

# The Future of Global Capitalism

## *Crisis, Financialization, and Digitalization*

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### ABSTRACT

The current moment in world capitalism is defined by three key developments. First, the system has become universal through globalization processes that date to the late twentieth century. Second, the system is undergoing a new round of restructuring and transformation based on a much more advanced digitalization and financialization of the entire global economy and society. Third, the system faces an unprecedented capitalist crisis that is as much economic, or structural, one of overaccumulation, as it is political, one of state legitimacy and capitalist hegemony. This crisis is also existential because of the threat of ecological collapse as well as the renewed threat of nuclear war and the danger of future pandemics that may involve much deadlier microbes than coronaviruses. Despite much talk of “deglobalization” and the breakdown of global supply chains in the wake of the coronavirus economic meltdown, world trade reached a record high in 2021. Transnational elites are pinning their hopes on a new wave of capitalist expansion and prosperity through digitally driven restructuring. Even if a new period of digitally driven expansion displaces the structural crisis temporally into the future, global capitalism will continue to generate social crises of survival and well-being for billions of people.

### KEYWORDS

capitalist crisis, digitalization, global capitalism, globalization

As any dialectician would tell us, the only thing permanent in the universe is change itself. Everything is in a process of emergence, development, transformation, and ultimately transcendence into something qualitatively new. Capitalism as a social system is no exception. The current moment in world capitalism is defined

by three key developments. First, the system has become universal through globalization processes that date to the late twentieth century. Second, the system is undergoing a new round of restructuring and transformation based on a much more advanced digitalization and financialization of the entire global economy and society. And third, the system faces an unprecedented crisis that is as much economic, or structural, as it is political, one of state legitimacy and capitalist hegemony. This crisis is also existential because of the threat of ecological collapse as well as the renewed threat of nuclear war, to which we must add the danger of future pandemics that may involve much deadlier microbes than coronaviruses.

Scholars have never arrived at anything close to a consensus on how to define globalization, or indeed, if it is even a useful concept. In my conception, globalization constitutes a qualitatively new epoch in the ongoing and open-ended evolution of world capitalism, characterized above all by the rise of truly transnational capital and the integration of every country into a new globalized system of production, finance, and services. Globalization proceeds from three earlier epochs in the history of world capitalism—mercantilism, competitive or classical industrial capitalism, and national corporate or “monopoly” capitalism (Robinson, 2004, 2014). Each of these long waves in the system’s development involved a series of minor crises that eventually culminated in major system-wide structural crises that were resolved through worldwide restructuring as new class relations, institutions, technologies, and patterns of capital accumulation came into being.

The world capitalist crisis that began in the 1970s is generally identified as the turning point for globalization as capitalists searched out new modes of accumulation and ruling elites set out to restore capitalist hegemony. Capitalism was able to transcend the 1970s crisis by “going global,” leveraging globalization processes into a vast restructuring and integration of the world economy. As the global economy emerged, production was the first to transnationalize, starting in the late 1970s, epitomized by the rise of the global assembly line and the spread of modern-day sweatshops in free-trade zones around the world. Next, following a wave of financial deregulation in most countries around the world, national banking and financial systems transnationalized in the 1990s and 2000s. The transnationalization of services has since followed through a new wave of international trade-in-service and other agreements that have expedited the decentralized provision across borders of services as well as the privatization of health care, telecommunications, and other industries.

Now, however, the debate on globalization has taken a new turn in light of a new system-wide crisis that began with the 2008 global financial collapse. World trade contracted for the first time in several decades in the wake of the 2008 global financial collapse, while populists and political demagogues, mostly from the Far Right, put forth a protectionist and antiglobalization discourse as they stoked the fans of xenophobia and nationalism. Then the coronavirus pandemic triggered an

economic meltdown in 2020 unmatched since the Great Depression of the 1930s, rupturing global trade and supply networks. The breakdown during the height of the pandemic of these networks, so emblematic of globalization, led many to predict a wave of diversification in supply chains, “de-globalization,” and the near-shoring or reshoring of production and supply chains that had previously been offshored. Academics and pundits declared that the world was moving into a period of “deglobalization.”

In fact, however, an analysis of the data and of the underlying structural transformations underway suggests quite the opposite—that we are approaching a new round of globalization based on a much more organic integration of economy and society around the globe. Globalization scholars Manfred B. Steger and Paul James (2020) show how the leveling-off of cross-border trade in goods and a dip in cross-border financial flows after the 2008 crisis was more than compensated for by a massive increase in global digital connection, so that instead of deglobalization there is a shift from “embodied globalization,” by which they mean the physical mobility of human beings, and “object-related globalization,” which refers to the mobility of physical objects, to what they term “disembodied globalization,” which pertains to intangible global transactions such as those I will discuss below. Even at that, however, trade in goods in fact rebounded from the 2008 collapse, the 2015 recession, and from the 2020 pandemic meltdown (UNCTAD, 2021). But as we will see, this new wave of digitally driven globalization that is upon us is unlikely to resolve the crisis of global capitalism. To the contrary, it is largely *driven by the crisis*.

#### GLOBAL CAPITALIST CRISIS

Despite claims to the contrary by neoclassical economists, crisis is endemic to capitalism, and instability rather than equilibrium is the natural state of the system. The history of capitalism is one of periodic crises of two types. One is cyclical, sometimes called the business cycle, and shows up as recessions. They typically occur about every ten years. There were recessions in the early 1980s, the early 1990s, and the early 2000s. The other is more serious, a structural crisis, or what I call a restructuring crisis because its resolution requires a major restructuring of the system. Cyclical crises may affect only certain countries or regions, whereas structural crises generally affect the entire world economy. In the course of the twentieth century the system experienced two restructuring crises, the Great Depression of the 1930s and the crisis of stagnation and inflation (known as “stagflation”) of the 1970s. Both these crises had their origin in what political economists call overaccumulation. In simplified terms, this refers to a situation in which enormous amounts of capital (profits) are built up but this capital cannot find productive outlets for reinvestment. This capital then becomes stagnant,

as capitalists hold on to their accumulated profits rather than reinvesting them, throwing the system into crisis.

The structural crisis of the 1930s was overcome through a Keynesian emphasis on state intervention to regulate the market and bring about redistribution; that of the 1970s was overcome through globalization. The financial collapse of 2008 marked the start of a new structural crisis that now threatens to become *systemic* as we approach devastating climate disruption and the ecological limits to capitalism's reproduction. In response to the crisis, the system has been undergoing a new round of restructuring and transformation based on a much more advanced digitalization of the entire global economy and society. The coronavirus contagion has turbo-charged these transformations. The agents of global capitalism are attempting to purchase for the system a new lease on life through this digital restructuring and through reform that some among the global elite are advocating in the face of mass pressures from below. If some regulatory or redistributive reform actually comes to pass, this restructuring *may*—depending on the play of social and class forces—unleash a new round of productive expansion that attenuates the crisis. In the long run, however, it is difficult to see how global capitalism can continue to reproduce itself without a much more profound overhaul than is currently on the horizon, if not the outright overthrow of the system.

The transnational capitalist class (TCC) had attempted to resolve the crisis of the 1970s by going global, as we have seen. Capitalist globalization and neoliberal austerity did lead to a new economic boom in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This process pushed the global working and popular classes onto the defensive and shifted the global balance of class forces in favor of transnational capital following the period of mass struggles in the 1960s and 1970s. But by liberating emergent transnational capital from national constraints, globalization undermined the redistributive programs that had attenuated capitalism's inherent tendency towards social polarization and had helped ensure the system's survival, at least for a while. The result has been an unprecedented sharpening of inequality that has fueled overaccumulation. Indeed, the level of global social polarization and inequality now experienced is without precedent. In 2020, the richest 1 percent of humanity had come to control more than half of the world's wealth while the bottom 80 percent had to make do with just 5 percent.<sup>1</sup> If left unchecked, expanding social polarization results in crisis—in stagnation, recessions, depressions, social upheavals, and war—just what we are experiencing at this time.

Although overaccumulation originates in the sphere of production, it becomes manifest in the sphere of circulation, that is, it shows up in the market as a crisis of overproduction or underconsumption. This refers to a situation in which the economy has produced—or has the capacity to produce—great quantities of wealth but the market cannot absorb this wealth. Overaccumulation appears first as a glut in the market and then as stagnation. In fact, in the years leading up to

the pandemic there was a steady rise in underutilized capacity and a slowdown in industrial production around the world (see, inter alia: Cox, 2019; Toussaint, 2020). The surplus of accumulated capital with nowhere to go expanded rapidly. Transnational corporations recorded record profits during the 2010s at the same time that corporate investment declined (*The Economist*, 2016). The total cash held in reserves of the world's two thousand biggest nonfinancial corporations increased from \$6.6 trillion in 2010 to \$14.2 trillion in 2020—considerably more than the foreign exchange reserves of the world's central governments—as the global economy stagnated (*The Economist*, 2020: 60). The extreme concentration of the planet's wealth in the hands of the few and the accelerated impoverishment and dispossession of the majority meant that transnational capital had increasing difficulty in finding productive outlets to unload the enormous amounts of surplus it accumulated. The more global inequalities expand, the more constricted the world market becomes and the more the system faces a structural crisis of overaccumulation.

The tendency for capital to overaccumulate is just that—a tendency that can be offset, temporarily at least, by what are called countervailing tendencies and by mechanisms that may counteract the tendency. Frenzied financial speculation, unsustainable debt, the plunder of public finance, and state-organized militarized accumulation are just some of the mechanisms that the TCC and capitalist states turned to in the years leading up to the pandemic to keep the global economy sputtering along in the face of chronic stagnation (Robinson, 2020). As the productive economy has stagnated, capitalists have turned above all to financial speculation. The global economy has become a giant casino for transnational investors. In the wake of the Great Recession of 2008 the U.S. Federal Reserve undertook a whopping \$16 trillion in secret bailouts to banks and corporations from around the world (GAO, 2011). But then the banks and institutional investors simply recycled the trillions of dollars they received into new speculative activities in global commodities markets, in cryptocurrencies, and in land around the world, fueling a new global “land grab.” As opportunities have dried up for speculative investment in one sector, the TCC simply turns to another sector to unload its surplus.

As a result, the gap between the productive economy and fictitious capital has grown into an enormous chasm. Fictitious capital refers to money thrown into circulation without any base in commodities or in production (see, inter alia, Durand, 2017). A major portion of the income generated by financial speculation is fictitious, meaning (here in simplified form) that it exists on paper but does not correspond to real wealth in the world, that is, goods and services that people need and want, such as food, clothing, houses, and so on. The trade in this fictitious capital represents less the creation of new value or expanded production than the mirage of a bustling economy, as stock markets surge, asset values inflate, and credit expands. The accumulation of fictitious capital through speculation may offset the crisis temporally into the future or spatially to new digital geographies

and new population groups but in the long run only exacerbates the underlying problem of overaccumulation. In 2018, for example, the gross world product or the total value of goods and services stood at some \$75 trillion, whereas the global derivatives market—a marker of speculative activity—was estimated at a mind-boggling \$1.2 quadrillion (Maverick, 2020). This accumulation of fictitious capital gave the appearance of recovery in the years following the Great Recession of 2008. But it only offset the crisis temporarily into the future while in the long run exacerbating the underlying problem.

### THE SECOND DIGITAL AGE

Structural crises such as those of the 1930s and the 1970s typically involve the transformation of patterns of capital accumulation and new rounds of expansion, often incorporating new cutting-edge technologies, such as synthetic materials, consumer durables, automotive and petrochemicals, and military-industrial technologies that drove the post-World War II boom. Early in the twentieth century, the Soviet economist Nikolai Kondratieff noted how the world economy, driven by new cutting-edge technologies, experiences cycles of some forty to fifty years (called Kondratieff waves). In these cycles, rounds of expansion eventually become exhausted and are followed by downturns and crises, resulting in a reorganization of the system and new technologies that help launch a new cycle. However, the underlying causal dynamic that drives these cycles forward is the struggle among contending social and class forces. New Deal and social democratic arrangements together with world war and postwar expansion “resolved” the structural crisis of the 1930s. But the contradictions internal to the model of redistributive nation-state capitalism led to a new structural crisis in the 1970s. As noted above, the emerging TCC “resolved” this crisis through sweeping worldwide economic restructuring.

Global capitalism appears now on the brink of another wave of restructuring and transformation based on a much deeper digitalization of the entire global economy and society. At the core of this new wave of technological development is more advanced information technology or so-called fourth industrial revolution technologies (see, *inter alia*, Brynjolfsson et al., 2014; Ford, 2015; Schwab, 2016; Srnicek, 2016; Robinson, 2022b). Led by Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the collection, processing, and analysis of immense amounts of data (“big data”), the emerging technologies include machine learning, automation and robotics, nano- and biotechnology, the Internet of Things (IoT), quantum and cloud computing, 3D printing, virtual reality, new forms of energy storage, and autonomous land, air, and sea vehicles, among others. Computer and information technology (CIT), first introduced in the 1980s, provided the original basis for globalization. It allowed the TCC to coordinate and synchronize global production sequences and therefore to put into place a globally integrated production and financial system into which every country has become incorporated. It also made possible the

global integration of national financial systems and new forms of money, such as hedge funds or secondary derivative markets. It enabled the frictionless and instantaneous movement of money (value) in its diverse forms around the world, bringing about the financialization of the global economy discussed above. Just as the original introduction of CIT and the Internet in the late twentieth century profoundly transformed world capitalism, this second generation of digital-based technologies is leading to a new round of worldwide restructuring that promises to have another transformative impact on the structures of the global economy, society, and polity.

It is hard to underestimate just how rapid and extensive is the current digital restructuring. According to UNCTAD data (UNCTAD, 2019: multiple pages and tables), the “sharing economy” will surge from \$14 billion in 2014 to \$335 billion by 2025. Worldwide shipments of 3D printers more than doubled in 2016, to over 450,000, and were expected to reach 6.7 million by the end of 2020. The global value of e-commerce is estimated to have reached \$29 trillion in 2017, which is equivalent to 36 per cent of global GDP. In that year, 277 million people made cross-border purchases through e-commerce. Digitally deliverable service exports amounted in 2019 to \$2.9 trillion, or 50 percent of global services exports. By 2019 global Internet traffic was 66 times the volume of the entire global Internet traffic in 2005, whereas Global Internet Protocol (IP) traffic, a proxy for data flows, grew from about 100 gigabytes (GB) *per day* in 1992 to more than 45,000 GB *per second* in 2017. And yet the world is only in the early days of the data-driven economy; by 2022 global IP traffic was projected to reach 150,700 GB per second, fueled by more and more people coming online for the first time and by the expansion of the IoT. We are approaching a situation, or may well have arrived at it, in which every person on the planet is connected—for the most part directly although everyone indirectly—through a single common digital network. Already by 2015 more than 30 percent of the global population was using social media platforms. By 2019 there were 5.2 billion smartphones in operation worldwide and more than half the planet was online (Schwab & Malleret, 2020: 27, 165).

If the first generation of capitalist globalization from the 1980s on involved the creation of a globally integrated production and financial system, the new wave of digitalization and the rise of platforms have facilitated since 2008 a very rapid transnationalization of digital-based services. By 2017 services accounted for some 70 percent of the total gross world product (Marois, 2017) and included communications, informatics, digital and platform technology, e-commerce, financial services, professional and technical work, and a host of other nontangible products such as film and music. This shift worldwide to a service-based economy based on the widespread introduction of fourth industrial revolution technologies brings about a sea change in the structure of capitalist production towards the centrality of knowledge to the production of goods and services. This has involved the increasing dominance of intangible capital (literally, capital that is not physical

in nature), what has alternatively been called “intellectual capital,” “intellectual property,” and “immaterial production,” along with the associated concept of immaterial labor, cognitive labor, and knowledge workers, in reference to workers involved in immaterial production. To use Steger and James’s (2020) term, there is a vast expansion of “disembodied globalization.”

The COVID-19 pandemic boosted the efforts of the giant tech companies and their political agents to convert more and more areas of the economy into these new digital realms (Robinson, 2022b). At the center of global restructuring are the giant tech companies, among them Microsoft, Apple, Amazon, Tencent, Alibaba, and Facebook. These companies experienced astonishing growth in the 2010s. Added now to the earlier tech behemoths are Zoom, Netflix, and other companies boosted by the pandemic as well as tech firms such as Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing (TSM), whose expansion and market capitalization was ballooning even before the contagion. Zoom daily users jumped by 3,000 percent in the first four months of the pandemic. Moreover, there are now hundreds of up-and-coming tech firms from around the world that prospered during the pandemic and can be expected to expand rapidly as restructuring proceeds. Apple and Microsoft registered an astounding market capitalization of \$2.08 trillion and \$1.63 trillion, respectively, at the end of 2020. Amazon’s capitalization stood at \$1.04 trillion going into the pandemic and had climbed to \$1.58 trillion by the end of 2020. Alphabet (Google’s parent company) registered a \$1.2 trillion capitalization, Samsung \$983 billion, Facebook \$779 trillion, and Alibaba and Tencent some \$700 billion each. Meanwhile, in just two years, from 2015 to 2017, the combined value of the platform companies with a market capitalization of more than \$100 million jumped by 67 percent, to more than \$7 trillion (for the data in this paragraph, see Robinson, 2022b: multiple pages).

A handful of the largest tech firms have absorbed enormous amounts of cash from TCC investors from around the world who, desperate for new investment opportunities, have poured billions of dollars into the tech and platform giants as an outlet for their surplus accumulated capital in search of profits. Annual investment in CIT jumped from \$17 billion in 1970, to \$65 billion in 1980, then to \$175 billion in 1990, \$496 billion in 2000, and \$654 billion in 2016, and then topped \$800 billion in 2019 (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, n.d.). As capitalists invest these billions, the global banking and investment houses become interwoven with tech capital, as do businesses across the globe that are moving to cloud computing and Artificial Intelligence. It is clear that the astronomical amounts involved in the market capitalization of the tech firms were largely a result of stock speculation. There appears to be an enormous gap, difficult if not impossible to measure, between the value of these companies’ material assets and their market capitalization, reflecting the same chasm between the real economy and fictitious capital discussed above. This is to say that the relationship between finance and production in the tech sector is the same as it is in the global economy at large.

But could this be a temporary relationship as investment in tech generates a productive reactivation and expansion? Productive recovery would require, under the logic of capitalism, that the rate of profit rises. This would come about, *ceteris paribus*, from a rise in productivity through digitalization without a corresponding rise in the overall wage rate, or at least that profits rise more quickly than wages. Data shows that from the 1980s on, those corporations that transitioned to CIT were dramatically more productive than their competitors, managing to resolve the so-called “productivity paradox” (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014: 100–101), whereby the growth in productivity notably slowed starting in 1973, the date of the onset of a structural crisis and subsequent globalization.<sup>2</sup> One McKinsey report estimated in 2016 that global growth rates for the next fifty years would slow to almost half of the rate it enjoyed in the previous fifty years, from 3.8 to 2.1 percent. The report pinned hopes on digital technologies as the major source of future growth (Kauffman et. al., 2016).

The breakdown of global supply chains during the pandemic led to much discussion of nearshoring and reshoring, and indeed, some of this was already taking place by late 2021 (Anzolin & Aloisi, 2021). However, it is highly doubtful that reshoring will somehow bring back to rich countries stable, high-skilled, and high-paying industrial and postindustrial jobs, given that the relocation back to the core centers of the global economy will involve high levels of automation (Robinson, 2022b). (As a side note, reshoring or “deglobalization” does not mean that capital ceases to be transnational [see Robinson, 2018, 2022a]. It is *transnational capital* that relocates from one place to another as the geography of global capitalism is continuously reconfigured.) The flip side of reshoring to rich counties is the automation of plants that were offshored. Sweatshops that employ largely young women in cheap labor zones around the world, perhaps the archetypical image of the global economy, may become rarer as the low-skilled and repetitive labor that these sweatshops employ are exactly the type of tasks that are easily automated. As early as 2012, Foxconn, the Taiwanese-based conglomerate that assembles iPads and other electronic devices, announced following a wave of strikes that year by its workers in China that it would replace one million workers with robots. In fact, official Chinese statistics report a decline of thirty million manufacturing jobs from 1996 to 2014, or 25 percent of the total, even as manufacturing output increased by over 70 percent (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014: 98).

On the other hand, digitalization drives the expansion of cross-border services, as electronic offshoring, unlike the overseas relocation of production facilities, is virtually frictionless and does not add transportation and other ancillary costs such as customs charges. By 2016 the production of CIT goods and services represented 6.5 percent of global GDP, and one hundred million people were employed in the CIT service sector (UNCTAD, 2017: 17). When work is carried out remotely it does not matter where it is performed. The surge in investment in remote working during the pandemic opened the door to increased trade in digital services.

Yet even for services, new digital technologies such as interactive voice response systems are reducing the requirement for direct person-to-person communication and may lead to the automation of call centers around the world. We may see in the coming years a mix of nearshoring and reshoring to rich countries and increased automation in areas that became labor-intensive industrial processing zones and service centers, such as China's Guangdong Province. In the long run, it may be that offshoring is a historical way station on the road to automation. Meanwhile, all signs point to continued crisis, including the prospect of a return to stagflation, despite the recovery of growth rates in 2021 as the world emerged from the worst of the pandemic.

#### CONCLUSIONS: PROLONGED CRISIS AND THE BATTLE FOR THE FUTURE

Crises provide the TCC with the opportunity to restore profit levels by forcing greater productivity out of fewer workers. This process is driven forward by the new wave of digitalization discussed above, accelerated now in hot-house fashion by the economic and social conditions thrown up by the pandemic. Since the 1980s almost all employment lost in the United States in routine occupations due to automation, for instance, occurred during recessions (for discussion, see Robinson, 2020). The first wave of CIT in the latter decades of the twentieth century triggered explosive growth in productivity and productive capacities, while the new digital technologies promise to multiply such capacities many times over. Specifically, digitalization vastly increases the organic composition of capital, meaning that the portion of fixed capital in the form of machinery and technology tends to increase relative to variable capital in the form of labor. In laymen's terms, digitalization greatly accelerates the process whereby machinery and technology replace human labor, thus expanding the ranks of those who are made surplus and marginalized.

It is true that the first wave of digitalization in the late twentieth century resulted in a bifurcation of work, generating high-paid, high-skilled jobs on one side of the pole, giving rise to new armies of tech and finance workers, engineers, software programmers, and so on. On the other side of the pole, digitalization produced a much more numerous mass of deskilled, low-wage workers and an expansion of the ranks of surplus labor (Robinson, 2020). But the new wave of digitalization threatens now to make redundant much so-called "knowledge work" and to deskill and downgrade a significant portion of those knowledge-based jobs that remain. As "big data" captures data on knowledge-based occupations at the workplace and in the market and then converts it into algorithms, this labor itself is threatened with replacement by Artificial Intelligence, autonomous vehicles, and the other fourth industrial revolution technologies. Indeed, even before the pandemic hit, automation was spreading from industry and finance to all branches of services, even to fast food and agriculture. It is expected to eventually replace much professional

work such as that of lawyers, financial analysts, doctors, journalists, accountants, insurance underwriters, and librarians (Robinson, 2020, 2022b).

It is certainly possible that digitally driven restructuring will unleash a new wave of expansion. But any such expansion will run up against the problems that an increase in the organic composition of capital presents for the system, namely the tendency for the rate of profit to fall, a contraction of aggregate demand, and the amassing of profits that cannot be profitably reinvested. In the larger picture, the heightened structural power achieved by the TCC through globalization and financialization has enabled it to undermine redistributive policies and to impose a new labor regime on the global working class based on flexibilization and precariatization, or proletarianization under conditions of permanent insecurity and precariousness. The International Labour Organization reported in 2019 that a majority of the 3.5 billion workers in the world either eked out a living (or attempted to) in the informal economy—that is, swelled the ranks of surplus labor—or worked in precarious arrangements, including informal, flexible, part-time, contract, migrant, and itinerant work arrangements (ILO, 2019: 2–3). Over the past four decades globalization has brought a vast new round of global enclosures as hundreds of millions have been uprooted from the Third World countryside and turned into internal and transnational migrants. Some of the uprooted millions are super-exploited through incorporation into the global factories, farms, construction sites, and offices as precarious labor, while others are marginalized and converted into surplus humanity, relegated to a “planet of slums.”

While the wave of technological innovation now underway may hold great promise for the long run, under global capitalism, the social and political implications of new technologies—developed within the logic of capital and its implacable drive to accumulate—point to great peril. In particular, these new technologies, *ceteris paribus*, will aggravate the forces driving overaccumulation and the expansion of the ranks of surplus humanity. They will enable the TCC and its agents to create nightmarish new systems of social control, hegemony, and repression, systems that can be used to constrain and contain rebellion of the global working class, oppositional movements, and the excluded masses—in short, the *global police state* (Robinson, 2020). Criminalization, often racialized, and militarized control become mechanisms of preemptive containment, converging with the drive toward militarized accumulation. Already, we may be seeing the breakdown of consensual domination and a rise of coercive systems of social control as strategies for surplus population management.

Even if a new period of digitally driven expansion displaces the structural crisis temporally into the future, global capitalism will continue to generate social crises of survival and well-being for billions of people. Worldwide, 50 percent of all people live on less than \$2.50 a day and a full 80 percent live on less than \$10 per day. One in three people on the planet suffers from some form of malnutrition, nearly a billion go to bed hungry each night, and another two billion suffer

from food insecurity. Refugees from war, climate change, political repression, and economic collapse already number into the hundreds of millions. The new round of digitally driven restructuring may turbo-charge the economy enough to usher in a period of rising profits and prosperity for the system as a whole even as millions—billions—sink into greater precariousness and desolation.

Hence, absent redistributive and regulatory reforms or state intervention to generate public or alternative forms of employment, digitally driven expansion will only aggravate the structural crisis of overaccumulation. The question then becomes one of class struggle and political contestation. Can mass struggle by the popular and working classes force on the system a measure of redistribution, reregulation, and social welfare investment that may offset the crisis into the future and give global capitalism a new lease on life? A “global spring” is breaking out all around the world.<sup>3</sup> From 2017 to 2019, more than one hundred major anti-government protests swept the world, in rich and poor countries alike, toppling some thirty governments or leaders and sparking an escalation of state violence against protesters (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, n.d.). However, this two-year period was but a peak moment in popular insurgencies that spread in the wake of the 2008 Great Recession, a veritable tsunami of mass rebellion not seen since at least 1968. Yet even if the global revolt manages to bring about a significant redistribution of wealth downward, global capitalism will still run up against the finite limits of the planetary ecosystem.

A Green New Deal, a call first put out in the United States, proposes combining sweeping green policies, including an end to fossil fuels, with a social welfare and proworker economy that would include mass employment opportunities in green energy and other technologies. A global Green New Deal may help lift the world out of economic depression as it simultaneously addresses the climate emergency and generates favorable conditions to struggle for a postcapitalist social order. In the larger picture, the technical infrastructure of the fourth industrial revolution is producing the resources in which a political and economic system very different from the global capitalism in which we live could be achieved. As many have noted, these technologies could be used to free us from the drudgeries of menial and dull work, drastically reducing socially necessary labor time and increasing leisure time. They may allow us to overcome obstacles that socialist-oriented economic planning in the twentieth century experienced once the price (market) mechanism of coordinating capitalist production had been suppressed. Under an entirely different social and economic system, we human beings could cease being slaves to machines and technologies employed for the purpose of exploitation and instead become masters of them. Then, we could build a global society based on an egalitarian democracy and material and spiritual well-being.

## NOTES

1. Oxfam publishes annual reports on the state of global inequality. See interalia, Oxfam (2015, 2018, 2021).
2. The average growth of output per worker in the United States was 2.3 percent a year between 1891 and 1972. It was just 1.4 percent a year between 1972 and 1996, and 1.3 percent between 2004 and 2012, although it recovered historical levels between 1996 and 2004, corresponding roughly to the period in which computerized became generalized in industry and services. See Wolf (2015): 15–16.
3. I do not normally cite *Wikipedia*, but one entry has perhaps the most comprehensive list of major protests in the twenty-first century with links to original or other sources: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_protests\\_in\\_the\\_21st\\_century](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_protests_in_the_21st_century).

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