



TEN YEARS AFTER *THE GLOBAL RIGHT WING*. INTERVIEW WITH CLIFFORD BOB

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Cliff, your book *The Global Right Wing and the Clash of World Politics* was one of the first looking at right-wing transnational activism. Until then, we were used to think of transnational activism as a leftist trend, and we largely missed the rightist version of that. How would you see this Global Right transnational activism ten years after the publication of your book?

I think it has evolved in a number of different ways. Though some of the activist groups that I've looked at, especially in the areas of LGBT rights, have maintained their ability to block new rights developments at the United Nations, they've fallen behind in a number of major countries since then. Same-sex marriage came to the United States since this book came out, and the whole concept of trans rights in particular has hugely blossomed since then. It really wasn't much on the radar screen at that point. Also, globalization and economic integration, which a lot of groups on the right—at least the part of the right that I looked at—are uncomfortable with, has also moved forward.

At the same time, the Right has had successes such as Brexit, the election of Trump, as well as the election of quite a number of other right-wing/populist/illiberal leaders in major countries like India, Brazil, Turkey, and of course Victor Orbán in Hungary among others.

A big focus in my book was the way in which activist groups in one country would refer to what has happening in another country as a model in some cases, or as a warning sign or nightmare scenario to avoid. Today, there's clearly been a lot of that transnational interaction continuing to go on among the activist groups that I looked at.

I didn't look as much at the political party side of things, although in my view it's very closely connected. One obviously well-known and quite interesting example is the efforts of Steve Bannon to create a “nationalist Internationale” to unify right-wing groups and parties, particularly in Western Europe. That's something that, if it had been happening at the same time I was writing the book, I would have loved to include. This form of transnational activism has certainly blossomed in the 2010s and especially after 2016.

How is U.S. domestic politics playing a role in expanding this notion of Culture Wars? In the United States, it seems climate change has now entered that field, with polarized groups opposing their philosophical principles against each other.

Yes, I think climate change certainly has become wrapped up in the polarization that we have in our country. There's this action-reaction aspect to this. As the left, the Democrats in particular, push harder and harder on climate change and especially make it a moral issue, it raises the hackles, to say the least, of those who disagree for whatever reason, and maybe especially those who disagree on their own moral grounds.

Although we focus on the cultural aspect, there's clearly a material, social aspect to it as well. The Trump phenomenon brought that out very strongly with so many formerly Democratic, working class, blue collar



voters who went for him. There are of course cultural issues such as racism or gun rights, but his election also clearly had an economic dimension to the extent that the Democratic Party has become much more a party of the upper middle classes and elites with more internationalist views, leaving behind some social groups who oppose, for instance, free trade agreements.

These groups feel under attack as well on the culture side. In my mind, there's absolutely no question that the deepening polarization here in the United States has been exacerbated by the Culture Wars. At the same time, the polarization on material grounds, too, reinforces that divide and certainly makes it harder for the activist groups on different sides to ever see eye to eye. In the end with our system of government, decisions eventually are made. To that extent, I do feel that some of the debate about U.S. politics which says, "Nothing ever gets done in our country," is misplaced. Eventually, compromises for public policies are done, even if of course they don't satisfy everyone.

Returning back to the Trump election, the efforts to delegitimize him and his voters with claims of being Russia's puppets upset many of his supporters. These people thought Trump would help them. They may have been misguided, but he did at least speak to their feeling, their pain, their interests—at least they certainly thought so and many apparently still do. I don't think he upheld most of that very well, except on a symbolic level, but to denigrate these Trump voters as just racists or puppets of Russia was wrong from an analytic standpoint. Obviously, these accusations go both ways, as Trump totally antagonized the left with misstatements and lies in so many ways as well!

In your book, Latin America and Africa appeared at the forefront of the internationalization of U.S.-originated Culture Wars. Now, that seems to have shifted more toward Central Europe and Russia. How do you see the arrival of this region into the broader landscape of transnationalized Culture Wars?

Yes, in my book I came up with this notion of a "Baptist-Burqa" coalition. And indeed, many of these international right-wing alliances are strange bedfellows coalitions because they bring together groups that had many differences. Most strikingly to me was the way in which the Christian right groups would work at the UN with Islamic organizations—and not just work with them, but actually really respect what they were doing. They, obviously disagreed on many points but also agreed on opposing gay rights or changes in gender identity.

I probably should have called it the Baptist-Burqa-Babushka coalition because activists in Central and Eastern Europe, and Russia have since become very much involved, and were indeed already present at that time, as Kristina Stoeckl's and Dmitry Uzlaner's forthcoming book on Russia in the global culture war will show. I did include in my book half a chapter on a conflict in Romania over same-sex marriage. So it wasn't absent, but I do think that Russia has become much more prominent since. And here also, groups in the United States who you might think would be skeptical of partnering with Russia are now seeing the country as a model to emulate, at least on the cultural side. They voluntarily overlook the issues they disagree on—freedom of speech for instance—to focus on what unites them.

Indeed, and that leads into another question: how should we think analytically into what is "an export" and what is the agency of local actors in promoting their own agenda for their own audience, in articulation with transnational strategies, but not necessarily "under influence."

This is a key question. In my first book, *The Marketing of Rebellion*, I wanted to bring back the agency of these local groups in out-of-the-way places—places that we don't think of as centers of the major NGOs. The whole



concept of export and import does not capture what's happening on the ground. There's a huge amount of reciprocal interaction and groups are using one another, and they're doing it to some degree because they share the same values and they have similar opponents, but also because they can pick and choose who their allies are going to be to try to use their scarce resources wisely.

They may not spend as much time with one particular group in a country as with another supporting them, but I do think that small activist groups in Brazil, Sweden or Romania for instance—the countries I studied in my *Global Right Wing* book—were very well aware of what was happening in the United States or in Western Europe on a whole range of rights issues. And conversely: American groups, too, looked to what was happening in these other countries as something that could be used here. One of the more interesting cases was a Pentecostal preacher in Sweden who was being prosecuted on hate speech charges for giving an anti-LGBT sermon. A very powerful American conservative legal group traveled to Sweden to help him. Ultimately, the case went up to the Supreme Court of Sweden, and his earlier conviction was overturned. Then the US firm helped bring him to California in the referendum battle over proposition eight about same sex marriage. So this Swedish minister was in California, speaking in Swedish with his speeches being translated into English, and telecast across the state to conservative groups to say, “I’m the warning of what could happen if same-sex marriage is legalized.”

Another case showing reciprocal transnational relations that I covered in *The Global Right Wing*: Brazilian gun activists reached out to the National Rifle Association for help in opposing a national referendum that would have banned the private sale of firearms in the country. When the activists unexpectedly won the referendum battle, the NRA then used what happened in Brazil to fire up their members here in the United States in various ways. So yes, we should give back agency to “smaller” players and look at how much they can be a source of inspiration to what is happening here, and not always in the reverse direction.

That's really a fascinating element. I would like now to move to your latest book, *Rights as Weapons. Instruments of Power, Tools of Conflict*, in which you analyze rights not as an end in itself but political tools that can be used both for liberal and illiberal purposes. Could you develop on that interpretation?

I came to that book from the perspective of someone who had mostly been focusing on human rights issues. I am very sympathetic to most of what the left views as the core types of human rights issues. But as I thought more about it, it just struck me that if we take off the word “human” from “rights”, what are “rights” themselves? I’m actually a former lawyer, but I hadn’t really looked into the philosophical definition of rights. Obviously, there are many different definitions as well as different definitions of human rights, but in that book, I tried to make a purely political argument that you have to look at rights as a tool used in political battles to try to achieve some kind of substantive good that you, as an activist or politician, want to achieve.

If you start looking at it that way, then there's no reason that rights are confined to being a tool of the left, and historically I think often they weren't. Marx for instance, was very critical of the whole concept of rights, but we can just look at some of the rights that tend to be ignored by human rights activists today to see this as well. For instance there's not a lot of focus on property rights, even though property rights have been part of the rights “package” from the eighteenth century, and are mentioned in the major UN documents about human rights. Increasingly, we hear about the rights of the majority or cultural rights, and it is often right-wing groups that use these rights when clashing with left-wing groups.

In *Rights as Weapons*, I focus on clashes of rights with contending groups using rights as various types of political tools that will help them achieve their substantive goals. Often these groups then seek to have their goals established in law or in constitutions—as *rights* to these goals, with the state then putting its power behind implementation and enforcement. This has happened time and again, and I chronicle historical as well as



contemporary cases in the book. Conflicts we're now seeing over trans rights, for instance, take this appearance of being a claim to one right versus another, e.g. trans rights vs women's rights, according to some activists.

How do you see your work relating to our Program's focus on illiberalism? What do you think illiberalism means and how useful is it analytically?

One problem is that when you use one of these abstract terms, it covers too much. I wrote this in the introduction to my *Global Right Wing* book--that the terms "right" and "left" can be misleading, and that the real focus should be on clashes over particular policy issues, no matter how the contenders label themselves or are labeled by others. On the other hand, I ended up using the term "global right-wing" in my title and elsewhere because of the apparent novelty (at least to political scientists) of right-wing groups as transnational activists. Still, I think we need to focus not on labels but on the policies that are being fought over.

Another problem with these terms in addition to their vagueness is that the terms have become highly politicized. "Illiberalism" is of course a negative. It would seem to mean anything that is not "liberal" or that actively opposes liberalism (anti-liberalism). So a key question is: What is liberalism? In the United States today, I believe that "liberalism" is shifting away from some of its classical meanings or at least away from commitments to key values that were associated with liberalism previously. Liberalism, to me, involves most fundamentally a free exchange of ideas, except in the most limited and extreme forms such as speech that immediately incites violence, which our Supreme Court has held not to be protected. Yet some of today's activist groups that call themselves liberal promote broader restrictions on speech or cancellation of speakers who they claim are promoting "illiberal" ideas, spreading "disinformation" or "hate." These terms are extremely vague and highly political, subject to much manipulation.

In the name of these terms, the speech rights of Americans are being controlled in civil society, by tech corporations, and even by the state in ways that I think, raise major questions about whether the result could ever be considered "liberal." To me, it's a shocker that some self-described liberals are so wrapped up in particular issues that they want any debate on them to be squelched—or maybe it is just partisanship on both sides. That to me is an illiberal position, but it is celebrated by many liberals (as well as by some conservatives). We see this on all manner of issues today, spanning typical left/right divides—trans rights, same-sex marriage, climate change, history education in public schools, boycotts of Israel, and much more.

I think that in the not so distant past, liberals would have found this apparent fear of and opposition to free speech strange and troubling. They might also have said that it weakens the ability of activists to fight and win their goals because you end up angering the other side more because you silence them and you don't have as much information about their ideas and strategies.

It's not just speech either. It's freedoms of association, freedoms of movement, and more—especially in the COVID-related lockdown policies implemented most aggressively by "liberal" Democratic governors. In Pennsylvania, for instance, I got involved in the debate over emergency powers that the governor had taken in spring 2020. The question that ultimately made its way onto a state-wide referendum in May 2021 was essentially whether a governor could not only put vast emergency powers into his own hands, but also continually renew them without a reasonable way in which the state legislature could stop that from happening. Fortunately, the referendum passed, but many liberals opposed it, not seeming to care that one-man rule is undemocratic and illiberal.

This is why I feel that your program is really interesting and useful. Despite the many recent shifts in the meaning of the terms "liberal" and "illiberal," we need to know much more about the many political conflicts



in the United States and worldwide in which these terms are invoked. Social scientists can certainly analyze the political uses of these terms, and I think that is very useful. As citizens we can also promote our own positions on substantive issues—and as true liberals uphold the basic Constitutional freedoms we have in this country, in broad and robust forms.

Interview conducted by Marlene Laruelle

Clifford Bob is Professor and Chair of the Political Science Department at Duquesne University. His areas of research and teaching include human rights, globalization, and U.S. foreign policy. His book, *The Global Right Wing and the Clash of World Politics*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2012. His 2005 book, *The Marketing of Rebellion: Insurgents, Media, and International Activism* (Cambridge), won the International Studies Association Best Book Award and other prizes. He edited *The International Struggle for New Human Rights* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) and is the author of numerous articles and book chapters. His current book project is *Should We Be Afraid? U.S. National Security and Foreign Policy*. Dr. Bob holds a Ph.D. from MIT and a J.D. from NYU.