



## Contesting the Global Order: The Radical Political Economy of Perry Anderson and Immanuel Wallerstein

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believed Black voters held the balance of power “strategized to *manage* the increasing number of Black voters in the electorate” (154, my emphasis).

The issue here is not with a single rhetorical choice, nor with Grant’s decision to focus on “elite-level changes” in Democratic Party politics (16). What is striking is that, as Grant herself notes in passing, the concept of a balance of power was developed by Black intellectuals both to help forge a shared Black political consciousness and to influence the beliefs and judgments of politicians. For Fortune and Du Bois, the assertion that Black voters held the balance of power in American politics was a premise in an argument that Black Americans *ought* to vote as an independent bloc for the sake of collective interests. For Moon, the fact that Black voters often held the balance of power in elections was a reason for politicians and parties to be responsive to their demands. The efforts of Black Americans in this period to conceive of themselves as the balance of power in American politics, and to bring others to recognize this, was an integral aspect of the agency that they exercised. Grant demonstrates decisively that the balance of power was a main character in the political history of the Great Migration – but it played this role as a political idea and social science fact at the same time.

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C. Wright Mills wrote that “ordinary men” are seldom “aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history,” or of “the kinds of history-making in which they might take part.”<sup>1</sup> For Mills, daily life captured as biography was far removed from sociological “grand theory.” *Contesting the Global Order* is a rare work that successfully bridges that divide. Greg Williams uses the biographies of Perry Anderson and the late Immanuel Wallerstein to illustrate how these two important Left intellectuals connected theories of world history to their own lives and scholarship, and to the lives of ordinary people. *Contesting the Global Order* makes an important contribution to our understanding of the work of two late twentieth century thinkers while simultaneously highlighting the relevance of their scholarship to the crisis-riddled world of today.

The book explores key periods in the lives of both men. Wallerstein was the quintessential outsider, a Jewish immigrant boy who grew up in a predominantly Christian nation. Anderson, the quintessential English insider, son of an Anglo-Irish peer and educated at Eton and Oxford, was also deeply influenced by his ancestor’s support for Home Rule. Both went on to develop cosmopolitan identities across a series of encouraging and discouraging events. As leftists, they witnessed the decline of the left in the United States and Britain following World War II.

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<sup>1</sup>C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 4.

Over the following decades, Wallerstein was greatly interested in the rise of anti-intellectualism in the US Republican Party, while Anderson foresaw the trouble that a resurgent conservative movement powered by nostalgia for the British Empire could create. At the same time, both were buoyed by the collapse of European colonialism in the postwar years. Both hoped for radical social change after the worldwide protests of 1968 and the defeat of the United States in Vietnam. The 1980s, however, proved a troubling time for both, with the triumph of the Margaret Thatcher-led Conservative Party and the Ronald Reagan-led Republicans, followed soon after by the collapse of the Soviet Union.

*Contesting the Global Order* elaborates the evolution of Wallerstein's and Anderson's thought in relation to three questions: the problems of capitalism, totality, and agency. Both asked what is capitalism and how it will end? What constitutes a totality or system? And, what is the effect of human action in the face of capitalism as a system?

As Williams shows, Anderson and Wallerstein often arrived at opposed conclusions. For Wallerstein, capitalism should be regarded as a closed totality that would eventually end on its own. Human agency matters most in the moment when the opportunity to create a new system presents itself. For Anderson, capitalism should be seen as historically determined but vulnerable to overthrow by revolutionary action, while simultaneously susceptible to preservation through ruling class reaction. Thus, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, for example, Anderson became pessimistic about the value of leftist activism, while Wallerstein interpreted the collapse as a sign of weakness in the world-system of which the left might still take advantage.

Wallerstein and Anderson shared a conviction that "the crucial problem was a lack of public and scholarly understanding of the historical process that gave rise to the current international order" (67). They disagreed on why this was important. As Williams explains in the chapters that make up the main body of his book, for Wallerstein, the decisive moment would be in the collapse of capitalism and its wake, but there was little to be done to hasten it along. For Anderson, the knowledge of history mattered because he saw agency itself as evolving. In short, knowledge of history would help to build human agency through the vehicle of class consciousness. Both thinkers envisioned an agency informed by what some call a "projective dimension."<sup>2</sup> Knowledge of past patterns and their repetition would allow activists to project future hypotheticals and choose among them. This type of agency is particularly important in a world-system where setbacks and victories are hard to distinguish in the short term.

These questions are important today because we face unprecedented ecological crises in addition to the human crises that have always been part of the capitalist order. Williams' penultimate chapter explores Anderson's and Wallerstein's reactions to the strengthening of the European Union and the problems of the European project. This chapter will be of particular interest to those who study Europe, but it could be a book-length project on its own. For the general reader, the most interesting material is in the preceding chapters that map out the evolution of two great thinkers and tease out the implications of their work for the contemporary world in an artful and engaging manner. While the disintegration of the political center has many on the right actively hostile to such systems-level thinking, there is an urgent need to reintegrate system-level thinking into our political discourse.

*Contesting the Global Order* does not spend much time exploring the multiple crises brought about by the current world-system or which responses to those crises might be most fruitful. This cannot be fairly cited as a weakness in the text, as it falls outside the already substantial plan for the book, but it would be interesting for Williams to explore the implications of his work on such contemporary issues. Nevertheless, *Contesting the Global Order* fills in

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<sup>2</sup>Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, "What is Agency?," *The American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 4 (1998): 983–4.

an essential gap in the existing social science literature. The book demonstrates the contemporary relevance of two remarkable thinkers, who struggled with their own relevance in the face of world history. The fact that Williams repeatedly brings an often arcane discussion of totalities and capitalism back to the topic of agency and the individual struggles confronted by Anderson and Wallerstein gives the reader ample opportunity to reflect on our current circumstances. Late-stage capitalism continues with periodic crises that seem only to result in a more entrenched capitalist system. Meanwhile, humans face ecological crises that may threaten the future of the species itself. Predicting the path of capitalism remains tricky and, as Williams urges us to do ourselves, he asks repeatedly, "Are we witnessing a crisis *within* capitalism? Or, are we witnessing a crisis *of* capitalism?" (9).

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