

Williams, Gareth. *Infrapolitical Passages: Global Turmoil, Narco-Accumulation, and the Post-Sovereign State*. Fordham University Press, 2021. 250 pp.

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Gareth Williams' *Infrapolitical Passages* dives headfirst into the philosophical question of how to clear the way for a register in thinking that remains at a distance from the political while simultaneously being able to touch upon it. The book's conceptual filigree recaptures Martin Heidegger's interrogation of *being* and puts it in the service of the pursuit of existence in a context of global turmoil and open indetermination. Throughout the book, Williams conducts two parallel operations, on the one hand, he offers a characterization of the contemporary as "the epoch of the end of epochality" (121), on the other, he carefully construes a theory of infrapolitics as a radical departure from and necessary alternative to humanist subjectivism and modernity's order of representation.

The book is composed of an Exordium, an Introduction, and two Passages that guide the reader through the labyrinthine landscape of the post-sovereign state. The opening pages serve the purpose of establishing the infrapolitical as the discursive nonplace where the *ontic* and the *ontological* become intertwined, producing a "*distance from* the modern metaphysics of subjectivity and the technical calculation of sovereignty, in conjunction with that distance's simultaneous *touch upon a thinking of being* uncaptured by the ontology of commodity fetishism." (7) Through this speculative operation, *Infrapolitical Passages* situates itself at the discursive crossroads between the question of the everyday and the concern for the *beingness of beings*.

The Introduction anchors the book in the much-vaunted debate on the exhaustion of modernity's teleology of progress and the closure of metaphysics. Calling into question Alain Badiou's notion of the intervallic period for what he understands to be a perpetuation of a humanist historicism, Williams argues in favor of a "shift of a certain kind" in the approach to the contemporary, the historical moment that inaugurates "the full planetary accomplishment of the ontology of the commodity" (15), a period synonymized throughout the book with the advent of globalization, the age of total subsumption, and late neoliberalism. *Infrapolitical Passages* claims for itself a certain approach to this historical threshold that stands in opposition to both the nineteenth century teleology of progress and the prophetic solution of the end of history. At stake in Williams's intervention is the ability to grasp the "generalized sense of expiration and mortality" denied "by both the acolytes of the

communist hypothesis and the active pursuers of capitalist surplus value” (19). This quasi-conceptual “third way” is the terrain of the infrapolitical, which the Introduction traces by reference to the works of, among others, Alberto Moreiras, Jaime Rodríguez-Matos, Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott, Ronald Mendoza de Jesús, Ángel Octavio Álvarez Solís, Jorge Álvarez Yáñez, and Maddalena Cerrato.

Part and parcel of the infrapolitical aspiration to withdraw from the political, field while remaining able to touch upon the political, is a certain epistemological indeterminateness, perhaps most palpable in the book’s embrace of the legacies of deconstruction. If infrapolitics “strives to clear a way toward a thinking uncaptured by the modern history of subjectivity, ethics, and politics” (26), a certain devotion to the elusive and the ephemeral becomes necessary to conceptually backtrack such history. Williams can, therefore, claim that “this is a book that makes no progress” but rather aspires to dwell in the “indiscernibility between *passage* and *nonpassage*” (29) that has come to define the experience of globalization.

“Passage I: Contemporary Turmoil: Posthegemonic Epochality, or Why Bother with the Infrapolitical” is centered around the contemporary impossibility of an experience of passage. In lieu of the epochal *transition* signaled by the political program of Revolution, what the contemporary offers is an ongoing *perishing* “in the absence of any claim to the representation of a new epochal destiny or thetic reality.” (37) This scenario is the historical corollary to the exhaustion of humanism and the dissolution of the certainty of salvation—a tradition Williams traces by way of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). Against this “ending,” Williams affirms the significance of *decontainment* and *infrapolitical posthegemony* as conceptual accoutrements that can help establish “a distance from the modern onto-theological metaphors of the subjective will to power” (50). The turn toward *infrapolitical posthegemony*, then, aspires to enact not an alternative politics but a “distance-taking” (52) from the political configuration of the metaphysics of the subject.

Underlying Williams’ argument is the overarching premise that “globalization signifies the explosion of the spatial metaphors” (53), or else, that in the age of neoliberal globalization all forms of spatial containment have become deterritorialized by the despotism of capital. This fait accompli undergirds Williams’ elucidation of a *post-sovereign market-state duopoly* that does away with all forms of finitude and inaugurates “a violently open indetermination” (54). Globalization appears as a leveling force that disbands all directive principles and determinations in the name of “accumulation at all cost.” The book locates the origins of this shift in the financialization of the global economy, the collectivization of public and private debt, and the increasingly extractive nature of the operations of capital, all of which have led to the historical demise of the Westphalian interstate system. In this

specific matter, *Infrapolitical Passages* stands in radical opposition to the constellation of spatially oriented theories—from combined and uneven development to world-systems theory, as well as certain strands of international political economy and border and migration studies—whose intervention into the open debate on the cultural implications of globalization conflict with Williams’s reading of the contemporary as the terrain of despatialization.

Moving forward *Infrapolitical Passages* resorts to the figure of the *katechon*—i.e., the restrainer, or container of mundane evils—to explore the transition from an era of restraint—spanning from the sixteenth century to the Cold War (“the last *katechon*”)—to an era marked by the “definitive deterritorialization of capital” (61) and the “twilight or *perishing* of the political form of the modern nation-state” (63). For Williams, the problem posed by this transition is not as simple as the distinction between an era of restraint and an era of *decontainment*, but rather the recognition that the post-sovereign market-state duopoly, “the force that *globalizes* as the very perpetuation of the dissolution of the modern nation-state, is *the* katechontic principle of our times, but without signposting the contours of a *passage* or *transition* to a new sovereign form or epoch” (64). The formula of the “perpetuation of dissolution” or a perpetual transition captures best the historical tipping point that *Infrapolitical Passages* is invested in elucidating.

The idea of a perpetuation of dissolution, however, is already present as a defining attribute of modernity prior to the advent of globalization—one has only to refer to the *Communist Manifesto*’s well-known depiction of the bourgeois era as an one where “all that is solid melts into air” to get a sense of how profoundly the world of katechontic restraint is already imbued by a force akin to that of perpetual dissolution. In this regard uncertainty and agitation, rather than distinguishing features of the contemporary, can be said to constitute exacerbations of tendencies that belong to a larger history of liquidation. It is similarly difficult to accede to the maxim of “accumulation at all cost” as the utmost principle of the period in question, since accumulation at all cost—understood as the reconversion of surplus-value into capital—has been the cardinal dictate of capital since it made its first appearance on the world stage. The specific problem that *Infrapolitical Passages* points to, then, is not necessarily dissolution or crisis as such, but the dwindling of sovereign power and hegemony as organizing principles in the face of a sustained crisis of accumulation. The latter has, indeed, triggered specific challenges to the nation-state and imperialism without, however, doing away with either of them.

Amidst this ongoing crisis and emphasizing the challenges it poses for creating mechanisms of consent, *Infrapolitical Passages* turns to *posthegemony* as a way of thinking through a certain closure of horizons without falling into the trap of reinscribing modernity’s regimes of representation and

subordination. Following Gramsci's notion of *equilibrium*, Williams constructs an interpretation of the 1970s and 1980s as the moment when "the neoliberal ethos of unfettered *corporate economic selfishness* unleashed on a global scale" (85) shattered the possibility of configuring stable forms of containment and representation. What is left in the wake of the ongoing collapse is the "infraexcess" that escapes all forms of regulatory representation. Infrapolitical posthegemony, then, exists as a thinking attuned to the possibilities that such "infraexcess" opens for "clearing away the subordination of freedom to the ontology of subjectivity." (96)

So why then bother with the infrapolitical? To pose the question seems to be, at the same time, a philosophical wager and a necessity in light of the book's unyielding dedication to a condition of infinite *ruination*, full exhaustion, perpetual ending, and *an-epochality*. That Williams is aware of the criticism *Infrapolitical Passages* opens itself to is evident in his preventive strike against the accusations of decadentism and pessimism that might be drawn from his interpretation of globalization "as a perpetual form of hollowing out and ending." (101) Likewise, Williams disavows the misconception that "the infrapolitical is antithetical to the act," (102) a conclusion that some might draw from the emphasis put throughout the book on the infrapolitical as a "register in thinking," a form of "conceptual attunement," or "the never-ending rekindling of the shadow of that which is withdrawn from representation." (106) Against these possible accusations, Williams offers an appraisal of infrapolitical thinking and, by extension, acting, as *an-archic*, that is, as grounded in difference and alterity as the sole forms available to remain at a distance from the political while moving toward that which, concealed by the political, might still lie beyond it.

While the first Passage dwells on the withering away of the nation-state, "Passage II: Narco-Accumulation: Of Contemporary Force and Facticity" meticulously explores the experiential contours of the contemporary by recourse to the notion of narco-accumulation, understood as "the movement of the commodity form—drugs, guns, bodies—unconfined by the legal restrictions of the modern state form" (111). Williams offers a compelling account of narco-accumulation's inner logic when he establishes that the former is a product of the market-state duopoly's *depolicing* of "its own legal restrictions on unlawful economic activity, while simultaneously performing the *militarization* of the *depolicing* in order to maintain the enactment" of law and order (111). This situation allows for a warlike scenario to emerge where premodern forms of subordination and property theft become essential for the circulation of commodities across borders. This juncture, Williams argues, "exceeds the notion and experience of *crisis*" (114), it rather points toward a qualitative transformation marked by a certain indiscernibility between sovereign stability and instability. As a result, the distortion of the boundaries

between war and peace has altered the traditional role assigned to paramilitary force as sovereignty's threshold, i.e. the limit demarcating anomie (lawlessness) from *nomos*.

Paying particular attention to the destructive violence concentrated at the U.S.-Mexico border, Williams explores the question of contemporary force and turmoil as defined by an “unhalingly generated creation, expansion, and circulation of the feeling of permanent *insecurity*” (133). Williams turns to Giorgio Agamben's work on stasis to expand the distinction between *stasis* (civil discord) and *polemos* (foreign conflict or war *stricto sensu*) as two different modalities of violence. As in the case of previous oppositions, Williams considers the factual differentiation between *stasis* and *polemos* as no longer operative in the context of the post-katechontic present. In what can perhaps be considered the main conceptual operation of the book, Williams turns the opposition between *stasis* and *polemos* on its feet by suggesting that *stasis* should not be considered as cause but rather as an effect of a previous dissolution that, following Carl Schmitt, Kostas Kalimtzis, and Nicole Lorau, he comes to designate as *diastasis* (separation). For Williams, the value of *diastasis* lies in making discernible “an originary, infrapolitical separating movement or momentary lapsus prior to and beneath all force” (141), which might allow for the coming into perception of what, in Heideggerian terminology, he refers to as the *with* of every *being-with*. As such, *diastasis* seems to name the opening that Williams set out to descry at the beginning of the book: “the originary, infrapolitical splitting that remains at all times prior to each and every form of conflict or dialectical politics of recognition, which as such never succumbs to the extension of knowledge, value, representation, or politics” (141). In the inner workings of *diastasis*, Williams finds “a terrible conundrum and an opportunity for thinking” (142), a conceptual opening from where to establish an infrapolitical register.

The closing sections of the book turn to a series of cultural instantiations of the infrapolitical that are used to frame a reading of the transformation of the Mexican territory into “the new border, the tomb of the proper, the negation of space by space” (164). Williams sets up his approach to this theater of conflict by revisiting Cormac McCarthy's screenplay *The Counselor* and Roberto Bolaño's *2666*. Moving between close reading and formal analysis, Williams demonstrates that in both cases, the question for the *beingness of being* is made available at specific instances, carving an infrapolitical pathway to formally inscribe the everyday experience of decontained horror and limitless *diastasis*. Williams closes the book with a plenteous analysis of Diego Quemada Diez's film *La jaula de oro* (2013) centered around the question of existence and “the uncovering of the anticipation and meaningfulness of death that makes existence possible in the first place.” (172) Analyzing a series of images that produce non-narrative *diegesis* (the portrayal of the migrant body, the natural spacing encountered by

the migrant in her movement through sovereign territorialities) and the use of the tsotil signifier *teiv*, Williams makes the case for the infrapolitical emergence of “the meaningfulness and understanding (the very facticity) of having always dwelled in proximity to death” (186), an understanding that allows for an existential grasp on *world* to emerge. In this turn toward existence and ontological difference lies the infrapolitical claim to the possibility of a future historicity uncaptured by the will to power of subjectivity. Such is, in the end, the felicitous task the book offers itself to.