



Book Review

Contesting the Global Order: The Radical Political Economy of Perry Anderson and Immanuel Wallerstein. Gregory P. Williams. 2020. Albany, NY: SUNY Press. 268 pages, ISBN 978-1-4384-7965-1 Hardcover (\$95.00)

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Gregory P. Williams' goal is to make the case that Immanuel Wallerstein and Perry Anderson are exemplary scholars of Radical Political Economy, nudging them towards the discipline of political science. The author compares the two thinkers in order to outline an approach that is focused on systemic transformations of global politics and the "Really Big Questions," which have once again become more pertinent in the wake of the many crises that began in 2008. Williams carries this effort through with conviction. Yet, this particular focus may have hidden from sight other considerations that could have strengthened the study.

Williams' account follows a chronological order starting with the very earliest works of Wallerstein and Anderson. The account is rich and skillfully uses both scholarly writings and other historical documents in drawing connections between the intellectual endeavors and historical contexts of Wallerstein and Anderson's (W&A) careers. Laudably, it is the discovery and showcasing of these connections that propels Williams' narrative forward, providing an enjoyable reading experience.

Williams specifically focuses on three issues that he sees once more surfacing as relevant for thinking about alternative politics of the future. These are the analysis of totalities, the origins and operations of capitalism, and the role of agency. Out of the three, Williams' best and indeed quite



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masterful discussion is that of totalities. Another stated and well delivered aim of the book is the demonstration of the importance of carefully considering the relation of theory and practice when engaging with the works of any scholar. In other words, through the examples of W&A, Williams successfully makes a case for the importance of historical reflexivity in social theory.

However, the book has also other strengths and shortcomings that the author could have better identified and addressed. Wallerstein and Anderson are an interesting and fruitful comparison pair, especially for the purposes of understanding how scholars undertake the search for alternative forms of analysis throughout long careers and in dynamic interaction with historical changes around them. However, despite this being an interesting comparison, Williams does not analytically reflect upon his choice of these particular scholars. Nor does he sufficiently discuss the possible analytical limitations that this choice sets, or the possible effects for the outcome of the analysis that the specific comparison of W&A leads to. What is this particular comparison good for and what not?

For example, Williams, a political scientist, simply characterizes Wallerstein and Anderson as radicals in academia and as “two pioneers” of an “unconventional” political economy narrative. But the reader would have benefited from a clearer explanation about the reference point that Williams adopts in approaching the two thinkers in this manner. Some might in fact see W&A as rather more mainstream, especially from the perspective of what radicalism might mean in today’s global academia. If we take a global historical perspective, can we in fact call Wallerstein and Anderson radicals? Are these two not rather more regular, even if successful and innovative, social scientists and historians of Anglo-Saxon and Western academia? Be it as it may, Williams’ claim that W&A are radical makes sense from the perspective of a right-of-center political orientation, such as those dominant in the Global North/West. This may stem from Williams’ attempt to enter into dialogue with more mainstream political science. Or perhaps the choice of W&A and the particular perspective taken on their works stems from somewhere else. In any case, spelling it clearly and reflecting upon it would have strengthened the case that the author is making. This is important especially since Williams emphasizes that the study is “written with the present in mind” (2020: 11)

But for now, I will bracket this question of why W&A are characterized as *the* Radical Political Economy scholars. An important motivation of the book is to ask “from where do we get ideas for the twenty-first century?” Williams (2020: 12) answers the question: “This work originates with the view that we should step back and reconsider twentieth-century radicals.” And indeed, the volume is an important contribution to the increasing calls for a better understanding of the historical context and genealogies of social thought.

Relatedly, as those on the Left seek new narratives about capitalism and socialism, it is sensible to turn back to previous attempts to do just that, both for innovation and for hesitation. William’s book is at its strongest in that effort, giving an introduction and well-crafted historical account of how two important thinkers of the post-WWII (scholarly) Left, in the West, sought to find new forms of thinking that could empower active criticism of capitalism, especially in terms of how we understand historical change. Indeed, a focus on “how” they went about this rather than

just “what” they put forth is an important strength of the study. Both Wallerstein and Anderson went to great lengths to diversify and multiply the intellectual tools at the Left’s disposal, which Williams captures well and in a convincing dialogue with major world-historical shifts of the past 70 years. It is in this regard that Williams’ most clear analytical contributions are made in his discussion and outlining of totalities as categories of socio-historical analysis through W&A’s writings and also in terms of how the historical context called forth such analytical lenses.

As such, the book raises important questions about which histories should we examine in order to provide ammunition in thinking about alternative futures, especially within the traditions and canons of social sciences. Some of the connections that Williams expertly draws, make the reader critically think whether, in terms of retrieving ideas from the past for alternative futures, this the right place to look. Whether and to what extent can radicals of 20th century Western academia provide alternatives or do they occlude them from our sight? Are not the post-WWII social sciences and their political assumptions sometimes exactly what many scholars are now trying to distance their thinking from? For example, despite their best intentions, a focus on ideas such as a scholarly Left vanguard in the West appear today blind to the realities of global knowledge production. Or the fact that only late in a career did these scholars come to realize the limitations of a Newtonian perspective, when today such critiques are widely accepted. Williams shows convincingly how often this type of localized experiences and a fairly provincial gaze characterized the intellectual environments of these otherwise (as Williams puts it) cosmopolitan thinkers. This in turn highlights the importance of careful historical reflexivity in engaging past social thought today.

Overall, Williams offers fascinating context and insight into the intellectual lineages of scholars whose works one cites so often, usually without sparing a thought to the larger network and history of ideas that one engages when so doing. Especially in the discussion of Wallerstein and Anderson’s early careers Williams provides interesting and at times also positively amusing points about politics and the reoccurring endeavors of being a social scientist as well as the repetition of old problems and ideas under different guises.

However, the aforementioned unstated, invisible reference point of the book, sometimes surfaces in the historical narrative as well. For example, surprising amounts of text are sacrificed to explaining that Stalin was not a true communist or to tracing the history of totality as a concept specifically through ancient Greece, Medieval theologians and the Enlightenment, instead of offering a less Eurocentric narrative. None of this seriously hurts the argumentative focus, and may in fact be a result of upholding it. But for the readers more attuned to historical methods this may raise a few eyebrows and appear as an unevenness that undermines the interesting historical connections that Williams at other times draws.

To return then to the question of why W&A, Williams’ book would have benefited from a more analytical and self-reflexive consideration of the particular boundaries within which Wallerstein and Anderson appear as pioneers of Radical Political Economy. Perhaps paradoxically for Williams’ book, Wallerstein especially paid great attention to methodological reflexivity and criticized approaches that did not identify their own “blinkers.” This omission also reflects

Williams' tendency to pay more attention to Wallerstein as a social historian and a theorist rather than a methodologist. For example, in his discussion about Wallerstein's thinking that led to the fourth volume of *The Modern World-System*, Williams overlooks the critical analysis of the historical social sciences as part of the world-system's geoculture and approaches the issue rather more straightforwardly as political rhetoric and propaganda.

An inherent problem in Williams' otherwise excellent book is its premise. One is left wondering, whether for the purposes of imagining future alternatives we need yet another comparison of two white men from Anglo-Saxon academia, no matter how radical they were in their time. This question, that keeps inevitably ringing at the back of the reader's mind, should have been better addressed by the author. For example, it could have been addressed through historical inquiry, especially considering the many connections that both of these thinkers upheld to the world beyond the Western institutions that made them the famous scholars they are.

Contesting the Global Order has several strengths but suffers from a lack of methodological self-reflexivity. It is at its best as an intellectual history of the latter half of the 20th century, as seen through the comparison of Wallerstein and Anderson and the interesting, even if narrow, keyhole that this opens up. With its excellent synthesis of this particular intellectual history via the skillfully explained similarities and differences between Wallerstein and Anderson, the book is an insightful read and interpretation that provides historical context not only for a newer generation of scholars but also for those already acquainted with world-systems analysis and Wallerstein's oeuvre.