

## **Book Review:**

### **William I. Robinson's "Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, U.S. Intervention, and Hegemony"**

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466 pp., \$59.95 (cloth) \$22.95 (paper).

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Most studies of globalization have focused on the growing web of manufacturing and financial ties that characterize the current era of capitalism. William Robinson has enriched this discussion with his insightful and detailed analysis on the politics of neo-liberalism. In doing so Robinson adds a vital component to our understanding of global economic restructuring. He shows how global financial elites have achieved hegemonic political power and implemented a new strategy for U.S. imperialism based on "low intensity democracy" in the Third World. This provides us with a picture of the political and superstructural changes to match the transformation of the world economic base.

Robinson views globalization as a "time of transition from one major epoch to another...a great historic crossroad" in which "the world system has entered into a qualitatively new phase, that of the global economy" (pp. 3, 8). This analysis argue that to understand the world as simply a continuation of industrial capitalist society misses the most important power shifts responsible for changing today's world. This is where Robinson focuses his book, offering new insights into how the transnationalization of the political process is intertwined with historic economic shifts.

The author uses a Gramscian analytical method to describe the structural changes in international politics. Gramsci's concept of hegemony is that of a "social relation which binds together a bloc of diverse classes and groups under circumstances of consensual domination" (p. 22). This consensus is cloaked in an "armor of coercion" so that class rule encompasses both democracy and force as forms of domination. Class blocs not only refer to relations between classes, but also dominant relations within class formations. This produces a constellation of forces which exercise state power and hegemony in civil society. Therefore obtaining leadership inside political parties, unions, mass movements and media intertwine with control of the state to produce an "historic bloc" in which ideology sustains social control.

Robinson uses this framework to describe a set of new international relationships under the hegemonic leadership of a global bourgeoisie. Driving these changes are the profound transformations in knowledge-intensive technologies which are unfolding a new social structure of accumulation. This has lead to the "emergence of transnationalized capital, concentrated in international finance, as the hegemonic fraction of capital at a world level" (p. 33). Groups most closely linked to the global economy now dominant the state and have ushered in the neo-liberal political agenda. This helps explain the present convergence of the Democratic and Republican parties, for example, the Bush and Clinton administration's mutual support for NAFTA. The leadership of both parties represent the new hegemonic bloc, maintaining only small areas of disagreement. In the South a technocratic elite is promoted by transnational capital to act as their counterpart and manage the new process of world accumulation.

Unlike the old colonial system which relied solely on coercive domination, the new hegemony is based on polyarchy. This is the term Robinson uses to refer to a carefully managed system in which

democracy is limited to electing competing elites. Democracy itself is given a narrow institutional definition which centers on the process and method of choosing leaders. As Joseph Schumpeter said; "Democracy means only that people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the men who are to rule them" (p. 49).

Robinson carefully traces the development of this elite theory of democracy to the post World War II international system. Starting with Schumpeter and winding his way through Robert Dahl's publication of "Polyarchy", the author shows how theory transformed into state policy through semi-official think tanks like the Trilateral Commission.

Robinson makes excellent use of quotes throughout his work. He provides us with such incriminating evidence that it reawakens our wonder over the self-serving lies and political pronouncements we are used to hearing over mainstream media. One of my favorites, by Samuel Huntington, reminds us that the elite are at least honest when speaking to one another, as Huntington states; "Political democracy is clearly compatible with inequality in both wealth and income, and in some measure, it may be dependent upon such inequality...Defining democracy in terms of goals such as economic well-being, social justice, and overall socioeconomic equity is not, we have argued, very useful. (p. 55)" How come we never hear this argued on Nightline?

The book takes this discussion into the reconstruction of U.S. foreign policy to match the needs of globalization. Beginning during the Carter administration and working through the Council of Foreign Relations and the Trilateral Commission, the transnationalized fraction of the ruling class gradually forged a new consensus. A basic shift from military to political competition occurred which employed political action, coercive diplomacy and covert political warfare as its main tools. To carry out the new strategy, the National Endowment of Democracy (NED) was built with a multi-purpose apparatus. Core groups within the NED focus on developing and directing political parties, unions, media, women's groups, youth movements, and peasant organizations in order to create a hegemonic consensus tied to neo-liberal policies and global capital. Robinson's detailed analysis of NED operations sheds important light on an organization which most people are only vaguely aware of, and which has replaced the CIA in importance in much of the South.

The core of Robinson's book are case studies of how new political hegemony was achieved in the Philippines, Chile, Nicaragua and Haiti, along with interesting but less detailed looks at South Africa and the former Soviet Union. He traces the transition from dictatorships to polyarchical regimes blending an exposure of neo-liberal strategy with the particular array of forces in each country. Robinson is careful in his examination of the popular movements, the old neo-colonial forces, and the new technocratic elite. The activity of the NED is inserted within the struggle between these social-political blocs forging a new transnational class alliance. The specific results and balance of forces is different in each case. But what is similar is a new hegemonic bloc which dominates both civil society and the state, and the integration of each country into the neo-liberal global market.

The book ends with an interesting discussion on the future of global society. Central to Robinson's critic is the question of how capitalism maintains legitimacy. He sees globalization in contradiction with the state's ability to satisfy basic economic and social demands. Political stability relies on sufficient national capital accumulation, but globalization undercuts the state's flexibility and redirects its focus producing "precisely the polarization between a rich minority and a poor majority which Marx predicted" (p. 348). In promoting formal democracy while expanding a socioeconomic system of vast inequality neo-liberalism creates an internal contradiction which will engender political upheavals.

Promoting Polyarchy needs to be read by anyone interested in globalization. It is an essential work that adds to our basic understanding of the epochal shifts changing the contours of our history.