



April 2020

The Betrayal of the Intellectuals

Forum: *Planetize the Movement!*

William I. Robinson

Surely Valentine Moghadam could not have known as she prepared her timely [essay](#) that we were at the doorsteps of the global coronavirus pandemic. Our existence has never appeared so fragile and also so interconnected. The health emergency underscores just how relevant—and urgent—her call to planetize the movement is. The emergency brings home to us three paramount matters.

First, the pandemic makes clear, for those who may have any lingering doubts, how the fate of any one community on the planet is now bound up inextricably with that of humanity as a whole. What appeared as a localized virus in Wuhan quickly spread to just about every country and community in the world, leading to the lockdown of several billion people and prompting what some have called the greatest crisis since World War II. Moreover, the economic meltdown triggered by the virus underscored how dependent we all are now on the globally integrated production, financial, and service system, controlled as it is by the transnational capitalist class (TCC) and its political agents in capitalist states around the world.

Second, the pandemic shows how the global or planetary consciousness that people have been talking about ever since globalization entered our vocabulary in the 1990s is more of a reality than ever. As several billions of us hunkered down—although it must be stressed that billions more did not have the luxury of confinement (for them, it was continuing to work or starve)—we stayed glued to television, Internet, and social media news about the virus and its impacts around the world. We felt a new sense of connection, of community, and of solidarity with one another. We experienced as never before what Marshall McLuhan, back in 1964, dubbed the global village.

Third, if we are to have any hope of resolving the dire problems that plague humanity, from ecological collapse, to war, poverty, inequality, and disease, we have to collectively confront across borders the powers that be in the world capitalist system and their control over the means of our existence. From Donald Trump's criminal ineptitude in addressing the pandemic, to the trillion-dollar bailouts for capital, the threat to survival that billions of precarious workers face as the economy plunges, and the overwhelming of woefully underfunded and collapsing public health systems, the pandemic lays bare how it cannot be left to our rulers to resolve the crisis of humanity.

This is where Valentine Moghadam's essay comes in. Since 2008, there has been a rapid political polarization in global society between an insurgent Far Right and an insurgent Left. Now, the crisis triggered by the pandemic, a likely prolonged depression, will leave in its wake more inequality, more political tension, more militarism, and more authoritarianism. It will surely animate far-right and neofascist projects that have surged in many countries around the world and will do the same for popular struggles from below. Social upheaval and political conflict will escalate. Crises are times of rapid social change and open up the possibility of pushing society in many different directions, depending on the outcome of battles among contending social and class forces. Any popular outcome to these battles, in turn, will depend on how the oppressed and exploited may come together in united struggle—precisely the topic Moghadam takes up.

But how prepared are popular forces from below for these life-and-death battles to come, for a “global movement against capitalism, militarism, and oligarchic states”? Moghadam affirms that the way forward will have to involve a new International (or whatever we chose to call it) and a shared agenda of struggle. In fact, a number of calls have gone out in recent years for the formation of a new world party or International. Just a month before his untimely death in 2018, the political economist Samir Amin published a call for the establishment of a global Fifth International of Workers and Peoples. Moghadam and I both participated in a [2019 forum](#) to debate such a new International and were broadly in agreement on its urgency.

Moghadam goes on to identify stumbling blocks that have impeded the forward motion of popular struggles from below. Even as “the rich array of activist groups and the dynamism and passion they display excite a sense of possibility,” she says, “the very diversity of movements and

their weak interconnection could constrain the Global Left's ability to achieve meaningful change." Now, having taken the discussion thus far, I am tempted to simply conclude with a "yes, yes, and yes" to the essay, as I find myself in agreement with all of her argument. But this would hardly amount to a contribution to debate. So, let me turn to what I think is absent in her account: a more decisive and forceful critique of the dominant paradigms that have contributed to this situation of "weak interconnections." We have to analyze why there is such a multiplicity of unconnected struggles as we remind ourselves that the battles to come are as much theoretical and ideological as they are political. And why is the language of class so absent?

A key part of the story is the betrayal of the intellectuals, for no struggle of the oppressed can be without its organic intellectuals. The mass struggles of the 1960s and 1970s opened up space for representatives from the oppressed groups and others who had earlier identified with the radical agenda of those mass struggles to join the ranks of the professional strata and of the elite. In academia, it opened up space for a new intellectual petty bourgeoisie whose class aspirations became expressed in postmodern narratives and identitarian politics. Sidelining class and pushing identitarian politics was a class project of this intellectual petty bourgeoisie, yet it came to infest many social movements, especially in the Global North. These narratives shaped the consciousness and understanding of a whole generation of young people, alienating them from embracing a desperately needed Marxist critique of capitalism at the moment of its globalization.

The best identitarian politics could aspire to was symbolic vindication, diversity (often meaning diversity in the ruling bloc), non-discrimination in the dominant social institutions, and equitable inclusion and representation within global capitalism. It is no wonder that the transnational elite embraced as its own the politics of "diversity" and "multiculturalism" as a strategy to channel the struggle for social justice and anti-capitalist transformation into non-threatening demands for inclusion if not outright cooptation. The strategy served to eclipse the language of the working and popular classes and of anti-capitalism. It helped to derail ongoing revolts from below.

Moghadam observes that we cannot divorce class from the multiple sectoral struggles that have raged. The post-modern identitarian paradigm and its cousin, intersectionality, exert a stifling hegemony in the academy. Notwithstanding their often radical-sounding language, they eschew class and the critique of capitalism at the level of theory and analysis as they advance the class

politics of the petty bourgeoisie. Such identitarian politics should not be confused with struggles against particular forms of exploitation and oppression that different groups face. Ethnic, racial, gender, and sexual oppression are not tangential but constitutive of capitalism. There can be no general emancipation without liberation from these forms of oppression.

Yet the embrace by significant portions of the Left of the limitations set by this identitarian class ideology and politics is an obstacle to planetizing the movement.

About the Author



William I. Robinson is a professor of sociology, global and international studies, and Latin American and Iberian studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara. He is the author of such books as *The Global Police State* (2020), *Global Capitalism and the Crisis of Humanity* (2014), *Latin America and Global Capitalism* (2008), and *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention and Hegemony* (1996). He worked for a decade prior to entering academia as an investigative journalist in Central America and has lectured widely at universities around the world on the topics of the global economy, international politics, and contemporary world affairs. He is active in several social justice movements, including immigrant rights in the United States and justice for Palestine. He holds a PhD in sociology from the University of New Mexico.

About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



Cite as William I. Robinson, "The Betrayal of the Intellectuals," a contribution to the forum Planetize the Movement!, *Great Transition Initiative* (April 2020), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/planetize-movement-robinson>.

About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As an initiative for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.