Robbins, *Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism*

**Part I.**

What is a commodity? What else could something be if it isn’t a commodity? What is the “society of perpetual growth” and what is “consumer capitalism”? Have the society of perpetual growth and consumer capitalism always existed? What are alternatives to them?

How, according to Robbins, can we best conceptualize the working of the culture of capitalism? What is the role of the nation-state in this context?

What is money? How is it the key to the culture of capitalism? What are the main steps in the development of money?

**Chapter One: “Constructing the Consumer”**

According to Robbins, are the drive for incessant accumulation of wealth and the culture of consumption based on the intrinsic nature of human beings?

How was the universe of the consumer and the consumer itself created? What are the roles of marketing and advertising? How did the transformation of institutions in the 20th century contribute to the making of consumer capitalism? What has been the role of the transformation of spiritual and intellectual values?

What has been the role of childhood in consumer capitalism? How has the role of childhood changed?

How is consumer capitalism being globalized?

**Chapter Two: “The Laborer in the Culture of Capitalism”**

Capitalism involves interactions among what three sets of people?

What is the “laborer”? In what sense is the emergence of the laborer a recent historical phenomenon?

What is “capitalism”? What, arguably, is its “genius”? What are the fundamental elements of capitalism? How is capitalism “more than an economic system”?

How does our language convey the notion that money “has an innate property of self-expansion” (or more simply, has a life of its own)?

What is “commodity fetishism”? What are some examples of it in our lives?

When did the sociocultural and economic construction of the consumer take place? When did the construction of the laborer take place?

What are the four principal characteristics of the laborer? What are examples of these characteristics in your life, or at least in our society today?
How does the growth of overseas assembly plants (and overseas customer-service centers as well) contribute to the laborer’s principal characteristics on a global scale? For example, how might such growth affect the position of you or others you know as laborers?

How have laborers commonly resisted capitalism? What are some examples in your life, or in the lives of others you know?

*Chapter Three: “The Rise of the Merchant, Industrialist, and Capital Controller”*

Since 1400 or so, how has the world’s distribution of wealth changed, and how did one area of the world come to dominate the others economically?

How and why did transformations in the organization of capital—that is, transformations in who controlled the money—take place?

How has the level of global economic integration increased, and what has been the consequence for merchants-industrialists-capital controllers, as well as for consumers and laborers?

How much long-distance trade was there in the world in about 1400? What areas of the world were most involved in such trade? How did people generally live in about 1400?

What were the relative positions of China, India, and Western Europe in the world in 1400 or so? What was the economy of China like? What did other areas of the world want from the Chinese economy, and what obstacles did they have to confront to obtain it?

What were the Americas like in about 1400?

How is it that western Europe advanced economically and militarily from 1400 onward, while areas such as China and India stagnated? What were the consequences of western Europe’s ascendance for the Americas?

Why did the industrial revolution focus on western Europe—led by England—from the mid-1700s to 1800s? What products formed the basis of the industrial revolution? Why were agricultural transformations fundamental to the industrial revolution? What were the social consequences of agricultural transformations?

Why did the factory system become the dominant form of industrial production?

What was the Age of Imperialism, and changes enabled it to happen? What were the consequences for the Americas, Africa, and Asia, as well as for western Europe and the U.S.?

When did the U.S. emerge as the world’s leading economic (but not yet military-diplomatic) power? How did this happen?
What kind of institution is the corporation and how did it accumulate so much wealth and power?

What is “corporate libertarianism,” and what are its underlying assumptions?

Why are the Bretton Woods Institutions, and why have they been important to the world economy since World War II?

Why did the U.S. dollar begin to lose importance in the world economy in the 1960s? What did this have to do with the onset of the debt crisis in the 1970s and 80s? What were—and continue to be—the consequences of the debt crisis for Latin America, Africa, and much of Asia?

In what ways is the separation between political power and economic power an enduring tension in capitalism? In this context, what is “economic competitiveness”? What is a “favorable investment climate”? What are the implications of these notions for the world’s societies, politics, and natural environment?

Chapter Four, “The Nation-State in the Culture of Capitalism”

What are the fundamental roles of the nation-state in capitalism?

How did the nation-state come to exist, and how does it succeed in binding together often disparate and conflicting groups?

What proportion of contemporary nation-states are more than 30 years old? Before the 19th century, how did most the world’s people identify their geographic identity?

Given that states have existed for thousands of years, what are the distinguishing characteristics of nation-states?

When did the state come to exist as a stratified society presided over by a ruling elite with the power to draw from and demand agricultural surpluses? Why did they come into existence?

How do states that have come into existence since 1500 or so generally differ from earlier forms of states?

What has been the role of language, education, and culture in the construction of nation-states? How has this been a source of conflict and struggle? How does this pertain to language in the U.S. as well as the current U.S. controversy over the teaching of evolution vs. creationism?

What has been the role of violence and genocide—including “terrorism”—in the construction of nation-states? How does this pertain to the U.S., past and present?

What is citizenship? What is nationalism? What is transnationalism? What are their implications for the power of nation-states?

In what ways is globalization—economic, social, and cultural—weakening, strengthening, or simply changing the rule of nation-state?
What are NGOs? When did they begin historically? Why have they increased in number and importance? In what ways do they weaken, strengthen, or simply change the rule of nation-states?

**Part Two**

What are the principles established in a society that determine people’s access to desired resources?

What are “market externalities”? Why aren’t people more concerned with them?

What is “Polanyi’s paradox”?

**Chapter Five, “The Problem of Population Growth”**

What is the basic argument of the Malthusians? What kinds of evidence fail to support their argument?

Why isn’t it straightforward to identify the Earth’s “carrying capacity”?

What, according to Robbins, is the ideology of Malthusian concerns?

What is “demographic transition theory,” and what, according to Robbins, do its theorists regard as an answer to high population growth in poor countries? What, according to Robbins, is wrong about demographic transition theory?

How and why did the economic expansion of the world capitalist economy changed reproductive behaviors?

What is “wealth flows theory”? How does it explain why the demand for children in poor countries remains high, and the circumstances under which such demand declines?

What problems might emerge or increase in poor countries if they become more oriented to the nuclear family structure?

**Chapter Six, “Hunger, Poverty, and Economic Development”**

Is world hunger the result of insufficient food production? Is famine the most common reason for hunger? Is famine caused by food insufficiency? Is hunger caused by overpopulation?

Why is it possible to be malnourished or to starve in the world today?

Historically, why have people left the land on which they produced their own food to seek wage employment, which requires that they buy food from others?

Why, perhaps, did humans shift from gathering and hunting to domesticating plants and animals?
What is the advantage of plow and irrigation agriculture? In what parts of the world did irrigation agriculture begin? What are the costs of irrigation agriculture? Where did plow agriculture begin? What is swidden agriculture? What are its advantages?

What was the most important change in food production inspired by the transformation of food into a capitalist commodity? What are the changes advantages and disadvantages? Why is high agricultural productivity essential for the growth of cities, manufacturing, and services?

What is the “neocaloric revolution,” and what are its problems? What is the “green revolution,” and what are its problems? What is the “green revolution II,” and what are its problems?

In the capitalist economy, what determines the production of food, including what kinds of food are produced? Under what circumstances is food production discouraged?

From Amartya Sen’s perspective, hunger is a failure of what, and is based on what conditions?

Was there insufficient food during the Irish potato famine of 1846-47? What were the causes of Malawi’s famine in 1949? What is the lesson of these famines?

Why is more attention given to famine than to endemic hunger? What have been the causes of endemic hunger in Brazil?

In what ways is “health a political symbol subject to manipulation”? What are the consequences for the poor?

Why, according to Robbins, is “economic development” not a solution to poverty and hunger? What are the three features of economic development that lead it to cause, rather than solve, problems? How does James Scott describe these features and their consequences?

Why is foreign aid not a solution to poverty and hunger?

What are the good and not so good features of the Grameen Bank’s “microcredit” approach to reducing hunger and poverty?

How are hunger and poverty based on the relations between consumer, laborer, capitalist, and nation-state?

Chapter 7, “Environment and Consumption”

What countries have the highest per capita rates of energy usage and carbon emissions?

How many hectares of land are required to maintain the consumption level of the average person in a high-consumption country? How do such countries make up for deficits in such land?
How is the history of sugar tied to the emergence and growth of the capitalist world economy? How has it involved relations between consumer, laborer, capitalist, and nation-state? How did the diet of the English working class change in the 1800s? What are “drug foods,” and what have been their role since the industrial revolution?

What is the impact of raising cattle for beef on the environment? How efficient is beef as a food source? How good is beef for our health? What has been the role of meat in the diet of most societies historically?

What was the role of cattle-beef production in the Irish Potato Famine? How did cattle-beef production affect Argentina and the U.S.? Regarding the U.S., how did cattle-beef production affect the Great Plains and American Indians? How has it influenced corn farming, and what are the consequences? How has cattle-beef production—past and present—involves relations between consumer, laborer, capitalist, and nation-state? What has been the impact of the modern “hamburger economy” on poor countries such as Costa Rica?

What is the difference between the “factory model” and the “agro-ecology model” of agricultural production?

How have rich countries exported pollution?

**Chapter 8, “Disease”**

What have arguably been “signature” diseases of various periods of world history? What do signature diseases reveal about particular times and places in history? How do such revelations pertain to relations between laborer, capitalist, consumer, and nation-state?

What four things are necessary for a pathogen to kill us? How do the four things pertain to relations between laborer, capitalist, consumer, and nation-state?

How did the shift from gathering/hunting to early agriculture change the relationship between microbes and humans? How has the history of urbanization change this relationship? How have these shifts pertained to relations between laborer, capitalist, consumer, and nation-state?

How have the environmental diseases of the past fifty years or so influenced the spread of disease? How has this influenced pertained to relations between laborer, capitalist, consumer, and nation-state?

How has the emergence and spread of AIDS reflected contemporary relations between laborer, capitalist, consumer, and nation-state?
Chapter 9, “Indigenous Groups and Ethnic Conflict”

Why have indigenous cultures commonly been destroyed in the history of the nation-state and world capitalism?

What are the common characteristics of indigenenous cultures?

What processes are involved in “ethnocide”?

Why are capitalism and democracy “a volatile combination” when there is a market-dominant minority?

Why is the case of Rwandan genocide “hardly a simple matter of tribal warfare or ancient hatreds?”

Part III

In what ways does the expansion of the culture of capitalism redefine space? What are the problems of the new globalized space?

What is “terrorism,” and how does it differ from other forms of collective violence? Have forms of collective violence changed over time? If so, how? What does it mean to “conduct a war on terrorism”?

Chapter 10, “Peasant Protest, Rebellion, and Resistance”

How are we to understand the actions of peasant farmers who wish to resist or take up arms against a heavily armed and obviously superior opponent?

How do the relatively powerless resist oppression by the relatively powerful? What is “resistance”? What are the obstacles to resistance?

What were the consequences of the green revolution for Malaysian peasants?

At what point does resistance become collective, and under what conditions does peasant protest become violent? How do these questions pertain to the case of the Kikuyu in Kenya?

Regarding Chiapas, why did peasants join or support the revolt?

What, perhaps, is the future of peasants and peasant protest?
Chapter 11, "Antisystemic Protest"

There are diverse kinds of protest in the modern world—labor, civil rights, feminist, environmental, militia, religious, and so on. Do such movements share anything in common in global perspective?

To the degree that they protest the workings of global capitalism’s expansion, they are “antisystemic” protests, according to some interpretations.

The roots of such protests are that capitalism requires constant changes—new ways of organizing production, new technologies, new markets, new forms of labor, and the like. Capitalism has been enormously flexible and dynamic in these ways. Such flexibility and dynamism, however, comes at many costs: social-geographic uprooting; changing distributions of wealth and power; challenges to our identities and group membership; new environmental problems; and more.

What were the first and second “world revolutions”? What groups took part? How and why did they take part? In what ways can these events be interpreted as “world revolutions”?

Regarding the “Revolution of 1848,” what two social movements did it establish, and why?

Regarding the “Revolution of 1968,” in what ways can it be regarded as a turning point in world history? What were its themes in the “West” and the “East”?

Regarding the Revolution of 1848, what conditions gave rise to labor organization and protest? How have owners/managers and governments addressed labor organization and protest since then?

Regarding the Revolution of 1968, what conditions gave rise to global feminist resistance? What have been its differing strategies and its sources of both solidarity and division around the world?

Regarding the Revolution of 1968, what conditions have given rise to ecological resistance movements? What have been its sources of solidarity and division around the world?

In summary, it what ways have protest changed? That is, how have forms of protest changed over history: before capitalism and over the various stages of capitalism? How has the formation of the modern nation-state been integral to the changing forms of protest?