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Expansion & Its Discontents

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Expansion & Its Discontents

I don't remember the last time I read a book that opened with a diatribe against the reviewer. William Appleman Williams's preemptive attack, nestled between Greg Grandin's excellent 2011 foreword to *The Contours of American History* and the book's original 1961 preface, essentially invites you, the reader, to forego this roundtable and pick up *Contours* yourself. You see, Williams warns, "any book, however excellent, can be ostensibly destroyed by using one of two simple techniques." The reviewer can either cite the author's errors to make the book appear eccentric or reframe the book's argument to make it seem boring. Either way, Williams writes, you are better off engaging him directly "in dialogue about what we Americans have been and done, what the consequences have been, and what we can learn from that experience that will help us go beyond our present limitations" (xxxviii-xxxix). It will save you some time, teach you something new, and probably leave you a better person.

The monologue is a wonderful introduction to the controversy that surrounded William Appleman Williams. The man had no shortage of critics. Williams, who passed away in 1990, was the prickly doyen of New Left revisionism. His scholarship explored the tension between exceptionalism and capitalism in American diplomatic history. Indebted to the teachings of Frankfurt School Marxism, Williams was an intellectual force at the University of Madison-Wisconsin between 1957 and 1968. His lectures and seminars attracted a coterie of young graduate students—Lloyd Gardner, Walter LaFeber, and Thomas McCormick, among others—who went on shape the historiographical debate about U.S. foreign relations through much of the Cold War. Remembered for their trenchant critique of midcentury liberalism, Williams's group collectively illuminated the domestic and economic origins of Washington's expansionary tendencies. Williams authored about six books during his stint at Madison, the most famous of which was *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, before moving to Oregon State University in the late 1960s, where he settled into a lower-profile career as an undergraduate teacher. He retired in 1988 as one of the most famous historians of the twentieth century. Although his views continue to polarize, even Williams's most strident critics have come to recognize the impact of his iconoclastic attack on midcentury conventional wisdom.¹

Contours is Williams's second most famous book and it is essentially a lengthy essay about the struggle between class-conscious capitalism and democratic socialism in American political life. For Williams, this struggle—which stemmed from an even deeper tension

¹ For an intellectual biography, see Paul Buhle and Edward Rice-Maxim, *William Appleman Williams: The Tragedy of Empire* (New York: Routledge, 1995). For critical reflections, see John Lewis Gaddis, "The Tragedy of Cold War History," *Diplomatic History* 17:1, 1-16; as well as Bradford Perkins, "'The Tragedy of American Diplomacy': Twenty-Five Years After," *Reviews in American History* 12:1 (March 1984), 1-18. For a recent roundtable, see "Fifty Years of William Appleman Williams' *Tragedy of American Diplomacy*: An Anniversary, a Discussion, and a Celebration," *Passport: The Newsletter of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations* 40:2 (September 2009): 8-36.

between individualism and communalism—drove U.S. expansion during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By bringing together incompatible notions of private property and collective welfare, the American frontier forestalled the inevitable confrontation between these visions by externalizing the debate about morality in U.S. society. The tragedy of American statecraft stemmed from this externalization process: rather than choosing between individualism and communalism, the frontier shifted attention to an evolving set of ‘evils’ that ranged from American Indians and southern slave-owners to Soviet planners and Third World nationalists. This process, Williams argued, powered three distinct epochs of historical expansion—the age of mercantilism (1740-1828), the age of *laissez nous faire* (1819-1896), and the age of corporate capitalism (1882-1960)—and raised a crucial question: Could expansion realistically continue in the nuclear age? According to Williams, the answer was as obvious as the solution: Americans had to renounce individualism, overthrow corporate capitalism, and break up the empire.

When *Contours* was published in 1961 it was widely panned, hence Williams’s defensive stance in the 1966 reprint. Some of the criticism was over the top—Harvard’s Oscar Handlin memorably speculated that the book was an “elaborate hoax” perpetuated by an author “ingeniously pulling the legs of his colleagues”—but a few complaints stuck.² In its original form, for instance, *Contours* was littered with small factual slips and guilty of some historiographical cherry picking. Yet Grandin’s 2011 foreword wisely keeps our attention on the book’s legacy, specifically Williams’s role in linking imperialism to the “problem of property in liberal thought” (vx). While Williams’s subject was U.S. history, his target was always John Locke. Locke had helped Americans elide the fact that “profits from the empire made it possible both to define freedom for citizens of the Metropolis as the crucial issue and to avoid fundamental questions concerning the nature and allocation of responsibility in society” (xxviii-xxix). *Contours* was designed to cut through this subterfuge and empower us, Williams’s readers, to recognize the high cost of American liberty. The country’s love affair with freedom masked a foreign policy shaped by greed, racism, and the centralization of political authority.

Does this argument still pack a punch in 2013? There’s no question that Williams is still relevant. He would have had a lot to say about the impact of the Reagan Revolution, a movement that has elevated selfishness to a virtue and made capitalism a national religion, and there’s little doubt that he would have lambasted Washington’s current misadventures along the southern rim of Eurasia. Moreover, there are echoes of Williams’s small government idealism everywhere in U.S. politics today; his call to recreate the Articles of Confederation may be one of the few things that connect the Occupy and Tea Party movements. However, Williams’s unabashed presentism, viewed fifty years on, raises a quandary for activist scholars. En route to denouncing American expansion in 1961, Williams could declare confidently that “the rest of the world, be it presently industrial or merely beginning to industrialize, is very clearly moving toward some version of a society modeled on the ideal and the Utopia of a true human community based far more on social

² Oscar Handlin’s review of William Appleman Williams’s *Contours of American History* in *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 48:4 (1962), 743.

property than upon private property” (487) – an assertion which seems somewhat silly in 2013. Why was Williams so wrong? And should *Contours*’ misreading of its own present affect our evaluation of the book today?

Williams would undoubtedly blame his mistakes on post-1961 neo-imperialism. However, the problem goes deeper. Scholars of decolonization, armed with different analytical tools, tend to look for explanations in more benign factors, such as the ideology of universal development.³ Williams’s dichotomous treatment individualism and communalism—which organizes so much of his attack on liberalism and expansion—seems outdated and simplistic in the context of this literature, partly because it distracts from the way that power actually worked. As Williams’s critics have observed for decades, his entire worldview rested on a romanticized (essentially Midwestern) alternative to a status quo he associated with America’s East Coast establishment. This alternative promised to redeem American exceptionalism, but getting there—as historians from David Pletcher to Melvyn Leffler have shown—led Williams to abridge and distort the actual historical record.⁴ For scholars inclined toward activism in the early twenty-first century, this is not an unimportant slip. As both the Occupy and Tea Party movements have shown, framing a problem is relatively straightforward. The real challenge is grasping how to accomplish goals in a decentered and cacophonous political arena. Change, after all, requires more than hope and a good story.

But surely Williams would disagree. Admittedly, *Contours* is neither eccentric nor boring. The book provides an important panorama of U.S. history, and its ambition alone should inspire today’s historians to reflect on the relevance of their scholarship.

³ For scholarship on American development, begin with W.W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, 1991). The historical literature continues to grow. For examples, see Nick Cullather, *The Hungry World: America’s Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia* (Cambridge, MA, 2010); Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore, 2003); Michael Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and ‘Nation Building’ in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill, 2000); *ibid.*, *The Right Kind of Revolution: Modernization, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present* (Ithaca, 2011); David Milne, *America’s Rasputin: Walt Rostow and the Vietnam War* (New York, 2008); Amy Staples, *The Birth of Development: How the World Bank, Food and Agricultural Organization, and World Health Organization Changed the World, 1945-1965* (Kent, 2006).

⁴ Melvyn Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, 1993); David Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Trade and Investment: American Economic Expansion in the Hemisphere, 1865-1900* (Columbia, MO, 1998)