Interview

"Overcoming the Blockage": An interview with Robert W. Cox

Ana Saggioro Garcia
Miguel Borba de Sá[1]

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Arriving at Old Cabaggetown, Toronto, Canada, is already a singular experience for a pair of Brazilian scholars, not so used to find such charming brick-housed, middle class neighbourhoods in their home country, where elites find themselves more and more confined to buildings that actually look more like fortresses than residences, full of private, armed security guards and electric fences. Old Cabbagetown used to be a workers residential area until the beginning of the 20th century, but it still conserves its bucolic simplicity nowadays when the working class of the region of Ontario, mainly composed by immigrants, lives away from there.

We went there in search of an interview with one of the most prominent Gramscian scholars of our generation, especially in fields such as the disciplines of International Relations and International Political Economy. Even though Robert Cox rejects being labeled Gramscian or Neo-Gramscian – *'I always resisted being put in a category'* – any attempt to dissociate his work in the last three decades from the Italian Marxist seems almost impossible, as the title of the first course he taught at York University (*"From Vico to Gramsci"*) already demonstrates.

Cox warmly welcomed us to his house in order to present ourselves with a two hour interview that covered many issues, ranging from his intellectual trajectory to the possible reconfigurations of the current world order after the ongoing economic crisis that broke out in 2008. Still very lucid at the age of 83, and with a particular perspective on the evolution of the most pertinent political dilemmas of our time, he revealed a sort of optimism about the collective efforts that states should do in order to confront the many challenges that humanity as a whole faces today, such as the environmental question or the reorganization of global finance. However, Cox once again rejects the label; for him '*disillusioned optimism*' refers to a utopianism that he wishes to avoid. *'I would rate myself as a pessimist'*, he says, before adding, *'but in the way George Sorel would define it'*.

The conversation went along with some surprising political, as well as theoretical affirmations. Showing a considerable distance from the approach advanced in, for instance, his seminal article *"Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations"* (1993), Cox seems now more inclined to a somewhat cooperative or harmonious account of the relations among

1. Ana S. Garcia is PhD in International Relations. She teaches International Political Economy at IRI/PUC-Rio. The interview was held during her research-stay at York University. She thanks to Leo Panitch for facilitating her stay at York University, and for personally introducing her to Robert W. Cox. Contact: anasaggioro@gmail.com. Miguel Borba de Sá is Master of Sciences in International Relations and Master of Arts in Government. He is a lecturer at UFRJ and IRI/PUC-Rio and has been a visiting researcher at the University of Alberta, Canada, from where he travelled to Toronto for this interview. Contact: miguelborbadesa@gmail.com. Alessandro Biazzi Couto has contributed to the interview's preparation.

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states, people and governments, as long as they *'have to come to realization that they do hang together and they have to hang together, because the big issue is really what's going to happen to biosphere"*.

This process of *"self-organization"* of international politics was certainly the point he most emphasized during the interview. Cox compares modern states with the neurons in our brains, which must *"reorganize themselves in order to get around the blockage"*. The current economic crisis is then considered as one of these such blockages, but also as an opportunity, for *"the impact of that is to force a kind of sense of collective thinking that will lead to some viable system of reorganization (...) analogous to the neurons getting themselves organized in order to overcome a blockage in the brain"*, he argues. In this respect, the advent of the G20 and the demise of the Dollar as the only international currency would be manifestations of the emergence of a more *"plural world"*, as he puts it.

Another noteworthy passage refers to Cox's perception of the nature of some challenges that this *"self-organization"* process demands, such as the necessity of helping Americans overcome their highly ideological sense of global leadership. According to him, this is a necessary step for the reorganization, that is, *"self-organization"*, of world politics, because *"probably one of the major problems for the world is to help Americans overcome the trauma, that they will have to face, in realizing that their ideas about the future of the world are not relevant. It's a big shock"*, Cox claims, just to reaffirm that *"maybe it's time to help Americans make the transition, which they probably are completely unaware that they need to make"*.

Cox shows a certain degree of skepticism about the so-called post-positivist approaches to IR, which has been impacting disciplinary debates for at least two decades now, even though many of those innovative accounts make explicit references to his work as sort of pioneer critique of the Liberal/Realist mainstream. In a moment that directly remits to his famous article *Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory* (1981), he warns about the necessity of keeping in mind that theory is always made for someone, for some purpose: *"Whatever you call it, I think it's important to see what lies behind the formulas that people are using"*, he declares after recognizing that, in any case, he *"is not very familiar with the new approaches"*.

The close relation between theory and political practice still seems to be a major preoccupation for Cox. He emphasizes that the biggest advantage of a concept like 'social forces' is precisely its vagueness and imprecision, something that in turn makes mandatory for the researcher to find out in each specific context what is the nature of those social forces under investigation. *"What are the social forces?"*, he asks, before complementing: *"It leads you to find out what they are. They are not there by definition, they are there to be discovered"*. According to him, this would be the opposite of what a World-System approach would do, with its a priori and well-defined *"macro-concepts"*. Even if Cox starts by saying that he finds the work of Wallerstein and Gunder Frank *"interesting"*, he soon challenges the reach of its validity by declaring that it might be something *"good to play with"*, but he doesn't believes that it might be a overreaching way of understanding the world. *"I'm too much of a historian to accept a model*

like that other than as a tool, seeing where it works and where it doesn't work, not just accept it as a definition for world problems".

This attitude perhaps explain Cox's reluctance to point to any specific social force or political movement that could perform the role of being potential revolutionary subjects of today's world. Instead, he reaffirms the pertinence of national struggles, which leads him to conclude: *"I don't think there is any single answer to that question"*. In this respect, Cox both advises and alerts the counter-hegemonic movements from below to *"be strong in their ability to resist the simple ways of being co-opted"*, suggesting that transnational solidarity might be a helpful strategy for that task. *"In that way, the attempts for co-opting movements in one of the countries could be countered by the influence of the movements in all the other countries to resist it. It is a question of building strength"*.

Many other issues are touched by Cox's impressive capacity of making simple, yet deep, historical analysis. Ranging from his criticisms to the inefficacies of international organizations such as the ILO – where he worked for many years – to his perception of the global financial architecture and its ramifications as fruitful points of departure in order to get a *"good picture of global problems"*, Cox's appears to be incapable of disconnecting from his intellectual activities, even if today he is away from classrooms and conferences.

Either from his house in Old Cabbagetown or from the many trips around the world he still takes, Cox's contributions seem as vivid and relevant as ever; still the source of many creative insights and solid analyses.

Finally, from our part, it should just be said how thankful we were for this opportunity. We hope that this interview could help not only to give IR and political science students a fresher source of counter-hegemonic perspectives, but also to contribute to the task of making a name such as Robert Cox receive the recognition and political value that his work certainly deserves. Hence, we wish that the readers could benefit from the interview that follows to the same extent that we were able to enjoy ourselves while making it.

Interviewers: How do you evaluate the so-called "Gramscian" approach on IR today? What would be for you the positive aspects it brought to the discipline and what would be its weakness? It's known that you don't consider yourself as a "Gramscian", why?

Cox: *I always resisted being put in a category. I think it's an idiosyncrasy, I feel resistant because if you're in a category, you are classified with a whole lot of other people with whom you might not necessarily agree. And you are considered to be a "club". I always think as an individual, I've never "joined a club", in the sense of being attached to a particular theory. In the course of my readings and personal development, I've picked up things in different places and at different times, and put them together, I don't have the same list of philosophical influences that people would associate with being in a certain school.*

I came to Gramsci quite late, it was after I left my work in Geneva and came to University of Toronto. I came to Gramsci perhaps through Vico.

My studies have been in History. I've never taken a degree in Political Science, I just taught in Political Science. I've been a professor, but I never studied it officially.

I think historically, so I pick up ideas in the course of my own personal development, and not because they are in a syllabus that is given to me. So, my syllabus is very personal, very idiosyncratic, and probably not like anybody else's. I'm not advertising it as a formula either, I think everybody finds their own way through a world of ideas, and my way has been my own personal way. Gramsci was one step. I think I came to Vico through Collingwood. Collingwood is a British historian and philosopher. There was a book published after he died called "The Idea of History", and it contained a number of lectures given over time, and that was a big influence on me when I was studying at McGill, in the 1940s. I went back to that because I recognized from Gramsci that Vico was an important influence on Gramsci, there is a whole Italian theoretical school, a traditional school. So that was my link there.

I had also a great influence from the French school, particularly Braudel and that group of historians that formed the Annales group after the Second World War. Most of them had been prisoners, and when they came back were working on a different concept of history, which was a very broad concept. It included geography, demography and various scientific ways of understanding different aspects of life, bringing them all together as a way of thinking historically. From the two concepts they worked with, the synchronic and the diachronic, they emphasized the synchronic as a foundation for thinking about change. In other words, you begin by looking at the whole world, and then you think of change on that basis.

So these are all different kinds of influences that seem to me that come together. I don't like to say "Gramscian" and especially "neo - Gramscian", because I'm not quite sure what the "neo" stands for. I've read Gramsci and derived certain ideas from that. Some people have criticized me in that what I've written is contestable in terms of Gramsci's work. Well, that may be true, but my point is that I'm not trying to repeat Gramsci, but I'm trying to use inspiration from Gramsci in order to develop my own thinking. So, I don't worry about that kind of criticism.

Another person whom I knew well was Susan Strange (you've probably seen her work). She was a wonderful person, a very frank, open kind of person. There was absolutely nothing pretentious about her at all. She took the position that International Political Economy had to be an open field, you had to be able to move in different directions, like the Braudelians and the Annales School. You would incorporate economics, geography, psychology, and sociology; and all these elements have to be understood as part of the comprehensive process of change, in which you can see the choices to make for the future. It's not just about understanding the past, but also about being able to make the right choices for the future.

I guess that would be my approach to the discipline of international relations. The name is limiting, because it suggests contacts amongst states, and it seems me that it's a much broader concept. Changes go on in society, and they have their repercussions through states, and states make their own impacts upon societies, and it is something much more comprehensive then just an inter-state, or international relations field.

Interviewers: You said once that neo-realism was an ideology in the discipline, corresponding to the cold war period. After the cold war, we had in the 1990s the flourish of a diversity of approaches, some have labeled them "post positivists". How do you evaluate the stand of the discipline today, or how would you classify the discipline in terms of ideology vis-à-vis the world order today?

Cox: *Well, that's more difficult because I'm probably less well-read on recent works, and less able to take a critical view. When you say post-positivist I might get a general idea of what may be there but I'm not sure that I can identify it so precisely that I could…*

Interviewers: In general terms, they are labeled "post–structuralists", which includes some constructivists, as well as those works focused on language, discourse and text analysis.

Cox: *I think it's all a way of looking at things. It's all a technique, which is useful, but I don't think any one's approach has to be taken as the valid approach. The world is much more complicated. But I think you can get interesting insights.*

I was just talking with Greg Chin, about some questions he raised concerning the idea of "internationalization of the state" and whether or not that was still a valuable concept. Or were things going on in the world that were changing the dimension of the state? It wasn't just a question of passive change of the state as a result of its contact with the global economy, but it was also that states are now having to get themselves organized in order to regulate in some way the global economy, which is the case concerning all these meetings of the G20 and so forth.

And my answer to him was: My son in law in Italy is a doctor, a neurologist. I've learned something from him that I thought was interesting metaphorically, and that is the concept of self-organization. When there is a blockage to the neurons in the brain, when something happens and they are not able to operate in the same way they used to operate. The neurons reorganize themselves in order to get around the blockage, and I think that a useful metaphor for the way in which the world has to reorganize itself. The states being entities that are there to participate in the reorganization, but there is a kind of process in which there is compulsion that is created by an event, or some series of events, that create a problem, a blockage.

Now we've got a world financial crisis and we know what went wrong, we don't know what to do about it. But the impact of that is to force a kind of sense of collective thinking that will lead to some viable system of reorganization. In other words, the state system itself has to go through a phase of self-organization. There is nothing that can be imposed upon it effectively. It's not as if the United States had the power to say, "well, this is the way it has to be and you're all going to follow these lines". Nobody will follow them now if they do that.

But the important thing is that collectively, the group of state actors will recognized that there is a problem. They may have a very imprecise idea of what the nature of the problem is, but they know that something has to be done, and if anything has to be done, they have to do it collectively or at least with a large degree of consensus. That forces a new pattern, it develops something, it may be

a slow development, but it will be analogous to the neurons getting themselves organized in order to overcome a blockage in the brain.

I think that's the way I would be thinking of problems now, rather than to pick out a doctrine and method, and say that we will follow that method.

Interviewers: What would be possible convergences between these new studies and your work based on social relations of production?

Cox: *I'm not very familiar with the new approaches. I look through phases where new approaches have been made, new terms have been used…I used a concept "ideological analysis" I think other people call it "deconstruction". Whatever you call it, I think it's important to see what lies behind the formulas that people are using. Even they might not be fully conscious of what lies behind their thoughts, but with a little bit of reflection you can see what forces and influences and what lay behind them.*

It's not that I'm a total materialist, in the sense that there is always an economic foundation for everything that anybody might think, but I consider that a lot of thinking is now purely ideological and that's what's interesting in a sense…

Interviewers: In a bad sense?

Cox: *Yes, in a bad sense…*

Interviewers: Not so collective or socially rooted?…

Cox: *…yes, and publics are ideologically trained and conditioned. The idea of introducing change in America is an enormous problem, because it's probably the most ideologically constructed population I can imagine in the world. You know, other people have spent most of their time just surviving, not to become so completely ideological. But the very formation from kindergarten upwards, and all of the ways in which politicians dress up their appeals, are so conditioned for the mass of people to think in a certain way. You have to take account of ideology in trying to come to terms with the practical problems that people face.*

Probably one of the major problems for the world is to help Americans overcome the trauma, that they will have to face, in realizing that their ideas about the future of the world are not relevant. It's a big shock. Maybe it's time to help Americans make the transition, which they probably are completely unaware that they need to make.

Interviewers: Is it a similar transition that the British had to do?

Cox: *I think the British are a good example. It was Tony Payne who was saying that the Americans should look back at the British case after World War II, when Britain withdrew from its bases in Asia and Africa, and abandoned the idea of being the global empire. Of course the British did that because they could see their friends in America taking over from them, and now I don't think America has the same ability to shift their responsibility to anybody else. So it's probably even more of a drama to America. I have a feeling that a fellow like Obama probably understands this, that he talks to Americans in a way to help them along.*

Interviewers: What is your perspective about what is going to come next? Do you see the emergence of a new period of hegemony, or a new power?

Cox: *Well, I think what could come is what I call a plural world. It would result from a self-organization process that would go on among particularly the major powers, but the major powers in a broad sense, like the G20s rather than the G8. It would take account of the difficulties of those countries that really aren't able to sustain themselves in the world, and are likely to be unable for some time to come in terms of just developing a basic economy. This kind of self--organization is a process where the people who are involved, the governments that are involved, would have to come to realization that they do hang together and they have to hang together, because the big issue is really what's going to happen to biosphere.*

Fukuyama talked about the end of history. For him, the end of history was a world that would run on the basis of American democracy and free market capitalism. For us I think the end of the world is the end of the biosphere, it's not the kingdom of god on earth, that's going to come about it, it's the end of the world. So, I think that's the big issue hanging over, and compelling some degree of consensus formation. It may be difficult, it may be long, but that's the big pressure I think, and a pressure that will be gradually recognized.

So, that global issue is there to put pressure on all the other countries to come to some kind of understanding of what they may be able to do together. I would just have hope, perhaps more than faith, that it would lead to a degree of self-organization. I don't see that there is going to be some kind of leadership role of any particular society. In the old Chinese world order, they had this idea of "one sun in the sky". I don't see that there is any "one" sun in the sense of one society or country with ability to lead, which is again the reason why you have to help the Americans get over the idea that they were destined to be the future shape of the world. It's a very strong feeling, and it's a feeling that in a certain sense for them was optimistic and divinely inspired, but ignores the existence of the largest part of the world and the formations that other people have.

I think the "one sun in the sky" idea is not a valid one for the future. I think more practically, go back to the Chinese world order. China became a kind of cultural leader for that world. Cultural leadership was more or less voluntarily accepted by other countries or other peoples who wanted to adapt to that culture. So China itself recognized the practicalities of differences and the need to act very pragmatically.

That's a very loose notion of a plural world, but it seems to me it's the most hopeful one, because I think the alternative, the idea of world leadership in the very crude form that was advanced by the neo-conservatives from George Bush, is something that's unacceptable for the rest of the world, not workable, and could be very destructive. So I think working to some kind of plural acceptance of the world should be feasible and hopefully will be.

Interviewers: Following this, how do you evaluate the increasing participation of countries such as Brazil, China or Russia in international formal and informal organizations, such as recently the G20? I tend more to think about it in terms of "cooptation", in the sense that these countries are adhering and acting with the big powers, trying to set the same rules,

but not changing the rules. To what extent would that mean a transformation in the new world order? Or is it a form of cooptation in order to get the "capitalist engines" running?

Cox: *Well I think this is a very valid point. It keeps a more pessimistic look of what has been going on. I've never been an optimist; I would rate myself as a pessimist. Pessimist in the way George Sorel would define it.*

Interviewers: How did he define it?

Cox: *Well, it's a more a realization of the constraints that bear upon any kind of action rather than any hopes for ideal solutions. He made a difference between pessimism and disillusioned optimism. I think disillusioned optimism is what happens if you have believed in the utopia to come, then you are upset because it doesn't arrive. Pessimism is not to expect utopia, but to realize that the constraints upon which people have to live, and hope they'll be able to handle those constraints in such a way as not to make a total mess out of things.*

Interviewers: *Nowadays, new forms of state have been emerging in the Andean region of South America, challenging some core elements of previous liberal forms of State. The Bolivian case appears as a somewhat paradigmatic example, where a combination of social forces led by indigenous movements was able to undermine neoliberal hegemony, eventually achieving the control of State power.*

Are the counter-hegemonic aspirations of Latin-American social movements in jeopardy due to the persistence of a neoliberal world order? How would be possible for them to deepen, or at least sustain, their political and social achievements in face of an ongoing hostility from the international environment?

Cox: *I think the neoliberal world order will probably be forced to change. The big shift between the G7 and the G20 is that, at least, it recognizes that the G7 was an inadequate way of organizing the world. It was very convenient, because they agreed just about everything and they arrived at what they called the Washington consensus, and that was good for them, but not for everybody else.*

I think the shift to the G20 is a kind of recognition implicitly that this doesn't work anymore. Whether it's a shift in the direction of something else, the something else is yet to be clearly defined, but I would think that it's an incentive for these countries. You've mentioned a lot about Latin America, and the countries with newer types of regimes that are not easily defined in terms of past history. To make themselves known at the world level, and to become players, they may not be so influential to begin with. At a certain point, usually something happens where it becomes necessary to take account of the position of a country holding out its particular problem; it gradually happens that some change called "self-organization" at a global level takes place. I'd be hopeful that this would be the way that things will happen.

There is no need for those countries that see themselves as representing some new attempt to define what a state is in the world, to abandon that opportunity. The way is more open now than has been before with the failure of the neo-liberal system. I think the world economic crisis in one sense is a great advantage, because it shows that global capitalism failed. Now governments have to

come in, pick up the pieces and try to remake something. They may not have the ideas that are going to solve all the problems in the best way, but they are going to have to improvise, and this is the opportunity I think for those countries that feel they need to change to assert themselves. The opportunity is there, because the forum is broader than it has been in the past.

So, it seems to me that it's positive in the way that the global economic crisis is an opportunity.

Interviewers: Governments like those of Chavez and Morales are usually portrayed as radical revolutionaries and threats, and so are quickly put into Cold War categories as enemies. In this situation it's hard to go on with developmental strategies, like protection for national industries. They are pressured from outside, and urged to follow the rules of the world order and, for instance, negotiate free trade agreements.

Cox: *I think you are right about all that. Some of it has to do with what I was saying earlier, about the way in which public opinion particularly in the United States, but also in other countries, has been so ideologized, so that it's easy to represent these people as somehow incompatible with your own way of life. But it's a big opportunity for people who are active outside of states and in social movements to spread alternative ideas, and for governments to experiment.*

Interviewers: So there is room for that right now?

Cox: *I think right now and particularly because the so-called developed world is in a very defensive mode. For example, China, which is a country that suffered a lot and where there have been lots of bankruptcies and a lot of problems, China is probably much better equipped to face the immediate future than some of the Western countries.*

I think Britain is in bad shape. There is more likely to be a turn towards a kind of nationalistic protectionist viewpoint in some parts of Europe and in America, whereas I think China sees its future as being a world power (maybe India in a similar way). The new rising economic centers in the world are more likely to be pressuring towards openness, but in a very discreet way because they don't want to be taken as aspiring to world leadership. The Chinese are very clever that way. They want to be seen as a responsible power, and they want to be seen as favoring important ideas.

For instance, the president of the Bank of China sent a little memorandum to the members of the G20, about making SDRs [Special Drawing Rights] into a reserve currency. China has instituted a kind of swap arrangement with some countries so people can use the Renminbi as a currency for buying in China. They don't have to use dollars.

They are gradually introducing ideas, and have the ability to work with these ideas without making enormous proclamations about how they are going to change the world economy. That's very much the Chinese pragmatic style.

Interviewers: *In some way Brazil is doing the same, on another level of course. It's very much in discourses about not trying to be a leader, bringing everybody together, but still, trying to push its projects and increase its power.*

Cox: *Well I think that's the way in which this process of self-organization takes place. It cannot take place if it purports to be a "final solution".*

Interviewers: We are working a lot on what is this role of those countries such as China, India and Brazil today. You have once described several elements of the so-called "neomercantilist development state". Do you think that this concept is still appropriate to analyze those countries today?

Cox: *I'm always hesitant about taking something from one historical period and applying it without modifications to another period. The idea may well arise. There is a movement towards a kind of mercantilism, in the sense that the state is now (generally speaking) in many countries taking an active role in terms of organizing and aiding the economy. It's not in the original mercantilist sense in manipulating the balance of trade, but in the sense of the state being active in the support of its economy, knowing that other states are also in that mode, making it a problem of negotiation among states. So that would be the kind of pattern I think would happen, rather then that things have been left to market, the world market, and about how the world is going to be organized by the fifty largest corporations, those kinds of things that people were talking about 20 years ago. In that way, I guess neo-mercantilism may be a term with some relevancy, but probably it's time now to think about a new term.*

Interviewers: Your work is, in our view wrongly, but commonly placed (together with World System Theory) within the IR Marxist tradition. What would be your comment on that?

Cox: *I find the work of Wallerstein and Gunder Frank interesting. I have never known them personally, I had made contact with Gunder Frank…I met him again in an elevator in Chicago not so long ago… it was a rather frosty greeting, it's hard to be unfriendly when you are in a elevator… But I could see he must have had a long-standing grudge against me, I forgot from what (laughs). Anyway, I think the World System theory has a "macro concept", capitalism as being one system that was global, and what happen in the world would be the internal contradictions of capitalism at the world level. As a theoretical model it's interesting to play with, but I don't think of it as being a way of understanding the world. I am too much of a historian to accept a model like that other then as a tool, seeing where it works and doesn't work, not just accept it as a definition for world problems. The alternative to that was a theory in that context called the "articulation of modes of production", where there were capitalist sectors and a non-capitalist sectors. There is some relationship between them, the world is a much more complicated pattern of relationships. It seems to me a more realistic way of thinking.*

It has something to do also with the relationship of the productive forces and relations of production, in the Marxist terminology.

Some people are stuck by the productive forces idea, which was that everything depends on the development of industry and of the proletariat, until the proletariat is strong enough to change the world. In a way, the Soviet Union adopted the forces of production model, developing big industry and subordinating agriculture. And the Chinese took the opposite route, saying "no, the relations of production, they

can change the world". So we have the "cultural revolution", we have the "great leap forward", they create chaos and confusion by saying we just rely on the relations of production to make these changes. They are both wrong in the sense that there has to be some sort of balance and a gradual development of change.

Interviewers: Our concern about asking you this was because mostly, people study the field of International Relations without studying capitalism. For us, this should be the first to be talked about. People study IR and make comparisons, for example, with the ancient Greek system, but there's no section about, say, the emergence of capitalism. We believe that it is not possible to study world politics taking the existence of capitalism for granted.

Cox: *I think it is non historical to extract models from history and apply them ahistorically to any place and any time in the world. I mean, it is just not a good way of thinking. But the other way of thinking, to look at the broad picture, is messier, takes longer and is less decisive…*

Interviewers: Especially for those who influence foreign policy in the United States…

Cox: *The United States is a case, in which the business ethic, business ideas, has been accompanied by a despising of intellectuals. But US foreign policy has been created by intellectuals, who got off in the craziest directions. That's the real contradiction. But there are also all the pragmatists, who are probably less well known, and who usually come in to save the situation. Hopefully there will be some evidence of that now. But I'm still worried about what they are doing in Afghanistan and Central Asia. They have made big mistakes there.*

Interviewers: Is there any specific issue or line of thought you would say it is important for IR students to focus on right now?

Cox: *I think what is called the "global financial architecture" is an interesting point because it leads in so many different directions. I think that the Chinese initiative of suggesting that there might be an alternative to the dollar as reserve currency is a case in point; it sounds like a small point, but is one that has ramifications to every realm of power, the way in which capitalism operates and the way in which countries relate to each other. I think you can follow an issue like that and then look at all ramifications of it, you probably will get a good picture of global problems. There may be other issues of the same kind you can pick on, trace all its ramifications, but not just within the confines of a discipline like international relations, because that's limiting.*

Interviewers: To go back to the issue of opportunities the financial crisis could bring about. We are all concerned about social transformation and how to take this opportunity to really transform, and not rescue or maintain, the capitalist order. This brings us to question of who would be the political subject, or social forces, able to start this movement of change. In your work, you have used different terminology, such as "social forces", "class", and "civil society" in a bottom-up sense. Can

you explain in general what are the differences and nuances, and why you use each concept differently? To what extent an analysis focused on social forces/classes can explain the world order better than so-called atomistic approaches?

Cox: *I can't even remember the reason, but… we did have the Marxist pattern that derives from Marx's analysis of capitalism: there were the owners of means of production and the proletariat or the workers. That seemed to me a convenient division for late 19th and early 20th century in the industrializing countries at that time, but I don't think it has much meaning now. It does perhaps in some countries where the industry is new and you have newly mobilized industrial working class. But not in the same sense as it did before, because all of these industrial workers, who are mobilized in that way, are in some sense more privileged than people who are left behind in the countryside and don't have industrial jobs. So that idea of a structure of classes that was going to change society, I don't think that works in a simple form. What you have to do is to look at the nature of the society. In some ways, social movements around ideas like feminism, ecology and indigenous movements, don't fall into the same kind of categories, but they are nevertheless important, in some places they may become more important, their role can be changed in particular situations, but they can't be generalized, it doesn't apply everywhere and at the same time.*

So I think "social forces" is a more useful concept because it is more vague, it is really a question mark: What are the social forces? It leads you to find out what they are. They are not there by definition, they are there to be discovered.

Interviewers: Among the subordinated groups, who are in your opinion potential revolutionary subjects today?

Cox: *I think they have to be around people who are reasonably well educated. They have to be around people not so poor that they can only think in terms of survival for themselves and their families. Who they are, we have to find out in each particular national situation. I guess we still think of national situations because that's how the world is divided up, but they may be regional or within countries, as well as just among countries. I don't think there is any single answer to that question, it's a question you have to put to yourself as a researcher, who is looking for this answer and to be in touch with people in your own countries, and find out where the movements are. I think the idea of the World Social Forum was an idea to bring them together, find out who they were, and there were a lot of different kinds of people that came to those meetings. Some of them sophisticated with their business suits, some more casually in their sandals; and there were different attitudes. Some expressed their demands in sophisticated language and some others with a more popular approach. You have to include them all and find out in each situation the particular combination that could be effective.*

Interviewers: It's more than a research question, it's a very practical one, which social movements pose to themselves all the time: how to build alliances to move beyond particularities…

Cox: *Yes, whom should we count on…*

Interviewers: Yes, who should come together, it seems the same question that Gramsci faced in his time about how to build a block with peasants and industrial workers in Italy….

Cox: *Well I think he had a similar idea of the counter-hegemony. It was not just the proletariat, because in some parts of Italy the proletariat was not in a position to do that. There could have been a combination of others groups in Southern Italy, for example. They could include some middle class elements, but the idea of hegemony was at least to bring together those who would be opposed to the existing state of affairs, that they had a common interest, and that their common interest was antagonistic towards those who were in power. It takes a little bit of discovery in practical situations; it is something you cannot know by definition, by an ideological deduction.*

Interviewers: The relationship between state and civil society in South America has become more complex today. There has been an increase of criminalization of social movements, which challenge the basis of capitalism in the South (especially private property and export-oriented extractive model), even under progressive governments. At the same time, those in civil society who do not challenge the capitalist structure, but aim to soften its effects through reform, are celebrated as part of the "democratic process". The same can be said for civil society groups acting on the international level. International organizations have been able to co-opt some of them and absorb part of their discourse, whereas they have de-legitimized more critical demands and criminalized protests.

From the perspective of your experience in international organizations, do you see that participation necessarily leads to cooptation and weakening of those groups with independent and opposed positions? What would be the conditions to occupy spaces inside governments and/or international organizations without falling into cooptation?

Cox: *I guess one has to live with these movements and find out from them if they have found any ways of acting. It's an obvious way for the existing power to react. There have always been these divisions within popular and social movements; that's visible between the ones who come with business suits and those who come with sandals. They've celebrated their cohesion in certain ways; obviously governments are far away from breaking that cohesion. I suppose, firstly, being able to describe what has happened in terms of the different forms of cooptation is perhaps an initial way of fighting against it. Making groups and social movements conscious of it, and the risks that they have to live with. Ultimately, it depends upon the strength of the social movement to prevent this from happening, but it is very difficult when you have a government as a great authoritarian power. I don't think there is a quick answer to your question, it is a very interesting case you have put to me.*

Interviewers: There is a new regional integration project between Venezuela, Bolivia, Cuba, and others, called ALBA. They have been developing a so-called social movements council at the same level as the execu-

tive council of governments. In my studies, we are concerned about how this new social movements council will work together with the executives of those countries at a regional level…

Cox: *Certainly it is sounds like a good initiative. I think the people who are with it will have to be strong in their ability to resist the simple ways of being co-opted, but they are probably conscious of the issue. Spreading that consciousness is one way of defense against it. It sounds like a good initiative especially since it involves a number of countries, not just within one country, which would make it more vulnerable to a government's actions. In that way, the attempts for co--opting movements in one of the countries could be countered by the influence of the movements in all the other countries to resist it. It is question of building strength.*

Interviewers: They are trying to create a common currency too, as a way to exchange without using dollars…

Cox: *That sort of thing will become more common because the whole question of reserve currency is a growing phenomenon. This is going to impact the role of the dollar, the confidence in the dollar. I guess everywhere governments and individuals will be looking for alternative ways of doing business among people and exchange things without having to make use of a common currency. This is what the Chinese are doing internationally with the long-term swaps. That sort of thing will probably become much more common as the confidence in the dollar erodes, and before some other alternative establishes itself, which might take a long time.*

Interviewers: South East Asian countries are concentrating most industrial activities and still highly regulate social relations, including labor. Latin American states are more democratic, but with neoliberal economic deregulation and heterogeneous societies, have a more fragmented working class, unemployment, informal work and economies highly dependent on commodities' export. Africa, with some exceptions, is excluded from concrete social gains in this global market to its working class. You have worked in the ILO [International Labor Organization] for many years. Given your experience there, do you see labor international regulation playing a critical role in today's social struggles? How would you evaluate labor regulation at the international level? Is it still worth fighting for it?

Cox: *I haven't thought about that for a long time. I left the ILO in the 1970s for personal reasons. But I also had the feeling that the organization was moving towards the sidelines of the world. Subsequently, any international issues involving labor, which used to be dealt with by the ILO, were increasingly being dealt with by the WTO or OCDE. In other words, those organizations that deal directly with economic issues were the ones that were decisive. The ILO continued to exist because it has a constituency, but like most bureaucratic organizations, you can create them, but you can't kill them. They don't die, they serve certain purposes. Often those purposes are more in the way of patronage, trip to conferences and that sort of thing. There are a lot of people in these organization that have an*

interest in perpetuating it, without it really performing any major function, and at the same time there are people who find themselves in those organizations and have an opportunity for taking a critical view. But they find themselves excluded, because they are "rocking the boat". In my view of the ILO, I have a number of good friends who stayed on, most of them are retired now, they are very good, clever, competent people, but I don't think the organization itself has performed any major function. I doubt that it is likely to be a forum for any significant activity in the international field. That function was important in the period between the two World Wars and the years immediately following, when welfare states were building up. The ILO rules and regulations had a certain influence on countries, being incorporated into their laws. The ILO helped the labor movements in those countries by giving them a model that they could follow when they were strong enough politically within a country to influence and enforce something. In that period the ILO played an important role, I am not sure it has continued to play that sort of role. Even in the period of the independence of the African countries, for example, some of the ILO rules were contrary to the interests of development, because they represented a way of making the organized worker into a kind privileged person, as a minority within society; and there were those in the ILO who began to be interested much more in spreading employment than protecting the position of employed workers. Spreading employment was the way to help those societies develop, and that became sort of conflictual within the ILO. The traditionalists said "no, we can't do that, our role is to promote standards"; but to promote standards in countries whose economies which were not in the shape that standards meant something for the general good was not a very useful activity.

Interviewers: But at the same time they allowed, for instance, corporations to do whatever they wanted, in the sense of not being accountable…

Cox: *That's right, they didn't take much of an interest for a while in the phenomenon of multinational corporations, in the way that corporations were operating in a number of different countries and how that created differences within countries. I didn't want to say anything negative about the ILO, but I don't see it as something that has a great future. The social movements will not be much interested in using the ILO as they are in perhaps in getting more publicity through other organizations, such as the United Nations, or other organizations that have an impact on opinion in some countries.*

Interviewers: *But how can labor regulation and higher standards be more effective, from an international perspective, if not through international organizations?*

Cox: *What is happening now is that they are negotiated as part of trade agreements. The values and interests are different there, the interests of trade are preeminent. The United States, for example, with its strong movement to prevent the exporting of jobs, leads towards a form of protectionism. So workers' organizations are making themselves felt in different ways, but not through the ILO.*

Interviewers: We want to thank you very much for this opportunity!

It was a very important experience to be at York University, even though some professors are on sabbatical now, researching and writing,

but not teaching... But being in contact with some of them, and also with our colleagues from the graduate program, was very important for us, and to have an opportunity to talk to you in person.

Cox: *I have a great feeling for York and recognizing how divisive the department always has been, how many conflicts there were involving personalities, with most of whom I have been able to be very good friends. York gave me an opportunity to teach what I wanted...It was there that I developed a course called "From Vico to Gramsci", which I don't think anybody had ever heard of before. But they allowed me to do that, and there was an adequate response from students... York gave me a certain freedom that I appreciate and I have enjoyed being there.*

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