which places ever more burdens on women in the home, and restrictions and rollbacks on rights to everything from abortion to affirmative action.

But all of this has failed to stabilize the system. As Robinson demonstrates, global capitalism has entered an epochal crisis triggered by the Great Recession. Our rulers got out of that downturn by imposing brutal austerity measures on workers throughout the world, making their lives even more precarious.

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They launched these attacks in the hopes of triggering a new boom, but they have failed. The system remains mired in what professor and author David McNally calls a [global slump](#), characterized by low rates of growth, state and corporate debt, and shrinking consumer demand. Even worse, there are now [signs](#) of yet another crisis accumulating throughout the world.

On top of all this, the system has disrupted the global climate, threatening all of human society and our ecosphere. It is creating superstorms, exacerbating economic and social inequality, and generating new waves of climate refugees fleeing “natural” disasters and rising sea levels.

All of these developments have thrown the system, its states and the parties that rule them into a profound crisis of legitimacy. In turn, the masses of the world have radicalized, staging many struggles, from the Arab Spring to the Occupy movement in the U.S., and in the process, have turned to both the left and the right in search of alternatives to the wretched status quo.

So far, the global right has gained the most ground, offering authoritarian scapegoating of oppressed groups, especially migrants, as false and brutal solutions to real grievances. Most ominously, it has opened the door to what Robinson calls 21st century fascism.

Robinson contrasts the right's success with the left, which has so far failed to provide an alternative way forward. Social democracy, as he notes, long ago rejected the need for revolutionary change by backing their own imperialist states and embracing neoliberalism. (Just think of New Labour in the U.K. under Tony Blair; he advanced capital's program of neoliberal restructuring of the British economy and he supported, and indeed trumpeted, George W. Bush's invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.)

Robinson also points out that alternatives to social democracy also remain limited. Non-governmental organizations remain tied to their capitalist donors, which limits the reforms they can advocate to only the most superficial changes to the system. And the revolutionary left is far too small and scarred — either by its past association with authoritarian regimes or its sectarian habits.

Defending the Marxist Theory of Imperialism

Robinson's account of the world system today and the tasks of the new socialist movement are insightful and invaluable, but his dismissal of the classical Marxist theory of imperialism is overstated. This theory offers key insights that help explain the existence and indeed intensification of geopolitical conflicts in our world today, exemplified most clearly between the U.S. and China.

Rivalry persists for three key reasons. First, as Russian Bolshevik Bukharin argued in *Imperialism and World Economy*, capitalism produces two tendencies: one toward internationalization and another toward national concentration, and in some cases, fusion with a home state in the form of state capitalism. Which of these two dominate, and their interrelationship or conflict, have varied over different epochs.

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For example, during the age of classical imperialism from the end of the 19th century through World War II, the dominant tendency was toward national concentration. Imperial powers competed with one another for the division and re-division of the world system in the interests of their corporations.

Since the 1970s, the dominant tendency has been internationalization, but not to the exclusion of national concentration. Indeed, most multinational corporations, however much they incorporate executives from various nations on their boards of directors, remain based in a home nation-state with dense networks of association with other nationally based corporations, and continue to use their home government to prosecute their interests in the world system.

Just think of the close relationship between U.S.-based multinational high-tech firms like Apple and Google, which however internationally oriented, lean on Washington to secure their interests in international negotiations over trade, investment and intellectual property rights — especially when faced with competition from China's state-owned and state-backed corporations.

Second, even in the epoch of globalization, capitalism does not grow in even fashion and has not

produced a homogeneous transnational capitalist class with shared interests. Instead, the system is subject to what Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky called the law of uneven and combined development.

Some sections of the world system develop earlier than others, and those can later stagnate as new developers leap ahead, combining the most advanced features of the system with archaic ones inherited from pre-capitalist modes of production. As a result, capitalism does not generate “a single, and increasingly undifferentiated, field,” as Robinson argues, but real (and in some cases) profound differences between capitalist nation-states’ economies and ruling classes.

Third, because each section of the international capitalist class — even those with multinational orientations — remains tied to particular nation-states, they must win hegemony over the middle and oppressed classes in their societies. This deepens the tendency for separate and particular configurations of capitalist classes, their states and national politics.

As a result, the system, even in the epoch of globalization, continues to produce geopolitical conflict and inter-imperial rivalry. Still, it would be absurd to argue that all of this plays out in the same manner that it did in Lenin and Luxemburg’s time.

A Nuanced Look at Imperialism’s Global Evolution

There are specific economic and geopolitical patterns to our period that grow out of the system’s logic and its history. Classical imperialism gave way to global superpower imperialism during the Cold War, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it in turn was replaced first by a moment of unipolar dominance by the U.S., and then, after the rise of new centers of capital accumulation like China and others, by a new asymmetric multipolar world order.

The U.S. remains the dominant capitalist power, but it is no longer unrivaled. It faces, as the state managers of U.S. imperialism recognize, a major potential superpower in the form of China, as well as lesser regional antagonists like Russia, Iran, and so on.

At the same time, given the economic integration wrought by globalization, and the fact that all the world’s main powers possess nuclear weapons and can therefore threaten “mutually assured destruction” in the event of armed conflict, inter-imperial rivalry today tends to be expressed as geopolitics and geo-economics with great powers angling for advantage while trying to avoid military conflagration.

As Robinson notes, most armed conflict tends to be that of the U.S. policing the crisis-torn sections of the world. But it does not do so in pursuit of the common aims of a transnational capitalist class, as he claims, but in the interest of U.S.’s hegemony over allies and against any potential rivals to prevent them from establishing positions of political and economic strength outside the orbit of Washington.

The politicians and state managers that run U.S. imperialism have made this abundantly clear in countless national security documents, which, from the Clinton administration on, aim to lock in U.S. dominance — especially over strategic resources like Middle Eastern oil — and prevent the rise of a peer competitor — especially China. Trump’s “America First” foreign policy is only the most recent and most extreme formulation of this ruling-class consensus.

Thus, the classical Marxist theory of imperialism helps us understand why the U.S. and China are [in conflict](#) over everything from trade, intellectual property rights, islands and the strategic waterways in Asia, 5G technology, and Beijing’s massive Belt and Road Initiative. It’s also important as a guide to action for the new socialist movement to oppose not just global capitalism but also U.S.

imperialism and its lesser rivals like China and Russia.

These powers have found themselves on opposite sides in conflicts over popular revolts from below, for example, against regimes like Bashar al-Assad's in Syria. Russia, Iran and other states backed the Assad regime against the masses, while the U.S. tried to cynically manipulate the revolt for its own aims, mainly to wipe out ISIS (also known as Daesh).

This reality puts the left in a position of having to take a stand on the policies of these rival, imperial and sub-imperial powers, and on popular revolts in states outside the U.S. sphere of influence. Tragically, many on the left sided with the Assad regime, Russia and Iran as a supposedly "anti-imperialist camp" standing up to the U.S., and slandered the revolution as a "color revolution" orchestrated by Washington.

No doubt Robinson, as an internationalist, would oppose such "campism" and stand with popular revolts from below. But because his theoretical framework downplays inter-imperial rivalry, it cannot help the left think through concrete questions like the different states' positions on Syria, why they are in conflict, and what stance the left should adopt toward them and the popular revolution. For that, we must return to, correct, develop and apply the insights of the classical Marxist theory of imperialism.

My disagreements with Robinson, however, should not obscure the strengths of his book. It offers insightful analyses of the development of globalization, the authoritarian turn of states throughout the world, the brutal assault on migrants, and the system's epochal economic and ecological crises.

Lastly, it holds forth the hope of building a new left across borders that can help lead a new international movement for reforms on the road to ecosocialism. This book should be read, discussed, and debated as part of developing new and creative Marxists determined to join that global struggle and help lead it to victory.

[Ashley Smith](#)

Ashley Smith is a socialist writer and activist in Burlington, Vermont. He has written in numerous publications including *Truthout*, *The International Socialist Review*, *Socialist Worker*, *ZNet*, *Jacobin*, *New Politics*, and many other online and print publications. He is currently working on a book for Haymarket Books entitled *Socialism and Anti-Imperialism*.

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