

Transnational state

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The theory of an emergent transnational state (TNS), as coined by sociologist William I. Robinson (2001), claims that through globalization a nascent political, juridical and regulatory network is coming into existence worldwide. This notion rests upon the idea that a dominant social force, a transnational capitalist class (TCC), propels globalization through transnational corporations (TNCs) (Robinson & Harris 2000). The TCC, to promote and ensure its power, requires a concomitant political project. Such a political project would involve, for example: (i) promoting investor confidence in the global economy, (ii) setting up mechanisms and institutions for responding to economic, political, and military crises that threaten the stability necessary for global markets, and (iii) establishing a degree of macroeconomic policy uniformity across borders.

A restructuring of the world economy in the era of global capitalism has also occurred alongside political restructuring. Emphasizing economic development through incorporation with global capital, state elites increasingly work to transfer state resources from “program oriented ministries (social services, education, labor, etc.) to central banks, treasuries and finance and economic ministries, and the foreign ministry” (Robinson 2001: 186). Over recent decades, more and more state elites have shared in this overarching project, which is ultimately in the interest of the TCC. State institutions, penetrated by transnational social forces, are changing, and, as Robinson suggests, in many ways are being incorporated into an emergent transnational network. Pushed by global capital and the policies of numerous institutions and powerful states (most importantly, the United States) such transformative processes continue to occur around the

world yet are also held back by numerous divisions, inherent contradictions, and forms of resistance.

In this way, the emergent TNS is an analytical abstraction for understanding how many national and supranational state institutions around the world are transforming through globalization, as the practices and ideologies of the state elites who operate them have become tied in a variety of ways to the promotion and accumulation of global capital. In this shift, a “loose network comprised of supranational political and economic institutions together with national state apparatuses” is being “penetrated and transformed by transnational forces” (Robinson 2007: 131). Robinson has looked in depth at how various social groups and strata and the institutions they operate through have become further incorporated into processes of global capitalism, for example, looking at how this has played out in recent history in countries such as Haiti, Nicaragua, the Philippines, South Africa, regionally in Central America, and across the Americas (Robinson 1996, 2003, 2008). As many socioeconomic processes increasingly occur as functionally integrated (to different degrees) across borders it becomes more difficult for social scientists to reduce such processes as bound to the “nation-state.”

Even the unilateral invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan by the United States, for example, can be understood as a conflict through the scope of global capitalism. Fractions of the TCC aligned with the US national state benefit from the intensified incorporation of new zones into global capitalism, as do many other fractions as time has passed. But still, even with different local conditions, and as tactical and strategic differences occur, transnationally oriented elites share in many overarching interests and processes.

While sharing in the view that global capitalism is a new epoch in the history of world

capitalism, and that we should move beyond the idea of only US imperialism as behind the fundamental structure of our global system, the idea of an emergent TNS should not be confused with a vague and faceless Empire as described by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000; also Sprague 2011). Rather, the idea of a TNS as an analytical abstraction helps us to frame and study historical processes in the context of broader class and social relations.

Other scholars have constructed theories to explain the intensification and transnational nature of networking through globalization. Manuel Castells (2009) puts forward the concept of a *network society*, where transnational networks of small and medium firms have come about during the era of global capitalism. Leslie Sklair (2002) conceptualizes a *global system*, where globalist and localist social groups conflict within national states. Saskia Sassen (2001) theorizes the concept of the *global city*, where large metropolises become centralized nexus points of the capitalist system. However, none of these concepts explain well the role of transnational social forces in asserting new power dynamics around the world.

During the final decades of the twentieth century a restructuring of the world economy occurred. This occurred alongside a political restructuring, with power “redistributed in society, and also within the national state apparatus itself, toward emergent transnational nuclei of local dominant groups” (Robinson 2001: 186). With the collapse of the reciprocal agreements between capitalists and labor (the Fordist or Kensityan models), neoliberal policies throughout the late twentieth century propelled a transformation of state institutions around the world. Robinson, from a neo-Marxian approach, suggests we first look at the sociological undercurrent of how such changes to state institutions have occurred through globalization.

By rejecting Weberian conceptions of the state and drawing inspiration instead from the writings on political economy by theorists such as Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci and Nicos Poulantzas, Robinson seeks to examine

state transformation as connected to ongoing processes linked to socioeconomic forces novel to the historical present. While recognizing the importance of historical processes, it is Robinson’s contention that for much of the world the dominant social forces are no longer national or international capitalists, but, rather, increasingly transnational capitalists operating through TNCs. This is especially important in considering how transnationally- and nationally-oriented social groups are operating in the current epoch.

To better access global capital, many state elites have transformed, taking on practices and ideologies connected with this phenomenon. Robinson proposes we can consider the transformation of the state during the epoch of global capitalism in relation to how these elites and the apparatuses they operate have developed. In this manner, state elites increasingly operate not as elites bound to the nation-state but as transnational elites, as purveyors of a TNS project with practices and ideologies that have become in many ways connected to transnational processes and the accumulation of global capital. This idea poses a challenge to both classical theories of imperialism and to Weberian nation-state centrism, as such a network “seeks to create and maintain the pre-conditions for the valorization and accumulation of capital in the global economy, which is not simply the sum of national economies and national class structures” (Robinson 2001: 167).

As a tenuous multilayered project, interconnected with local, national, and regional processes, the emergent TNS is made up of three components: (i) national states, (ii) supranational political forums, and (iii) supranational economic forums. Within these three components are TNS apparatuses: various national and supranational institutions, agencies, and ministries all undergoing transformative processes in the era of global capitalism. According to Clark and Dear, “generally speaking, the term ‘state apparatus’ refers to the set of institutions and organizations through which state power is exercised” (1984: 45). In the contemporary

era of globalization, Robinson argues that many state elites (operating through national states as well as supranational economic and political forums) have developed new practices and have become ideologically tied to the promotion of global capital. Some are attempting (though greatly struggling) to develop new coordinative relations:

... an emerging network [which]... has not yet acquired a centralized institutional form... multilayered and multicentered. It links together functionally institutions that exhibit distinct gradations of "state-ness," that have different histories and trajectories, and that are linked backward and forward to distinct sets of institutions, structures, and regions (Robinson 2004: 88).

Still, the national state increasingly penetrated by transnational social forces, maintains practices long-associated with functions of the nation-state (police, taxation, public works, etc.), however, qualitatively new practices and ideologies have become deeply embedded. Transnational elites and technocrats believe that to develop they must insert their national states and institutions into global circuits of accumulation (Robinson 2010; Dominguez 1996). They need access to capital, and capital is in the hands of the TCC. However, state elites must still appeal to their home audiences. They still interact with a variety of national social groups as well as those groups that are transnationalizing. Because of this, even as ties with the TCC deepen, national rhetoric and national state policies occur that are in *apparent contradiction* with TCC interests. In this way, political leaders attempt to maintain national political legitimacy while deepening practices of a global nature. As these state elites become entangled with and dependent upon processes of global capital accumulation they increasingly transition from taking part in *national* or *international* processes to *transnational* processes. Observing such phenomena in Central America in the 1980s, 1990s and

early 2000s, where national states were penetrated by transnationally oriented dominant groups both from "within" and from "without," Robinson argues:

... From "within," transnationalized fractions vied for, and gained control over local states, particularly over key ministries tying each country to the global economy and society... From "without," diverse transnational actors representing an emergent TNS apparatus penetrated local states, liaised with transnationalized fractions therein, and helped design and guide local politics... (Robinson 2003: 217–218).

Robinson suggests that in addition to national states, supranational economic and political forums make up the emergent TNS. The economic forums include the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, and smaller regulatory authorities such as the Bank of International Settlement. Political forums include the G20, UN, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), as well as regional political groupings, such as the European Union, and regulatory institutions, such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Still, the activities of transnational elites are incoherent and their project unsustainable, as Robinson explains via Marx's crisis theory. Even with today's conjuncture of capitalist crisis, global warming, and rising inequality around the world, transnationally oriented elites have sought in different ways to stabilize the system or promote the accumulation of global capital. Robinson argues that in carrying out their strategies they have focused often on certain key sectors of state institutions, pushing them away from projects of national development and instead toward policies more transnationally geared:

... In this way "chunks" of national states break off and become functional parts of a TNS. These ministries and branches become de-nationalized; transnational entities

linked organizationally to nation-state institutions. They do not become representatives of some other nation-state, as nation-state theories suggest, but of transnational capital and the transnational state elite (Robinson 2003: 217–218).

Others have begun to use the idea of an emergent TNS. George Liodakis writes that “the transnational dialectic of capitalist transformation is rapidly leading from the historical international system of nation-states and the traditional forms of nation-state centered class struggle to a transnational class formation, an emerging transnational state (TNS) and a rising significance of transnational class struggle and solidarity” (Liodakis 2010: 65). A group of scholars, utilizing the world systems approach, acknowledge, “it is important to theorize the transnational state and to study its emergence” (Chase-Dunn et al. 2008: 5). A number of other recent studies have in different ways pointed toward the transnationalization of state apparatuses or ways in which transnational processes converge with the state (Chimni 2004; Dent 2003; Djelic & Drahos & Braithwaite 2004; Helleiner et al. 2010; Jacobsson et al. 2003; Jayasuriya 2005; Sahlin-Andersson 2008).

Kanishka Jayasuriya suggests that the idea of a TNS “forces us to explore how the national state has been transformed through the transnationalization of state actors and institutions. It compels us to confront the way global capitalism has rendered conventional notions of statehood” (Jayasuriya 2004: 6). While Jayasuriya recognizes that the ongoing transformation of the state is linked to novel socioeconomic forces, he describes this process as occurring through various institutional mechanisms such as “complex systems of multi-level regulation, meta-governance, and systems of soft law” (quoted in Sprague 2010: 128). He adds the transnationalization of state apparatuses is occurring in part through the rise of a global regulatory regime characterized by processes of “decentralized enforcement”, whereby supranational institutions lay down standards for member states and monitor their compliance

rather than directly regulating their activities (Jayasuriya 1999: 452).

Jerry Harris stresses looking at the TNS relative to its nascency, coming into existence slowly and waveringly, its networks lagging behind the development of TCC networks for example. By utilizing the state as a tool of transformation, many dominant transnational groups are pushing attempts at integration or to stave off global economic collapse. Harris adds that states have undergone important changes with the rise of new social forces in past historical periods as well. For example during the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain, he explains that capitalist classes captured Parliament and the state “in a prolonged political struggle with the landed gentry”, adding that:

History shows that states can undergo a radical shift in purpose without a violent revolution... A similar transformative process is now taking place in countries throughout the world where differences between globalists and nationalists policies define the terrain of local political struggle (Harris 2006: 56–57).

Scholars have also used the idea of a TNS and its apparatuses in empirical studies. William Avilés writes of the “role of an incipient transnational state in initiating, modifying and implementing Plan Colombia” (Avilés 2008: 411). He argues that theories of US imperialism cannot account for what are more nuanced transnational processes. Pointing out the transnationality of corporations active in Colombia, he observes “a commitment by actors in the USA and Colombia to a transnational order of neoliberal economics and ‘market democracies’ as well as the existence of a transnational policy network that eased the policy-making process” (Avilés 2008: 426). The goal of such a project as Plan Colombia, Avilés points out, is to bring about further integration into a global capitalist economy, even as the United States remains the most powerful state promoting this process.

In one particularly interesting case study, Robyn Magalit Rodriguez examines national state agencies in the Philippines and their role as TNS apparatuses in promoting the exploitation and exportation of labor. She examines, for example, the facilitation by certain Philippine state institutions of transnational processes tied to the accumulation of global capital, how, “through this transnational state apparatus, research is conducted to determine broad, global demands for Philippine labor, while more focused research in particular countries examines which specific industries are experiencing shortages of labor and/or whether those particular countries offer visa categories that would allow Philippine migrants to enter for employment” (Rodriguez 2008: 796). With growing coordination between state elites, “Philippine migration officials and bureaucrats have increasingly become experts in the global field of ‘migration management,’ working as consultants to other labor-sending countries or playing host to delegation from other countries because of the Philippines’ highly developed migration bureaucracy” (Rodriguez 2010: 145), working closely with countries in their region such as Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, and China, as well as with supranational institutions and government ministries in labor-receiving countries in Europe, the Persian Gulf and North America. State officials pointed out to Rodriguez how memorandums of agreements to ensure exchange of information had been developed with other countries; some officials were working for other governments to aid the development of their migration programs. She explains how supranational institutions, or forums, like the WTO and the ASEAN meanwhile facilitate and lay out standards, working toward “greater mobility of labor both regionally and globally” (Rodriguez 2010: 146).

In sum, the idea of a TNS helps us conceptualize a nascent global network of national and supranational state institutions by examining how apparatuses within this network have become interpenetrated by elites that are transnationally oriented. In this manner, even as this project is inherently contradictory and

crisis-prone, through such ideas we can seek to understand how dominant state strata are engaging in shifting practices and ideologies connected to the promotion of global capital. The state, rather than disappearing or returning, is continuing to transform but in ways peculiar to the epoch of global capitalism. Importantly, as Robinson and others suggest, sustainable forms of resistance and alternative models of development must grapple with these changing conditions.

SEE ALSO: Anti-capitalism; Capitalism; Globalization and inequality; Governance; International Monetary Fund; Nation-state; Neoliberalism; Network society; Restructuring; Standardization; Transnational capitalist class; Transnational corporations; World Social Forum; World-systems analysis; World Trade Organization.

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