

The US will not become Colombia

NZZ Interview with

Nobel laureate James A. Robinson

Nobel laureate Prof. James A. Robinson, Reverend Dr. Richard L. Pearson Professor of Global Conflict Studies at the University of Chicago

Abstract

Nobel laureate James A. Robinson argues that today's global tensions are less the result of a historic rupture than of unresolved social and economic failures in the United States. In this interview, he explains why Donald Trump's rise reflects deep-seated discontent rather than a sudden break with the past, why liberal institutions have lost credibility, and why the apparent strength of autocracies such as China may prove deceptive. Despite the turmoil, Robinson remains cautiously optimistic that the United States – and other democracies – can still reinvent themselves. The interview was conducted by NZZ journalists Peter A. Fischer and Albert Steck during Robinson's visit to the Department of Economics at the University of Zurich in September 2025.

Peter A. Fischer and Albert Steck, NZZ: Mr Robinson, the world order is undergoing fundamental change. Are we currently witnessing a historic upheaval?

James A. Robinson: I doubt that this change is as dramatic as some people claim. Are we witnessing the collapse of the rules-based world order? No, in a historical context, the current changes are not that unusual: just think of the US war in Vietnam or the invasion of Iraq. America has always pursued what it perceived to be its own interests.

But with the trade war, the US is now suddenly in conflict with its closest allies: Europe and Canada.

Why has the US cooperated with Europe until now? It did so not out of some higher calling, but because it thought it benefited from doing so. However, the circumstances have changed, as can be seen from many facts. In particular, real wages have stagnated for the majority of Americans in the period of rapid globalization over the past 50 years. The recent backlash against globalization is partly a consequence of this.

The American economy is the strongest in the world. Why do you think globalization is suddenly no longer working for the US?

Globalization has primarily benefited the highly educated in US society, including academics. At the same time, an enormous divide has opened up in the society. Many middle-class and less educated people are worse off today than they were 50 years ago. These are among the people who voted for Donald Trump.

Do you think it is reasonable for Trump to make such a radical change of course?

Globalization has deepened the divisions in American society. But that does not mean that the measures Trump has

taken are going to be effective. I would describe the economic policies, like tariffs, as idiosyncratic and possibly counterproductive. In the case of Brazil, for example, he is linking the tariff to the alleged 'witch hunt' against former President Jair Bolsonaro. But here economic policies are used as a broader tool of statecraft, rather than to achieve purely economic ends, so it is difficult to evaluate them simply using economic criteria.

Do you expect the liberal principles that made the West strong after the Second World War to remain important in the future?

That's a difficult question. However, we should not forget that anti-liberal forces have always been very present in the US. One example is the McCarthy movement, which fought against the alleged infiltration of society by communism in the 1950s. At the same time, we must acknowledge that the self-proclaimed liberal forces have increasingly discredited themselves.

How did you come to this assessment?

During his term in office, President Joe Biden has summarily cancelled billions of dollars in student loans. Even though these people, with their top-class education, are already among the beneficiaries. For me, this measure is symptomatic of how the liberal movement in the United States has lost touch with reality. Similarly, the economy has become increasingly alienated from society. Liberalism has been taken to extremes and has not worked in terms of promoting the living standards of the majority. It has also pushed ideological positions that many people do not agree with. That is why renewal is needed. The current chaos thus offers an opportunity for new ideas and models to establish themselves. Will this succeed? I hope so, but of course the change could just as easily fail.

At present, it seems more likely that social media is further deepening the divide in American society rather than bridging the gaps.

However, academic research has not found any significant effects of social media on social polarization. What I notice is that this discussion tends to distract from the real problems.

What do you mean?

The point is that the standard of living has fallen for around half of the population. That is a fact. And it is also about the detached response of the liberal Democrats to this development. The support for the American Health Secretary and his anti-vaccination theories, the ‘anti-woke’ movement, all of this is a reaction to the Democrats’ social projects. So the problem is not just globalization and falling wages.

Donald Trump himself despises the established institutions. But I think it’s an exaggeration to classify him as authoritarian.

Has trust in politics been lost?

For me, the big story behind what is happening in the US right now is that the obvious problems have been neglected and suppressed for decades. This has eroded trust in democratic institutions. And now Trump can govern without having to adhere to established institutional processes.

This is reminiscent of autocratically ruled China, which has so far triumphed in the trade dispute with the US. Democratic Europe, on the other hand, is the loser. Do democracies find it more difficult to find their place in the new world order?

Europe is weakened – this has become even more apparent now with Trump’s tariffs. However, the stagnation began 20 years ago. The reasons include excessive regulation and excessive state redistribution, which cannot be financed. Nevertheless, I am convinced that Europe can reinvent itself thanks to its capabilities. However, this will require some tough decisions.

In your books, you always emphasise the advantages of democratic institutions. However, the fact that China, unlike Europe, is responding so resiliently to the new situation contradicts this assessment.

China has performed remarkably well in recent decades. However, its strong growth was mainly due to copying Western technologies, which often led to violations of patent and property rights. Another important factor was the reallocation of the rural population, which provided factories with a huge reservoir of labour. The Soviet Union also developed quite successfully at first: as late as the 1970s, the US feared that Russia might overtake it in the space race.

You are sceptical about China’s future?

It is true that China cannot be directly compared with the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, I am convinced that Chinese growth will stall at a certain point – although I do not know when that moment will come. Ultimately, the Communist Party is concerned with controlling power. Economic growth is secondary to its own legitimacy. This can be seen dramatically in

communist North Korea. History clearly shows that those who wield power become corrupt sooner or later. This is especially true for systems based on totalitarian power.

Isn't the US under Trump also developing into an authoritarian state?

In my opinion, the US is far from that. What we are seeing is rather a backlash against the uncontrolled economic deregulation of recent decades. Trump's supporters are a broad coalition, ranging from conservative nationalists and devout Christians to libertarians like Elon Musk. Donald Trump himself despises the established institutions. But I think it's an exaggeration to classify him as authoritarian.

But why do you believe that Trump's reign will ultimately lead to better institutions and not simply to an authoritarian system of favouritism?

History has shown that an inclusive society can turn into an extractive one and I have not argued that what you called "Trump's reign" in itself creates better institutions. My point is that this moment has arisen because of deep problems with the preexisting situation and now we have a chance to address those problems. Is it likely that this turns into an authoritarianism the United States? I don't think so.

So you don't see any danger of the United States destroying the very foundations of its own success?

I don't know. We live in confusing times that call many certainties into question. Many things are possible, but I would be very surprised if the United States turned into Colombia. The United States has experienced much worse and still managed to reinvent itself time and again.

The United States was previously regarded as the 'beacon of the free

world'. This reputation has been severely damaged in a short period of time.

Unfortunately, that's true. Until now, the US has distinguished itself by attracting the brightest minds and the best talent from around the world. This model is undoubtedly fading. But we are not only seeing this development in America: no one wants foreigners at the moment.

Switzerland is also considered a classic immigration country. The model of a small, open economy has been very successful for a long time. Is that over now that the law of the jungle applies?

Switzerland has survived much more serious crises in the past: the Habsburgs and the Nazis, for example. But the country can rely on strong institutions that have been built up over centuries. The American attacks on world trade are therefore nothing new for Switzerland.

Nevertheless, open market economies such as Switzerland and Taiwan are particularly dependent on regulated market access.

I agree that trade is more important for small countries. But here, too, we should not underestimate the dynamics of change. The US is now imposing tariffs on imports from Switzerland. But this is creating new opportunities: by the end of this century, 40 per cent of the world's population will live in Africa. I think if the US withdraws from the global economy for good, then the world will re-balance without the US.

How do you see artificial intelligence influencing all these changes?

It's like globalization: on the one hand, the use of artificial intelligence promises huge productivity gains and economic growth. This is particularly true for Western countries with rapidly aging populations. On the other hand, the benefits can be very unevenly distributed: routine tasks are automated, and poor countries have little

access to innovations. The crucial question is therefore who will own the robots. I fear that the gap between rich and poor will widen even further.

Overall, however, your assessment of the current situation is significantly more optimistic than that of many other academics. Your colleague Daron Acemoglu, with whom you shared the Nobel Prize, takes a much more pessimistic view of developments in the United States.

The United States undoubtedly faces major problems. And opinions on how to solve them vary widely. It is therefore important that we acknowledge the reality of today's American society. Despite all the reservations about Donald Trump, he has at least understood the concerns of ordinary people better than many politicians. After all, he entered politics as an outsider. That is why I see the current changes as curative. And that is probably why I am more optimistic than some of my colleagues.

Source

This article was first published in the newspaper NZZ on 23 September 2025. Translated and edited for layout purposes by the UBS Center.

You can find a recording of Robinson's speech and other material on the topic on the Center's website: www.ubscenter.uzh.ch

Photo: © Nobel Media AB. Photo: Clément Morin

About the speaker

Nobel laureate Prof. James A. Robinson is Institute Director of The Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Global Conflicts, the Reverend Dr. Richard L. Pearson Professor of Global Conflict Studies, and University Professor at the University of Chicago. He is an economist and political scientist whose influential research examines the interplay between political power, institutions, and prosperity. Robinson's work explores the historical and contemporary causes of political and economic divergence, combining the quantitative methods of economics with the qualitative approaches of other social sciences. He was awarded the 2024 Nobel Prize for Economics for his studies of how institutions are formed and affect prosperity.



Nobel laureate James A. Robinson
Reverend Dr. Richard L. Pearson Professor of Global Conflict Studies
at the University of Chicago