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Portia Roelofs

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REVIEW ARTICLE



## The death of political possibility? Reading *State and society in Nigeria* 40 years on

Portia Roelofs 

St Anne's College, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

**State and society in Nigeria**, edited by Gavin Williams, Lagos, Malthouse Press, 2019, second edition, 302 pp., paperback, £26, US\$36, ISBN 9789785657586.

### ABSTRACT

In this 2019 reboot of his collection of essays from the 1970s, Gavin Williams traces the lingering the impact of colonialism and international capital on Nigeria's political economy, the shaky development of an indigenous industrial class and the changing role of the state in national development. However, reading the book, it is not clear what such an analysis is *for*. Is it intended as a diagnosis? An indictment? Williams leftist commitments are clear, but amid the painstaking analysis one can ask: what is the point of studying politics? In this review article the author unpicks Williams' at times contradictory answers to this question and argues that the book demonstrates the relevance of mid twentieth-century Nigerian politics to readers today. She poses the question of how we can navigate the possibility and risks of newly volatile twenty-first-century politics, unchained as it is from the liberal orthodoxy of the past 40 years.

### KEYWORDS

Marxist political economy;  
politics and development;  
Nigeria; democracy; the state

On the first page of the introduction to Gavin Williams' relaunched *State and society in Nigeria* (2019), originally published in 1980, we are immediately told: '[t]he essays are inevitably dated.'<sup>1</sup> Indeed 40 years is a long time in Nigeria. Given the current median age in the country hovers around 18 years, it is not hyperbole to say it is more than a lifetime away. Moreover, reading about Nigeria in the mid 1970s, one cannot avoid a sense of dramatic irony, foreboding: yes, Williams describes a country post-independence, post-civil war, post-1973 oil price hike. But, with hindsight, those events which from the current vantage point look so decisive – the oil price crash of 1983 and the disastrous structural adjustment policies in 1986 – are just around the corner. One reads with bated breath.

Over the course of the book – structured as a preface, six essays written between 1972 and 1980, and a final conclusion essay penned in 2010 and updated in 2016 – Williams unpacks the lingering impact of colonialism and international capital on Nigeria's political economy, the shaky development of an indigenous industrial class and the changing

role of the state in national development. However, reading the book it is not clear what such an analysis was *for*. Is it intended as a diagnosis? An indictment? Williams' leftist commitments are clear but amid the painstaking analysis we can ask, what is the point of studying politics? In unpicking Williams' at times contradictory answer to this question, the book demonstrates the relevance of mid twentieth-century Nigerian politics to readers today.

## I

Williams broadly offers two conflicting answers to the question of what a leftist political-economy analysis is fundamentally trying to do. The first is that politics and political economy are ways of assessing the development of capitalist society. The preface to the first edition (Essay I) draws on classical Marxists, Lenin, Gerschenkron and others who argued that capitalism is not an end in itself but is a way of rapidly expanding the productive capacity of an economy to make way for socialism later. As Williams notes, the development of capitalism is 'too serious a business to be left to the capitalists' (60). Williams talks about his work as part of a 'generation of expatriate "radical" scholars researching and writing in the decades following the Nigerian Civil War' (217). 'What we were trying to do', he explains, 'was to make sense of the international economic context, *the formation of a capitalist society*, the social relations of classes and class politics at local, regional, and national levels, and the nature of "the state" in Nigeria' (218, emphasis added).

Yet, running alongside the imperative to develop capitalism while holding one's nose is an apparently contrary agenda: 'a radical rejection of "development" through the exploitation and subjection of producers, whether in the name of "socialism" or "liberalism" and [in its place] a commitment to the "emancipation of labour"' (7).

Thus, Williams apparently rejects the goal of socialism *per se*, and the development of capitalist society which his fellow Marxists see as being so essential to its eventual arrival. This emphasis on 'emancipation of labour' outside of the formulaic prescriptions of Marxism guides the final two essays (V and VI). At the end of the chapter on ideology and rural development, the book slips from its dominant and at times inscrutable use of the third person to venture: '[w]e must face the question: under what conditions can farmers advance and protect their interests, and how can they, in alliance with others, establish and maintain those conditions?' (151). Surely the purpose of the Marxist conceptual apparatus set up in the introduction and used throughout the bulk of the book is to specify what those conditions are and how they are to be arrived at? It is odd that on the last page of the first edition of the book, this question is suddenly thrown open. To understand the source of this ambivalence we must first appreciate the scale of what was at stake in political debate in post-independence Nigeria, and the role of scholars and intellectuals within it.

## II

The twin themes of limitless possibility and bone-deep frustration were ever present during the post-independence period in Nigeria and consequently shape the book. Reading the book in 2021 one notices the strikingly ambitious political imagination of

many of the key actors. On Independence Day, 1 October 1970, General Yakubu Gowon announced a nine-point programme by which the military would implement far-reaching changes to the country's political life including '[t]he implementation of the National Development Plan; The eradication of corruption in our national life; the preparation and adoption of a new constitution; [and] ... organization of genuinely national political parties' (63–64).

Following Gowon's political demise in 1975, the authors of the introduction to the 1976 draft constitution<sup>2</sup> aimed for nothing less than defining a 'universal goal' for the nation and were confident that they could render a sensible answer. They asked:

What do we really want for the generality of Nigerians in the foreseeable future? The answer must surely be that we seek to enhance the welfare of the individual through providing better educational facilities, housing, health facilities, more jobs and a rising standard of living for the people as a whole. (82–83)

The *Guidelines for the third national development plan* contain similarly bold visions (65–69). Even those state actions which critics saw as having been weakened and diluted, like the 'incomes review process', speak to a level of ambition that today (here and now) seems impressive (68). Outside government, the era saw strikes where 750,000 workers withdrew their labour for two weeks (73–74), at a time when Nigeria's population was a quarter of what it is now.<sup>3</sup> Compare this to current complaints that African political parties do not even have distinguishable manifestos (Bleck and van de Walle 2013), let alone coherent visions to steer national development. Reading this now, when right-wing populism seems to be the only electorally viable alternative to post-politics neoliberal centrism (Temelkuran 2019), the sense of possibility evident in Nigeria in the 1960s and 1970s is hugely exciting.

### III

This excitement and these broad horizons can in part be traced to the dynamism of Nigerian intellectuals themselves. Yusuf Bangura's (1994, 270) work on intellectuals and the state in Nigeria gives some sense of the fast-changing context in which professors were working. The 200 professors at Nigeria's sole university in 1960 saw their ranks swell by a factor of 10 in a decade. By the time Williams was writing in the mid 1970s, the size of the student body had expanded from less than 2000 in 1960 to almost 45,000 in 1978.

As their numbers grew, academics were never far from the centres of power in Nigeria. Bangura provides a rich overview of the changing fortunes of different sections of the intelligentsia, but a couple of examples suffice to illustrate the intertwining of political-economic analysis and practice at the highest level. During Allison Ayida's term as president of the Nigerian Economic Society, he was the 'super perm sec' who designed much of Gowon's technocratic agenda for an executive-led rational development plan (61–62). Similarly, much of the 1979 constitution was written by Professor Billy J. Dudley, who came to the role as chairman of the Department of Political Science at the University of Ibadan. Bangura describes how, even under General Ibrahim Babangida's military rule in the 1980s, academics were called upon to proffer answers to major questions of political direction:

Following the debate on the IMF, the government felt there was a need for another debate to determine the type of political system best suited to Nigerian conditions under civil rule. A seventeen-member Political Bureau was appointed to administer this debate. Most members were drawn from the universities, including seven political scientists, a mathematician/political economist, an educationist, and a historian. (Bangura 1994, 281–282)

Whereas it might be thought that ‘expert’ political scientists are recruited by the state to give apolitical managerial or technical prescriptions, this was not the case, as shown by the outcome of the Nigerian Political Science Association’s conference in May 1986 on the theme ‘Alternative political futures for Nigeria: 1990 and beyond’. In his write-up for the *Review of African Political Economy*, Jibrin Ibrahim laments how the left and the right were agreed on their shared refusal to recommend that the government adopt a liberal democratic political system (Ibrahim 1986, 38). Clearly, the broad horizons of political thinking were matched by the ambitions of political science as a discipline in Nigeria.

Alongside this sense that the future was theirs for the making, there is in Williams’ book a recurrent and profound frustration. Given the pervasive pessimism with which Nigeria is discussed today, this despair sounds disturbingly familiar:

By 1960 it was clear that hopes for ‘life more abundant’ were only to be realised for the few. ... Nigerians found that colonial rule had been replaced by politicians’ rule. Politics itself became the focus of resentment. It was identified with the corrupt and blatant enrichment of the few at the expense of the many, and the nepotism, tribalism and repression with which the politicians kept themselves in power. (109–110)

If this was 1960, the year Nigeria gained independence from Britain, then what hope is there now? Was the Nigerian project over before it started? Yet, in Williams’ telling, this despondency stopped short of the now ubiquitous resignation: frustration with politics was at every turn twinned with a sense of possibility that politics – as it was then understood – could be escaped or transcended. This sense of the possible in the face of frustration took a number of forms.

On the part of the federal government this led to a desire to ‘institutionalize state regulation of class relations and take class issues outside the realm of politics’ (61). As such, Gowon proclaimed that the federal government ‘operates a system which knows no loyalty other than loyalty to the nation and people’ and sets development objectives above politics (61). In practice this was a justification for the bureaucratic authoritarianism characteristic of so many military regimes in the 1960s and 1970s. A sense that politics could not be allowed to endanger national development lingered into the 1980s, with General Muhammadu Buhari’s subsequent military takeover and ‘war against indiscipline’.

However, there were rival visions of how politics could be at once contained and overcome. A more familiar option to students of democratic politics today is constitutionalism, which envisions democracy within legally defined limits. The Drafting Committee of the 1979 constitution, who saw their job as preparing the country for civilian rule and the return of democracy, were cautious about the risks of political ideals getting lost in political competition: ‘[s]uch is the pre-occupation with power and its material benefits that political ideals as to how society can be organized and ruled to the best advantage of all hardly enter into the calculation.’ As Williams explains, there was the belief that ‘political

ideals, embodying public goals and values' should be placed 'above politics and define the framework within which political conflict is to take place' (82).

Williams argues that both of these tendencies had their turn at power in Nigeria. Constitutional democracy, which he terms the rule of politicians, operated in various forms at municipal, regional and national levels from 1936 to 1966. Bureaucratic authoritarianism, which he calls the rule of administration, took over in 1966, before solidifying under Gowon's rule at the end of the civil war. At the close of his analysis in 1977, Williams predicted that both would fail to resolve Nigeria's enduring contradictions: '[c]ivilian rule is thus likely to repeat the "failure of politics", and hence to invite in its turn a fresh demonstration from the military of the "failure of administration"' (123).

In the standard retellings of Nigerian political history since independence, these are the two options, which flipped back and forth before the country settled into democracy in 1999. Indeed, this contradiction is inherent in the state: '[o]n the one hand, the state and its agencies are required to regulate conflict among contending interests. On the other hand, the state serves as the instrument of these contending interests' (82). However dysfunctional the current political system or ubiquitous the criticism of those who operate within it, the current orthodoxy says that progress lies in consolidating democracy as set out in the constitution, and better protecting from capricious politics those rights and protections which should be 'above politics': rule of law, human rights, the inviolability of electoral competition.

But in Williams' account there is a third option beyond the rule and failure of politicians and administration. While there was no space in the politics of wheeling and dealing for more expansive political values like equality and popular legitimacy, they could nonetheless be sought 'through direct resistance to exploitation and oppression, as in the 1964 general strike, or in the Tiv and Yoruba resistance to their respective regional governments' (58) of which the prime example is the Agbekoya rebellion which Williams documents in Essay V (161–181). The strike, referred to above, which mobilised three-quarters of a million people, 'was in effect a strike *against* parliamentary politics' (original emphasis). Williams explains this as follows:

The politicians had made it quite clear that their looting of public resources could not be challenged within the framework of electoral politics. Popular participation was limited to begging politicians to secure for individuals and communities a small slice of the national 'cake'. (57)

Here we get a clearer sense of William's own normative political commitments. What marks this third option as different from both the foregoing arguments for bureaucratic authoritarianism and constitutional democracy is that it demands that the system must be allowed to contain *more politics, not less*: 'a narrow conception of politics reduces it to the contest for political office and the competition for its spoils. Politics in Nigeria often seems to be about just this' (134). Whereas current commentary is on the side of the constitution drafters, seeing the route out of 'spoils politics' in the return to the spirit and the letter of electoral competition, Williams sees 'narrow' electoral democracy as paving the road to spoils politics. In Essay IV, Williams reflects on the 1979 elections:

The manoeuvres which produced electoral competition [depoliticized] both public issues and the mass of workers, peasants, craftsmen and petty traders. ... there was little difference among the policies of the parties. All were committed to a combination of private enterprise,

state spending on education, welfare and development, and a 'fair' division of resources within the federation. (134)

Were the socialist candidates to have had the organisational wherewithal to compete, they too would have found themselves 'recruit[ing] personal followings in order to compete with bourgeois politicians for elected office and disposal of its spoils' (134). We should not pin our hopes on a political system in which major questions of distribution and power are not up for grabs.

#### IV

The issue I posed at the beginning, of what Williams thinks we should do, and what politics is for, is clarified in Essay IV. While this comes in the middle of the book, it is one of the last things Williams wrote in his analysis of Nigeria, in the final months of the 1970s:

The task for socialists seems to me to be to find ways to build on the resistance of the common people to exploitation, and to create a popular socialist movement which goes beyond the issues which concern workers alone, and articulates the grievances of all exploited classes. (138)

It is clear that Williams' motivation lies squarely with the 'emancipation of labour', for which the development of a capitalist society is neither a precondition nor a pathway. Despite the space given to setting out Marxist frameworks in the introduction, and their studied application in Essays II and III, Williams is committed to a much more uncertain exploration of unspecified and uncertain conditions under which people are able to 'produce freely in co-operation with one another rather than under the direction of capital and the state' (7).

For Williams, the movement away from strict Marxist frameworks towards a more open pro-labour stance entails a shift in scholarly methods, which he elucidates in the final essay (VI), *Ideologies and strategies of rural development*. He rejects 'researcher-led' development in favour of epistemic humility. In the context of studying agricultural development, he follows Polly Hill: '[w]e must study the farmer, not patronize him: we must assume that he knows his business better than we do, unless there is evidence to the contrary' (Hill 1970, 29, quoted in Williams 2019, 211). In this final essay we also see a relaxing of the terminology used to describe the oppressed: '[a]t the very simplest level of analysis, Ibadan, like other societies, divides into two, those who have, and those who have not.' The have-nots, rendered in Yoruba as the *mekunnu*, are defined in contradistinction not only to the 'olowo (wealthy)' but also to the 'omowe (educated), olola (noble, in Ibadan implying chiefs), or alagbara (powerful)'. They include people from what Williams calls different 'class situations', including 'traders, farmers, and industrial workers', but are united by their exclusion from the 'the significant opportunities for gaining rewards in society' (139–140).

#### V

To recap: the book opens with several chapters of what appears to be standard Marxist analysis. The task facing Nigeria is to develop capitalist society in order to pave the way for socialism, with the state subordinating individual capitalists in the process. At the

same time, Williams acknowledges early on that the emancipation of labour may require an entirely different and perhaps uncharted path, for which the development of capitalism for socialist ends is perhaps a false promise.

Against this background, Williams' eventual argument that true emancipation may require more politics, not less, puts him the same boat as theorists of twenty-first century politics like Chantal Mouffe. Mouffe (2005) argues that the post-political consensus of the 'end of history', where there is nothing left to be decided, must give way to agonistic competition, where left and right articulate the irreconcilable conflicts which false consensus papers over. The limits of what can be contested need to be relaxed in order that bourgeois democracy can be replaced with more radical and just possibilities.<sup>4</sup>

However, what we see increasingly now is that when politics shakes off the conventional constraints of the last 30 years of centrism it becomes apparent that the stakes are high. There is the potential for profound ugliness and regression, just as there is the potential for emancipation. After Clinton and Blair, we are as likely to find ourselves ruled by Erdogan, Orban or Trump, just as easily as by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. There are risks and rewards to politics beyond the ballot box.

As new possibilities in politics open up, we are left hesitant about the appropriateness of our tools of analysis. Who knows where politics 'with the brakes off' will lead? Marxists have often been fortified by the apparent solidity of models of political and economic change – this sense of solidity, however disheartening, is evident in the earlier essays of Williams' book (II–IV). Over the course of the book, we see a crack emerging in Williams' belief in the expansiveness of political possibility, while at the same time his confidence in existing models of how these possibilities will play out weakens. In many ways, we end up as readers back where we started from: right here, right now. The range of imaginable political outcomes has never been broader or more consequential; whether our analysis – as socialists, as political scientists, as those who seek to start with the insights of our informants and work up – can give us any sort of guidance in the years ahead remains an open question.

## Notes

1. In fact, this quote comes from the electronic review copy I was sent. It was cut from the final print edition, where it was replaced with the more diplomatic 'My understandings of the subjects and my analytical vocabulary have changed since I submitted my thesis in 1967' (1). All other page numbers refer to the 2019 print edition.
2. Report, Constitution Drafting Committee (1976), vol. 1, p. v.
3. According to the Worldometer website population page, the population of Nigeria was 49.1 million in 1964, and 201 million in 2019: <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/nigeria-population/>.
4. For an insightful discussion of Mouffe's theory vis-à-vis contemporary Nigeria, see Husaini 2019.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.



## Note on contributor

**Portia Roelofs** is Clayman-Fulford Junior Research Fellow in Politics and Political Thought at St Anne's College, Oxford. Her book *Good governance in Nigeria: rethinking accountability and transparency in the 21st century* is forthcoming with Cambridge University Press.

## ORCID

Portia Roelofs  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6174-9478>

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