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Introduction by Dustin Walcher

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Introduction by Dustin Walcher, Southern Oregon University

William Appleman Williams's scholarship has received a great deal of attention over the past few years. The fiftieth anniversary of the initial publication of his most famous book, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, occasioned a lengthy roundtable in *Passport: The Newsletter of the Society of Historians of American Foreign Relations*, and a plenary session at the annual meeting of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations.¹ A generation after his death, Williams's influence on the field remains strong. I would be surprised if a single graduate student in the history of U.S. foreign relations has not been compelled to wrestle with his ideas at some length. At the same time, it appeared, at least for a time, as though the field was moving in directions that took practitioners away from Williams. In particular, Williams's focus on the intersection of ideology, policy, and the economy, which is at the very heart of *The Contours of American History*, has been underemphasized for much of the past generation.

Those circumstances are changing. The history profession has begun the process of rediscovering economic history, broadly defined. Even before the onset of the 2008 Great Recession, the history of capitalism began to emerge as a distinct subfield. Meanwhile, scholars from a variety of existing subfields – not the least of which remains the history of U.S. foreign relations – continue to engage the history of empire. Often uncredited, Williams's ideas – and his intellectual legacy – hovers over much of that new work.

All of which brings us back to *The Contours of American History*, which demands a fresh look not only because Verso published a fiftieth anniversary edition (with a new forward by Greg Grandin), but because its themes and arguments are directly relevant to scholarship being produced by new generations of historians. *Contours* is not as well-remembered as *Tragedy*, yet it was, remarkably, an even more ambitious project. Unlike *Tragedy*, *Contours* is not principally a study in the history of U.S. foreign relations. Instead, it lays out what Anders Stephanson calls “a relentless master narrative” of U.S. history. Like Williams's work more broadly, fundamentally *Contours* is about ideas. Williams traces the evolution of mainstream thinking about the organization of politics, the economy, and society from early modern England, across the Atlantic to the colonies, through to the United States of the early 1960s. In particular, Williams highlights the persistent tension between corporate and communal rights that has been at the center of public debates over the country's social, political, and economic organization. Resolving those tensions, at least temporarily, almost always entailed looking outward. Expansion, first across a continent, and then into new markets overseas, provided a vehicle for evading that tension. At the same time, since the Pilgrims settled in Plymouth, Americans have exhibited a tendency to externalize evil (the Pilgrims identified the local Native Americans as the manifestation of evil). Protecting what they saw as an exceptional experiment subsequently entailed defeating evil abroad.

¹ “Fifty Years of William Appleman Williams' *Tragedy of American Diplomacy*: An Anniversary, a Discussion, and a Celebration,” in *Passport: The Newsletter of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations* 40:2 (September 2009): 8-35.

In advancing its arguments, *Contours* reperiodizes U.S. history into three parts: an Age of Mercantilism, an Age of Laissez Nous Faire (in Williams's unique phraseology), and an Age of Corporation Capitalism. Williams emphasizes the importance of corporate rights and responsibilities during the Age of Mercantilism. But by the time Andrew Jackson ascended to the presidency, the United States transitioned from that Age of Mercantilism to one of Laissez Nous Faire. In that new age, an emphasis on individualism came to trump any vision of a cooperative commonwealth. The triumph of the Age of Corporation Capitalism provided more structure to the market mechanisms and the unrestrained individualism of the Age of Laissez Nous Faire. Institutions – public and private – grew much larger, but it was the business corporations that came to dominate. Upon the publication of *Contours* in 1961, the Age of Corporation Capitalism remained. It is not clear whether Williams would have seen the conservative resurgence of the last third of the twentieth century as inaugurating a new period, or simply as the culmination of the Age of Corporation Capitalism.

Contours argues that the course of U.S. history has generated ever-greater centralization of wealth and power. The institutions created during the Age of Corporation Capitalism served to institutionalize those existing trends. They have also helped to facilitate the country's seemingly relentless outward push. Williams, who studied his subject because he saw "history as a way of learning," would have preferred a fundamentally different course. (17) Within his scholarship, Williams pointed toward the potential benefits of smaller government institutions, for example believing that the Articles of Confederation provided a more authentically democratic framework for governance than the Constitution, in large part because the former centered power closer to the people. He was a populist who believed in the inherent rationality and common sense of ordinary Americans, in much the same way that he distrusted most elites in business, banking, and politics. There were, of course, exceptions; John Quincy Adams and Herbert Hoover in particular receive more depth and positive treatments than they do in most other syntheses of U.S. history.

Taken together, the contributors to this roundtable provide a guide to assessing the relevance of *The Contours of American History* more than fifty years after its initial publication. Lloyd Gardner, who studied under Williams at the University of Wisconsin, offers sometimes personal recollections of the way the ideas explored in *Contours* initially took shape. Stephanson sketches the intellectual currents that Williams ultimately weaved together to form the narrative. Perhaps most notably, he identifies Williams first and foremost as a "communitarian," and in so doing provides a more useful way of thinking about Williams and his ideas than the usual fallbacks of Cold War revisionism and, inaccurately, economic determinism. Ryan Irwin emphasizes both the ambition and limits of *Contours* – particularly in light of the addition of fifty years' worth of new scholarship.

Williams's many contemporary critics would likely be perplexed by our continuing discussion of *Contours*. Indeed, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. was reportedly flustered when the Modern Library included *Contours* on its list of the 100 most important non-fiction books of the twentieth century, and bemoaned the decision. (xiii) Schlesinger aside, even those who disagree with Williams's interpretations have been compelled to wrestle with them, and

generally acknowledge the significance of their contributions to the historiography. Contrary to Oscar Handlin, *Contours* was not Williams's idea of a joke foisted on the broader historical profession.² There are, of course, limitations and shortcomings associated with the book. Moreover, Williams's metanarrative did not analyze every significant theme present in the broad contours of American history. Nor did it foreground many of the critical issues that social and cultural historians went on to analyze in the decades after the publication of *Contours*. On the other hand, it did provide a compelling re-periodization of U.S. history and an insightful analysis of the evolution of the United States' political and economic organization that, despite some anachronistic features, is startlingly relevant both to the contemporary course of U.S. politics and the ongoing development of the historical literature. How many fifty-year-old works of history can make such claims?

Participants:

Dustin Walcher is an Associate Professor at Southern Oregon University who analyzes international political economy, social unrest, and political violence. He is currently revising a manuscript that examines the link between the failure of U.S.-led economic initiatives and the rise of social revolution in Argentina between the 1950s and 1960s.

Lloyd Gardner is Professor Emeritus, Rutgers University, where he taught from 1963 to 2012. Author of many books on foreign policy, his new book, *Killing Machine: The Presidency in the Age of Drone Warfare*, will be published by the New Press in November, 2013.

Anders Stephanson teaches the history of U.S. foreign relations at Columbia University, where he holds the Andrew and Virginia Family Foundation Chair. One of his interests is historiography and the politics that can sometimes be discerned in it.

Ryan Irwin teaches at the University at Albany-SUNY and writes about decolonization and the Cold War. His first book, *Gordian Knot: Apartheid and Unmaking of the Liberal World Order*, was published by Oxford University Press in 2012. He's currently writing a book about the nation-state in the twentieth century and a comparative biography of the mid-1970s.

² Oscar Handlin, Review of William Appleman Williams, *The Contours of American History*, in *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 48:4 (March 1962): 743-745.

Review by Lloyd Gardner, Rutgers University

I would like to begin by thanking the editors of this roundtable for asking me to offer a review of the new edition of William Appleman Williams's "Magnum Opus," *The Contours of American History*. I am also especially grateful that Greg Grandin made it his special mission to pursue a new edition of *Contours*, with an introductory essay that provides an excellent framework for re-examining the book, both as a strikingly new interpretation of American history at the time it was published, and continued relevance, but, also, in retrospect, a *cri de coeur* from a deeply committed veteran of World War II and graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy. I entered graduate school in the fall of 1956 and studied with both Fred Harvey Harrington and Williams, who supervised my thesis. I heard many of the ideas explored in *Contours* as a teaching assistant in his course on American foreign policy, and over coffee in local Madison drugstores.

Williams had returned to the University of Wisconsin in 1957 having published *American-Russian Relations, 1781-1947*, a sweepingly iconoclastic study that built upon his doctoral dissertation of Raymond Robins' failed mission to the new Bolshevik regime during the First World War.¹ He saw the rejection of the Robins mission in a larger sense as a failure of nerve in confronting the fundamental challenge of revolution. And that led Williams to ask bigger questions. The underlying message that characterizes all of Williams's work is quite simple: there are choices in history; the outcome is not predetermined. The historian's obligation is to explain the forces and rationales that produce decisions, not to defend them, nor like our colleagues in political science, to 'model' history into a useful past for current policy purposes.

The final chapter of *American-Russian Relations*, entitled "The Sophistry of Super-Realism," explained "Containment" not as realism, but as a prescription for unending wars premised upon America's supposed ability and obligation to make the world over again in its own image. Instead of replacing Wilsonian 'idealism,' or better put perhaps, 'idea-ism,' Containment was really its logical end. In the later years of George Frost Kennan's long engagement with his original role in providing explanations for what he 'really meant' by Containment, he came closer to Williams's position in a number of ways. Both men were concerned with finding a way to avoid the global catastrophe of nuclear war, and both were convinced that the answer was not to be found in what, after the Cold War ended, would then be re-named "nation-building" outside the United States. But that is a discussion for another time and place.²

¹ William Appleman Williams, *American-Russian Relations, 1781-1947* (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1952).

² A good place to begin would be with Marc Trachtenberg's timely reminder of the language of the original "X" article, and the seeming effort to re-interpret Kennan's initial statement of the Soviet challenge. See "Trachtenberg response to Gaddis RT," H-Diplo, May 8, 2012. <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-diplo&month=1205&week=b&msg=SQRzD0MRH6ws2OYW4mNKvA&user=&pw=>

Williams was fond – some would say overly fond – of turning things on their head to see how they looked, and to pioneer in his own way counter-factuals, something that is often missed in commentaries on his work. Today counter-factuals have a very different meaning, sometimes approaching the fantasies of television reality shows. For Williams they were important in a different sense, to improve understanding of the past in the present. He mentioned to me that the title “American-Russian Relations” was a deliberate effort to suggest at the outset that the initiative for much of what happened in the past had been on the American side. In other words, that Americans had some major responsibility for the way relations developed from the beginning. Of course, what he was aiming at was the standard narrative of American diplomatic historians at the time, as well as political leaders, the mantra that the nation was in a perpetual state of reacting to the outside world. It was always, as President Lyndon Johnson put it about the war he waged in Vietnam, “We did not choose to be the guards of the gate, but there is no one else.”³

The Tragedy of American Diplomacy appeared in 1959 and explored the reiterations of similar themes throughout the twentieth century. *Tragedy* challenged accepted truths and unacknowledged assumptions. It received a front page review in the *New York Times* from old New Dealer Adolf Berle, but the historical establishment wondered what made Williams adopt the “Open Door” motif as a form of anti-colonial imperialism. Moreover, he began in this book what became standard in *Contours*, acknowledging the achievements of class conscious conservatives in understanding that community welfare sometimes had to come before individual ‘freedom,’ and then accepting the obligations that insight required. Accused of being an ‘economic determinist’ in his historical vision, or myopic about causality, Williams actually puzzled American Marxists with his emphasis on putting ideas and individuals back into the narrative.

Almost anywhere one chooses to pick up the story in *Contours*, the narrative features a conflict between champions of different visions of how American history should unfold in the future. It is there at the outset, for example, with the story of how John Locke related to the Earl of Shaftesbury’s vision of the good society, beginning as an admirer of Shaftesbury’s outlook, but then becoming the key figure in the transition to a very different conceptual framework. “For whatever reason, Locke failed to grasp or act on Shaftesbury’s central insight that corporate responsibility is the key to a meaningful as well as wealthy life; he offered instead the polarities of conformity and unrestrained individualism” (61). In other words, here was the seed of a dilemma confronting liberals who successfully opposed the mercantilist domination of political and economic thought.

In this instance, as in others, Williams assumes his readers will have more than a nodding familiarity with the contributions of his protagonists. He expects a lot of readers, including understanding the concepts of ‘Mercantilism,’ grasping the crucial difference made by changing one word in talking about the later era called ‘Laissez-Faire’ to ‘Laissez-nous Faire,’ and awareness of the complex elements that make up the ‘Age of Corporate

³ George McTurkin Kahin and John W. Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam* (New York: Dial Press, 1969), p. 304.

Capitalism.’ One has to keep in mind all the time, moreover, how these ages evolved on the North American continent. This was, to say the least, a new way of approaching American history. And it shook out a lot of new insights from the old historical cloaks hanging in the Halls of Ivy.

John Locke, Williams argued, provided the basis for Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, but both were misunderstood in a fundamental way as positing a weak central government that left the welfare of the community to the hidden hand of the marketplace. While it was certainly true, he argued, that Smith broke with mercantilism, the modifications he wanted to see had to do with “government authority and regulations *within one part of the system*” (65, emphasis in the original). The rest of the system required strong government. He continued, “neither of them proposed that the government should abandon its responsibility for sustaining and extending such an imperial system” (65).

The encounter between Locke and his sometime mentor, Shaftesbury, illustrates how Williams used counter-factuals. Each of these encounters posited different outcomes of a turning point in American history, with a suggestion of the way things might have turned out – and even a hint of how they might yet turn out in the future. Williams was certainly not a relativist, but he did not believe, either, that the past was a closed book. History is written by the winners, goes the saying we are all familiar with; but in *Contours* winners and losers are not separated by traditional understandings of their previously assigned roles. They function together in an unfinished dialectic. His attempts at a new periodization of American history to replace the traditional ‘terms’ with the concept of ‘ages’ was another way of pointing to the possibilities for what he called in a book of essays, *History as a Way of Learning*. It was a way of learning not about specific lessons or mistakes, but of how to make sense of the present world – how we got to where we are.⁴

The key debate at the outset of the nation’s independence, he argues thus, was over how to control and integrate the lands beyond the Appalachians, the area of the Northwest Ordinance. Here was a powerful motivating force for the Constitutional Convention, and the debates over the roles the final product assigned to the states and the federal government. Like many historians of that era, Williams pays special attention to James Madison, and in general to the authors of *The Federalist Papers* as men who provided the world with some of the finest political analysis up to that time as well as a magnificent example of expository writing. Also like other historians, Williams was impressed with the arguments in Federalist No. 10, a document that he would argue provided the Rosetta Stone for decoding American history, that would then become in a different age the logic of John Hay’s ‘Open Door’ notes at the end of the nineteenth century. Williams saw the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 as the initial grand compromise of American history. It breached the gap between those who wanted to risk the turmoil in the West with a softer policy, and those who wished to govern the area like a province with no chance at self-government. The important breakthrough here was the willingness of the southern states, guided in part by Madison’s logic in Federalist No. 10, to go along with the ban on slavery in

⁴ Williams, *History as a Way of Learning* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1973).

the area. “It also indicated the way that American mercantilists would solve the dilemma of freedom and expansion, an expanding *nation* would provide enough wealth and welfare for a republican-ism which included slavery” (135, emphasis added.)

In Madison’s mind always was the fear – before the Constitution especially – that majorities in the untamed area of the West might gang up to pass laws or act in other ways to challenge property rights. These were sophisticated men who debated that summer in Philadelphia, however, and who, while they believed they should rule, had no intention of closing off society by denying rights to others, fully aware that that would undermine the foundations of the new Republic and contradict its rationale. Hence the formula, expand the sphere and reduce the likelihood that factions would or could combine to undo the work of establishing a government which was neatly counter-balanced to deny any one branch the ability to achieve ultimate control or a tyranny. One of Williams’s insights in *Contours* was his suggestion that in these debates, Madison and other southerners accepted the Northwest Ordinance as an entering wedge on the eventual demise of slavery. It is a debatable proposition, of course, but there is some evidence to back up the argument.⁵

Lest this review get out of hand in terms of length, at least, I must move along to a conclusion others can debate, for *Contours*, as one of its many advantages, serves to open discussion on important historical issues. What provoked many, of course, was the way Williams dissented with liberal orthodoxy about who were the ‘heroes’ in insisting the empire had temporal or territorial limits, men like John Quincy Adams, Herbert Hoover, and Charles A. Beard. The problem each faced as the Turnerian historian Walter Prescott Webb neatly summed it up in the title of his 1937 book, *Divided We Stand: The Crisis of a Frontierless Democracy*, was how to reconcile the often conflicting values of liberty and community by restraining the urge to make the world over – resisting the temptation, even, to see the world as a place of light and dark from outer space, with technological solutions to fundamental political problems.⁶

The dilemma Williams and Webb described has been repeated over and over again, beginning with Dean Acheson’s argument to Yale alumni in 1939 that the greatest threat to American democracy was not the breaking of the two-term tradition by Franklin D.

⁵ A very important article, Jack Rakove, “The Madisonian Theory of Rights,” in the *William and Mary Law Review*, vol. 31, number 2, 1990, suggests how Williams’s interpretation of counter-factuals plays out in terms of historical options: “One Madisonian puzzle yet remains. I have argued that the unlimited national veto on state laws was the crucial proposal for the protection of rights that Madison favored in 1787 and 1788. Could he seriously imagine that his own constituents would ever accept such a proposal once they understood that its reach would extend to the regulation of slavery? Or did he somehow hope that the veto would provide an entering wedge with which the national government might work to weaken the hold of slavery and all of its evil effects? If he at least glimpsed the latter possibility, can we not conclude that the Civil War amendments, especially the fourteenth, are the most Madisonian elements of our Constitution?”

⁶ Webb’s *Divided We Stand: The Crisis of a Frontierless Nation*, was published by Farrar and Rinehart, New York, 1937. For an introduction to the problem see, Lloyd Gardner and Bevan Sewell, “Beyond the Ends of the Earth: Donald Rumsfeld, the Mantra of Progress, and an Outer Space View of America’s War on Terror,” *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 45, number 4, November 2011.

Roosevelt, or military invasion, but the danger that the New Deal would expand the role of government in an America isolated in a world that was dominated by state managed economies, the Axis Powers and the Soviet Union, and push those tensions beyond the capacity for solutions by extending the sphere. After the Vietnam War led to Congressional initiatives in reining in the 'Imperial Presidency,' those who had denounced Acheson suddenly found much to admire in his statecraft in sustaining the Cold War version of an empire of liberty. Gerald Ford complained at the end of the 1970s that instead of an imperial presidency, there was now an imperiled presidency. His words predicted the complete conservative turn-around about the dangers of a strong president, and the focus on providing the White House with legal arguments for interpreting the Constitution so as to insure presidential authority to wage war in ever more challenging and secretive ways in order to reconcile the tensions within Madisonian Republicanism.

As Williams might say, let's talk about how that happened.

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)

What other diplomatic historian could have written a work of this scale and ambition? The question is, of course, rhetorical. There is none (I leave aside whether there are any 'diplomatic historians' as such anymore). Charles Beard, whose shadow lurks over every page here, could and did write in such a grand vein, but then again he was not a diplomatic historian and in a way not a historian to begin with, though he wrote extensively on history as well as on foreign relations. Williams goes the other way: beginning with the axiomatic of 'expansionism,' his classic is really not about foreign relations (there is remarkably little on that topic) but about periodizing the essential forms of U.S. history, their appearance and inner structure in three distinct moments, that gave rise to that apparently constant desire. Williams insists on calling his opus an 'essay;' but the five hundred pages of detailed exposition do not fall within the conventions of that genre, so one assumes he is using the term literally to indicate that, as with almost all his works, this is an 'attempt' at something. His prefatory Napoleonic proverb says as much ('You commit yourself, and then – you see').¹ Williams is nothing if not an intellectual risk-taker.²

It was perhaps the quality of 'attempt' that so infuriated Oscar Handlin when he reviewed (in a manner of speaking) *Contours* as possibly some kind of "hoax," an improvisational joke on the reader.³ Williams was always in the business of displacing reigning conventions, especially those of the Oscar Handlins of this world, the compactly serried, liberal historians of safely 'internationalist' conviction, the obliging ideologues of the Cold War in the academy. Hence Williams's impertinent, if not downright scandalous, promotion of Herbert Hoover - let's see what happens if we stick that one to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (Williams liked to refer to Schlesinger as 'Junior.') Inevitably, this will to iconoclasm in combination with his appropriation, at time seemingly off-handed, of foreign concepts, led him into some odd assertions; but there should be no mistake about the seriousness and depth of this bold work, nor indeed about its sustained intellectual vigor. It is a highly structured, elaborately worked out argument.

Williams represents, one notes in passing, a kind of totalization that has long been out of fashion in radical (or 'critical') historiography: what he puts forth is nothing less than a relentless master narrative. I am myself not much bothered by this aspect: narratological

¹ Napoleon's apothegm, 'On s'engage and puit on voit,' (or 'verra'), is not a certified one but it was cited to good effect by Lenin in 1917. Williams's rendition loses some of the notion of 'engaging in battle' but the statement is perfectly expressive of his own way of being towards the world.

² I have thought, off and on, for a long time about Williams, the starting point and central reference for all critical writing on U.S. foreign relations since the late 1950s. His death in 1990 and the subsequent memorial conference at Madison, WI, however, occasioned a first attempt, echoed here, to think through his work as a whole rather than merely in the context of 'revisionism' and Cold War historiography.

³ *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 48:4 (1962), 743-45.

closure of the ideological kind is inherent in any periodization, and we are all 'periodizers.' What is at once more interesting and questionable is the way Williams goes about his totalization: his method, as he likes to think of it. This, in turn, is intimately related, if not identical, to the political frame and problem which overdetermines it: there is a methodological problem of 'overcoming' as well as a political one. My remarks will center on these two aspects.

The object of inquiry is essentially the American will to expand and the *Weltanschauung* which informs it (more about this foundational concept later). Expansion and/or empire is inscribed as an inner principle expressed in three discernible periods or moments: mercantilism 1740-1828, laissez-faire ('laissez nous faire' in Williams's typically eccentric recasting) 1819-1896, and Corporation Capitalism, 1882 to the present (i.e. 1961 and one wonders if he would have found postmodernity another moment or more of the same). Each of these periods, typified by their economic *Weltanschauungen*, follow the same sequence of development: emergence, rise, adaptation and, finally, supersession. An order never 'works' completely and so adaptations to realities generate new ideas and new realities. Finally, there is the transition to a new order. The scheme is vaguely Hegelian though Williams never did anything with Hegel nor, as far as I can tell, thought extensively about him (except, indirectly and to various degrees, through his reading of Karl Marx, Wilhelm Dilthey, Georg Lukacs, Karl Mannheim, and others). History, then, 'moves' through a series of moments in which the struggle to complete the concept invariably undermines the concept itself (to anticipate, generally because it entails 'expansion.') To get the dialectic going, Williams posits a beginning in the 'mercantilist' period of renaissance England all the way up to the eighteenth century, a moment typified by the organic conceptions of the Earl of Shaftesbury. By the time of the American Revolution, this moment had passed in Britain, replaced by laissez-faire, successively represented by John Locke and Adam Smith. Mercantilism, ironically, survived and was implemented in novel ways by the revolutionary, post-colonial generation in the United States. And thus the road was open for the historical sequence of the United States to be played out in its three main stages or scenes, featuring a restricted set of social forces vying for dominance. A striking feature of Williams's account is the thoroughness with which the dominant view comes to dominate as it were and the degree to which conflict, insofar as it appears, is a product of ruling-class divergences (e.g. "industrial gentry" versus "syndicalist oligarchy" in the period of Corporation Capitalism). Meanwhile, there are some heroes, or at least sympathetic individuals, namely, those who manage to articulate and embody a class consciousness appropriate to the historical moment but sometimes also to see the potential for solutions that preserve, or at least try to preserve, some notion of the commonwealth and the organic whole, in the best of cases solutions that eschew aggressive expansionism. Politically, Williams was always a communitarian, even before that notion became a commonplace. Hence his explicit esteem for Shaftesbury, James Steuart, many of the founding U.S. generation, John Quincy Adams, Brooks Adams (up to a point), the aforementioned Hoover and, in a different register, Charles Beard and Martin Luther King, Jr.

All of which is subject to dispute, though it is in the nature of Williams's argument that *actually* to dispute it would require ultimately an alternative view or sequence rather than

simple fault-finding. I shan't attempt that here, though it is hard for me, certainly, to see any 'mercantilism' in the early stages of the Republic unless one reduces the concept to mere consideration of the national whole. Concepts are however pre-eminently instrumental for Williams, to be used for the purposes of thinking and arguing; and regardless of the appropriateness of 'mercantilism' one can see what he wants to achieve by deploying it: to differentiate a certain political project (for which he actually has a great deal of elective sympathy) in the early Republic from what followed in the periods of laissez-faire and corporate capitalism. In any case, to open this up as regards what is are for me the two key aspects, method and politics, one must begin with the partial exception to his conceptual instrumentalism, namely, the notion of '*Weltanschauung*.' To be sure, it too is being 'used' for a purpose; but it fulfills that purpose so well for him that it becomes rather a staple for most of his career as a historian and public intellectual.

Weltanschauung, sometimes rendered too literally in English as 'worldview,' got Williams first and foremost out of the Beardian impasse. Eugene Genovese, when he was still a Marxist, was partly right in accusing Williams of 'neo-Beardian' incoherence, in pointing out that the emphasis on 'economics' was essentially idealist in a philosophical sense since it had no real causal analysis or theory of capitalism as a system.⁴ A better designation is 'post-Beardian,' for Williams's solution to the Beardian conundrum of economic determinism did in fact, *prima facie*, transcend Beard in condensing the material and the ideal in a single concept. Moreover, that concept provided Williams with a plausible response to the ferocious, anti-Beardian attack on 'economic interpretations' launched by the liberal consensus historians of the 1950s. The methodological (but also theoretical) solution, then, was *Weltanschauung*, about which I now want to say a word or two (and momentarily expanding a bit beyond *Contours* proper).

Coined by Kant and then used variously in the 1790s, the term became a real concept in Hegel as a way of synthesizing the forms of thought of a particular period. These forms are grasped as 'objectifications' of the Absolute Spirit which, existence and thought being two sides of the same historical process, are *always real (and so 'objective')*. Particularities are only understood as parts of a whole, a whole which they 'express' (hence one might call this 'expressive causality'). In the nineteenth century the concept then assumed a more 'subjective' and psychic aspect, only to be refined and developed in a neo-Hegelian sense by Dilthey around the turn of the century. In the early 1920s, Georg Lukacs made partial use of it in his classic Hegelian-Marxist work *History and Class Consciousness*, and soon after-wards it became a cornerstone of Karl Mannheim's 'sociology of knowledge,' in turn the subfield of Hans Gerth, Mannheim's erstwhile assistant. Gerth, having exchanged Berlin for, eventually, the rather different environs of Madison, WI, became Williams's very knowledgeable friend and equally idiosyncratic colleague after the war.⁵

⁴ See Eugene Genovese, "William Appleman Williams on Marx and America," *Studies on the Left*, 6:1, (1966), 70-86; and his "Beard's Economic Interpretation of History, in Marvin Swanson, ed., *Charles A. Beard : An Observance of the Centennial of his Birth* (Greencastle, IN: DePauw University, 1976), 25-44.

⁵ Mannheim, early on a follower of his fellow-Hungarian Georg Lukacs, invented 'the sociology of knowledge' in the 1920s, most famously exemplified later in *Ideology and Utopia* (in English 1936). Lukacs's *History and Class Consciousness* appeared in 1923 (English translation only in 1971). Hans Gerth

Usage varies among these successive figures (Dilthey's is arguably the most refined); but across the board, *Weltanschauung* constitutes an *actual spiritual expression of the Objective Mind/Geist*, of the inner principle or essence of a period or process, a unified or synthetic outlook on the world which is also practical and strategic. Thus it can be observed, classified, and typified in conformity with standard scientific procedure. More fundamentally, it can tell us something real about the *Zeitgeist* that it expresses, and so form the basis for periodization, which is what the business of historiography is ultimately about. Yet one can only gain *access* to these 'world views' by means of 'understanding' (*Verstehen*), which is to say our capacity as historians/human beings to interpret what other human beings have done in the past. Understanding, then, is the capacity to understand the objectifications of mind by means of empathy across time. The privileged entry point here to a *Weltanschauung* is exceptional individuals and their manifestations of *consciousness*: the highest condensations, the highest expressions of the underlying spirit. We are able, then, to 'recuperate and restore' this spirit and its meaning by means of interpretation and understanding.⁶

Introduced to it in developed form by Gerth, Williams found all of this attractive and useful. It was attractive and useful because it offered a way out of his central intellectual dilemma, which was how to go beyond the towering yet obviously flawed example of Charles A. Beard. The early Beard's emphasis on economic aspects he had found congenial; and for Beard's 'proto-isolationist' (*very much in quotation marks*) stance on foreign policy he had clear affinities as well. Moreover, Beard's emphasis on totalizing interpretation had been laudable, for by pinpointing what Williams here called "the frontier-expansionist outlook" (464), Beard opened up a critique of it.

And so, of course, it did for Williams. Yet Beard had never managed to transcend his early reliance on a mechanical model of causality where economic interests 'cause' concrete policies in an immediate way, like a billiard ball colliding with another and putting it into motion. In due course, Beard abandoned this construction of causation but (argues Williams) found no secure footing in any other methodology. In the 1930s, he struggled valiantly with this conceptual impasse, trying among other things to make use of various German thinkers; alas, the exigencies of fighting Roosevelt's slide into interventionism

collaborated with C. Wright Mills, his earlier student, in the publication of the endlessly reprinted *From Max Weber* (originally 1946). Gerth, a native German speaker and former student of Mannheim's, was really the leading light here but Mills ended up getting most of the credit. Williams, to put it mildly, learnt a great deal from Hans Gerth, The line of descent is in any case obvious (a little too obvious?): Lukacs, Mannheim, Gerth, Mills/Williams –and Weber hovering throughout.

⁶ Williams says little about Dilthey's auxiliary insistence on *Verstehen* but it figures in a minor key in his critique of Richard Hofstadter's psychologizing accounts, very influential in the 1950s, which essentially recast the history of social movements in terms of anxiety and status, psychic rationalization. For Williams, on the contrary, people normally mean what they say and we can understand this by putting ourselves in their shoes, by getting inside and working ourselves outwards as it were, going from the part to the whole and back to the part again in an ever-widening hermeneutic circle till we reach the most general and symptomatic *Weltanschauung*.

rendered his epistemological break incomplete. In *The American Spirit* of 1942, he and Mary Beard introduced a notion of *Weltanschauung* (by way of Albert Schweitzer); but it remains inchoate. Thus Beard never managed to articulate a concept of the national *Weltanschauung*.⁷

For, as Williams came to think, by seeing in economic discourse - the American *Weltanschauung* being chiefly economic in nature - expressions of underlying realities, indeed another aspect of those realities, one could retain the economic emphasis and still overcome the old dualism of thought and existence, the perennial question of whether concepts reflect 'reality' or the other way around. A *Weltanschauung*, to use Williams's own formulation, is then "an inclusive conception of the world" that is also "an explanation of how it works" and "a strategy for acting upon that outlook" (20). Indeed it "integrates economic theory and practice, abstract ideas, past, present, and future politics, anticipations of utopia, messianic idealism, social-psychological imperatives, historical consciousness, and military strategy."⁸

At the center, at the essential core if you will, of that whole, is *the economic will to expand*. In the period of corporation capitalism (with its typical configuration of corporatist, syndicalist 'interests') that will was expressed in 'the Open Door,' Williams's best known use of *Weltanschauung*. Beginning with the actual statements (or 'objectifications') from around 1900, he reworked them into a fully operational vision of the world, predicated on several things coming together in the 1890s:

First, an agricultural community struck by depression while already being used to equating expansion and prosperity; second, the disappearance of the frontier; third, the emergence after the Civil War of an industrial "gentry," for which expansion also became a unifying idea; fourth, the crystallization of this perspective into a fullblown *Weltanschauung* by, each in his own way, Fredrick Jackson Turner and Brooks Adams, exceptional, organic intellectuals of the new era; and it then reached its apotheosis in the Open Door notes. This was then disseminated throughout the body politic as a ruling idea, soaking it so speak. Everyone, more or less, came to agree that the idea of non-colonial expansion of markets without war was the very essence of the American spirit; everyone, more or less, also came to see the American model as a universal one, to be replicated around the globe for the benefit of humankind as a whole. *Everyone, more or less, signed up.*

Still, there was a dialectical twist, for in realizing the ideal one ends up subverting it. The

⁷ His central methodological statement on Beard is "A Note on Charles Austin Beard's Search for A General Theory of Causation", *American Historical Review*, 62:1, (1956), 59-80. This is what the Beards say in *The American Spirit*: "a world-view is an organization of knowledge, ideas, experience, and desires into the structure of a human drama or epic with an opening, acts and scenes, and intimations of fate, duty, opportunity." Charles and Mary Beard, *The American Spirit* (New York: McMillan, 1942), 1-2.

⁸ William Appleman Williams, "A Historian's Perspective," *Prologue: The Journal of the National Archives*, 6 (Fall 1974): 200-203, 201-02. This text is an excellent summation of his methodological development.

very success of Open Door was also war for the protection of markets, and prosperity turned out not to bring freedom across the board. By midcentury, the argument continues, the informal American empire was facing increasing opposition, first in the threat of atomic war with the eastern powers, later in various third-world revolts and revolutions. The frontier, the perpetual crossing of the frontier, had now reached its limits, so to speak, as a *Weltanschauung*: forces and dangers now presented real obstacles. At this stage (i.e. the present one) it is really up to Americans everywhere to confront themselves, to overcome this dilemma, to return home and resurrect the project of a true American community. The alternative is ever-deepening crises at home and abroad.

This moral exhortation (which is more explicit in the *Tragedy*) to Americans to reinterpret and recover, “history as a way of learning,” some other *truth* of America and thus break with the expansionist logic, sits oddly, of course, with any notion of systemic capital accumulation: the economic system is apparently subject to collective will and decision based on principle. Moral idealism corresponds, in effect, to philosophical idealism. Scratch the surface and there emerges not only a communitarian for whom property is the central issue (anti-intellectual consumerism coupled with anti-communism atomizing the social and destroying community) but some representative of the old Christian Commonwealth. What one thinks of that is a matter of taste and orientation. Perhaps the public intellectual closest in spirit to Williams here is George F. Kennan - another dissenting believer in the organic community of the Christian Commonwealth, but that is another story. Critics on the left, meanwhile, such as Genovese and Ian Tyrell, took Williams to task for losing track of the Marxist emphasis on structures. Relatedly, Tyrell also underscored, quite rightly, that Williams’s use of *Weltanschauung* led him to privilege ideological manifestations, *in this case* economic ones, over actual economic processes.⁹ Williams does not distinguish between system and ideology, so it is sometimes difficult to say whether American capitalism really needed expansion for its survival (which is hard to demonstrate empirically), if it merely tended to expand, or if expansionism was an ideological mistake on the part of policymakers. He might respond that he is consistent in seeing system and ideology as two sides of the same historical process; but he got himself in concrete trouble at times by vacillating between the argument that the apparently insignificant foreign trade and investments were actually significant, and that, in any case, the important fact was that policymakers *believed* expansion was significant. The central weakness of Williams’s account is, in fact, the undertheorized category of ‘expansionism,’ which, however ‘observable’ as spirit and orientation towards the world, is not an explanatory concept.

While the typical accusations of simple economic determinism are thus misplaced, it remains that Williams’s *Weltanschauung*, in being definitionally almost exclusively a matter of *domestic derivation*, systematically ignores the geopolitical dimension, the exigencies of the international system, that also serve to shape by necessity any given policy orientation. The mediation between the inside and outside disappears, returning only as *an effect* of the playing out of the *Weltanschauung* in the outside. The domestic focus is thus inscribed in

⁹ See Ian Tyrell, *The Absent Marx* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986). This important work deserves reconsideration. For Genovese, see note 3.

the 'method' as such. One might in fact go a step further: there is no account of *politics* qua politics in Williams. In attacking the consensus school, he preserved it. While they depoliticized by making 'politics' coterminous with the total (we are always already Lockean liberals), Williams eliminated the political instance by making it coterminous with the project of organizing property and political economy as discourse. Politics subsequently entered by the backdoor because that project led in the real to subverted purposes and problems of what might be called Life, existential issues of who we are and how that might have related to community and property, not to mention (down the road apiece) the peasantry of Vietnam.

The 'method' of *Weltanschauung*, in short, is not a minor question. Williams replaced Beard's early mechanical causality with a model of expressive causality: reading manifestations of an inner essence for the purposes of constructing a seamless whole, encompassing the material and the ideal. Such a seamless whole might have been an improvement on Beard, but it generated an essentialist concept in which every individual part is somehow reflected in every other while moving along as an essential unity in linear time. The totality becomes altogether too total, as it were. Ideology, very much privileged in the 'excavation,' was homogenized, the expression of a class conceived, not as a material structure but as a collective *subject*, a collective individual with all the attributes of an individual. The dominant view of the world was then successfully diffused throughout the whole, indeed defining the whole as objective manifestation. As Williams once characterized a statement by Dean Acheson, it "provides us with a fact that contains the whole and a whole that contains every fact."¹⁰

That essence, that Achesonian fact, was for Williams 'expansion' and 'expansionism' in terms of markets and control; but 'expansionism' as a constant desire explains very little when it comes to actual policy. The Cold War, to name something ready at hand, was at some level about organizing the capitalist system (how could it be otherwise?) but its rationale as a U.S. project was political in a way that cannot be accounted for by any expressivist logic. The relational, contestational, and contradictory element in ideology, never perfect wholes, tends to disappear. No expressivist notion of *Weltanschauung*, however provisionally useful, can account for the specific trajectory of U.S. foreign policy.

To reread *Contours* now is, however, to be astonished by a daring and vastly creative intellect. Williams did not flinch from engagement on the grand scale, nor from breaking radically with convention at a time (it is easy to forget) when such a way of being towards the world was subject not only to professional marginalization but also, in effect, to downright repression. So one would do well to follow Williams in his will to explain and to periodize in the name of explanation. One would do well, too, to let into the proceedings a bit of his enchantment with the unexpected. What other diplomatic historian would make it a habit once a week to go into the periodicals room of the library and read journals *entirely at random*, philology, numismatics, whatever? The question is rhetorical.

¹⁰ "A Historian's Perspective," 202.

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