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Globalisation

Nine Theses on Our Epoch

William I. Robinson

The left and progressives around the world are struggling to come to terms with the fundamental dynamic of our epoch: capitalist globalisation. The globalisation of capitalism, and the transnationalisation of social, political and cultural processes it entails, is the world-historic context of developments on the eve of the twenty-first century. The debate on globalisation is being played out in the academy, and more importantly, among diverse social and political movements worldwide. These movements have run up against globalising processes that are reshaping the very terrain of social action, including the deep constraints, as well as real opportunities, that the new global environment presents for popular change. In my view, however, activists and scholars alike have tended to understate the *systemic* nature of the changes involved in globalisation, which is redefining all the fundamental reference points of human society and social analysis, and requires a modification of all existing paradigms.

Capitalist globalisation denotes a world war. This war has been brewing for four decades following the second world war, concealed behind a whole set of secondary contradictions tied up with the cold war and the East-West conflict. It was incubated with the development of new technologies and the changing face of production and of labour in the capitalist world, and the hatching of transnational capital out of former national capitals in the North. The opening salvos date back to the early 1980s, when, as I argue below, class fractions representing transnational capital gained effective control of state apparatuses in the North and set about to capture these apparatuses in the South. This war has proceeded with transnational capital being liberated from any constraint on its global activity, given the demise of the former Soviet bloc and capital's increasing achievement of total mobility and access to every corner of the world. It is a war of a global rich and powerful minority against

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the global poor, dispossessing millions, and threatening figuratively, in that the bellicose proportions. But capitalist globalisation is and none can escape it. Calling the current state underscore the extent to which the colonial depredations to disarm. Capitalist globalisation confronts major contradictions.

First, the essence of the modern world system, of capitalist ones in every part.

Activists and scholars internationalisation of economic integration processes so on. The world has been linked to the global market, to the globalisation is bringing political processes and social life. Globalisation structurally impossible autonomous, economic appropriate units of an

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Global capitalism limits on the accumulation globe, every nook and breaking up and communities managed by local and household undermining what their daily existence principal means of production

the global poor, dispossessed and outcast majority. Casualties already number hundreds of millions, and threaten to mount into the billions. I refer to this as a world war figuratively, in that the level of social conflict and human destruction is reaching bellicose proportions. But I also mean so literally, in that the conflict bound up with capitalist globalisation is truly *world* war: it involves all peoples around the world, and none can escape involvement.

Calling the current state of affairs a world war is a dramatic statement, intended to underscore the extent to which I believe humanity is entering a period that could well rival the colonial depredations of past centuries. However, I do not mean to be apocalyptic or to disarm. Capitalist globalisation is a process, not so much consummated as in motion. It confronts major contradictions that present possibilities for altering its course. [...]

First, the essence of the process is the replacement for the first time in the history of the modern world system, of all residual pre (or non)-capitalist production relations with capitalist ones in every part of the globe.

Activists and scholars have noted that globalisation involves the hastened internationalisation of capital and technology, a new international division of labour, economic integration processes, a decline in the importance of the nation-state, and so on. The world has been moving in the past few decades to a situation in which nations have been linked, via capital flows and exchange, in an integrated international market, to the globalisation of the process of production itself. In turn, economic globalisation is bringing with it the material basis for the transnationalisation of political processes and systems of civil societies, and the global integration of social life. Globalisation has increasingly eroded national boundaries, and made it structurally impossible for individual nations to sustain independent, or even autonomous, economies, polities and social structures. Nation-states are no longer appropriate units of analysis.

These are all important features. But the core of globalisation, theoretically conceived, is the near culmination of a process that began with the dawn of European colonial expansion and the modern world system 500 years ago: the gradual spread of capitalist production around the world and its displacement of all pre-capitalist relations. From a world in which capitalism was the dominant mode within a system of 'articulated modes of production', globalisation is bringing about a world integrated into a single capitalist mode (thus capitalist globalisation). This involves all the changes associated with capitalism, but changes which are *transnational* rather than national or international in character. It includes the transnationalisation of classes and the accelerated division of all humanity into just two single classes, global capital and global labour (although both remain embedded in segmented structures and 'hierarchies').

Global capitalism is tearing down all non-market structures that, in the past, placed limits on the accumulation – and the dictatorship – of capital. Every corner of the globe, every nook and cranny of social life, is becoming commodified. This involves breaking up and commodifying non-market spheres of human activity, namely public spheres managed by states, and private spheres linked to community and family units, local and household economies. This complete commodification of social life is undermining what remains of democratic control by people over the conditions of their daily existence, above and beyond that involved with private ownership of the principal means of production. [...]

Second, a new 'social structure of accumulation' is emerging which, for the first time in history, is global.

A social structure of accumulation refers to a set of mutually-reinforcing social, economic, and political institutions and cultural and ideological norms which fuse with and facilitate a successful pattern of capital accumulation over specific historic periods. A new global social structure of accumulation is being superimposed on, and transforming, existing national social structures of accumulation. Integration into the global system is the causal structural dynamic that underlies the events we have witnessed in nations and regions all around the world over the past few decades. The breakup of national economic, political and social structures is reciprocal to the gradual breakup, starting thirty years ago, of a pre-globalisation nation-state based world order. New economic, political and social structures emerge as each nation and region becomes integrated into developing transnational structures and processes.

The agent of the global economy is transnational capital, organised institutionally in global corporations and in supranational economic planning agencies and political forums, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Trilateral Commission, and the G7 forum, and managed by a class-conscious transnational elite based in the centres of world capitalism. This transnational elite has an integrated global agenda of mutually-reinforcing economic, political, and cultural components that, taken together, comprise a new global social structure of accumulation.

The economic component is hyper-liberalism, which seeks to achieve the conditions for the total mobility and unfettered world-wide activity of capital. Hyper-liberalism includes the elimination of state intervention in the economy and also of the regulation by individual nation states over the activity of transnational capital in their territories. It is putting an end to the state's earlier ability to interfere with profit-making by capturing and redistributing surpluses. In the North, hyper-liberalism, first launched by the Reagan and Thatcher governments, takes the form of deregulation and the dismantling of Keynesian welfare states. In the South, it involves 'neo-liberal structural adjustment' programmes. [...]

The cultural/ideological component is consumerism and cut-throat individualism. Consumerism proclaims that well-being, peace of mind, and purpose in life are achieved through the acquisition of commodities. Competitive individualism legitimises personal survival, and whatever is required to achieve it, over collective well-being. Consumerism and individualism imbue mass consciousness at the global level. They channel mass aspirations into individual consumer desires, even though induced wants will never be met for the vast majority of humanity. The culture and ideology of global capitalism thus work to depoliticise social behaviour and preempt collective action aimed at social change by channelling people's activities into a fixation with the search for individual consumption and survival. [...]

Fifth, the 'brave new world' of global capitalism is profoundly anti-democratic.

Global capitalism is predatory and parasitic. In today's global economy, capitalism is less benign, less responsive to the interests of broad majorities around the world, and less accountable to society than ever before. Some 400 transnational corporations own two-thirds of the planet's fixed assets and control 70 per cent of world trade. With the world's resources controlled by a few hundred global corporations, the life blood and the very fate of humanity are in the hands of transnational capital, which holds the

power to make life and concentrations of economic power globally. Any discussion of the

The paradox of the of 'democracy' around the misuse of the concept (cratos) of the people the transnational elite borrow a concept from It refers to a system of participation in decision-making by competing elites in 'democracy' is a formal hegemonic, in the sense based less on outright and political disempowerment 'veto power' of global

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power to make life and death decisions for millions of human beings. Such tremendous concentrations of economic power lead to tremendous concentrations of political power globally. Any discussion of 'democracy' under such conditions becomes meaningless.

The paradox of the demise of dictatorships, 'democratic transitions' and the spread of 'democracy' around the world is explained by new forms of social control, and the misuse of the concept of democracy, the original meaning of which, the power (cratos) of the people (demos), has been disfigured beyond recognition. What the transnational elite calls democracy is more accurately termed *polyarchy*, to borrow a concept from academia. Polyarchy is neither dictatorship nor democracy. It refers to 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 electoral processes. This 'low-intensity democracy' is a form of consensual domination. Social control and domination are hegemonic, in the sense meant by Antonio Gramsci, rather than coercive. They are based less on outright repression than on diverse forms of ideological cooptation and political disempowerment made possible by the structural domination and 'veto power' of global capital. [...]

Sixth, 'poverty amidst plenty', the dramatic growth under globalisation of socioeconomic inequalities and of human misery, a consequence of the unbridled operation of transnational capital, is worldwide and generalised.

The dual tendency is for wealth to be concentrated among a privileged stratum encompassing some 20 per cent of humanity, with the gap between rich and poor widening within each country, North and South alike, and, simultaneously, a sharp increase in the inequalities between the North and the South. The worldwide inequality in the distribution of wealth and power is a form of permanent structural violence against the world's majority. This is a widely noted phenomenon, but it needs to be linked more explicitly to globalisation.

In Latin America alone, the number of people living in poverty increased from 183 million in 1990, to 230 million in 1995, according to figures recently released by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). Taking into account population growth, the percentage of the population living in poverty, according to the ECLAC, increased from 40 per cent of the total population in 1980, to 44 per cent in 1980, and 48 per cent in 1995. This rise in poverty is thus more exponential than arithmetical. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) adds that, among the Latin American poor, 59 million people suffer from chronic hunger. According to the most recent of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) annual reports, *Human Development 1994*, 1.3 billion people live in absolute poverty – literally on the verge of life and death. A third of the South's population 'lives in a state of abject poverty', states the report, 'at such a margin of human existence that words simply fail to describe it'. One billion are without access to health services, 1.3 billion have no access to safe water, and 1.9 billion are without access to sanitation.

These annual UNDP reports have become widely disseminated. A comparison of recent reports reveals the frightening tendency for the chasm between a shrinking minority of haves and a vast majority of have-nots to widen ever further. The 1992 report indicated that the wealthiest 20 per cent of humanity received 82.7 per cent of

the world's wealth. Its 1994 report places that figure at 84.7 per cent. The comparison also reveals that the abyss between rich and poor nations continues to widen. In 1960, the wealthiest 20 per cent of the world's nations was thirty times richer than the poorest 20 per cent. Thirty years later, in 1990, it was sixty times richer. Just one year later, in 1991, the latest year for which figures were available, it was 61:1, according to the 1994 report. [...]

Seventh, there are deep and interwoven racial, ethnic and gender dimensions to this escalating global poverty and inequality.

As global capital concentrates, it disproportionately locks out women and racially and ethnically oppressed groups. As transnational capital moves to the South of the world, it does not leave behind in the North, or encounter in the South, homogenous working classes, but ones which are historically stratified and segmented along racial, ethnic and gender lines. In the North, for instance, labour of colour, drawn originally, and often by force, from the periphery to the core as menial labour, is disproportionately excluded from strategic economic sectors. Relegated to the ranks of the growing army of 'supernumeraries', made the most vulnerable sector in a racially-segmented labour market which is becoming more, not less, rigid under globalisation, it is subject to a rising tide of racism which includes the dismantling of affirmative action programmes and the implementation of repressive state measures against immigrant labour pools. Although globalising processes undermine the existence of pre-capitalist classes, they also intensify stratification within labour, often along racial/ethnic lines, in both North and South. However, I suggest that 'hierarchies of labour' are becoming spatially organised across the North-South axis, given global integration processes, new migration patterns, and increased concentrations of Third World labour in the First World, as well as the increasing impoverishment of the once-privileged 'labour aristocracies' of European origin. This issue and its theoretical implications, too, require further exploration.

The root cause of the subordination of women – unequal participation in a sexual division of labour on the basis of the female reproductive function – is exacerbated by globalisation, which increasingly turns women from reproducers of labour power required by capital into reproducers of supernumeraries for which capital has no use. Female labour is further devalued, and women denigrated, as the function of the domestic (household) economy moves from rearing labour for incorporation into capitalist production to rearing supernumeraries. This is one important structural underpinning of the global 'feminisation of poverty' and is reciprocal to, and mutually reinforces, the racial/ethnic dimensions of inequality. [...]

Eighth, there are deep contradictions in emergent world society that make uncertain the very survival of our species – much less the mid- to long-term stabilisation and viability of global capitalism – and portend prolonged global social conflict. [...]

Endemic to unfettered global capitalism [...] is intensified social conflict, which in turn engenders constant political crises and ongoing instability, both within countries and between countries. In the post-war period, the North was able to shift much social conflict to the South as a combined result of an imperialist transfer of wealth from South to North and the redistribution of this wealth in the North through Keynesian state intervention. No less than 160 wars were fought in the

Third World from 1945 to 1994. [...] global strife from interclass and national classes and nations in the Third World. [...] UNDP's 1994 report on 'Human Development within states'. [...] Underlying these are diverse forms of fundamental human rights.

As the worldwide rush to modernise has become a crisis of civilisation. So far, it is devoid of any ethical content. It is a structural contradiction between under-consumption and over-consumption, and, as many analysts have noted, it is the cause of social crisis and environmental degradation. [...] twentieth-century capitalism and nature – are the two main species and of life itself.

[...] We should have a world that is democratised. This does not mean global capitalism, but that all people should have a programme for revolution. [...] on popular struggles and movements. [...] task is to develop solutions to the problems from the constraints that exist. [...] alternative to global capitalism. [...] transnational bourgeois class. [...] and operates globally. [...] political activity for the development of the activity of this global class. [...] class consciousness and the need to link the local to the national.

Third World from 1945 to 1990. However, globalisation involves a distinct shift in global strife from inter-state conflict (reflecting a certain correspondence between classes and nations in the stage of national capitalism) to global class conflict. The UNDP's 1994 report underscores a shift from 'a pattern of wars between states to wars within states'. [...] Uncertain survival and insecurities posed by global capitalism induce diverse forms of fundamentalism, localism, nationalism and racial and ethnic conflict.

As the worldwide ruling class, the transnational bourgeoisie has thrust humanity into a crisis of civilisation. Social life under global capitalism is increasingly dehumanising and devoid of any ethical content. But our crisis is deeper: we face a *species crisis*. Well-known structural contradictions analysed a century ago by Marx, such as over-accumulation, under-consumption, and the tendency towards stagnation, are exacerbated by globalisation, as many analysts have pointed out. However, while these 'classic' contradictions cause social crisis and cultural decadence, new contradictions associated with late twentieth-century capitalism – namely, the incompatibility of the reproduction of both capital *and* nature – are leading to an ecological holocaust that threatens the survival of our species and of life itself on our planet. [...]

[...] We should harbour no illusions that global capitalism can be tamed or democratised. This does not mean that we should not struggle for reform within capitalism, but that all such struggle should be encapsulated in a broader strategy and programme for revolution against capitalism. Globalisation places enormous constraints on popular struggles and social change in any one country or region. The most urgent task is to develop solutions to the plight of humanity under a savage capitalism liberated from the constraints that could earlier be imposed on it through the nation-state. An alternative to global capitalism must therefore be a *transnational* popular project. The transnational bourgeoisie is conscious of its transnationality, is organised transnationally, and operates globally. Many have argued that the nation-state is still the fulcrum of political activity for the foreseeable future. But it is not the fulcrum of the political activity of this global elite. The popular mass of humanity must develop a transnational class consciousness and a concomitant global political protagonism and strategies that link the local to the national and the national to the global. [...]