

The Journal of International Relations, Peace Studies, and Development

Volume 6 | Issue 1

Article 2

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Recommended Citation

Rochat, Matthew () "A Crisis of Globalization: A Review Essay," *The Journal of International Relations, Peace Studies, and Development*. Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/agsjournal/vol6/iss1/2>

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A Crisis of Globalization: A Review Essay

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Ian Bremmer, *Us vs. Them: The Failure of Globalism*. New York: Penguin/Portfolio, 2018, pp. 208.

William Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 258.

Dani Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox: Democracy and the Future of the World Economy*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2011, pp. 368.

Abstract

Ian Bremmer's book *Us vs. Them: The Failure of Globalism* focuses on the discontents of globalization and draws a link between economic insecurity and tides of political polarization that have swept across states, splintering segments of the population and leaving deep social fractures in their wake. In this review essay, I expand on Bremmer's argument by incorporating two other recent works of global political economy that shed light on the current state of globalization, *The Globalization Paradox: Democracy and the Future of the World Economy* by Dani Rodrik and *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity* by William Robinson. Based on these three works, I examine divergent interpretations of the sources of the ongoing crisis, I address issues of ontological disharmony in the globalization literature, and I present three possible responses to the crisis of globalization. I conclude with a brief discussion of COVID-19, which serves as yet another watershed indication that the process of globalization is in peril. I then reaffirm the utility of considering all three books as a complementary anthology and urge a continued focus on the dialectical relationship between globalization and populism moving forward.

Keywords: globalization, globalism, political economy, capitalism, populism, financial crisis, COVID-19, pandemic

A Crisis Unfolds

The turn of the 21st century was heralded by some as the new era of globalization. Due in part to an exponential upsurge in innovation and growth in computer and information technology, the world had never appeared more interconnected. Barriers to international trade and finance were on the decline, liberal democracy was on the rise, and information and ideas passed unencumbered between disparate corners of the globe in a matter of seconds. Proponents of globalization envisioned a world where the economic pie would continue to grow bigger as open markets and international institutions supplied the tide to raise all boats on a sea of wealth and prosperity.

Then, suddenly, the United States housing bubble burst sending seismic tremors across world markets that were pushed to the brink of collapse, triggering the 2007-2008 Global Financial Crisis. Massive bailout packages were pumped back in to save hemorrhaging financial institutions, but not before a great deal of damage had been inflicted on the global economy. The aftershocks were felt in both developed and developing countries alike, with the poorest and most vulnerable individuals bearing a disproportionate burden of the suffering. A worldwide recession ensued, resulting in homelessness, job loss, food insecurity, and general economic misery. This cataclysmic event laid bare a superficial turn-of-the-century zeitgeist of optimism to reveal a profound sense of skepticism, less assured of the virtues of globalization.

In recent years, this underlying skepticism has percolated up to the surface in the form of popular outrage. Opportunist politicians have harnessed resentment and fanned the flames of populism to exploit social cleavages, pitting groups against one another. The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States and Britain's exit from the European Union serving as stark embodiments of this globalization crisis. This narrative provides the immediate historical backdrop for Ian Bremmer, as he surveys the 2018 global political landscape in his book *Us vs. Them: The Failure*

of *Globalism*. Bremmer's depiction focuses on the discontents of globalization and globalism,¹ and draws a link between economic insecurity and tides of political polarization that have swept across states, splintering segments of the population and leaving deep social fractures in their wake.

In the pages that follow, I expand on Bremmer's argument by incorporating two other recent work of global political economy that shed light on globalization and the current crisis, *The Globalization Paradox: Democracy and the Future of the World Economy* by Dani Rodrik and *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity* by William Robinson. Among the three books, Bremmer's *Us vs. Them: The Failure of Globalism* is the most recent and the only work written after watershed manifestations of the ongoing globalization crisis; the election of Donald Trump and Brexit. Thus, Bremmer's book serves as the centerfold of this review. Rodrik's work, which is cited several times by Bremmer, can be viewed largely as a complementary piece to Bremmer's and provides a rigorous historiography of the unfolding globalization process over time. If Bremmer's book focuses on popular discontent in the current global political landscape and Rodrik's book chronicles the historical context of globalization, then Robinson's book provides a theoretical scaffolding for understanding the *constellations of social forces* that drive globalization. Particular subsets among these forces have played significant roles in instigating the current global crisis.

Read in isolation, Bremmer's book furnishes a simple snapshot of us vs. them social and political polarization around the world. Despite its many insights, Bremmer's analysis is lacking two major components which would otherwise enable a more thorough understanding of the current state of globalization. These include 1) a rigorous historical analysis that considers globalization across time and 2) an underlying theoretical framework. Fortunately, when read in tandem with the other two works, a more comprehensive picture emerges.

¹ Bremmer distinguishes these two terms by defining *globalization* as "the cross-border flow of ideas, information, people, money, goods and services" whereas *globalism* is characterized by "the belief that the interdependence that created globalization is a good thing."

In the section that follows, I provide summaries of the three works, outlining major contributions to the theme of globalization in the context of the ongoing crisis. In this section, I also highlight the ways that Rodrik and Robinson fill in major gaps from Bremmer's analysis. In the subsequent section, I examine divergent interpretations of the sources of the globalization crisis, as articulated by the three authors. In the third section I address ontological disharmony between these works. It would be a fool's errand to predict precisely how the process of globalization will evolve moving forward, but in the fourth section I present three *possible* responses to the globalization crisis. These responses follow a framework devised by Robinson, but ultimately incorporate the insights of all three authors. I conclude with a brief discussion of the COVID-19 global health pandemic, which serves as yet another watershed indication that the process of globalization is in peril. I then close by reaffirming the utility of considering all three books as a complementary anthology and urging a continued focus on the dialectical relationship between globalization and populism moving forward.

Three Tales of Globalization

Bremmer's *Us vs. Them: The Failure of Globalism* is a story that begins and ends with those who have been left behind by the same process through which multinational corporations, Wall Street, and global elites have profited immensely; the working-class masses who "believe that 'globalism' and 'globalization' have failed them."² In large part, it is a story that describes a climate of economic insecurity and cultural anxiety that has proliferated in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis. Insecurity and anxiety have bred a politics of divisiveness as populist leaders on both sides of the political spectrum have taken advantage of these conditions by channeling collective resentment. Bremmer's analysis focuses on specific state examples, describing the various fault lines that political leaders have emphasized in order to separate "us" from "them," such as race, ethnicity, gender,

² Ian Bremmer, *Us vs. Them: The Failure of Globalism* (New York: Portfolio, 2018), 2.

religion, nationality, citizenship status, class, caste, and job sector. Bremmer proceeds with the topic of “walls,” where he illustrates physical, informational, and economic barriers employed in places such as the United States, Europe, India, and China in an effort to counteract globalization. Bremmer forecasts the continued construction of walls in years to come as a political tool of protectionism:

Some of these walls will be designed to protect “national interests,” an idea that will be defined ever more broadly. Others will be built to protect the interests of a ruling party or even an individual leader and his family, friends, and clients. Some will be thrown up as quickly and haphazardly as the Berlin Wall, a barrier made of cheap cement and pebbles that divided East and West for twenty-eight years. Others will be digital-age barricades that are much more difficult to climb over or tunnel under.³

Bremmer concludes by suggesting that governments “rewrite the social contract” as an alternative to building walls in order to remedy the globalization crisis and provide for the needs of society in new ways. Bremmer highlights the importance of creative solutions and makes recommendations regarding education, taxes, the gig economy, and social initiatives that governments can pursue to rebuild relationships with citizens. Looking beyond government, Bremmer cites examples of private organizations innovative attempts at providing public goods.

Where Bremmer’s book focuses primarily on the state of the world in 2018, Rodrik makes a major contribution to Bremmer’s argument by providing a historical narrative that follows the shifts in globalization across time. He begins the first chapter of his book, *The Globalization Paradox: Democracy and the Future of the World Economy*, in 1671 with an anecdotal story of the Governour and Company of Merchants-Adventurers Trading into Hudson Bay,⁴ a British chartered company engaged in the Canadian fur trade. The king’s charter granted the company a great deal of authority and “its powers extended considerably beyond trade. It had a standing army, could make war, enter

³ Bremmer, *Us vs. Them*, 101.

⁴ The company still exists today as Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC), one of Canada’s largest retail companies operating stores in Canada, the United States and parts of Europe.

into treaties, mint its currency, and administer justice.”⁵ Rodrik uses this example to illustrate the formation of the earliest multinational corporations, and how they tended to operate as monopolistic trading charters backed by the military power of the state. Rodrik underscores that historically, markets and states have served complementary functions. He argues that viewing states and markets as opposing forces is a false dichotomy, given that “market exchange, and especially long-distance trade, cannot exist without rules imposed from somewhere.”⁶ Rodrik goes on to explain the concept of “transaction costs” in international trade:

Think of all the things that we take for granted that are absolutely essential for trade to take place. There must be some way - a marketplace, bazaar, trade fair, an electronic exchange - to bring the two parties to a transaction together. There must be a modicum of peace and security for them to engage in trade without risk to life and liberty or concern for theft. There must be a common language for the parties to understand each other. In any form of exchange other than barter, there must be a trusted medium of exchange (a currency). All the relevant attributes of the good or service being exchanged (for example, its durability and quality) must be fully observable. There must be sufficient trust between the two parties. The seller must have (and be able to demonstrate) clear property rights over the goods being sold and must have the ability to transfer rights to the seller. Any contract that the two sides enter into must be enforceable in a court of law or through other arrangements. The parties must be able to take on future commitments... and do so credibly. There must be protection against third parties trying to block the exchange or impede it. I could keep going, but the point is probably clear.⁷

The goal of reducing transaction costs via globalization is a theme that Rodrik returns to again and again. His narrative continues by charting the rise and fall of international trade during the first era of globalization.⁸ Subsequently, Rodrik undergoes a balanced evaluation of the argument for free trade, elaborating on its virtues and pitfalls. He then addresses the impact of Bretton Woods institutions on trade liberalization. Rodrik distinguishes post-World War II globalization of the Bretton Woods era from the era of neoliberal “hyperglobalization” embraced by political leaders such as

⁵ Dani Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox: Democracy and the Future of the World Economy* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 8.

⁶ Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox*, 9.

⁷ Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox*, 13-14.

⁸ Defined by Rodrik as “the long century before 1914” (Rodrik, 24).

Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s into the 1990s. The later period being notable due to the extraordinary push to eliminate transaction costs associated with national borders.

This was a critical period in the history of economic globalization where deregulation of finance, privatization, and free market ideologies reached unprecedented levels as they became fully enshrined in IMF, World Bank, and WTO policy. These institutions, in turn, pressed this Washington Consensus agenda on many developing nations through conditional loans and structural adjustment programs. Interestingly, developing states who balanced neoliberal policy reforms while protecting domestic industries, were among the nations who experienced the most dramatic growth during this time period. Notable examples are represented by the “Asian Miracle” in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia. The meteoric rise of China as an economic juggernaut serves as one of the most remarkable counterweights to market fundamentalist calls for full-scale liberalization.

For Rodrik this is representative of the globalization paradox of today; that hyperglobalization and market liberalization will only work if all states adhere to the same rules. Yet many states are not willing to sacrifice their sovereignty, which creates unresolved contradictions between globalization, democracy, and states pursuing their own national interest. This leads Rodrik to consider the question of whether unified global economic governance is either feasible or desirable. Rodrik responds to both with a resounding “no” arguing that:

We must acknowledge and accept the restraints on globalization that a divided global polity entails. The scope of workable global regulation limits the scope of desirable globalization. Hyperglobalization cannot be achieved, and we should not pretend that it can. Ultimately, this reality check can lead us to a healthier, more sustainable world order.⁹

⁹ Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox*, 232.

Rodrik, like Bremmer, concludes by providing suggestions for how we might reform the system, designing “capitalism 3.0” in an effort to promote “sane globalization.” A critical point made by Rodrik is that there are many different types of globalization, and the fundamental question isn’t whether we want more or less globalization, but what kind and what the rules should be. Rodrik cautions against one-size-fits-all, “hedgehog” approaches to globalization, encouraging a more nuanced, “fox” perspective that seeks to balance the prerogatives of states and markets.

From Bremmer and Rodrik’s works, it is clear that the process of globalization has not been a simple success story. It has benefitted a certain subset of the global population while marginalizing others, breeding a sense of popular discontent over time that has metastasized in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis. Robinson’s theory of global capitalism, which he refines in his book *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*,¹⁰ provides a powerful explanatory framework for understanding the social forces that drive globalization. These forces have played a significant role in instigating the current global crisis. Robinson’s theoretical conception of globalization is a substantial contribution to Bremmer’s argument, so that we can interpret present-day populism as being part of an interrelated ecosystem as opposed to distinct movements occurring in isolation from one another. Robinson draws inspiration, yet simultaneously distinguishes himself from Marxism, the world-systems approach, historical materialism, and other critical theories which “focus on the internal dynamics of capitalism in order to understand the crisis.”¹¹ Fundamental to the understanding of Robinson’s theory is the concept that:

We have gone from a world economy, in which countries and regions were linked to each other via trade and financial flows in an integrated international market, to a global economy, in which nations are linked to each other more organically through the transnationalization of the production process, of finance, and of the circuits of capital accumulation. No single nation-state can remain insulated from the global

¹⁰ His original theory was presented in an earlier publication, *A Theory of Global Capitalism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

¹¹ William Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 2.

*economy or prevent the penetration of the social, political, and cultural superstructure of global capitalism*¹².

Robinson points to hyperglobalization as the era where a new global economy emerged, following a brief interregnum period that was born out of the 1970s restructuring crisis.¹³ Two essential components of this new global economy are the Transnational Capitalist Class (TCC) and the Transnational State (TNS). The TCC is a class-based entity whose affiliations extend beyond the borders of individual states, including members in the Global North and South alike, positioning itself as a global ruling class. The TNS is constituted as a decentralized network “made up of trans- and supra- national organizations together with national states that function to organize the conditions for transnational accumulation and through which the TCC attempts to organize and institutionally exercise its class power.”¹⁴

According to Robinson, these agents of global capital have sought to open up remaining zones resistant to the penetration of transnational capital. This is evidenced by cases such as structural adjustment reforms in the developing world facilitated by Bretton Woods institutions, the incorporation of former Soviet bloc countries and China into the global economy, and the violent prying open of Iraq’s “Green Zone.” This penetration of the TCC is not merely a geospatial phenomenon operating in the developing world, but also seeks to privatize and commoditize previously inaccessible markets in the developed world. Such is the case with Unicor “a public company that uses inmates from US federal prisons to produce goods and services.”¹⁵ Proponents of *new imperialism* have argued that the penetration of capital is not a transnational phenomenon but has been pursued through the prism of competing states. Robinson refutes this argument, asserting that the

¹² Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, 2.

¹³ An interregnum is described by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks* as the time when “the old is dying and the new cannot be born.”

¹⁴ Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, 2.

¹⁵ Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, 116.

legal domicile of a corporation is irrelevant in a system of global production and financial liberalization, where in 2006 “financial markets were trading more in a month than the annual gross domestic product of the entire world.”¹⁶

For Robinson, the global crisis of today is a product of the internal contradictions of the capitalist system that leads to eventual overproduction, underconsumption, and the inability to unload surpluses. When this occurs, the system must restructure itself as it did by shifting to corporate capitalism and a new wave of colonialism in the 1870s, transitioning to a Fordist-Keynesian system of redistributive capitalism in the 1930s, and turning to the capitalist globalization model following the 1970s crisis. According to Robinson the Great Recession signaled yet another structural crisis of capitalism. During the current interregnum period, the manner in which this crisis will be resolved still remains unclear. Robinson concludes by identifying three possible responses to the crisis, which I discuss in a later section.

Sources of the Globalization Crisis

There are numerous synergies between the visions of globalization presented by the three authors. Yet despite many similarities, there are also notable divergences between these authors’ visions of globalization. One such divergence involves the sources of the current globalization crisis, as ascribed by each of the three authors.

According to Bremmer there are several ways that globalization has sowed the seeds of its own sickness. First and foremost, Bremmer cites economic insecurity as the most essential source of the current globalization crisis. He highlights displaced workers who have lost jobs when production and supply chains are moved abroad in the endless pursuit of lower wages and reduced cost. More prominent than outsourcing and offshoring, Bremmer views technological development and

¹⁶ Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, 145.

innovation as one of the greatest threats to economic security. According to a 2015 Ball State University study cited by Bremmer, “automation and related factors, not trade, accounted for 88 percent of lost US manufacturing jobs between 2006 and 2013.”¹⁷ Not only is this illustrative of a fundamental source of *current* economic displacement, but Bremmer also cites another study showing the prospects for *future* job displacement:

*The consulting firm McKinsey & Company has estimated that 73 percent of work in the food service and accommodations industries could be automated in coming years. More than half of jobs in the retail sector could be lost and two-thirds of jobs in finance and insurance sectors are likely to disappear once computers can understand speech as well as humans do.*¹⁸

An additional source of the globalization crisis denoted by Bremmer is cultural anxiety, given that globalization doesn’t merely move factories and supply chains, but real people. This feeds public anxiety by “shifting the racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious makeup of communities, sometimes abruptly.”¹⁹ This became a particularly salient issue in the Brexit campaign, as Conservative Party MPs such as Boris Johnson stressed that immigration and refugee resettlement place ““huge unfunded pressures”²⁰ on the National Health Service and other public services. In other words, the foreigners are coming for both your jobs and your health insurance.”²¹ Finally, Bremmer points to several additional factors amplifying the current crisis, including communication filter bubbles, terrorism, cyber security, and widening inequality.

For Rodrik, the primary source of the globalization crisis derives from the aforementioned political trilemma of the world economy, which forces us to choose between restricting democracy

¹⁷ Michael Hicks and Srikant Devaraj, “The Myth and Reality of Manufacturing in America,” Conexus Indiana, Ball State University, April 2017, <http://conexus.cberdata.org/files/MfgReality.pdf>.

¹⁸ Michael Chui, James Manyika, and Mehdi Miremadi, “Where Machines Could Replace Humans- And where They Can’t (Yet),” *McKinsey Quarterly*, July 2016, www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/digital-mckinsey/our-insights/where-machines-could-replace-humans-and-where-they-cant-yet.

¹⁹ Bremmer, *Us vs. Them*, 20.

²⁰ Steven Erlanger, “Money, Jobs and Sovereignty: Myth vs. Reality Ahead of ‘Brexit’ Vote,” *New York Times*, June 6, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/08/world/europe/britain-brexit-vote-facts.html>.

²¹ Bremmer, *Us vs. Them*, 21.

(the “Golden Straitjacket”), limiting globalization (the “Bretton Woods compromise”), or globalizing democracy (“Global Governance”). In an era of hyperglobalization, the Bretton Woods compromise has been ruled out, leading to an unresolved contradiction described by Rodrik:

We cherish our democracy and national sovereignty, and yet we sign one trade agreement after another and treat free capital flows as the natural order of things. This unstable and incoherent state of affairs is a recipe for disaster. Argentina in the 1990s gave us a vivid and extreme example. However, one does not have to live in a badly governed developing country ravaged by speculative capital flows to experience the tension on an almost daily basis. The clash between globalization and domestic social arrangements is a core feature of the global economy.²²

In Rodrik’s view, hyperglobalization is the epicenter of the current crisis. It has created a volatile tension between democracy and national sovereignty. His nostalgia for the post-World War II era preceding hyperglobalization is evident, as he argues for a reinvention of the Bretton Woods compromise. He cautions, however, against “simply [bringing] back wholesale the approaches of the 1950s and 1960s” arguing that “we will have to be imaginative, innovative, and willing to experiment.”²³ Rodrik’s vision for a “sane globalization” is detailed in a later section.

Finally there is Robinson, who points to the internal contradictions inherent in the capitalist system as the essential source of the current globalization crisis. He approaches the crisis from the vantage of a heterodox political economist, contending that:

1) Crises are immanent to capitalism, that is, crises are “normal” insofar as they are generated by the “normal” functioning of the system; 2) crises are generated by the many interrelated contradictions internal to capitalism, whether posited as the rate of profit to fall, as the social antagonism between capital and labor, between use-value and exchange-value, forces and relations of production, value-production and value-realization - posed as the disjuncture between production and circulation, and termed overproduction or underconsumption - or as overaccumulation (overproduction of capital).²⁴

²² Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox*, 190.

²³ Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox*, 205.

²⁴ Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, 130.

Robinson explains that there are three types of crises: cyclical, structural, and systemic. He identifies the current global crisis as a structural crisis but does not rule out the possibility of a structural crisis transforming into a systemic crisis, involving “the replacement of a system by an entirely new system or [leading] to an outright collapse.”²⁵ Complicit in the current crisis are both the TCC and TNS who seek to perpetuate the capitalist system, operating symbiotically in their relentless pursuit of continued accumulation. Robinson describes a system hurtling towards its breaking point that has been handed a temporary lifeline through “financial speculation and militarized accumulation.”²⁶ One aspect of this is what Robinson refers to as the development of a “Global Casino” where the “world derivative market has climbed to an unfathomable \$791 trillion, eleven times the size of the entire world economy.”²⁷ The second aspect is a product of the military industrial complex, which ranges from:

*The replacement of state soldiers by mercenary armies (“private security firms”), to the subcontracting of reconstruction projects, military engineering, the construction of military and conflict-related installations, the supplying of food, consumer items, and services to occupation armies, the construction of private prisons and “security walls,” and even the subcontracting of torture and interrogation.*²⁸

More recent permutations of militarized accumulation have also been born out through various forms of social control and the commodification of state repression. This is embodied by the “war on drugs,” “war on poverty,” “war on terrorism,” and more recently the “war on immigration,” which have collectively become multitrillion-dollar industries.²⁹ Robinson contends that few frontiers remain uncolonized by transnational capital, accelerating the urgency of the current crisis. I return to this topic in a later section.

²⁵ Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, 129.

²⁶ Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, 134.

²⁷ Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, 137.

²⁸ Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, 151.

²⁹ The global arms trade alone is estimated by Andrew Feinstein to be a \$3.5 trillion business in his book *The Shadow World: Inside the Global Arms Trade*.

Addressing Ontological Disharmony

In addition to divergent interpretations of the sources of the current globalization crisis, another important disharmony which must be addressed is the ontology, or primary unit of analysis, identified by each of the authors. Among these works, the subject of ontological disharmony is the role of the state in the international system. On one end of the spectrum, there are those who believe that the state persists as the fundamental unit of analysis. On the other end of the spectrum, there are those who contend that, in a global society, the state should no longer be understood as the most central actor.

In Bremmer's case, the state continues to be the fundamental unit of analysis. This is made abundantly clear in the chapter titled "Fault Lines" where Bremmer conducts a case-by-case analysis of 12 individual countries that he describes in chapter two as "the world's largest and most important developing countries: China, India, Indonesia, Russia, Turkey, Brazil, Mexico, Venezuela, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and South Africa."³⁰ Throughout the book, Bremmer provides additional state-based anecdotes and empirical evidence to support his claims.

While Rodrik makes a case that states have more or less salience depending upon the type and degree of globalization, his analysis also considers the system as a whole, as exhibited by sections devoted to international institutions, multinational conglomerates, and the global labor force. Part of this systematic consideration likely stems from the fact that his globalization narrative begins before the advent of the modern state system. Despite considerations for the system in its entirety, it is evident that for Rodrik, the state persists as a fundamental unit of analysis. In his account, Rodrik introduces the concept of the "political trilemma of the world economy" which involves three options for managing the tensions between national democracy and global markets:

³⁰ Bremmer, *Us vs. Them*, 53.

We can restrict democracy in the interest of minimizing international transaction costs, disregarding the economic and social whiplash that the global economy occasionally produces. We can limit globalization, in the hope of building democratic legitimacy at home. Or we can globalize democracy, at the cost of national sovereignty. This gives us a menu of options for reconstructing the world economy... We can have at most two out of three.³¹

Under this framework, the state remains a relevant unit in two out of the three possible scenarios. If, however, hyperglobalization and democratic politics are prioritized under a situation of global governance, then the designation of distinct states is less germane. Rodrik characterizes this as the least likely and least desirable scenario making it clear that the state remains a central focal point:

We may think we live in a world whose governance has been radically transformed by globalization, but the buck still stops with domestic policy makers. The hype that surrounds the decline of the nation state is just that: hype. Our world economy may be populated by a veritable alphabet soup of international agencies- everything from ADB to WTO- but democratic decision making remains firmly lodged within nation states.³²

Robinson would disagree with Rodrik and Bremmer's state-centric approaches. He demonstrates this by presenting the most novel ontology, which he defines as *constellations of social forces*. Early on in his book he introduces the concept of *reification*, and warns of the pitfalls of state-centric approaches:

Nation-state-centric approaches reify institutions by substituting them for social forces and then giving them a fixed character in causal explanations, so that, for instance, national states are bestowed with agency in explaining global political and economic dynamics. Institutions such as states, however, are not actors with an independent life of their own; they are the products of social forces that reproduce as well as modify them and that are causal in historical explanations. Social forces operate through multiple institutions in complex and shifting webs of conflict and cooperation. We need to focus not on states as fictitious macro-agents but on historically changing constellations of social forces.³³

³¹ Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox*, 200.

³² Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox*, 208.

³³ Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, 11.

This emphasis on constellations of social forces is consistent with Robinson's theory of global capitalism. His theory moves beyond national borders by focusing on the transnational capitalist class and the transnational state, which he argues are "concealed behind nation-state data."³⁴ Given that Robinson's analysis attributes greater weight to transnational class allegiances than national ones, this ontological focus is a sensible choice. Though Robinson's approach may be the least conventional, it also seems highly useful in a world of hyperglobalization. If one accepts that social forces and financial capital have transnationalized, it would be self-limiting to confine analysis within the bounds of geospatial units.

The Future of Globalization

In Robinson's chapter "Policing Global Capitalism," he identifies three *possible* responses to the current globalization crisis. He affirms that this menu of responses is not exhaustive, nor is it mutually exclusive, and is fully contingent on the agencies of various constellations of social forces that come together in particular conjunctures. Nevertheless, I elaborate on these responses, by incorporating Bremmer and Rodrik into Robinson's framework in which responses to the current globalization crisis may take the following forms: neo-fascism, reformism, and revolutionary mass struggle.

The first response, what Robinson terms "twenty-first-century fascism," would be incontrovertibly characterized as the least desirable response by all three authors. Robinson describes the proto-fascist response up to this point as involving "militarism, extreme masculinization, racism, the search for scapegoats (such as immigrant workers and Muslims in the United States and Europe), and mystifying, sometimes millennial, ideologies."³⁵ Robinson reiterates that fascism is a particular

³⁴ Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, 39.

³⁵ Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, 163.

response that strives to contain challenges from subordinate groups. He goes to great lengths to impress that “a twenty-first-century fascism would not be a repetition of its twentieth-century predecessor.”³⁶ In fact, he suggests avoiding the term *fascism* altogether when possible, given knee-jerk dismissals resulting from frequently misapplied references to Nazi Germany. Robinson alludes to Bertram Gross who helped illustrate the mechanisms through which fascism operates in his 1980’s book *Friendly Fascism: The New Face of Power in America*³⁷:

*The element that Gross saw as central to all types of fascism is a strong interpenetration of large capitalist corporations with a repressive centralized government that serves corporate interests. He argued that such a state of affairs can develop gradually and incrementally, without a dramatic takeover of power by an overtly authoritarian party, and that control can be exercised through more subtle and sophisticated means than in the classic cases. Indeed, he believed that the evolution of such a system of friendly fascism in the United States is fully compatible with retaining a two-party and ostensibly democratic system.*³⁸

A critical distinguishing feature Robinson highlights is that twenty-first-century fascism in the United States is not expressed through competition with other states but is a function of the dictatorship of transnational capital. Robinson cites a decades-long assault on unions, steady wage stagnation since the 1970s, flexibilization of employment, “right to work” campaigns, draconian cuts in social services, corporate tax breaks, and violent crackdowns of peaceful protest as symptoms of transnational capital’s pathological, neo-fascist repression of the global working class.

A second possible response to the globalization crisis according to Robinson’s framework is reformism, which thus far has “appeared to be the dominant response from elites in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 collapse.”³⁹ This brand of reformism involves a turn towards “institutional economics, a limited re-regulation of global market forces, tax reform (e.g., the Tobin Tax), limited redistribution, and multi trillion-dollar state intervention programs designed to bail out transnational

³⁶ Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, 168.

³⁷ Bertram Gross, *Friendly Fascism: The New Face of Power in America* (Boston: South End Press, 1980).

³⁸ Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity* 169.

³⁹ Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, 159.

capital.”⁴⁰ Bremmer and Rodrik would both be situated firmly within this reformist camp, given that their recommendations largely support the preservation of the global capitalist system as opposed to radically challenging the current world socioeconomic order.

Bremmer’s suggestion of “rewriting the social contract” may appear revolutionary at first blush. Yet the details he spells out conforms more to modest reformism, expressed through a list of top-down recommendations that grant limited agency to social actors from below. Some of his prescriptions are supported by rigorous academic research, whereas others are based on anecdotal evidence. Examples of these ideas include early education reform, technological skills training and subsidies, taxes on robots or machine usage, tax transfers to displaced workers, new corporate tax schemes, debt forgiveness, reorganization of social safety nets adapted to the gig economy, universal basic income, compulsory savings plans, and social programs ostensibly aimed at reducing inequality.

Furthermore, Bremmer presents several examples that champion the role of the private sector. In reference to the early emergence of pensions, he remarks, “The private sector, not government, led the way. The first pensions in America were provided by the American Express Company to its employees in 1875.”⁴¹ He also includes a section titled “Beyond Government” extolling the virtues of corporate philanthropy. Robinson would describe this as an example of Antonio Gramsci’s *passive revolution*, under which dominant groups “bring about mild change from above in order to undercut mobilization for more far-reaching transformation from below.”⁴² Emblematic of this reformist position is the subtle re-emergence of privatization rhetoric, laying the foundations for future accumulation after a brief systematic restructuring. Bremmer concludes by reasserting a TCC-consistent argument that private capital penetration should be a central part of the solution:

⁴⁰ Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, 159.

⁴¹ Bremmer, *Us vs. Them*, 139-140.

⁴² Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, 171.

Yet private companies and institutions will be a crucial part of any serious effort to rewrite the social contract, because they can incubate ideas that governments won't and experiment in ways that governments can't. This will make a difference. Companies can use the marketplace to find out what works and how people will respond to new ways of doing things.⁴³

Likewise, Rodrik remains within the bounds of the reformist camp with his appeal to revert back to a Bretton-Woods-inspired iteration of globalization; a step back from the modern era hyperglobalization. In a similar way that Robinson differentiates classical fascism from twenty-first-century-fascism, Rodrik also makes a clear distinction between the globalization era under the Bretton Woods regime and his vision of globalization under “Capitalism 3.0.” He argues that we can’t simply impose the same global trade regime as before, but that it must be reinvented to suit the needs of a new era. Similar to Bremmer, Rodrik’s recommendations are predicated on change from above, and consider the role of social forces as fairly inconsequential. Deviating from Bremmer, Rodrik provides a more scrupulous set of prescriptions that would appear to constrict the TCC thereby limiting the scope of capitalist penetration.

Rodrik details seven “commonsense principles for a new globalization.” Among them, he emphasizes the following points; that markets must be embedded within systems of governance and that governments and markets are complementary; that democratic governance based in states is preferable to global governance; that there are multiple paths to economic development; that countries should have the sovereign right to protect their own social arrangements, regulations, and institutions; that countries do not have the right to impose institutions on others; that international rules should not be abandoned entirely and that a relatively open global economy that maintains diversity and greater flexibility remains optimal; and finally, that democratic decision-making should remain a cornerstone

⁴³ Bremmer, *Us vs. Them*, 160.

of any international system, so that non-democracies may be excluded from certain preferential treatments.⁴⁴

Where Bremmer’s reforms are primarily concerned with domestic policy, Rodrik’s reforms ascend to the level of the international system, requiring significant coordination among individual states. Rodrik’s prescriptions signify a greater degree of national sovereignty and, if enacted, would include enhanced barriers to transnational capital penetration. Robinson would therefore draw attention to the extreme difficulty in implementing Rodrik’s proposed reforms, due to vehement opposition from the TCC and TNS.

This leads to the third potential response to the globalization crisis, revolutionary mass struggle as part of a movement for global justice. For Robinson, this would entail the pursuit of a post-capitalist global order. At present time, he characterizes this movement as robust and growing, yet incoherent and decentralized:

Everywhere popular forces are in ferment and mass struggles escalating. The organized left has had a renewed presence in many countries. These counterhegemonic forces call for the resolution of the crisis through a more far-reaching transformation of the global social order. But severe fragmentation of the popular classes brought about by decades of global informalization and flexible accumulation continues to challenge counterhegemonic forces to find new ways to aggregate dispersed groups into collective project of transformation.⁴⁵

Robinson insists that reform and revolution have never been mutually exclusive struggles, as struggle from below is “mutually reinforcing [and] part of a broader project of transformation.”⁴⁶ However, Robinson avoids overly optimistic projections, maintaining skepticism about the prospect of global revolution absent the amalgamation of disparate social movements “into a powerful political force capable of contesting the TNS.”⁴⁷ Robinson ends with a spirited appeal for a transnational

⁴⁴ Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox*, 236-247.

⁴⁵ Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, 162.

⁴⁶ Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, 235.

⁴⁷ Robinson, *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity*, 235.

popular project seeking to awaken social consciousness, empower the global working class, and facilitate convergence of bottom-up and top-down struggles.

Conclusion

Though all of these works were published well before the first case of COVID-19 was identified in December of 2019, the global pandemic serves as yet another watershed indication of the central theme in all three books; that the process of globalization is in peril. Over one year removed from the initial outbreak, it is clear that interconnectedness on both an economic and human level has dropped precipitously. In the quest to secure scarce resources, states and individuals alike have at various times resorted to self-preserving behavior. Within states the flames of populism continue to burn. The US Capitol insurrection on January 6th, 2021 is a potent reminder. At present time, there is still a great deal of uncertainty about the lasting impact of COVID-19 on globalization.

On the one hand, it is possible that history will view this moment as a temporary pause, that will eventually unleash a new wave of openness. On the other hand, it is also possible that the pandemic will be viewed as a continuation of a larger trend of insularity, portended by previous landmark developments such as the Global Financial Crisis, the election of Donald Trump, and Brexit. There may yet be a third option that falls somewhere in the middle, whereby globalization is supplanted by regionalization. This would involve greater integration within certain blocs, and greater fragmentation between certain blocs. Many hurdles remain before COVID-19 can be referred to in the past tense. Thus, a comprehensive assessment of the impact of the pandemic on globalization remains a future endeavor.

In closing, I reaffirm the claim posited at the outset; that a multi-perspective, theoretically rich analysis across time is essential to understanding globalization in the context of the current and ongoing crisis. On its own, Bremmer's book is insufficient in this regard, but when accompanied by

Rodrik and Robinson's books as part of a complementary anthology, we can begin to understand how the shortcomings of globalization are linked to the development of us vs. them social and political polarization around the world today. The three visions of globalization portrayed by the authors display many synergies, while also maintaining key distinctions. This intellectual diversity allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the sources of crisis, the relevant units of analysis, and possible responses moving forward. Just as the three authors offered prescriptions for the future of globalization, so too do I prescribe a continued focus on the evolution of the dialectical relationship between globalization and populism.

Acknowledgements

This paper would not have been possible without the advice of numerous faculty members and graduate student colleagues across three distinct disciplinary fields at the University of California Santa Barbara: The Department of Political Science, The Department of Sociology, and The Department of Global Studies. Special thanks are owed to Benjamin J. Cohen, William I. Robinson, and Paul Amar. In their own ways, each has encouraged my intellectual curiosity and served as a model for the type of scholar that I aspire to be. A final word of thanks to my family, whose love and support is the best cure for any writer's block.

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