

Interview with Robert W. Cox

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Introduction

Robert W. Cox is Emeritus Professor of Political Science at York University, Toronto. As the introductory blurb to his latest collection of work [1] points out, 'For more than thirty years (he) has been at the forefront of developing a critical political economy of modern world capitalism. A seminal thinker with an immense following, his work in the past has rarely been anything less than challenging . . . (He is) a dissident in a world where intelligent dissent is in short supply . . .'. Others, notably the late Susan Strange, have observed that what characterises Cox's work is his refusal to be dogmatic and his insistence on intellectual independence.

Cox's academic achievements are the more remarkable given that he did not become a university teacher until he was 45. Prior to that he had spent 25 years at the International Labor Organisation (ILO), where he became assistant director-general. Over the long haul Cox's refusal to strait-jacket himself with a commitment to a particular intellectual camp has enabled him to trace, with theoretical elegance, developments in the global political economy from the post-war period onward. Over this time he has engaged with themes such as class and production, the internationalisation of the state, multilateralism and global governance, ecology, and civilisations.

The contributions for which he is still probably best known are those that formed the basis of the development of neo-Gramscian perspectives [2] on the study of International Relations, which had an enormous impact, not only within but well beyond that discipline. The major influences on his work—Vico, Gramsci, Braudel, for instance—underline his commitment to an historicist mode of understanding that represents 'an alternative tradition to positivist social science and . . . is the proper route towards the study of historical structures and structural change' (*Approaches to World Order*, p. 29). More recently, he has begun to develop a 'new ontology of world order', where ontology is taken as 'an attempt to identify the factors that help towards understanding and acting upon a particular historical conjuncture' (*Political Economy*, p. 78). The Series Editors' preface to that volume points to two topics that stand out in this later work, 'the role of a revitalized civil society in

determining the future of global governance and the prospect of generating legitimacy through the peaceful coexistence of civilizations' (*Political Economy*, x). These two major themes, the neo-Gramscian, and (especially) the new ontology of world order, form the substance of the interview with Cox, which was recorded in Toronto in March 2002.

NOTES

- [1] Robert W. Cox with Michael G. Schecter (2002) *The Political Economy of a Plural World: Critical Reflections on Power, Morals and Civilization* (London, Routledge).
- [2] The fullest and most accessible collection of Cox's work up to 1995 is Robert W. Cox with Timothy J. Sinclair (1996) *Approaches to World Order* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

D: How do you see your theoretical thinking contributing to the analysis of the relationship between globalisation, societies and education?

C: I don't know whether I can answer that directly, but I'll talk around it. My own perspective has been evolving a lot . . . people will talk about things that I wrote fifteen, twenty, years ago as though that is what I am now, but I think I've moved along in many ways. The thing that I've been engaged in recently is a way of thinking about what a civilisation is, and how one can also conceive of the interactions of civilisations without bringing them all into one homogenised whole. I think, in some ways, globalisation as it's discussed in much of the literature, is a thesis foreshadowing *one* civilisation. I was just reading . . . an opening statement by the rector of the United Nations University, for a conference about the dialogue of civilisations, and he used a metaphor that I can understand, but which I would reject. The metaphor is that there is one great river running down, which is world civilisation, and there are all kinds of tributaries flowing into it, and that suggests to me the image of the merger of all these civilisations into one big thing. My view is a little bit like that of people who argue about biodiversity, that diversity is a good thing; you don't want to eliminate cultural and civilisational diversity by merging everything into one thing.

So, to me, it's not just a question of saying what's happening in the world as though it were something that was unchangeable. My view is that you need to know about what is happening in order to decide whether that's what you will support for the future, or maybe you should try to change the course. And so as regards civilisations, to me, it's a good thing that there are groups of people who have different ideas about how to develop, about how to organise their economy, how to organise their societies, and that does not necessarily mean what Huntington calls the 'clash' of civilisations. Just because they're different, they don't have to fight each other, but what they do have to do is recognise that they exist together with others and should try to find some areas in which coexistence becomes compatible.

Earlier I've talked about inter-subjectivity as being the realm of thought that can constitute the compatibility among large groups of people where they understand the

world more or less in the same way and therefore they can communicate with each other meaningfully and they can formulate projects meaningfully. And what I was talking about now is something that I once called a *supra* inter-subjectivity, that is the existence of several different inter-subjectivities that search for some common understandings, where they can communicate amongst each other, and not just within the domain of the group that understands itself as a distinct civilisation. So that's the trend of my thinking, and I think it has some relevance to the issue of globalisation and in a certain sense it's counter globalisation, but not in opposition to the idea that certain aspects of globalisation, such as communications technology affect everyone.

What that means, in some degree, is thinking through what it means to be a civilisation.

I'd arrived at a kind of definition, at one stage, by thinking back to origins and saying that at the beginning came the development of a kind of communication among people who lived in proximity one with another, a primitive form of language, and language grew out of certain myths. Myths created meaning out of common ideas, not necessarily actual events, imagined gods and so forth, and language comes out of that. Thus inter-subjectivity arises through language and through some of the inheritance from language, certain aspects of religion, and so forth. And those things relate to the material conditions in which they arose; they have to make the material conditions understandable to people, so there is a kind of continuing relationship between the basic elements of thought and the material conditions in which they arise. That doesn't mean that there's a base-superstructure relationship in the Marxist sense, but it means that whatever the realm of thought is, it has to be able to make sense out of the material conditions, and to allow people to understand them and to act within them and to act to change them. So, the notion of a civilisation I came to was of a fit between inter-subjectivity and the material conditions of existence. And you start with that, and then try to think through what are some of the dimensions of a civilisation, what it is that distinguishes one from another. And so I think these are ways in which one can see differences among civilisations; and I think that by getting to the roots of these differences one need not necessarily adopt the point of view of another civilisation, but one can understand how it comes about that certain people are thinking in different ways . . .

D: Do you see that there is increasing convergence as a result of globalisation, or is it your view that there will be variety on the ground as capitalism has proved it can live with a variety of civilisations, for example, with patriarchy and feminism, racism and anti-racism . . .

C: No, I think that's correct, certainly as I see it, in terms of capitalism. There are those who say that capitalism is one thing, and in a certain way it is one thing if you look at it in terms of the financial circuits and, to some degree, in terms of technologies. But I think when you begin to look at it in terms of how people are organised to operate capitalism, then we see different kinds of capitalism. Nonetheless, within capitalism I do see a latent conflict between the market, which is the synchronic concept, and production, which is a diachronic concept. With these

two there will always be an incompatibility within capitalism but it may be resolved momentarily in one place or another in different manners. It's hard to think of capitalism as one thing, and certainly not as a stable thing.

D: Do you think, for instance, that the conception of Confucian capitalism, or Confucianism as an explanation for the success of East Asia, would fit into the conception of civilisation?

C: Well, I think it's more complicated. I think you could start with the Confucian concept of the family and of the sort of structure of authority that runs from some supreme element down through the state and the corporate level, the hierarchy of the family, and so forth. That's the theme that's pushed by some of the Asian autocrats. They are saying that's our thing; it explains how we do things, and, at the same time, I think there has been a revolt against that view among Asian people and that's not just now, it goes back a long way. I've been reading, recently, in Chinese history, the work of a French historian, Jean Chesnaux, about secret societies from the fourteenth, and even well on into the nineteenth century. The secret society has been a phenomenon in Chinese history, which has been marginalised by historians. Chesnaux sees it as, really, the counter-society that develops within the structured Confucian society. The Taoist element is important in the counter-society, because the Taoist element is much more egalitarian, even allowing for the equality of men and women. The secret societies were much inspired by that notion, but they didn't just emerge and replace the established Confucian society. What happened was that they could mobilise the populace among the peasantry, and among some of the urban workers; but they didn't have the power to overthrow the state. Groups within the army, and some well-placed bureaucrats that wanted to overthrow the old structures could take the leadership of a revolutionary movement if they could gain the support of the secret society. So I think it would be a mistake to think of Confucianism as being one solid thing that explains the success of Asian capitalism. I think Confucianism is part of a dialectic that may be in a process of transformation.

D: Is this a commodified form of Confucianism?

C: . . . I think it becomes that, in the language of the leaders of Singapore, for example. They are saying leave this to our ways, we know how to do it very well, we know how to do it better than you because we are not morally degenerate. And, at the same time, their invocation of Confucianism becomes a justification for an authoritarian form of economic and political order.

D: Does the spread of the English language to where it may become more or less indispensable for at least some strata of global society mean that inter-subjective meanings will have to be mediated in, or through, English?

C: It's an interesting question. I'm not really equipped to answer it, but what it stimulates me to think of is that there is no English language any more. You know,

there is an English language that's taught at Oxford and Cambridge, and the purity of it is preserved, and there's a certain pride in it, among people who can speak it and can write it, but the English language that we think of as a global thing is something totally different, and it's also very varied.

The first variation, of course, was the American version, and the American version itself is split into any number of versions, and you've got the African version . . . so that English has become a quasi means of communication among people who can be just as mystified by each other, though speaking the same language! I guess that English, primarily, is a sort of instrumental thing that's used by different people, and it doesn't really reveal the deep structure of thought in each case: that has to be looked for. In fact, global English is a mirage; all kinds of meanings are covered over by it, so that people can be using the same terms and giving them different meanings. This gets me back to my main argument, that one has to be able to penetrate into the minds of other people and to understand what they really mean when they are expressing themselves.

I'm very devoted to Giambattista Vico and he confronted this problem when he tried to think back to the origins of society; he said it took him a good twenty years to try to move from the highly refined state of thought in which he, himself, in the eighteenth century was immersed, to go back to those earliest human beings at the beginning of time when they were trying to express themselves, and communicate their meanings. And I think that's really the basic problem for the world, in a sense, that we have to go beyond an initial reaction to things, as though others were like us. You know, the Twin Towers are attacked, and fall, and so we think we've got to do the same, we hit back in the same sort of way without really stopping to think. We even suspect the effort to ask what was the reason behind it.

D: How far do you think that globalisation can be seen as modernisation, or Westernisation, or Americanisation?

C: Well, it seems to me that they're pretty close. I started off by thinking of globalisation: when did it happen? When did people start talking about it, and noticing that there was something going on that they call globalisation? I think that was probably as recently as the 1970s, and it was a transformation within capitalism that was going on at that time which was away from the notion of national markets that were linked by flows of trade and investment and payments and so forth towards the notion that, although these things were still there, there were still national boundaries, there were still regulations, but there was something else that was coming along, which could be called global.

It was manifested in the diversification of production processes and their placement in different parts of the world, and, once they're a combined process, in finance, and the development of things like the Euro-dollar market and ultimately, the sort of global finance that we have now. So, it was an economic thing in terms of the process . . . it began that way. But then people began to notice that there were all sorts of other things that you could also connect to globalisation. When you put them all together then you can probably say, well yeah, but it's been going on since the

beginning of time! And, you know, that may be something to say, but it doesn't help you very much because if you want to deal with something you've got to have some idea of when it began, and how it's developing and what you could possibly do about it. So the idea that globalisation is something that is innate within the human species I'm not sure that it's a very helpful idea. I think that what's been important, and what's caused all the conflict, and the episodes like Seattle, and Genoa, and so forth, is that what's going on has been hurting people, some people, and benefiting others, and it's generating a kind of clash, not of classes which is not a very useful way of describing people nowadays when we think of all kinds of different identities. But I see it as an economic process that has created an awareness of a lot of disabilities and conflicts that are now all merging together, if you like, under what we call globalisation.

What's interesting there, to me, are processes; the authors of globalisation are very well organised in hierarchical structures, and think in terms of organisational patterns. The opponents are very loosely organised in networks with a lot of spontaneity and a reluctance to become hierarchically organised. And that, in a way, is part of the problem, because it means you can't fight the political struggles very effectively without that degree of organisation. But, if you get that degree of organisation, you lose what you are—your own sense of identity.

I think there's definitely evidence that there is a movement that can loosely be called anti-globalisation, though I don't think that's a very correct designation for it, which is taking the form, very often, of a kind of de-politicisation. So many people, and particularly young people, from affluent countries, don't feel any affinity with the political process and don't see that the political process is the way that they can solve the problems. They see that the politicians are incapable, or unwilling, to solve the basic issues of the distributions of incomes, and employment and so on; and they lose confidence in formal politics and the parliamentary process. They try to deal with the problem by looking elsewhere, sometimes to street demonstrations, sometimes to more violent action but often just through self-organisation. There is no clear pattern, as I see it, but there is something going on and globalisation is being counter-acted by another process that is creating a dialectical opposition, but manifesting itself in a variety of ways.

D: You've referred to a 'transnational capitalist class'. Do you see it as the author of globalisation?

I don't think of it as a kind of conspiratorial, unified group, and nor do they, because their whole thesis is that the initiative of the individual organisations and groups is what drives globalisation, not some overall strategy. There are certain conditions which are necessary for it to go on and I think they're very keen to preserve those conditions; that's why we have the World Trade Organisation and the effort to enact a multinational agreement on investment, which they didn't quite achieve, but which still might happen. In other words, they want to organise the world in such a way that the conditions for globalisation will go on, but the process itself is not something that is masterminded from the top, no.

D: One thing we're particularly interested in, given your earlier career in the ILO, is the role of international organisations. Is it conspiratorial to see them as fully implicated?

C: I feel rather sad about this particular question. I went into the ILO just after the war and I think there was a tremendous burst of enthusiasm and feeling that the conditions now were such that we could build up the structures of a world with social equity and peace, and all the rest of it, and that spirit held for a while. I think, in a way, a lot of the international structures have been turned around. The primary goals have been adjusted to conform to the requirements of this kind of growth. It doesn't mean that they are not doing good work, but they're doing work within the conditions that are laid down for them.

The United Nations, at one stage in the sixties particularly, was a vehicle for expressing the hopes of poor countries around the world . . . the newly independent countries. The United Nations was in the business of helping states organise themselves in order to manage their own economies. About a decade later came the Reaganite view that organising economies was a bad thing, and that one shouldn't help states to do that sort of thing when one should try to get them out of it and let private enterprise do all the new developing. And that turn, I think, became quite important for the whole structure of international organisations during that period, and even in the political realm, including peacekeeping. The idea had been that the United Nations would play a major role in overcoming conflict situations and provide a kind of impartial, arbitrating force for peacekeeping. You see the way things have moved; the United Nations is virtually out of that field now, it's the United States and NATO that are doing all that, and so the international institutions have been marginalized on the political front. They're still there, and I think they can still make useful statements. I think Kofi Annan's statement for example, about the situation in Palestine, was a genuine and a correct statement. But you're aware that what counts is what the United States is going to do, and what the United States is going to do is probably as much conditioned by their desire to pacify things for a moment in Palestine, so they can attack Iraq. You know, it's not thinking through the long-term solution of the Israeli/Palestine situation, . . . I may sound bitter, or cynical, but I think one does acquire a certain reflective judgement of some of these things over the years.

R: There seems to have been a new breed of international organisations emerging. I'm thinking now of the OECD that seems now to have taken on a somewhat different brief to its earlier one, and now the more recent emergence of the WTO.

C: You've got, now, the international economic agencies that are managing the conditions for global capitalism and many quite honestly believe that that's the best thing for the world. If you go back to the 1940s—you just have to compare the Havana charter for the (proposed) International Trade Organisation with the charter for the World Trade Organisation. It's a different world, and different norms are expressed in those texts and it does indicate, really, the evolution of capitalism over that period of time. For a long time, I thought the United Nations seemed to be

almost a counterweight to the World Bank and the IMF, but now it's moving much more into the same posture where, in a sense, the representation of poor countries is a sort of safety valve rather than a means of effective action.

D: Do you think things have changed in international organisations? Is it that intergovernmental organisations have been compensated for in any way by the growth of non-governmental organisations?

C: Yes, I think that's important, and it's certainly there, and it's not just through the sort of official non-governmental organisations some of which have access to the United Nations. It's not the influence that they can exert there, in the United Nations; it's the fact that you've got Amnesty International with their own way of enquiring into abuses of human rights. And the fact that you've got the *Médecins Sans Frontières*, who are on the ground in all these different places and can make known conditions that ordinary journalism would never discover, or can draw the attention of journalists to the things that are going on so people can be informed. I think that's important, and there are a great variety of local organisations that are taking things into their own hands, and who provide the possibility for a creation of new political authorities that have a base in society where you see the social base of a lot of the existing political authorities being very much eroded and resting on habit, or brute force.

D: You discuss a good deal about state forms but you don't discuss so much how they relate to particular institutions, such as education. Can you comment on this?

C: Well, it seems to me that education is very diffuse in all the areas that you've just mentioned; that, in one sense, education is the way in which the state forms citizens and which in that sense is a hegemonic project. If I think back to my own schooldays, when I was in high school I used to have a constant running debate with a history teacher because the history teacher, I thought, was teaching what we used to call the Whig interpretation of history. And my view was contradictory to that and so even at that early stage you can see the relationship of a state project, if you like, of education, with the individual, and how many people may be shaped that way unquestioningly and other people will take a different stand and it will just challenge their critical faculty. So that's one element of education.

The other element is the formation of personnel for the labour market, in which case, again, it is the economy that dictates and dominates and creates certain forms of education, on one side the state and on the other economy.

At a more refined level, I guess there is the advance of technology and science, which I think is perhaps like art. It's something that attracts certain people because it challenges their mental processes and yet, there again, injected into that is what kind of development of science and technology does the economy and does the state want to encourage? So you've got those influences running through education.

At the other extreme is education as the arousal of the intellectual curiosity, and critical ability, in the minds of people, which isn't something that necessarily interests

the state, or the economy, or the advance of technology, but which is probably indispensable for creativity to continue in any lively way for any length of time. So, it seems to me that all these things are bound together, and they all happen through the same institutions, schools, and other sorts of para-schools, if you like, which are vehicles for learning. And, some of us feel that our own educational activity is to get people upset so that they'll think critically, and other people take the view that their job is to fit people into the existing structure, and it seems to me that this is a split which is natural to education, and it is very important that that split be continued—we can't have it all one way, or all the other.

D: The other aspect of education, if I could use one of the phrases of yours, is that global economy does not need all the people in the world.

C: That, in a way, is a kind of metaphor for what's happened to the United Nations; in my mind, you know, it's poor relief and riot control—it's humanitarian assistance and sending in a military force where civil order breaks down that's become, in a way, the debased consequences of what was a great project.

D: Do you see an alternative to that emerging?

C: Right now, not really. I think that at the macro level I see three forces at work. One is what Michael Hardt and Toni Negri in their book called 'Empire'. It's not about imperialism in the nineteenth/twentieth century sense but the concept of a political order that is centralised and extends itself into all different parts of the world. It's not a formal institutionalised structure, but a real structure, and we've got this coming out of Washington now, sometimes in the form of a so-called coalition. You see it in this country [Canada] now, in the way that everything that happens now is really conforming to what Washington needs. And you can also see it through much of the rest of the world. There is this sort of centralised power that emanates from one source. I think now we can see it as a corporate structure and a state structure that is centralised, and that is what emanates into all different parts of the world. It goes beyond the classical concept of an inter-state system. We have relations between states and very well-defined channels and all that sort of thing, boundaries and so forth. This is global in the sense that it cuts through the boundaries, but it does have one central point. That's one force.

Alongside that, I think you still have the Westphalian concept, that is a state system with organisations of power; and at a certain point European countries are going to stop, rather than go along with the United States and they're going to cut out their own separation from that central power; and in Japan, China, Russia, you'll still have other elements of the Westphalian system, but at some moments it doesn't look as though it's operating so effectively. You've got these two parallel systems.

Then I think you've got the third force, which is what you were talking about earlier, that is, the bottom-up force of non-governmental organisations, or more broadly civil society (the name's not so important). What's more important is that people are organising themselves, to express their own wants, and to formulate their

own ideas about the world, to work together, and that's obviously the weaker of these three forces. But, as I see it, the world is in a kind of balance with these three forces operating. The first one is apparently dominant, for the moment; the second one, possibly, able to form a kind of counterbalance to it; and the third, in the longer term, may be able to change the concept of political authority and accountability.

D: But you don't think the second force is in terminal decline, however slow?

C: No, because I think, in a way, if the third one is going to operate, it will probably have to operate, initially, through the second one. And I also think that it will probably have to operate within the first. It seems to me that if we're going to have any fundamental change, it's going to have to come from opposition within the United States and that seems very remote when you see all the flags that are flying and all of the declarations that are being made, but, on the other hand . . . at the same time, there is, obviously, a fund of thought in the United States, somewhere, which is not consistent with jumping on the train to move along with George W Bush.

C: . . . things are fluid now. A lot depends on the strength of the movement from the bottom, which I think one shouldn't over-emphasise, but it's there. The strength of organisation from the global level, particularly global financial markets is still strong, but then we're all aware of the fragility of those global financial markets. So I'd say yes, we're in a very fluid situation—the thing could break down at almost any point. And what that gets back to is the question of where is the base for authority when things, when markets, break down, or when states are no longer very functional, when people are alienated from their own political authorities. What happens then? What kind of an alternative can be built up and, you know, that's the sort of thing that doesn't happen quickly.

R: Some would actually say that some of that political authority is already there and has been constitutionalised, so, for instance, the agreements like NAFTA, and so on . . .

C: Well my colleague, Stephen Gill, has coined this phrase about the 'new constitutionalism' and I think that's exactly what we were discussing earlier. That has happened largely through the transformation of the idea of international organisation into structures that provide the conditions for capitalism, but the fluidity and instability results from the fact that even with those conditions there is a lot of fragility. There is a constant threat of failure in financial markets, although the authorities will say, oh, we've learned an awful lot about how to control them, we've survived several crises and we know, more or less, how to do it; and they're probably right, but it doesn't provide for a long-term future as one might have thought in those three decades following the Second World War when we reached a certain state where you don't expect much change but there are still certain threats to be faced. No, I wouldn't like to enter into the realm of prediction, but if I have any thoughts, it's about how to build up a more solid base of global authority—a base for a political authority that could correspond to aims for things like social equity and peace.

R: Are there models around, for instance, like the European Union for building new types of states?

C: There could be. Though I go back to my model of the Chinese secret societies in which the movement from the base, by itself, is not likely to become the new authority but could be the base upon which a new authority is built and some of that new authority could come out of the elements within existing structures, like the European Union, that can capture the ideas of greater social equity, for example, and build upon the base that's already there, and I think this relates to the conflict in Europe over the social market and the democratic deficit and all of these related issues.

R: David Held writes about the need for the possibility of a global civil society in the form of global government, and I'm wondering what you think of that notion? Does it offer any possibility?

C: Well, I think what he's writing is interesting but I can't quite agree with the vision of the future that he thinks is desirable. I would probably be a bit more sceptical about the extent to which it becomes feasible, at this stage. The key problem lies in the process of building the future. But I guess it doesn't do any harm to have a vision in your mind, ahead of you even if the future doesn't turn out to be like it. I want to end with what I was saying about those three forces, and the thought that there isn't really a pre-determined future. We have to make the future and we have to make it, I think, from the ground up, and I would be inclined to direct the attention of people who are trying to build up effective civil society organisations, to be critical and sceptical and reflective about the extent to which they may be co-opted by existing systems of power, at the same time not to turn down opportunities of working through existing institutions. I mean you can work within the system without, at the same time, becoming subservient to it.

I think Gramsci's idea of the organic intellectual is an important concept. Some people have thought through this problem in relation to the social group that they know and whose thoughts they can more or less express, perhaps even clarify. That could be the basis for developing this kind of approach to education, and to other things.

D: Robert Cox, thank you very much indeed.

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