

Book Review:

Transnational Conflicts: Central America, Social Change, and Globalization

By WILLIAM ROBINSON

(London, Verso, 2003), 400 pp., paper, \$26.00, 18 pounds.

Reviewed by Jerry Harris

William Robinson is emerging as a major theorist on globalization, with particular expertise on Central and Latin America. His latest work, Transnational Conflicts combines innovative theoretical insights with a detailed empirical study of Central America. Any argument that positions U.S. hegemony at the center of a nation/state imperialist system will have to answer Robinson's analysis of transnational capitalism.

What makes Robinson's approach so unique is that he takes his argument into the heart of what most observers consider the backyard of U.S. imperialism, Central America. If any region of the world is under U.S. hegemony many would list the countries of this region: Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

But Robinson takes the reader through a convincing history. Starting in detail with the post-World War II period of agro-export and Import-Substitution Industrialization the book shows how Central America has been linked to and transformed by the global economy. He does this by tracing the particular history of each society yet attaching this to the broader patterns of world economic development. While showing the unique historic context of each country through its social, political and class conflicts Robinson links these particularities to the general development of Central America's insertion into the international economy. His key argument is this insertion has been rearticulated by globalization. This rearticulation has affected capital, labor and the state in all their dimensions and is linked to global circuits of accumulation not the national economy of the U.S.

These insights are particularly rich in explaining the failures of the revolutionary movements in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala, as well as current economic structures and social problems. Robinson argues the political and economic crisis of the post-World War II model of development created the conditions for social rebellion. These revolutionary insurgencies did in fact help destroy much of the old institutional arrangement of power and wealth. But unable to achieve complete victory or hold onto state power they lost the initiative to new transnational capitalist fractions. These transnational capitalist were able to consolidate their project in both the economic and political spheres with the help of U.S. and global capital and reinserted Central America into the world economy through free trade zone sweatshops, new agro-exports and privatization of the state's social and economic functions. The analysis is not only backed-up with a rich political history but a wealth of economic data and charts.

One interesting question that Robinson doesn't fully address is whether or not revolutionary armed struggles based on a strategy of national liberation can be successful under today's conditions of globalization. He does raise doubts about governments under left leadership having the ability to follow independent socioeconomic strategies because of the constraints of

transnationalized capital. Here he suggests social movements can be more successful in moving society towards grassroots empowerment and democracy. But does globalization mean we are in a period of post-national liberation to be replaced by forms of global social struggles? This implies the guerrilla war led by FARC in Colombia as well as Lula's government in Brazil face serious structural limitations. These are big questions, which to be fair, go beyond Robinson's intent. But they are strongly suggested by elements of his analysis and would be interesting to pursue in future work.

Robinson is one of the main proponents of transnational capitalist class theory and certainly enriches and extends his ideas with this book. One important element is his articulation of the development of a transnationalized state. This state doesn't have a centralized form as historically developed in modern nations, but exist in both transnational institutions and the transformation of current nation/states. Here again we see the author's dialectical approach to historical processes and the combination of the particular with the general. Transnationalized bodies such as the World Trade Organization and World Bank work in tandem with national states to rearticulate labor relations, financial institutions and circuits of production into a system of global accumulation. It is this transnational state that is organizing the functioning and rules for global capital, not the U.S.

As Robinson explains: "The Transnational State is attempting to fulfill the functions for world capitalism that in earlier periods were fulfilled by... a 'hegemon' or dominant capitalist power that has the resources and the structural position which allows it to organize world capitalism as a whole and impose the rules, regulatory environment, etc, that allows the system to function." (p. 44) But Robinson underlines a crucial point, "continued existence of the national-state system is a central condition for the power of transnational capital (because) transnational fractions among dominant groups are able to use these core states to mold transnational structures." ((p. 47) Therefore national states act as transmission belts for the transnational project. Here Robinson attempts to solve what others see as a contradiction, the continued existence of powerful national states in a globalized system. But the real question is not simply their existence but their function.

This leads towards a major question of what epistemological approach should be taken in the study of world systems. Robinson argues that the world must be studied from a globalized perspective rather than one based on nation/state structures. To properly understand the role of local and regional economies or class structure they must be studied from the perspective of their point of insertion into global accumulation rather than their relationship to a particular national market. This does not mean one should ignore local conditions, history, or culture. Indeed, Robinson's book is built around the understanding of such local conditions. But the key becomes their relationships to a transnational system and the dialectic between the global and local.

There are many other aspects of Transnational Conflicts that provide keen insights and time for reflection. This is an indispensable study for any student of globalization and Central America and pushes forward the boundaries for discussion and debate.