

# Regional Illusion, Capitalist Reality

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**W**illiam Appleman Williams has earned the respect of American radicals through decades of brilliant writing and advice. So even when he is more suggestive than clear—even when he may be wrong—it is appropriate for his fellow radicals to consider his ideas and to respond. In the October 1981 issue of *democracy* Williams argued that confederation rather than centralization and localism rather than internationalism are the appropriate spheres for radical work and radical vision. Appealing for the creation of communities built to more human scale, Williams once more raises the recent slogans of Jeffersonian democracy.

But which decade are we in? This is the moment of the world car, a time when Detroit neighborhoods are in danger because automakers have found that, after all, Mexicans *can* make four cylinder engines, and dozens of other national communities can make dozens of other automotive components. This is the era of the ascendancy of the multinational union-buster that defeats the workers of one country by placing investment in another. This is also the century which has witnessed the bankruptcy of “sewer socialism” (i.e., socialism in one city), and the brutality of socialism in one country; indeed, we now witness the impotence of trade unionism not merely in one craft, but in one industry and in one nation.

If ever experience should have taught the left that confederal principles are a formula for defeat, it is now. However sage Williams’s observations are about the importance of community, human scale, and balance between people and nature, his formula should be rejected. I shall show why the Jeffersonian vision is a false lead for the future and why the forms of struggle toward a better future (which itself might be more decentralized) must not bear the burden of presaging

the institutions of that future. Contrary to Williams's apparent conclusion, that American radicalism has been enamored of a supercentralist Marxism, I contend that his contribution is relatively typical of the last twenty years of radical discussion and that the ideas he proposes are very widespread, even consensual; indeed, I offer that they are in large part responsible for the impasse of the American left.

But first we must set aside as obvious and correct one or two of his practical insights—insights that are not new, but in fact form the bulk of progressive practice today. Williams argues that the Mormon ascendancy in the Great Basin represents a regional power bloc which has been able to frustrate one important part of the renewed arms race (the mobile-basing mode of the MX) and that it represents, in its local rootedness and its joining of secular and religious community, a model for regionalized radical work against the arms race. The logic of his argument amounts to this: if radicals were successful all over the country in saying "Not in my backyard you don't" to facilities of war of all kinds, the pace of the arms race would be slowed, and we would thereby gain time for reconstruction.

In the first instance, it is certainly true that people do not want to be nuclear targets and appeal to such "local" interests is one important way to build support for a disarmament movement. This is comprehended by the practice of such groups as the Mobilization for Survival, the Physicians for Social Responsibility, and many other groups. Furthermore, it is also the case that anti-arms race activists everywhere find themselves in coalition with progressive members of the religious community. That Williams is not original in this insight does not detract from its obvious good sense. But even here there are limits to the possible achievements of such work.

As I write this, Reagan has just announced that rather than the mobile basing mode for MX his Administration plans to go forward with an MX placed in 100 "superhardened" silos now holding Titan and Minuteman missiles. In addition, the cruise missile will be deployed in large numbers and placed in old bombers and, later, new B-1 bombers, while accurate Trident-2 missiles will be placed on the new Trident submarines.

One sees in Reagan's decision the constraints imposed upon him by Mormon resistance to the construction of 4,600 silos in Utah and Nevada. These constraints did not, however, halt or slow the arms race: tens of billions of new dollars have been committed and a provocative first-strike capacity has been strengthened.

In discussing local resistance to the industrial elements of the war machine, Williams targets Boeing's aircraft plants as an example for his area, the Northwest. But surely local success obstructing such military contractors (largely inconceivable) without *simultaneous* success everywhere would find thousands among the "reserve army" of declining industrial communities clamoring for the opportunity to do any, even this, dirty but high-paying work. So we may say yes to local coalitions, yes to a nonsectarian search for religious allies in halting the

thrust toward holocaust; but no, no illusions about the resources available to American elites intent upon evading such initiatives.

Returning now to the question of confederation as a model for socialists we must begin to understand the constitutional structure of the American political economy. Among the first observations which strikes anyone working, as I do, in an older industrial region of the country, is the degree of governmental decentralization which actually does exist. American federalism devolves to states and localities a degree of authority which is relatively rare among the capitalist countries of the West. That there are fifty separate jurisdictions within which state legislatures and executives formulate the rules of local economic activity produces a mosaic of legislative terrain across the continent. Historical circumstance and present realities produce, therefore, a mosaic of patterns in the struggles between capital and labor over public policy. As a result, some jurisdictions have more or less advantageous legal climates within which labor unions confront employers; have made more or less successful efforts to regulate or deter environmental degradation; have more or less adequate supports for the poor or dependent.

In the long run this terrain is thus composed of differentially propitious environments for capital investment. And the result is that the states with the most anti-union profiles of public policy, the lowest wages, the most austere and punishing supports for the needy, and the most permissive regulations for pollution are the states which have experienced over the last generation the most rapid investment and job creation. We are all familiar with the consequences.

The older regions, where workers and their allies have been most successful in this century, have increasing degrees of insecurity—whether through unemployment (or fear of it), or sensitivity to mergers, takeovers, and business failures. Their cities age without adequate reinvestment. As a son of the South Bronx I am witness to the irrational waste which results when an environment which was once materially adequate becomes unpopular in the eyes of the investment community.

The flow of investment decisions toward more exploitable environments and away from those in which workers and consumers have been more successful domestically is structured both by the federal system and by the fact that states and municipalities themselves are forced to bid against one another for the favors of those who control resource allocation: the national and multinational corporations. The currencies of the competition are various public subsidies and repressive policies.

This is not merely a national process. Even where labor is well organized on an industrial basis and has formed collective bargaining agreements nationally, it finds that the global corporation can, if it chooses, withdraw capital from an entire national fraction of the working class and light upon some other national jurisdiction where it perceives a better "business climate." Sewing machine operators in the Boston-Washington corridor do not compete with each other only on

a state-by-state, or city-by-city basis; they are now pooled in a labor reserve with operators throughout the Caribbean and the Pacific rim. And in those more exploited regions, repressive regimes remove all unionization threats and keep wages to a fraction of North American rates.

Now, would a confederal system ameliorate this search by investors to find ever larger pools of more exploitable labor? In fact, it would drastically weaken the already weak structure of national labor and consumer protections. Would the Federal Reserve District One (Williams suggests Federal Reserve Bank Districts as appropriate confederal units) choose a lower minimum wage than some other district? Would this lead the other districts, willy-nilly, to have to lower theirs, or suffer capital outflow? That the country and the world is a mosaic of different balances between the people and the corporations is *not* a resource for the people, but rather the reverse—as long as the investment decision is private and centralized, i.e., capitalist.

Thus, we are in an era of the ascendancy of a *global* capitalist system. Among the key features of this moment are, first, crisis in the advanced countries brought about by intense international competition. This leads to the concentration of capital and a search by the enlarged enterprises on a global scale for conditions of production which maximize profits. This global scope of capital mobility is able to take advantage of every shade of local difference, pitting states, localities, and countries against one another for the favors of the goose of investment so that it might lay the golden egg of employment. To the extent that reforms are won in one local jurisdiction capital may leave it; victory may turn to ashes. Thus, rather than a perspective in which regional autonomy is in the interests of radicals, the reverse is probably true. Struggles which seek national and international uniformity of demands and policies are apt to be more successful in bringing a semblance of decency to both workers and consumers of various public and private goods.

**D**ecentralization is probably desirable, but the current moment is proof, however difficult to accept, that some reforms are only in the popular interest after the system of property relations has been transformed. William Appleman Williams was not born yesterday: his proposal has a feature which appears to encounter the above objection. He proposes that radicals call for a Constitutional Convention composed of representatives elected from regions (the present Federal Reserve Board Districts—actually a clever regional definition of the nation) who would propose a Constitution. Then, he says, after passing a Bill of Rights, the Constitution “would move on to such matters as . . . the public ownership—but regional allocation—of social resources. . . .”

Here we have the magic formula: the revolution in property relations is to be the result of a Constitutional Convention called to form a confederal, regional, form of government. Once again an American radical proposes a procedure in the hopes it will produce the substance of his vision.

The simplicity of this accomplishment is just that. If we embarked upon his program tomorrow and worked for a decade, does any of us believe that obtaining such a Convention would be a theater in which the capitalist mode of production would simply be ratified away? It is unlikely that such a Convention would be held at all, but if it were the result would probably be a corporatist nightmare. It is even more probable that agitation for such a procedural reform would produce tacit support from those business interests anxious to avoid all social regulation and an even greater devolution of state authority to localities (either new regions or old states).

But it is national authority and not regional choice which has accomplished whatever motion towards justice we have seen in race relations. It is national authority rather than local politics which has been the matrix of labor's ability to organize; it is the national government which has the ability to tax and spend in sufficient volume to provide meaningful supports to the dependent and infirm. Conversely, local options to produce right-to-work laws, permissive regulation, or austere income support undermine the successes of more progressive areas.

This has not, contrary to Williams, been properly understood by radicals in the sixties and seventies. Preoccupied by a rhetoric of local control and local organizing, radicals and activists on the left created a symbolic language which was easily coopted by Nixon, Ford, and now Reagan to cede social resource allocation to the local bourgeoisie. With both militants and Republicans echoing Jeffersonian language about the virtues of local government, things have actually become worse—less just, less compassionate—than they were under those “mean,” “cold,” bureaucrats who inherited the New Deal.

Further, Williams argues that local resistance to the facilities of warmaking would be more effective than Washington demonstrations in slowing the arms race. I doubt it. Surely widespread local turmoil was important in creating an atmosphere in which the war in Vietnam became unpopular. But I find it unbelievable that the mass outpourings in Washington demonstrations, in 1967, 1969, 1970, 1971, and so on, should be so casually dismissed by such a dedicated opponent of imperialism. Let me be even more contentious: that the left could not create a unitary anti-imperialist organization out of the thousands of local coalitions against the Vietnam War made the rapid reversal of the forces of sanity since the late seventies much easier. There has been no stable organization which can organize the present mass sentiment for peace: peace organizing must now begin anew.

Lurking behind Williams's views, I suspect, but certainly explicit among

many who also hold them, is the contention that a movement for a socialist democracy should presage in its organizational forms and its programmatic projections the forms of the new society. This is an attractive cliché of the last twenty years at least. It is neither logical nor validated by experience. The reason is simply that a better society is defined as one in which the chief adversaries—the large organizations of private capital and their ability to perform global transfers of resources—have been defeated. The task of construction can then begin without their specific power and opposition. In the meantime, however, directly as employers and indirectly through their domination of the state, the capitalist class has immense resources to frustrate organizations, parties, and movements. Divide and conquer, we all know, has been a favored racial and ethnic tactic in industrial relations. It is now their key strategy over space. The multinationals would love the Constitutional Convention Williams proposes: a weaker American state system would be an improvement over the current system, for the current one, though weak, is upon occasion capable of forcing them to take circuitous routes to their goals.

For a long time such substantive and organizational realities have found no credible response from the activist left. Proposals such as Williams's Confederation follow proposals about "community control" or citizen participation, and all of these entail organizing perspectives which emphasize localized arenas. These enthusiasms have the common characteristic of proceduralism at the center of the reform agenda. They all hope that some localization of political process, or some institutional inclusion of local voice, will somehow produce social justice or even, in Williams's case, socialism.

The characteristics of agitation around proceduralist reforms are these: first, the proponents refer only vaguely to their substantive programs for improving material conditions or building new forms of economic relations. Instead of public demands and education in support of affordable housing, for example, radicals, if they acted along the general lines of Williams's advice, would agitate for regional control over national tax revenues.

Second, proceduralist agitation directs the attention of constituents to the inefficiencies of larger units of government. Such public argumentation, in the context of bourgeois cultural dominance, dovetails nicely with the program and rhetoric of conservative fractions of capital. While it allows the radical a certain protective coloration as a genuine participant in the political culture, it does little to advance public understanding of the realities of control over productive life.

Third, procedural reformism does not directly address the material deprivations and insecurities of the lives of most people. Rather, it appeals to the imagination and creativity of the intelligentsia; it does not attract a popular or working-class base.

For each of these reasons, the proceduralist bias of Williams and recent ac-

tivists are inappropriate to the tasks of the current era.

Moving to a broader dimension, I am most curious about Williams's conflation of left internationalism with American imperialism. He seems critical of socialist internationalist perspectives. Surely Williams would not suggest that the U.A.W. refuse to attempt to organize auto and metalworkers to confront the car makers worldwide? Or, would he suggest that we withdraw from the struggle to stop American intervention in El Salvador? In fact, he does *not* do the latter. He specifically and quite rightly says that our position should be that American foreign policy should not presume to remake the world, but rather should simply cease to aid the world's reactionaries. But why address this to left internationalists, whose position it already is?

A closing note. Williams argues, as did Robert Goodman in *The Last Entrepreneurs*, for a regional socialist politics. Both revere community, democracy, and a more meaningful scale in human affairs. Their sentiments are admirable, but they are, programmatically, dangerously sentimental. A look at the emerging global system should lead an objective observer to wonder whether any vision of socialism short of world scale is practical. If we must dream, let us at least use experience and understanding of the system as we see it. Does anyone believe that Mitterand can build socialism against the grain of West Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, and the Low Countries? Is socialism in one country a meaningful concept in 1982? These are not sentimental concerns; they are at the heart of the matter, at the heart of victory or defeat. The stakes are terribly high, but in this moment of retreat if we emerge with a renewed version of Thomas Jefferson, defeat is certain.