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 **Transnational Conflicts: Central America, Social Change,  
and Globalization (review)**

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

**Reviewed by:**

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*Patricia Marchak (bio)*

"The Dialectic of Globalization and Development" is the title of the first of five lengthy chapters, this one spelling out a neo-Marxist theory of globalization. Subsequent chapters focus on Central American transitions within the politics of globalization, concluding, in the final chapter, with the contradictions of global capitalism as they are illustrated in Central America. A short end-section deals with whether (Robinson's word) the Sociology of Development?

Robinson begins by observing that globalization is an historic process, not an event, and that it is a qualitatively new stage in the evolution of world capitalism, not intentionally conceived and implemented though it includes agency as well as structure. He outlines the nature of this process in the initial chapter, emphasizing the departure from world-systems theory and dependency theories. He characterizes these as applications of Weberian market-driven approaches to capitalism, in contrast to Marxist theories of production and production relations. He warns that the dependency model (popular with Canadian political economists during the 1970s and early 1980s) is not useful for interpreting contemporary relationships between transnational corporations and economic development throughout the Caribbean (or, for that matter, anywhere else).

Distinguishing a "world economy" from a "global economy," Robinson outlines the development of globalized circuits of accumulation. His distinction is important for an understanding of the argument. Global capitalism supersedes national economies via transnational integration of production and exchange operations. Transnational capital "has become the hegemonic fraction of capital on a world scale." (p. 19) Put in lay terms, it is not the United States that is the contemporary hegemon: it is transnational capital. Such capital impoverishes labour in the United States as well as elsewhere, and creates a global elite and global class structure, rather than an imperial-country dominant class over colonial-

Central America becomes a crucible within which we are invited to watch the historical process that first transformed the region from indigenous agriculturalists and pastoralists to reluctant wage-workers on coffee estates (19<sup>th</sup> century model), then began the transformation of the estate mode to industrial and tourist development. Neither transformation was or is now complete, and the disarticulation of diverse modes erupts in the 1970s and 1980s as revolutionaries attempt to dismantle the estates and the early industrial plants. American military backing and armaments prop up various dictators while the transitions are effected, but uneven development is not an accident so much as a predictable outcome of capital accumulation.

In Robinson's analysis, the elites of the previous estate period became the agents for industrialization, so while the estates were overshadowed and went into decline their owners went on to greater accumulation capacities, while workers and farmers experienced decreasing economic fortunes that forced many to migrate north in search of wage-work. Despite the interventions of the United Nations and human rights groups, "a redistribution of property and wealth was not on the agenda of the peace negotiations ... they paved the way for the full implementation of the project of global capitalism in Central America." (p. 70). Democratization benefited capital much more than workers or indigenous populations.

Robinson is careful to point out that the process, though it has agents, is not directed from on high. Once the process is in motion, the transformations become probable outcomes. Technology that is developed primarily to reduce reliance on labour exceeds original intentions and transforms production processes altogether from time to time, but technology *per se* is not a causal agent. At the same time, other paths might occur. Had revolutionary groups succeeded in taking over in Guatemala during the 1950s, for example, its history might well have been otherwise. Capitalism would still have been its economic underpinning, but its class structure and the mode by which it was

integrated into the global economy could well have been divergent. In this way, political processes do have some impact on how capitalism is developed. In Nicaragua, revolutionaries took over but, circumvented by American military and economic forces, did not result in much more than quickening the demise...



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Joxe does not take Nietzsche, Foucault, or Baudrillard seriously. He shares with Paul Virilio and many contemporary intellectuals the fear that a catastrophe is pending. If we proceed from a slightly different vantage point and admit that the West is the catastrophe, and that this catastrophe has already taken place, and is now globalizing, hope becomes a rare commodity, and one we would be foolish to invest either in Europe or globalizing NGOs. Globalization is unstoppable, and a unifying Europe, itself surely a temporary phenomenon, is but one of its effects. So is America.

*Bishop's University*

Gerry Coulter

**William I. Robinson, *Transnational Conflicts: Central America, Social Change, and Globalization*. London: Verso, 2003, 400 pp.**

"The Dialectic of Globalization and Development" is the title of the first of five lengthy chapters, this one spelling out a neo-Marxist theory of globalization. Subsequent chapters focus on Central American transitions within the politics of globalization, concluding, in the final chapter, with the contradictions of global capitalism as they are illustrated in Central America. A short end-section deals with whither (Robinson's word) the Sociology of Development?

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Democracy and Its Discontents: Development, Interdependence and US Policy in Latin America Wiarda Howard J. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996, pp. x, 367, sublease specifies the Fourier integral.

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