

The Global Police State

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William I. Robinson

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Introduction

“George Orwell Got It Wrong”

In her novel *Everything is Known*, Liza Elliott describes a future dystopia where five global mega-corporations, dubbed Affiliations, rule the planet. “Infested with the inescapable surveillance industry, the five global Affiliations manipulated Big Data to commodify and commercialize all human activity for profit.” The Affiliations had subordinated states to their domination: “George Orwell got it wrong. Big Brother did not come from a totalitarian state, but from a totalitarian non-state.” Big Data was “a relentless cybernetic grandmaster who with sneaky eyes and listening ears spied on everything: your clothes, your friends, recording every word you spoke or wrote. It kept account of all this and more to amass the info power it needed to control the market, the heartbeat of the money economy.” The world’s population had become divided into three segregated social clusters: the members of the Core, the Peripherals, and the Outliers who comprised a majority of humanity:

Outliers were the discarded people. If they could not function in the Affiliation run world, they were cast off. Their lives, such as they happened, were their own fault. There would never be sympathy. They scrounged out a life with the dregs, the overruns, and the un-sellable excesses from the opulent Core and stark Periphery. Some worked unpredictable marginal field-labor jobs while others scrounged in the leftovers, the scraps, and the trash.¹

The world Elliott describes could well be, with not much of a stretch, a portrait of the one we live in. The unprecedented concentration of capital at the global level has cemented the financial power of a transnational corporate elite that uses its economic power to wield political influence and control states. In 2018, just 17 global financial conglomerates collectively managed \$41.1 trillion, more than half the GDP of the entire planet. That same year, the richest 1 percent of humanity, led by 36 million millionaires and 2,400 billionaires, controlled more than half of the world’s wealth while the bottom 80 percent had to make do with just 4.5 percent

of this wealth. It is this mass of downcast humanity that make up Elliott's *Peripherals and Outliers*, what in the pages to follow are referred to as "surplus humanity."

Yet the technical infrastructure of the twenty-first century is producing the resources in which a political and economic system very different from the global capitalism in which we live could be achieved. Through popular political control of the new technologies, as Srnicek and Williams remind us, we could collectively transform our world for the better:

Machines are accomplishing tasks that were unimaginable a decade ago. The internet and social media are giving a voice to billions who previously went unheard, bringing global participative democracy closer than ever to existence. Open-source designs, copyleft creativity, and 3D printing all portend a world where the scarcity of many products might be overcome. New forms of computer simulation could rejuvenate economic planning and give us the ability to direct economies rationally in unprecedented ways. The newest wave of automation is creating the possibility for huge swathes of boring and demeaning work to be permanently eliminated. Clean energy technologies make possible virtually limitless and environmentally sustainable forms of power production. And new medical technologies not only enable a longer, healthier life, but also make possible new experiments with gender and sexual identity. Many of the classic demands of the left—for less work, for an end to scarcity, for economic democracy, for the production of socially useful goods, and for the liberation of humanity—are materially more achievable than at any other point in history.²

If we are to free ourselves through these new technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, however, we would first need to overthrow the oppressive and archaic social relations of global capitalism. At a time when both fascism and socialism again appear to be on the agenda around the world, it behooves us to study the system of global capitalism, less as an intellectual exercise in itself than in order to struggle against its depredations with a view towards replacing it with one that can avert catastrophe and meet the material and spiritual needs of humanity. Rather than serving to liberate humanity, the new technologies are being applied at this time by the agents of this system to bring about a global police state.

While I am hardly the first to talk about a police state, I mean in this book considerably more than what we typically associate with a police

state—police and military repression, authoritarian government, the suppression of civil liberties and human rights. Certainly we see this, and more, around the world. In this study, however, I want to develop the concept of global police state to identify more broadly the emerging character of the global economy and society as a repressive totality whose logic is as much economic and cultural as it is political. By global police state I refer to three interrelated developments.

First is the ever more omnipresent systems of mass social control, repression, and warfare promoted by the ruling groups to contain the real and the potential rebellion of the global working class and surplus humanity. Savage global inequalities are politically explosive and to the extent that the system is simply unable to incorporate surplus humanity it turns to ever more violent forms of containment. The methods of control include sealing out the surplus population through border and other containment walls, deportation regimes, mass incarceration and spatial apartheid, alongside omnipresent new systems of state and private surveillance and criminalization of the poor and working classes. They also include the deadly new modalities of policing and repression made possible by applications of digitalization and Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies. The global police state brings all of global society into what in Pentagon jargon is called "battlespace," concentrated in the world's megacities that are now home to more than half of humanity.

Second is how the global economy is itself based more and more on the development and deployment of these systems of warfare, social control, and repression simply as a means of making profit and continuing to accumulate capital in the face of stagnation—what I term *militarized accumulation*, or *accumulation by repression*. If it is evident that unprecedented global inequalities can only be sustained by ubiquitous systems of social control and repression, it has become equally evident that quite apart from political considerations, the ruling groups have acquired a vested interest in war, conflict, and repression as a means of accumulation. As war and state-sponsored violence become increasingly privatized, the interests of a broad array of capitalist groups shift the political, social, and ideological climate towards generating and sustaining social conflict—such as in the Middle East—and in expanding systems of warfare, repression, surveillance, and social control. We are now living in a veritable global war economy.

And third is the increasing move towards political systems that can be characterized as twenty-first-century fascism, or even in a broader sense,

as totalitarian. The increasing influence around the world of neo-fascist, authoritarian, and rightwing populist parties and movements, symbolized above all by Trumpism in the United States, has sparked a flurry of debate on whether fascism is again on the rise. There has been a sharp polarization around the world between insurgent left and popular forces, on the one hand, and an insurgent far Right, on the other, at whose fringe are openly fascist tendencies. A project of twenty-first-century fascism is on the ascent in the civil societies of many countries around the world. The project has made significant advances in recent years in its competition to win state power, and in some cases, it has gained a foothold in the capitalist state. At the same time, a neo-fascist culture appears to be emerging through militarism, misogyny, extreme masculinization, and racism. Such a culture generates a climate conducive to mass violence, often directed against the racially oppressed, ethnically persecuted, women, and poor, vulnerable communities. But a fascist outcome is not inevitable. Whether or not a fascist project manages to congeal is entirely contingent on how the struggle among social and political forces unfolds in the coming years.

This global police state is emerging at a time when world capitalism descends into a crisis that is unprecedented, given its magnitude, its global reach, the extent of ecological degradation and social deterioration, and the sheer scale of the means of violence that is now deployed around the world. In the first instance, global police state is a story of control and repression of the poor and working classes. There are growing movements against the many expressions of global police state—mass incarceration, police violence, U.S.-led wars around the world, the persecution of immigrants and refugees, the repression of environmental justice activists. Yet often these movements are based on moral appeal to social justice, which by itself begets, at best, mild reform. If these movements are to attack the global police state in its jugular vein, they must identify global capitalism as the driver of the systems of social control and repression that they are combating. This book attempts to do just that. It sets out to identify the contemporary dynamics of capitalist transformation and the novel forms that are emerging. This concept of global police state allows us to specify how the economic dimensions of global capitalist transformation intersect in new ways with political, ideological, and military dimensions of this transformation.

Methodologically speaking, the causal sequence in this story starts with a critique of global capitalism and its crisis, and especially a new round of transformations in world capitalism in recent decades. Chapter 1, “Global

Capitalism and Its Crisis," summarizes my theory of globalization as a new epoch in the ongoing and open-ended evolution of the world capitalist system. I then show how a global police state is coming about as a response to a crisis that is driven by the contradictions internal to the system. The focus is on the underlying structural level of the crisis, what is known as overaccumulation, a concept I introduce in Chapter 1 and expand on in Chapter 2. The chapter ends by examining the financialization and digitalization of global capitalism, arguing that these processes, far from resolving the crisis, are bound to aggravate it.

From this starting point, we trace the social, political, and cultural-ideological conditions that fertilize a global police state, as laid out in the next three chapters. These chapters combine theory and analysis with an abundance of empirical, often shocking, data on the global police state. We will see in Chapter 2, "Savage Inequalities: The Imperative of Social Control," that the concentration of economic power in the hands of the transnational capitalist class generates a concentration of its political power that can only be considered a dictatorship of transnational capital. It is the revolt of the oppressed and exploited populations around the world that compels this transnational capitalist class to impose increasingly coercive and repressive forms of rule. The global police state is centrally aimed at *coercive exclusion* of surplus humanity. The chapter identifies the underlying process of capitalist accumulation that has led to the exclusion of several billion people and made work in the capitalist economy more and more tenuous. It also explores how cognitive labor is becoming precarious in a process of digitalization that may displace millions more and result in laborless production. The emerging megacities of the world are the battlegrounds where the excluded and the oppressed face off against the global police state.

Chapter 3, "Militarized Accumulation and Accumulation by Repression," shows how transnational capital is more and more dependent on a global war economy that in turn relies on perpetual state-organized war making, social control, and repression. The circuits of militarized accumulation coercively open up opportunities for capital accumulation worldwide. The generation of conflicts and the repression of social movements and vulnerable populations around the world become a strategy that conjoins profit making with political objectives and may even trump those objectives as the driver of militarization and repression. The events of September 11, 2001 marked the start of an era of a permanent global war in which warfare, intelligence, repression, and surveillance are more

and more the privatized domain of transnational capital. Criminalization of surplus humanity activates state-sanctioned repression that opens up new profit-making opportunities for the transnational capitalist class. The chapter concludes with a look at social cleansing and militarized accumulation around the world.

In Chapter 4, “The Battle for the Future,” I discuss the threat of twenty-first-century fascism and the global reform project to save capitalism from itself. From there, I contemplate the prospects for a renewal of emancipatory projects around the world and the challenge of revitalizing a Left that could help bring about an ecological socialist future. Once we have exposed the brutal world of global capitalist inequality and exploitation, the most urgent matter becomes how can we move forward toward greater social justice. But it is not one that I take up at any length in the conclusion. This is in part because I myself do not have the answers; those must come through collective struggle itself. And it is in part because my contribution in this work is to uncover the beast of global police state through analysis and theoretical insight combined with eye-opening empirical exposition.

To that end, I offer a “big picture” of the emerging global police state in a short book that is eminently readable. The pages to follow may startle many readers and make them angry. I trust the work will serve as a warning of the dystopic future that is upon us. More importantly, by exposing the nature and dynamics of this out-of-control system, I hope it will contribute to the struggles to bring about an alternative future based on human freedom and liberation. We do face a crisis of *humanity*. The destruction under global capitalism of the social fabric worldwide and the extreme alienation of labor, our very *species being*, raises fundamental questions about what it means to be human and how to recover our humanity. It is in the nature of our species to work together to assure our collective existence. But the capitalist system that throws up a global police state turns such cooperation into a process of destruction for masses of humanity as we are made to compete with one another to survive. Crises of values, identity, meaning, and community ensue. If we are to recover our humanity we must—contra capital—re-embed ourselves in relations of reciprocity and mutual well-being.

Finally, a caveat is necessary. I have strived to make the study readable to a politically engaged public and social justice activists yet satisfying to scholars from diverse fields. Keeping it short and assuring that it is accessible means that inevitably there are generalizations that do not apply

INTRODUCTION: "GEORGE ORWELL GOT IT WRONG"

everywhere and that some nuance must be forsaken. It will be left for those readers intellectually or politically motivated by this study to further pursue the matters it raises. Those who want to delve deeper into the academic literature and theoretical debates that have helped inform my study can follow up on the extensive references that I have placed in the endnotes.

Los Angeles
October 2019

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Global Capitalism and its Crisis

“The difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas as in escaping from the old ones.”

John Maynard Keynes

All social orders exist in a perpetual state of development, transformation, and eventual demise. Capitalism is no exception. It is the most dynamic system that humanity has ever seen, and also the most destructive. Certainly, the inner workings of the capitalist system have remained constant over the centuries. These include the relentless drives to endlessly accumulate capital (to maximize profit) and to expand outwardly. These drives led over the centuries to ongoing waves of colonialism and imperialism as the system expanded out of its original heartland in Western Europe and came to engulf the entire planet. What *has* continuously changed over the centuries are the social formations and technologies through which capitalism operates and the institutions and sets of class relations that organize the system. But now world capitalism is in the midst of a severe crisis. Will the system survive? Will humanity survive the ravages of this crisis? Capitalism has proved remarkably resilient even as it has faced one crisis after another in its centuries-long existence, defying predictions of its imminent demise and emerging renewed after each major crisis. Indeed, in response to global crisis, the system is at this time undergoing a new round of transformations, involving the construction of a global police state. At a time when both fascism and socialism have reappeared on the global agenda, it is urgent that we study these transformations.

World capitalism has gone through several historical stages, or epochs, in its ongoing and open-ended evolution. Constructing what social scientists refer to as a “periodization” allows us to make sense out of the process of historic development and transformation of a system; it means not that earlier stages disappear but that they become superseded by transformation from within. The first stage in world capitalism, symbolized by the bloody conquest of the Americas starting in 1492, is known as the

epoch of *mercantilism and primitive accumulation*, what Marx referred to as the “rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production.” It was marked by the creation of a world market, the colonial system, the emergence of a trans-Atlantic economy, and the intensification of trade between West and East. The second, *competitive or classical capitalism*, was marked by the Industrial Revolution, the rise of the bourgeoisie, and the forging of the modern nation-state, keynoted by the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789. The mercantile epoch ran from the symbolic dates of 1492 to 1789, while the age of classical capitalism gave way in the late nineteenth century to the third stage, that of *national corporate (“monopoly”) capitalism*. This stage brought a new wave of imperialist conquest, the consolidation of the world market, and the rise of powerful national financial and industrial corporations.

Globalization marks a shift towards a qualitatively new epoch in world capitalism, that of *global capitalism*. Let us here review my theory of global capitalism as I have laid it out elsewhere.¹ The turning point in the epochal shift came during the world crisis of the 1970s, about which I will have more to say below. Capitalism was able to transcend that crisis by “going global,” leveraging globalization processes into a vast new restructuring and integration of the world economy. This new transnational phase is marked by a number of qualitative shifts in the system and by novel articulations of social power worldwide. The hallmark of the new epoch is the rise of truly *transnational capital* and a new globally integrated production and financial system into which all nations and much of humanity have been integrated. To be sure, capitalism has always been a *world* system—it was never simply national or regional. It expanded from the onset, ultimately engulfing the entire world, and depending throughout its existence on a web of worldwide trade relations. National development has always been conditioned by the larger worldwide system of trade and finance and on the international division of labor that colonialism brought about.

But this began to change in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Surveying the world economy at century’s end, the British historian Eric Hobsbawm observed:

The world economy in the Golden Age [1945–73] remained *international* rather than *transnational*. Countries traded with each other to an ever greater extent ... [T]hough the industrial economies increasingly bought and sold each others’ production, the bulk of their economic activity remained home-centered. Nevertheless, an increasingly *trans-*

national economy began to emerge, especially from the 1960s on, that is to say, a system of economic activity for which state territories and state frontiers are not the basic framework, but merely complicating factors ... and which sets limits to what even the economies of the very large and powerful states can do. Some time in the early 1970s such a transnational economy became an effective global force.²

This new transnational phase entails a shift from a *world economy* to a *global economy*. In the world economy, countries and regions were linked to each other via trade and financial flows in an integrated international market. In the new global economy, nations are linked to each more organically through the transnationalization of the production process, of finance, and of the circuits of capital accumulation. By circuit of accumulation I mean the process by which the production of a good or a service is first planned and financed (by capitalists), followed by attaining and then mixing together the component parts (labor, land, raw materials, buildings and machinery, etc.) in production sequences, and then by the marketing of the final product. At the end of this process, the capitalist recovers his initial capital outlay as well as profit and has thus “accumulated” capital. This is what Karl Marx referred to as the “circuit of capital.” In earlier epochs much of the circuit was “self-contained” within a single country.

Technological developments, above all the introduction of computer and information technologies (CIT), alongside the revolution in transportation and novel organizational and managerial strategies, allowed capital to achieve global mobility. Capitalists set about in the late twentieth century to reorganize production worldwide in order to maximize profit-making opportunities and to gain further advance over the global working and popular classes. Having achieved this newfound *global reach*, capitalists could now freely search for the cheapest labor, lowest taxes, and laxest regulatory environments as they forged a new global economy. They put in place a globally integrated yet spatially fragmented production and financial system organized through vast networks of subcontracting and outsourcing that span the planet. As national production systems fragmented, they became integrated externally into the new globalized circuits of accumulation.

Previously, to take an oft-cited example, auto companies in the United States produced cars from start to finish, with the exception of the procurement abroad of some raw materials, and then exported them to other countries. The circuit of accumulation was national, save for the final

export and foreign payment. Now, instead, the process of producing a car has been decentralized and fragmented into dozens of different phases that are scattered across many countries around the world. Often individual parts are manufactured in several different countries, assembly may be stretched out over others, and management may be coordinated from a central computer terminal unconnected to actual production sites or to the corporation's country of domicile.³

The global economy that emerged out of this restructuring is epitomized by the rise of the global assembly line and the spread of modern-day sweatshops in free-trade zones around the world, as well as a digitalized global financial system through which money moves seamlessly and instantaneously across the globe, and by a global capitalist culture of corporate brands, consumerism, and a narcissistic individualism. More recently, services have also experienced transnationalization involving the decentralized provision across borders of services, including digital services and e-commerce, along with the further privatization of health care, telecommunications, and other service industries. With this globally integrated economy comes a more organic integration of social life worldwide. Even the most remote communities are now linked into the new circuits of global economy and society through vast decentralized networks of production and distribution, as well as by global communications and other integrative technologies and cultural flows increasingly fostering these networks.

The Transnational Capitalist Class and Transnational State Apparatuses

But global capitalism is not faceless. A transnational capitalist class (henceforth, TCC) emerged as the manifest agent of global capitalism, about which much has been written in recent years.⁴ The leading sectors of national capitalist classes have experienced integration with one another across borders in a process of transnational class formation. Its interests lie in promoting global rather than national markets and circuits of accumulation, in competition with local and national capitalist groups whose fate is more closely bound up with their particular nation-states. This TCC is the *hegemonic fraction of capital on a world scale*. It is made up of the owners and managers of the giant transnational corporations, or TNCs, and the financial institutions that drive the global economy.

These transnational corporate conglomerates have ceased to be corporations of a particular country and have increasingly come to represent

transnational capital. The TNCs have internalized markets within their networks across national and regional frontiers, making themselves independent of their states of origin and their territories. The TCC may have originally emerged out of the “Atlantic ruling class,” or among North American and European capitalists. But by the second decade of the twenty-first century, it had become a truly global ruling class, with contingents from most countries and every continent, even if still skewed disproportionately towards the traditional Western core of world capitalism and now China.⁵ As we shall see, the TCC and the global corporate conglomerates they control have become progressively invested in a global police state.

How does the TCC organize itself to pursue its interests around the world? How do the class and social relations of global capitalism become institutionalized? What is the system’s political authority structure? Despite the rhetoric of market fundamentalism, the capitalist system cannot be sustained through market relations alone. Capitalism requires the state in order to function. There emerged two broad approaches to understanding the capitalist state in the 1960s and 1970s, the heyday of theorizing on exactly how the capitalist class is able to assure that the state represents its interests and reproduces capitalism. One approach held that the state was “instrumentalized” directly by the dominant groups in order to shape policies in their interests, for instance, by placing their agents in government positions, by lobbying, or by financing election campaigns. The other held that dominant groups did not necessarily instrumentalize the state directly but rather the very structure of capitalist society forced the state to implement policies that advanced the interests of these dominant groups.

In this latter view, the state is structurally dependent on capital; for instance, it requires capital to invest in the economy in order to generate employment and revenue and must therefore implement policies that assure a favorable investment climate for capitalists. It is clear that both these processes are at play in global capitalism. The TCC directly instrumentalizes states around the world and at the same time every country and the whole global economy is structurally dependent on transnational capital. States have to generate the conditions for transnational capital accumulation, and this means not only assuring a favorable climate for making profit but also repressing any threat to the rule of capital. It is important to see this relationship of the state to transnational capital. Many resistance and social justice movements target governments as the visible heads of the global police state yet fail to see transnational capital

behind the state, entrenched in civil society, which, as we shall see, is the most potent site of the global police state.

But it is clear that in this age of globalization national governments do not exercise the transnational political authority that global capitalism requires. The TCC has attempted to convert the structural power of the global economy into supranational political authority and to exercise its class power around the world through transnational state (TNS) apparatuses. TNS apparatuses should not be confused with a global government, which does not and may never exist. Methodologically speaking, the TNS is not a thing; it is an analytical abstraction that helps us make sense of contemporary developments. This TNS is constituted as a loose network made up of trans- and supranational organizations together with national states that have been captured by transnationally oriented policy makers and state managers. TNS apparatuses function to organize the conditions around the world for transnational accumulation—that is, to open up resources and labor around the world to transnational corporate plunder. They form an institutional network around the world through which the TCC and its political agents attempt to create and reproduce the conditions for global capital accumulation. But this does not mean that the nation-state disappears. To the contrary, as I will discuss later, one of the most explosive contradictions of global capitalism is the contradictory mandate that national governments have. They must promote the conditions for global capital accumulation in their territories and at the same time they must secure their legitimation through “the nation.”

It is difficult to understate the extent to which capital has become transnationally integrated, concentrated, and centralized in the TCC. One oft-cited 2011 report by the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology undertook an analysis of the share ownerships of 43,000 transnational corporations. It identified among these a core of 1,318 TNCs with interlocking ownerships. Each of these core TNCs, in turn, had ties to two or more other companies and on average they were connected to 20. Although they represented only 20 percent of global operating revenues, these 1,318 TNCs appeared to collectively own through their shares the majority of the world's largest blue chip and manufacturing firms, representing a further 60 percent of global revenues—for a total of 80 percent of the world's revenue.⁶ But when the research team dug further they found that these 1,318 TNCs tracked back to a “super entity” of 147 even more tightly knit companies, representing just 1 percent of the global corporate stock, that controlled 40 percent of the total wealth of the network. Not