

## Interview with Dr. Paul Adler



**CV:** This is Casey VanSise, the 2021-22 Thomas J. Davis Fellow for the Center for the Study of Force and Diplomacy (CENFAD), for those who are unaware of me at this point. We are joined today by [Dr. Paul Adler](#), who is [presenting for CENFAD](#) about his book [No Globalization Without Representation](#), which was published, I believe, by University of Pennsylvania Press in 2021?

**PA:** Yes. It is almost one year old!

**CV:** Well, this is great! Almost the one-year anniversary! So I guess I thought I would just start out by asking you a little bit about the basic premise of the book. What is the argument that you are making, and the subject matter that you are examining? You are looking predominantly at US activists, correct?

**PA:** Correct. Yeah, it is a multi-part argument. The post-1970s narrative about the left is that it is in decline and neoliberalism has been ascendant ever since,

and that it is a fairly simple story – that with part of the liberal-left in the United States, the decline involved the loss of radical social movements, and the decline in numbers and strength of the labor movement. I am not overturning that story, but there is more to that story. So the argument I am making is that, yes, there was a liberal-left that had some real political swing and cachet, and that yes, those movements did decline, but what that led to was liberal advocacy organizations, especially those started in the 1960s, taking on a new kind of political burden beyond what they had initially been conceived to do. So they were not mass-membership, politically strong organizations, but insider [lobby] organizations, and they suddenly became the lead actors at the same time that global neoliberalism was arising. They found that combatting on the terms of global free trade and the rise of neoliberal global governance was a promising and necessary field to fight on. So that is what the book is about.

**CV:** Well, very fascinating. I should mention to our readership and audience that you actually worked for some time in the mid-2000s for Public Citizen, which was one of these organizations featured in your book.

**PA:** Yes, I did.

**CV:** Very good. So I guess I am curious about what from that experience you might have brought to the book, and that perhaps inspired you when you were writing the book?

**PA:** Sure. The most basic thing is that I was allowed access to records that were not, as of that time, in any formal archives. So I just could not have written it [without that]. But more conceptually-speaking, I think I brought an empathy and a specificity in some of the questions that I was asking to the research. So I had ideas about how some of these coalitions worked and these politics worked, which was more than nothing because it is not a story that has really been told [before] as comprehensively as [in my book]. So the way I would put it: if you are writing a new book on the US Civil War, you can read a book that tells you what happened in the Civil War. I was having to construct that, but because I had worked in those fields, I had some of that basic narrative down. That might be a somewhat surface answer, though, so I am happy to try to go deeper if you want.

**CV:** Well, that is great! I would love to venture a little bit more into perhaps what from your experience specifically informed that if we have time, but I guess moving onto the next question in the meantime – obviously, you were mentioning US activists operating on a global stage, and that is a very important aspect of your book. With the period you are examining, it is sort of fascinating that you parallel these increasingly prominent organizations with the rise of neoliberalism, and that is different from the standard narrative of neoliberalism always being triumphant in the post-1970s period. So, in a roundabout way getting back to the question I was trying to ask, with US actors operation on a global stage, does your book examine other international activists that they coordinated with? For instance, I think of José Bové in the late 1990s with the farmers protests in France, and obviously with the “Battle in Seattle” [surrounding the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial Conference] and later

conferences, you had a lot of transnational organizing.

**PA:** Yes, I do. And the book is about a few different campaigns. But in each case, I do talk particularly about different Global South actors, depending on the campaign. So with NAFTA, it is Mexican organizations. With the formation of the World Trade Organization, for example, there is no specific country that that is most affecting, so what I particularly talk about—and this has not been written about that much, at least in US circles—is Penang, Malaysia, and I give some background on why that has become sort of a hub of progressive activism. But Penang has been a disproportionately important place because of the organizations that have started and are based there, especially those involving Afro-Asian coordination. And with a lot of the groups that I write about, the reason that they get along well with the US groups is that they occupy fairly similar types of social, educational, and class parameters. We are talking about lawyers and PhD economists who, in Malaysia, have been to Cambridge University, and in the United States, went to Georgetown or Harvard Law Schools. This is similar to global corporate elites, where there is an extensive literature suggesting that an Indian CEO and a US CEO of multinational corporations often have a lot more in common [with each other] than they might have with the janitor in their same office. That was one reason among others that these transnational activists were often able to work fairly well together.

**CV:** Well, very interesting! I guess getting into the talk that you are doing for CENFAD, what other scholarship by some CENFAD faculty might have informed your work at any point? Obviously, our director Dr. Alan McPherson has written a book,

*Ghosts of Sheridan Circle*, about the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS), and that figures into your book as one of the organizations that you examine.

**PA:** Alan's work on US-Latin American relations has been very helpful for me. [His work] also [motivated my] thinking about these transnational solidarities, as well as his showing how these opposition stories are not just inexorably tales of defeat. [In *The Invaded*,] he writes about how transnational alliances helped end the [early-twentieth century] occupations in Nicaragua, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. So I think that scholarship was very helpful for me.

**CV:** In keeping with this theme of you speaking to CENFAD, which aspires to be interdisciplinary, I always ask our different authors who are presenting on different subjects—for instance, when people were presenting on the Civil War—what can historians gather from your work, and what can other disciplines gain from your work, whether international relations (IR) scholars, political scientists, or otherwise?

**PA:** The contribution that I am making historically is partly just being in that position where you are one of the scholars who writes about the very edge where the [extant] historical scholarship has hit chronologically. I actually look forward to seeing my scholarship ripped to shreds, and know at least one graduate student [who appears poised to do so]. I am excited about that because I was one of the early ones, so the early scholarship always gets complicated, nuanced, and critiqued!

For other disciplines, I think I write about something where there are already a lot of political science and sociology books about NGOs. I find a lot of them exist in chapters and edited volume format rather than as full

books, so I think my case-studies just get to be more expansive, and that I pulled out some notes where there can be political science and sociology scholarship making many of the same arguments, but at a minimum, I give a lot more of the background and the detail to really firm that up. Because I also find that with a lot of that scholarship, you spend a lot of time going through the theories of IR and sociology, and you then have sort of the case-studies [being supplementary] – which, to be fair, makes sense for the discipline. Conversely, though, I am just in the archives going for it!

**CV:** Our time is perhaps a little bit limited, but circling back to the question that I asked you earlier about your work for Public Citizen, you do bring that up in the introduction of your work as well, if I am not mistaken.

**PA:** I do.

**CV:** So perhaps you could elaborate a little more on what you were doing while you were there.

**PA:** Oh, sure. While I will say that, first of all, I tell the story at the beginning of the book about how working at Public Citizen partly led me to get a PhD, because I just wanted to get a much deeper understanding of the work that I had been doing previously. Another reason that I put it at the beginning was to honestly to signal to the reader, “here is where I am coming from – I am not going to say I am biased, because it is pretty clear that I have my political commitments and whatnot, so you know where I am coming from and I am not hiding anything.”

But anyway, regarding the work I was doing, I was a legislative assistant, so I would be doing everything from

## ***Strategic Visions: Volume 21, Number II***

photocopies to helping do research for a report to bringing stuff to Congress. I wore a rat costume once at a protest and handed out fake bills to members of Congress that we did not like. I helped assemble a research project about contributions and votes on different free trade measures. So, yeah, it was a real mix of the kind of grunt work that needs to get done for an organization like that, combined with some more “brain work,” so to speak. It was quite an experience!

**CV:** Well, very good! So I think we have to wrap things up now, but I just wanted to remind our readers and viewers that we are interviewing Dr. Paul Adler about his book *No Globalization Without Representation*, so for anyone who will be reading or viewing this retrospectively, I would encourage anyone to go and grab a copy. So thank you for your time, Dr. Adler!

**PA:** Thank you!