Transnational Conflicts: Central America, Social Change, and Globalization
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What is This?

**keywords:** Central America ✦ conflict ✦ development ✦ globalization ✦ social change

William Robinson’s *Transnational Conflicts* is an impressive study of Central America’s transformation over the past few decades, in which the region transitioned from a period of violent conflict to a series of peace accords and economic restructuring. The study’s scope is almost encyclopedic. Its holistic approach encompasses discussions of economic, political and social change in their interrelatedness. Whereas much of the globalization literature is either too abstract or too thin on theory, Robinson does a marvelous job in applying his theoretical framework to a fine-grained analysis of the region’s recent history. Global capitalism is in his view the defining feature of our era. Many authors would agree. Yet, employing a Marxist notion of capitalism, for him the criterion that sets the current era apart, is not simply the more widely discussed worldwide expansion of trade but the transnationalization of the production process that started in the 1970s.

Robinson maintains that for Central America, globalization implies a heightening of social inequality, a limitation of the redistributive and regulatory capacity of the state, and increasing stress on the social fabric, expressed in rising crime rates and loss of state legitimacy. He stresses that only a small fraction of the 30 million people living in Central America have the banking capacity that would make them attractive consumers by global standards. As seen from the perspective of global capitalism, Central America is thus not of much interest as a site of consumption but is of interest as a site of profitable production. For Central America, therefore, globalization means the insertion into a competitive race to the bottom, in which a cheap labor supply, powerless unions and low taxation are cast as preconditions for an export-led model of development.

Robinson examines Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica from a comparative and transnational perspective in order to gauge the similarities and divergences of their recent trajectories and the extent to which local actors struggled with, adapted to, or took advantage of the larger globalizing process. He traces in each of these five republics how a new transnationally oriented elite emerged, gained strength in the context of the World Bank’s conditioning of loans to economic restructuring and ascended to power by establishing its neoliberal project in civil society and gaining control of the state apparatus. In his view, financial support from the USA played a decisive role, though it came in different forms. These ranged from bankrolling the counter-insurgency against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua to sponsoring non-governmental organizations little inclined towards profound structural changes and more outright neoliberal think tanks.

Robinson argues that the logic of capital determined these outcomes and left Central American countries with little leverage to pursue any alternative path...
deviating from the Washington consensus. The region’s revolutionary movements had merely helped to break the grip of the landed oligarchies, and the later peace accords facilitated the rise of the new transnationally oriented elite, which emerged from the land-holding families and flourished with the imposition of the new economic model of export-led development.

On a meta-theoretical level, Robinson distinguishes between ‘deep structures’, among which he counts the laws of capitalist development, and the more fluid historical ‘structures’, which he sees as contingent articulations of these laws insofar as they are the outcome of the ongoing interplay between these laws and agency at specific times and places (p. 35). Although he acknowledges in his Introduction the need to bring structure and agency together and stresses that historical processes are ‘not inevitable’ (p. 34) and at times even ‘highly contested’ (p. 35), he does take the economic aspects of globalization to be the structural determinants of social change and postulates an explicit primacy of the ‘material basis’ over any ‘ideational determinacy’ (p. 13).

The counter-point to his largely structural analysis comes in the final sections of the book, where Robinson considers the prospects for the region from the perspective of the popular classes. He warns that Central America’s current state of tranquillity is an ‘illusion’ (p. 319) and argues that the social contradictions that had given rise to the insurgencies of the region are not resolved but rather exacerbated through another layer of contradictions. He expects therefore a new round of contestation as the popular sector regroups itself.

However, Robinson is skeptical of the activities of NGOs in Central America. He warns that the rhetoric of strengthening civil society and the Third Sector can often be a disguise for the dismantling of state responsibilities for social reproduction. He points to the role NGOs have played in counter-revolutionary campaigns and to the massive funding they received from governments of the global North. Although he recognizes the heterogeneity of Central American NGOs as they range from rightist and neoliberal think tanks to humanitarian aid and progressive community organizations, overall he sees in them primarily an instrument to de-radicalize and divert the demands of the popular sector away from the state. Thus they are a component in the transition ‘from domination within the state to hegemony in civil society’ (p. 229).

Robinson does not believe that ‘sustainable development’ is possible under the conditions of global capitalism. He sees the best hopes for the Isthmus’s poor majorities in acquiring the capability to disrupt the neoliberal mode of globalization by ‘throwing a monkey wrench into the gears of the global economy’ (p. 315).

Robinson urges a new conception of development not based on territory or nation-state as the unit of analysis but on social groups. He sees no national solutions, but advocates transnational mobilization from the grassroots.

Robinson thus postulates four conditions for ‘effective counter hegemony’ (p. 321ff.), including a bottom-up unification of grassroots struggles (p. 321), the formulation of a ‘socialist’ alternative to the Washington consensus of the transnational capitalist elite (p. 323), ‘cross-border organizing’ (p. 324), and more ‘critical’ studies of globalization as a means to unmask the inherent incompatibility of global capitalism and sustainable development (p. 325). While many would agree on the need for more studies on the complex processes of globalization that
are so crucial for our common future, it is not clear how the other three conditions can take shape. One question would be whether all NGOs would indeed fall into the dichotomous categories of being either pro-New Right elites or pro-grassroots, or whether many of them might pursue an agenda of their own that does not fit into any of these categories. Another issue relevant for many voters in Central America is how to achieve more security against crime and gang-related violence. There seems to be a consensus about the priority of this issue between broad sectors of society, while the Left has largely failed to articulate a project that can serve as an alternative to this type of security.

Robinson argues that the findings from his case study of Central America ‘can contribute to an understanding of the dynamics of change elsewhere in emergent global society’ (p. 3). Surely it can, but this claim is somewhat problematic when the fact is not taken into account that the cases he examined were very small countries in the self-proclaimed backyard of the USA, and not larger players such as Mexico or Brazil, which might have different means of leverage just because of the scale of their internal markets.

Although the volume appears to be at times repetitive with the same points repeated over and over again, this has the advantage that chapters or sections can stand on their own and can be read individually. As a whole or in parts, I am sure that Robinson’s timely contribution will be widely discussed. It should find its place on many syllabi of courses on the region’s contemporary history and on the larger issues of globalization, comparative political economics and regime transitions.

Markus S. Schulz is an assistant professor at New York University. For his work on the social consequences of globalization, he won the Bielefeld Prize for the Internationalization of Sociology. His most recent publications include articles on culture and contentious politics and a co-authored multi-volume book series on *Internet and Politics in Latin America* (Vervuert, 2003 [in German]).

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This book in the SSIS series consists of sociological and anthropological contributions by 11 authors on various aspects of the issue of ‘glocalization’. It gives a summary of recent activities of ISA Research Committee 09 on the ‘Sociology of