

Interview with Robert W. Cox by Daniel Drache and José Luis Valdés-Ugalde*



How did you become a historical materialist? You began life in Montreal in an Anglo Canadian family. When you look back over the years, how did you come to this very large, rich, and diverse theoretical viewpoint?

When I was at McGill University studying history, I was not only studying history in the sense of certain times and places -- medieval, modern, European or Canadian, and so forth; but I also began to think about what is the nature of history. In that regard, one of the things I read was a book called *The Idea of History*, a collection of lectures and papers by R.G. Collingwood put together and published after Collingwood died. It is a rather coherent collection and it showed me a way of thinking about the nature of history as a form of knowledge. And that stuck with me pretty well through my life. I keep going back to it. Collingwood began with the study of Giambattista Vico who lived in the 18th century in Naples. He was a counterpoint to the Enlightenment. René Descartes, the great father of modern science, theorized the method of modern science based on the separation of the observer from the observed. Vico was more aware of the unity of observer and observed – of how the individual was creating the world through his thought and actions.

Later, when I began to study Marxism, I was constantly comparing the Marxist theory of history with Vico's. Karl Marx thought in terms of a progressive history, history leading towards an ideal end, an end that was going to result in a communist society. Vico was concerned with history as a cyclical process and the organic way societies evolve from birth to maturity and decline with the possibility of rebirth and a new cycle beginning. It was a very different concept of history from the Enlightenment view of progress towards some ultimate goal.

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As an innate pessimist, I found Vico's conception more compatible with what I understood about the world. So, when I came to reflect upon Marxism, I thought that Antonio Gramsci approached it from perhaps a more subjective – a more Vician -- point of view. This was the point of view of ideas, motivations, and the creation of the collective will to change, something that Gramsci derived from Georges Sorel. Sorel is another person I keep returning to who influenced my thinking – especially his idea of the social myth and the way an idea is inserted into the collective consciousness and becomes a powerful force for change.

So, it is a big leap from Collingwood the liberal to Gramsci the materialist. How did it happen?

Collingwood was in the idealist tradition in England derived from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, but he didn't accept all the implications of Hegel. Collingwood was thinking of history as something that you could approach from the inside. In other words, he emphasized the motivations and thoughts of the people who made history rather than just looking at it from the outside -- observing events, classifying them and so forth. For him history was the inside story. He tried to give it life by putting the inside 'outside' so to speak.

I think Gramsci was more in tune with that approach, within the sphere of Marxism. Marxism is a broad category of thinking. Marx for example in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* looked at the great tableau from an historical point of view, but if you look at *Capital*, it is a much more analytical, 'outside' view of the changes to the structure of production. I became much more sympathetic to the Gramscian point of view because it sees history from both the inside and the outside.

This inside/outside distinction sounds correct, but it sounds abstract in a certain way, because perhaps the more conventional view of Marxism is system, structure, and actor, in which the proletariat fulfills its historical mission.

I call myself an historical materialist in the sense in which Gramsci understood that term. The other more deterministic kind of Marxism, Gramsci called historical economism. He made the distinction between historical economism and historical materialism: historical materialism embodied the need to arouse subjectivity as part of the process of transforming the objective world whereas historical economism did not; it just relied upon the objective economic process.

Now, the other thing I always feel is that any theory has to be understood in its historical context. There are no theories about humanity that are absolute truths. There are relative truths – truth within a certain framework. The person who best described the way in which frameworks change and succeed one another was Fernand Braudel, the eminent French historian, who came back from a prison camp after World War II. Braudel co-founded the Annales School of French history. He wrote about historical structures as something that arise out of certain historical crises and may exist for a long time. Historical structures include the shape of the economy, the nature of political systems, and the cultures of people. All of these structures have a certain duration in time, but are gradually transformed or, even possibly suddenly transformed, into another structure.

I think of Marxism in that sense: as a theory in which the proletariat became the force for change. Particularly if you take England as the case with which he was most familiar and the country in which he lived. It was the time when the proletariat was being created, the rural

peasantry was forced off the land into the cities, and industry was becoming dominant. Capital was transformative in making the changes that would revolutionize English society and all of these conditions would lead Marx to define his theory.

You have to consider the implications of structural change that followed on such a vast scale. In England and Europe the working class eventually achieved a certain position with respect to the state; states changed themselves and became more democratic. When you look at the rest of the world as people became more conscious of their place in global society, Marxist theory was beginning to penetrate more widely as an explanation of what was happening. Industrialization was beginning in poor countries and a proletariat was created there. But when you look at proletariats in poor countries they were rather privileged in relation to the great mass of people still living in rural areas. The power relationship was different from that in the Industrial Revolution in England. And furthermore, in the more industrialized countries, the proletariat became a well organized, well established force; but other influential forces also began to appear such as feminism and environmentalism. People in these movements became actively concerned with change in other ways. On balance, Marxist theory, while still having certain validity, has to be integrated into the larger framework of the newly emerging historical structures.

Graduate students are still reading Cox. What is Cox's message to theorists in International Political Economy when you look at how the world has changed since you began your theoretical work?

The message is to be keenly aware of what is going on in the world today without trying to fit that into some pre-existing theory. What I like to say is -- let theories arise out of your understanding of the world rather than shoehorn the world into a framework that is predetermined by theory. So, I would not like to prescribe any kind of theoretical message in the sense of preferring one theory over any other. I published an article in *Millennium*, in 1981,¹ making the case that you need to look at the material conditions of existence, the prevailing ideas, and the existing institutions to see how they interrelate. That kind of framework, I suppose, has a pretty broad and general application. The important message is to look at those three areas in concrete terms and not to presume that there is any determinism between them. Study how that interrelationship is working out, and when you see the nature of the structure that emerges, then you look for the points where conflict is imminent or latent, and see how that conflict could arise and could provoke a certain pattern of change.

Now, for example, we are leaving behind a world defined by Pax Americana in which the United States was in the dominant role, and entering a world where the United States' role will be less determining. It is important to examine how the United States can adjust to a more plural world without this creating a great international crisis, conflict, or war. In addition, it is important to see what sort of power structure emerges and how it could emerge in a relatively peaceful way rather than through a conflict in which nuclear weapons would be totally destructive.

¹ Robert Cox, "Social Forces, States and World Order: Beyond International Relations Theory," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 10; No. 2, 1981.

When you talk about new historical structures at the global level, how badly bruised is the Washington Consensus as the framing document for global public policy? In the crisis, is global capitalism regrouping to take command again?

Yes, I think the Washington Consensus is a matter of history now. It was based on consensus around a certain economic doctrine called neoliberalism, which was considered to be of universal applicability. Anyone joining in that consensus would join it according to the basic rules laid down -- free trade, free movement of capital and deregulation. It seems to me, especially after the financial crisis of the last year, one has to be skeptical about accepting the rules of a system that could break down in the way it did. Those who accepted the rules could not see it breaking down the way it happened.

Now there is an incentive for global south economic groupings to challenge U.S. hegemony. China is moving in the direction of broadening its role as the economic center of Asia; Europe is already creating its own economic entity. The experience of the 2009 financial crisis will help embolden countries to assert their new found influence. The big question is the relation between the United States and China; the United States is so indebted to China, its primary creditor. There is incentive for the two countries to find a way of working together, but I think, from the Chinese point of view, that would probably not mean working together in the sense of going back to the Washington Consensus. China and the South want to create a new arrangement, maybe they'll call it a Beijing Consensus, whereby regional groupings can live together, trade and have more diplomatic relations that are not destructive.

Do you think that black September delivered a knockout blow to global neoliberalism?

It is likely only the beginning of the end. We need to think in terms of the future, and not of the future as just a continuity of the present. The unwinding of global capitalism is complex and quite indeterminate.

This is a transitional situation where both the United States and other powers are learning to create new modalities of coexistence, rather than a world order led by one superpower. I think the United States will have a big problem adjusting to this new plural world. For instance, President Barak Obama began his administration with a vision of change – change both within the United States and of the US role in the world—but he has failed to make good his words. One year later, he is confronted with many difficulties impeding that change: the Senate on the question of healthcare and on foreign relations with respect to Israel's opposition to the Palestinian desire for a homeland in which Palestinian state could coexist with Israel in a peaceful way. These impediments are the result of very powerful interests within the United States, and so the process of change is going to be difficult with domestic politics so polarized. Change will also be hard for the US relationship to the world as a whole; one of the major problems is how other powers can relate to the United States in a more consensual relationship rather than one of leadership and 'followership.'

Do you think Obama has been taken prisoner by the system? How do you explain this transformation from a renewal candidate, in the best tradition of American liberalism, to a rather disappointing politician?

At first, Obama seemed promising. He aroused a lot of support, particularly from young people in the United States who backed his candidacy. They were overjoyed in seeing him as an antiwar candidate. People had great hopes about all the things he would be able to do. Once in power, Obama found out that as the President of the United States he is not as powerful a person as one might have imagined. The system imposes limits and very powerful constraints. Americans see that he is not accomplishing the things that he set out to accomplish and disillusionment sets in. Another factor is that he inherited many policies from the Bush administration and the previous Carter administration. You look at the different areas, and particularly in foreign policy, there has not been much change. What has happened is probably more acceptable to some of the people who were already Bush people and disappointing to those people who looked for significant change.

I am not sure how that will play out. There is no other candidate or opposition party that could muster support against Obama in favour of somebody else; but the Republican right has certainly mustered a lot of strength to oppose his policies. It seems now very doubtful that his watered down bill on health care will pass.

Despite a Democratic majority, how does the current congressional paralysis affect US foreign policy? It seems to be creating an opening for other countries to become members of the global leader's elite club?

What we see is that Washington, the dominant global military power, cannot do what it used to, but it can still make an awful lot of trouble and damage. Remember that the Russians could not control and were finally pushed out of Afghanistan, and they were powerful militarily also. The Americans want to be in Afghanistan too and the United States remains the world's unrivalled military power, but it cannot create the new world order it is so desperately attempting to impose. It cannot achieve the political goals that the United States is supposed to have. In a sense, the rest of the world is playing the role of Gandhi, saying that 'non-violence is probably our best weapon.' Regime change and violence is what will undermine the US position and deny it the support of the rest of the world. I think that the United States is beginning to recognize that they are going to have to adjust to a different position in the world, a position that would be one of collegiality with other powers, rather than one of military might.

So, is this the new structure that of soft power?

Joe Nye introduced the idea of soft power, and what he meant was that the United States was attractive because many people would like to live like Americans. A lot of the ideas that come from America, and even the styles and the movies that come from America, create a favourable impression. The problem is that while 'soft power' may rest on the idea that people desire to be like Americans, it is being overwhelmed by reactions to US-led wars and use of military power. So American soft power is no longer the force that it once was; some people have grabbed on to that term and use it very broadly in a way that doesn't really have very specific meaning.

Should we still think about terms like hegemony, or is there a need to take account of new non-state forms of power?

Let's talk about hegemony briefly. In international relations theory, hegemony used to mean the political and economic dominance of one power over others -- the others would be deferential

towards the hegemonic power. In the Gramscian sense, hegemony is much more a matter of the 'inside' rather than the 'outside' that I spoke of earlier. The distinction is between the way people think and how they understand the nature and order of the world. They understand a world in which there is US leadership and there is a Washington Consensus, and think that's what's natural, that's what's normal. Hegemonic thinking is not about one military superpower and the exercise of power; it is about the way people think about the structure of the world and the way in which things are done in a certain manner as being normal. What 'shatters' this vision of world order they have in their own minds is when it is disrupted by things like the financial crisis, the excessive use of US military power, the killing of civilians in the Afghan war -- this shatters their mental vision, their normal way of seeing things. What people then perceive are different centers of power and forces that undermine the received notion of a hegemonic world.

We are going through that phase now. The natural form of the world, one defined by American leadership, is no longer one that people around the world see as natural, as common sense. There's a different idea of what the world order could be or might be, in that sense the old concept of hegemony has disappeared before our eyes.

If hegemony disappears, does that mean we enter into a period of political and economic instability? What is the new normality? No consensus? Constant negotiations? Constant toing and froing?

Yes, and instability brings with it many problems. It would mean that there is a continual process of negotiation between major powers. It could also underline an understanding that violence brought on by a major war would be disaster for the system as a whole. Therefore it has to be avoided by constant adjustment and negotiation. You will never arrive at a new world order which can be expressed in formula-like terms the way the Washington Consensus was.

This is really a new era? Is that what you are saying?

We don't quite know what it will be like, but we have to be alert and prepared to contemplate the adjustments that will be needed. One of them, obviously, is the environmental issue. The Copenhagen meeting demonstrated that the world is not yet ready to deal with that effectively. At the same time, it demonstrated that there is no solution that can be imposed by a hegemonic power or powers without real negotiations leading to a substantive agreement to cut CO₂ emissions and share the costs. A non-hegemonic world order places responsibility on all countries to work something out that they can agree upon, because they know that not agreeing to a core set of obligations would lead to a disaster.

The failure of Copenhagen is now being laid at the foot of the Obama presidency because basically it was his moment to show leadership and he failed. Is this part of the unfolding tragedy of Obama -- an iconic figure now fallen from grace?

It certainly is a big blow in that respect. The roots of the disappointment go deeper and are a product of US domestic politics. The battle over health care will be the real test. Whether Obama will be able to deal with the powerful interests that prevent the reform of the US health system is really a scandal when you compare it to the rest of the world. Why a country as rich, with such

experience, and so much high technology as the US is not able to create a system which guarantees health care for its population bewilders the rest of the world.

The United States has a rival and a competitor in the Euro zone. Where do you position the EU in the new configuration globally? What kind of leader is it?

The EU has, without using the term, adopted the Gandhian approach. They minimize their military role and their role in trying to change the rest of the world. The EU is probably formed in such a way that its internal structure conforms to the possibilities of a world of coexistence among many centers of power. But the fact that they are in this sort of Gandhian mode means that, in its military and economic form, the EU is not yet influencing other areas of the world. Modern Europe is in a way more self-contained and distant in its relationships with the rest of the world. Still their model is attractive. For example, China is probably more interested in developing strong economic relationships with the EU now, as well as creating its own economic center in the Asian region. By contrast, the United States is more and more being perceived as a threatening force, both militarily and economically in Asia and other parts of the world; whereas Europe is perceived as far less threatening.

So what you're saying is that Europe, as a non-military power, has got extra leverage?

It has soft power that people will admire and want to emulate. Europe promises a world in which you have continuous negotiations about the environment and all the issues that affect the world as a whole. Europe is a model of power that can work well in this situation. The problem is now to see whether both the United States and China can conform to that type of relationship. This would be very difficult for the United States particularly because they would have to withdraw their military presence in many parts of the world. They would have to stop using Taiwan as sort of threat against China. They would have to pull out of Georgia and the Caucasus as a strategic threat against Russia and China. They would have to withdraw as the protector of the right wing in Israel and promote the idea of a peaceful relationship between Israel and the other countries in the Middle East. All of this poses trouble for the United States since the whole of their military and foreign policy establishment has been built up around the idea that they must be present in those areas of the world. The biggest problem to this potential world order is the reordering of US goals and objectives.

So far, we have looked at Obama, at soft power, and the new historical structures at the global level. Let's turn our attention to North America. Has NAFTA outlived its usefulness to Washington, as the Obama administration struggles with both internal gridlock and mounting external challenges?

This is an area that I have not studied very closely. The problem with North America is that NAFTA has created a framework for integration, but as soon as anything happens that is inconvenient for the United States, they feel they are not bound by this framework agreement, and they operate on their own by going around it. Ultimately these institutions are a façade for powerful sets of interests. Probably we are working towards the emergence of a new alternative pattern of relationships in the Americas. It seems to me that there is already some evidence of that.

Latin America is being driven by a change in its social structure, in Bolivia and Venezuela, for example. The social power structure in those countries is beginning to change, and the old pattern of just accepting US dominance no longer prevails. Other alliances are beginning to emerge. This means there will be a whole restructuring of relationships in the Americas. This is another thing that the United States is going to have to gradually come to terms with. The coup in Honduras shows that they are not ready to do any fundamental re-thinking. I had a sense while it was happening that Obama was in favour of the elected president returning, finishing his term and then having elections. But the State Department with [Hillary] Clinton in charge bowed to the right wing forces on Capital Hill and supported the coup in Honduras. And for Obama it was a defeat.

Obama's presidency has had a lot of reversals, defeats, and disappointments so far.

What grade would you give Obama after a little more than a year in office?

I think he has been defeated on just about everything. I think it comes back to the word 'hope,' which was his word in the election. The problem with hope is that you cannot go on proclaiming it without it turning into despair. I think he has lost a lot of the support he had, which means that his power with the popular forces in the United States has diminished considerably. This diminishes his possibility of taking on the entrenched forces in the United States. This has repercussions within the United States, at the level of the Americas, and at the global level.

I just wanted to go back a bit to what you said that the United States has shifted its view towards NAFTA and the idea of North America. Can we go into detail of why this might have happened?

I haven't really studied it in terms of getting to grips with the issues within those countries, other than appreciating that many of the Latin American countries now have a different kind of relationship to the United States than that they had during the era of Roosevelt and even of Kennedy.

Is this basically because Mexico, faced with the drug war in the north and an epidemic of the transborder trafficking in guns, no longer has the bright future that *The Economist* once predicted for it and is now very close to being a failed State?

It seems that Mexico is very fragile. Criminal organizations are in some places more powerful than the State and have penetrated into the State. It is hard for me to say why that has happened and how its happening is related to what has evolved in terms of the relationship with the United States. That is bound to have had an effect, but whether that in fact has been detrimental to the development of Mexico or has been something which has contributed solely to the internal situation in Mexico, I couldn't say.

Canada, Mexico and the United States are going their separate ways, they have different agendas that they are struggling with. Is that really at the core of what troubles North America? Mexico struggles with narcoterrorism; the United States faces economic decline; and Canada suffers the curse of too many resources and the culture of complacency.

Canada under its present leadership is so closely tied to the United States, whereas, it would seem to me, that Canada's opportunities lie in increasing relationships with Asia and Europe, while

diminishing, where possible, dependency upon the United States. This comes from a view of the state of economic decline in the United States and of the potential damage that can come from being closely tied to that financial structure. Still, Canada did better through this last crisis insofar as its banking system was not as affected by the financial meltdown as the Americans were. Surely that is a warning sign that being protected from too close involvement with the US economy was a good thing. Canadians are missing the opportunities. The future of Canada lies outside of North America in many ways.

When you take stock of the many changes happening in North America and Europe, where do you position yourself with respect to your view of democracy? Are we moving towards a more democratic order of things? Are we staying in place, or moving backwards?

Democracy is a word that means a lot of different things to different people. I am a bit wary of abusing it, just like I am a bit wary of using the word 'progress' in the sense in which it is often understood. Democracy can be a failing institution, that is, the people can be the cause of failure when they do not see the future other than as a continuation of their own present state of affairs and the improvement of their own present situation. They do not see the need for a change and therefore are unlikely to support measures necessary for change.

We saw this in Canada with the Liberal Party's "green shift" that seemed like a new line of political action and a new era of political policy. When Stephen Harper defeated Stephane Dion in the election, the green shift became an embarrassment to the Liberal Party because it failed to attract electoral support. It was deemed to have been a failure. Harper was more concerned about the cost of making the changes to the oil sands and the energy industries than to take practical steps to reduce the destructive effects of pollution. All this business about cap and trade as a solution is a soft option for the interests that pollute. What they are saying is 'well, we will just pay a little more for the opportunity of polluting,' rather than saying 'we will change this business once and for all,' which would be more costly for them in the immediate future. The government calculates that people really do not care about the environment. That is in conflict with the concept of democracy and with reality.

In Asia, democracy is not so much about the individual; it is about the community and the community of nations. By 'democratic,' Asians usually mean including everybody; but not everybody in the sense of self-centered individuals but everybody in the sense of all communities. This concept of democracy is in conflict with the American concept, which is based so much on the individual. So I'm very skeptical about the use of that term in a generalized sense since it can mean very different things. You have to understand its meaning in different national and cultural situations and consider what is most beneficial for the people involved, not just as individuals, but as communities.

When you look across the globe, what do you see as the main threats to the spread of democracy and democratic practice, as it takes these different forms?

There are certain tests that are applicable. One test is in the area of human rights -- to what extent are people being subjected to violence and force by a political power. I think it is generally unhelpful when human rights activists are more concerned with individual rights than with collective rights. I think the human rights issue goes beyond individual rights, and is more important when it confronts the suppression of certain communities and a certain sets of ideas rather than more

specifically individual kinds of rights. Not that individual rights are unimportant, but there is a difference of level between property rights and outlawing of torture.

Where do we fit China into a view of the spread of democratic theory and practice?

This is a difficult case with many negatives but I take a hopefully positive position. The Chinese Communist Party is a different kind of organization than what exists in other places. The word communist in this case is an historical residue covering something that has evolved into a rather unique Chinese party/state. The Chinese were able to avoid the sort of collapse that happened when the Soviet system broke down, because of the strength of the Chinese party. Particularly after Mao, the party leadership has been able to recruit and train, and socialize a set of leaders that have a sense of the interest of China as a whole. They also realize that there is an extraordinary amount of conflict within China, and the elite leadership has used the party in such a way that messages from the base can come up to the leadership. So the leadership is able to respond to those issues in China, and in that way maintain control of the population, which is always fragile and which is ever upper most in the mind of the leadership. I wouldn't use the 'democracy' but here is a system in which the interests and concerns of the base of the society in its completely heterogeneous and varied form can be made known through the agency of the party to the leadership. So in a way it is a kind of system which allows for the people to voice their concerns, so these concerns can be uppermost in the minds of the leadership; and the leadership has to take that into account when they are dealing with other countries, other powers.

Clearly there are areas, like Tibet, where this has not worked, and where there is kind of collective resistance to the leadership. There is a huge problem to resolve here. It shows that there are limitations in that system, but there is a system that exists although it doesn't have a name, which is contrasted with democracy. Democracy also has many varied forms. So it is not accurate to think of democracy as one ideal type, and say, well China is not of that type.

But China has a problem; there are four hundred million people online and an even greater number of mobile phone users, which are mini computers. So the old model was that the party could control the flow, the socialization of the flow of information. China is in the middle of the same kind of information revolution in which people redefine themselves to the market, to the State, and to each other.

Certainly that is happening in China. Again the question is to what extent and through what mechanisms can the leadership be attentive to this access to information challenge and deal with it, hopefully intelligently, before there is a collapse of order within China. I think this is what the Chinese leadership are thinking about all the time, the messages are coming from below. So it is a kind of bottom up system, and not just the sort of top down system where the leadership decides and then applies their decision by force; because they cannot do that any longer. They know that.

So when you look at the United States and at the G2 with China, two great rivals, two great competitors, what kind of report card would you give the current Chinese Leadership and Obama?

To compare the two, the Chinese come out on top. The significance of Obama is that he has reversed the totally anti-Chinese views of the previous administration. Initially, he has approached

China with a view to cooperation rather than conflict. That was a big change. The Chinese leadership have been very pragmatic in their approach to the United States; they have been non-ideological in the sense that they are not offering some solution to the world's problems. Instead what they are offering is the possibility of a cooperative relationship, provided they are recognized and accepted for what they are, and are not considered to be a country that will have regime change forced upon it, Recognize China, respect it and deal with it. I think that is the position of China. On a personal level, Obama is coming to that view, but there are still a lot of forces within the United States that will not find that acceptable, forces that are building anti-Chinese sentiment in America.