

Olympus Mislaid?

A Profile of Perry Anderson

Gregory Elliott

At the very outset of his story, Berlin seems to have mislaid Mount Olympus.

Perry Anderson
'The Pluralism of Isaiah Berlin' (1990)

Longtime editor of *New Left Review* and co-founder of New Left Books; diagnostician of English exceptionalism and historian of European Absolutism; sometime interlocutor of Trotskyism and monitor of Western Marxism; today, contributor to the *London Review of Books* and Professor of History at the University of California – Perry Anderson enjoys a salience within Anglophone Marxist culture that is widely acknowledged. Yet the career of a figure whom Terry Eagleton has nominated 'Britain's most brilliant Marxist intellectual' remains curiously unexplored.¹

Various reasons might be adduced for this – not least, the deterrence to scrutiny afforded by the work of a polyglot polymath, possessed of the 'olympian universalism' he once attributed to Marx and Engels.² In an age of specialists, Anderson is a generalist – but quite the reverse of an amateur. If, in the words of one sardonic observer, he has produced 'a synoptic oeuvre stretching from 800 BC to last week',³ it is testimony to the quality of that oeuvre that it should have commanded the respectful attention of the relevant authorities (whether on 800 BC or last week). Olympian, in matters of substance and style alike, Anderson unquestionably is. The epithet has become a cliché of commentary upon him. But Marxist mortals need not fear to tread: for what is Jove without the thunderbolts?

The appearance in spring 1992 of two collections of Anderson's essays – *English Questions* and *A Zone of Engagement* – signalling a 'turning-point' in his politico-intellectual development,⁴ offers an opportunity to attempt a rudimentary reconstruction of it to date. For whilst neither volume affects completeness, each arguably obscures as much as it illuminates about their author's evolution since his début in 1960.

In the Foreword to *A Zone of Engagement* Anderson notes the discontinuity between its first three chapters, classified as 'intra-mural surveys within the intellectual world of the revolutionary Left', and the remainder of the book, culminating in a long essay on Fukuyama which upholds the essentials of his verdict on contemporary history. Anderson's dawning scepticism from the mid-1980s about the 'revolutionary Marxist tradition' – to which he had adhered for close on two decades – attached to both its analytical resources and its political prospects. Historical materialism had come under challenge as a 'theory of historical development' from Anglo-Weberian historical sociology; revolutionary socialism had been discountenanced by the 'societal ascendancy of the West'.⁵

Evidence of Anderson's altered stance prompted critics to wonder whether he remained a Marxist or socialist of any species, never mind a revolutionary one. Where did the erstwhile partisan of Lenin and Trotsky, the scourge of academicism and Eurocommunism, now stand?

Trotsky once remarked that 'Lenin thought in terms of epochs and continents'.⁶ Something similar might be said of Anderson who, in consequence, has always played the long game, emulating the 'ability to wait' enjoined by Trotsky in his time.⁷ Notwithstanding the significant discontinuities by which his career has been punctuated, there are profound continuities in Anderson's project, disclosed by recurrent historico-political themes and patterns of response. Today, it might seem as if he has heeded a version of the counsel given to disabused Communists by Isaac Deutscher in 1950, and 'withdraw[n] into a watch-tower', whence he can 'watch with detachment and alertness this heaving chaos of a world ... and ... interpret it *sine ira et studio*'.⁸ But in one crucial sense he has not withdrawn to the watchtower (though he may now reside in an ivory one), since – unlike Deutscher – Anderson has been stationed there all along.

Despite his youthful impetuosity and occasional intemperance, the historical perspectives of Perry Anderson have invariably been secular, attuned to the *longue durée*. Underlying a certain inconsistency of orientation and affiliation, induced by the shifting imperatives of successive conjunctures, is a settled *attentisme*, distanced from the contingencies and vagaries of the immediate. Anderson would never subscribe to Braudel's provocation: 'Events are dust.' Nor, however, would he consider a half-century in politics a long time. In a passage composed a decade before Braudel coined his slogan, and which Anderson has cited approvingly, Trotsky wrote:

Twenty-five years in the scales of history, when it is a question of profoundest changes in economic and cultural systems, weigh less than an hour in the life of man. What good is the individual who, because of empirical failures in the course of an hour or a day, renounces a goal that he set for himself on the basis of the experience and analysis of his entire previous lifetime?⁹

Fifty years on, and a few hours into that lifetime, Anderson's own professed source of inspiration is the stoicism of Gramsci, whose 'strength of mind was to bring moral resistance and political innovation together'.¹⁰ Whatever the identity of the figure in the Andersonian mirror, however, it reveals an enduring commitment to the socialist ideals of a lifetime. If this is an accurate characterization, it shifts the burden of critical attention, away from suspicion of incipient heresy, to the maintenance – in the absence of any of the political co-ordinates which might sustain it – of the 'olympian universalism' of Anderson's station in the watchtower. That posture was problematic in the past, when the existence of global socialist organizations nevertheless permitted him to speak in the name of an imaginary international which never found satisfactory embodiment. But with the *débâcle* of socialist traditions in the twentieth century, and with the consequent crisis of Marxism – at first strenuously denied, at length reluctantly conceded – Anderson's position has become yet more precarious, for ever more deracinated.

Contrary to Hegelian Marxism, Anderson had tended to define 'scientific socialism' as the *external* conjunction of a theoretical research programme and a practical movement, rather than as 'the theoretical expression of the proletarian movement'.¹¹ Predicated, even so, upon what the early Lukács designated as 'the actuality of the revolution',¹² in its mature form Anderson's Marxism conceived historical materialism as an *explanatory* science of history and a *normative*

critique of capitalism. In the first register, Marxism furnished a causal knowledge of the past and present, and thereby informed the struggle for a liberated future, guiding political actors in the adoption of viable strategic means to the feasible socialist end. In the second register, without regressing to the 'utopian socialism' which Marx, Engels and their successors claimed to have superseded, Marxism not only provided reasons for opposing capitalism, but ought (so Anderson maintained with increasing urgency in the early 1980s) to explore the institutional contours of a future socialism.

What becomes of this prospectus amid the *non-actuality* of reformist, let alone revolutionary, socialism – at a time when (to invert Marx and Engels) 'the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things' is not 'communism' but global capitalism, and its trophies include the traditional agencies and strategies, parties and programmes, of its historic antagonist?¹³ The permissive conditions of what a critic (privately) dubbed 'Andersonian Meta-Trotskyism' have clearly disappeared; yet its habits have manifestly died hard. It is the tenacious consistency of Anderson's project, resolutely focused on epochs and continents, and seemingly immunized against conjunctural vicissitudes, that raises the most intriguing questions about it.

Reorientations within English Marxism

Anderson's initial contributions to the collective enterprise of the first New Left in 1960–61 comprised a tribute to the recent Cuban Revolution and a critique of Swedish social-democracy.¹⁴ Each, albeit briefly, indicated two of the distinctive strands in his philosophico-political formation: an orientation to Sartrean Marxism and a commitment to Third World revolutionary nationalism. Two further components, possibly the most durable – the influence of Deutscher and Gramsci – found expression in an introduction written in 1962 to accompany Italian Communist Party documents. Commending the PCI's 'combination of fluent modernity and lability in the domestic Italian situation and intransigent militancy on colonial issues', Anderson remarked the asset it had in the 'sophisticated and indigenous Italian Marxism' of its pre-war leader.¹⁵

With the recession of CND and the exhaustion of the original New Left, Anderson was poised to assume the editorship of *NLR* and reorient it on the avant-garde model of *Les Temps Modernes*. Anderson and his colleagues made what they regarded as a virtue of necessity. The moment of 1956 having passed, they were without the domestic anchorage or continental relays of their predecessors. Reacting to this dilemma, they

adopted an attitude of militant ‘separatism’ towards indigenous left-wing currents and implemented a comprehensive internationalization of the *Review*.¹⁶ At home, the new *NLR* renounced political mobilization for cultural reformation: the induction of the French and Italian Marxisms that might seed their hitherto missing British counterpart. Abroad, it looked to a regenerated Communist movement and national liberation struggles as vectors of anti-capitalist advance – an emphasis evident in the book-length study of ‘Portugal and the End of Ultra-Colonialism’ contributed by Anderson in 1962.¹⁷

Thus, when *NLR* redirected its attention to the UK in 1963–64, unveiling the ‘Nairn–Anderson Theses’ on British history, it was with the intention of defamiliarizing the national physiognomy: Britain was treated as if it were a foreign country and emerged unrecognizable to many readers. Quite apart from the iconoclastic conclusions of the Theses, this effect was directly traceable to an alien idiom: the systematic application of predominantly Gramscian categories to the British social formation.

The centrepiece of the Theses was Anderson’s ‘Origins of the Present Crisis’,¹⁸ whose title indicates their motivation. Noting the absence of ‘even the outline of a “totalizing” history of modern British society’, Anderson argued that

until our view of Britain today is grounded in some vision of its effective past, however misconceived and transient these may initially be, we will continue to lack the basis for an understanding of the contradictory movements of our society, which alone could yield a strategy for socialism.¹⁹

Anderson’s ambition, then, was to conceive the ‘effective past’ accurately, so as to interpret the present aright, and thereby meet a precondition for transforming it into a socialist future. Theoretical history – a genealogy of the present – was a necessary condition of adequate political practice.

Methodologically, three defining Gramscian characteristics of the undertaking stand out. The first is a focus upon the *singularities*, rather than the *similarities*, of the national variant of capitalism: ‘the differential formation and development of British capitalist society’.²⁰ The second is consideration of the *longue durée* – ‘the distinctive overall trajectory of modern British society since the emergence of capitalism’²¹ – as the key to the current conjuncture. And the third is *anti-economism* – in particular, the sovereign power assigned culture and ideology in the reproduction of the British social order.

The substantive theses ventured on the national trajectory may be assembled under four headings: (1) the *prematurity* and *impurity* of the English ‘bourgeois revolution’ in the seventeenth century, generating a dominant agrarian capitalism and an allied mercantile capitalism; (2) the *priority* of the English Industrial Revolution, and its coincidence with counter-revolutionary mobilization against France at the end of the eighteenth century, polarizing a precocious proletariat and a self-effacing bourgeoisie; (3) the *supremacy* of British imperialism in the late nineteenth century, with its domestic legacy of aristocratic hegemony; (4) the exceptional *continuity* of British state and society in the twentieth century, spared external destruction or internal reconstruction.²²

Following his survey of its historical genesis, Anderson turned to the contemporary structure of British society, under a rubric – ‘History and Class Consciousness: Hegemony’ – which acknowledged the Lukácsian–Gramscian provenance and ‘culturalist’ tenor of his account. In sum, the dominant English ideology was a ‘comprehensive conservatism’ – a compound of ‘traditionalism’ and ‘empiricism’, the one venerating the past, the other abolishing any future.²³ For its part, the proletariat was dispossessed of any ‘hegemonic ideology’ and marked, instead, by ‘an immovable corporate class consciousness’, seemingly unsusceptible to revisionism, yet no less unamenable to socialism.²⁴ Having demoted the industrial bourgeoisie, and deflated the industrial proletariat, of the *Communist Manifesto* and *Capital*, Anderson launched a critique of ‘Labourism’ as the incarnation of economic corporatism.²⁵ As regards the overall configuration of class power in the UK, in accordance with one reading of the *Prison Notebooks*, he postulated the ‘supremacy of civil society over the state’,²⁶ intimating that a war of position would have to be engaged there by socialists.

What political conclusions did Anderson infer from the foregoing? Initially, cautious expectations of a future modernizing Labour government, under its ‘dynamic and capable leader’, Harold Wilson.²⁷ These were soon disappointed – and as rapidly discarded. However ingenuous they might appear in retrospect, they nonetheless demonstrate that Anderson held an ‘operative’ conception of Marxist theory.²⁸ This was further apparent from a long essay, published in 1965, in which his strategic perspectives were clarified and applied to Britain.²⁹

In the Foreword to *English Questions* Anderson remarks that, just as the French 1789 constituted the paradigm of the bourgeois revolution England had evaded, so Italian Communism functioned as a ‘coded

contrast' with British Labourism in his early work.³⁰ In 'Problems of Socialist Strategy' – never reprinted – the contrast is uncoded. Taking his cue from an ideal-typical continental Communism, which supplied the terms of his comparisons with Leninism and Labourism, Anderson sponsored the kind of structural-reformist strategy for socialism which would become institutionalized as 'Eurocommunism' a decade later.

According to 'Problems', the two received conceptions of socialist strategy – the revolutionary (Communist) and the reformist (social-democratic) – 'became ruling visions on different sides of the great geo-political divide which runs between Western and Eastern Europe; they correspond to two worlds and two histories.'³¹ Adapted to its environment of 'scarcity', which precluded the realization of an 'authentic socialism' east of the Elbe, 'Leninism', for all its faults, constituted 'an immense, promethean progress for Russia, as it does today for China'. Replication of it in the West, by contrast, would be 'fundamentally *regressive*', imperilling a 'vital historical creation' – democracy – which any advanced socialism must transcend, not destroy.³² This did not ratify the social-democratic road to power, since it, in turn, was vitiated by its statism – a parliamentarism which fundamentally misconceived the 'polycentric' power structure of capitalist democracy, neglecting the predominance therein of 'civil society' over the state.³³

This is not the place to examine Anderson's alternative socialist strategy. It will be sufficient to note that, having identified civil society as the locus of capitalist hegemony in conditions of liberal democracy, Anderson deduced a corresponding *counter*-hegemonic role for socialist culture, articulated by an anti-capitalist intelligentsia.³⁴ Cultural avant-gardism was thus prescribed, even as political vanguardism was proscribed, for the West.

Anderson would disown this essay, criticizing it for compromises with reformism and illusions in the socialist vocation of the Labour Party.³⁵ Whatever its demerits, it endeavoured to complement the Gramscian diagnosis of British society with a prognosis for British socialism. Indeed, it was the first and last such text of its kind released by Anderson. The bulk of a manuscript from 1970 – 'State and Revolution in the West' – its title conjoining Leninist precedent and Gramscian horizon, never saw the light of day. 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', extracted from it and published six years later, effected a convincing refutation of Eurocommunism (including the young Anderson), rather than a vindication of the revolutionary socialism to which he had by then gravitated.³⁶ Unlike 'Origins of the Present Crisis', 'The

Figures of Descent' more than two decades later was not coupled with *any* national strategic reflection – which is expressly declined in its conclusion.³⁷ In this respect, the omission of 'Problems' and presentation of *English Questions* in two companionate parts – the first collecting essays on British politics and culture from the 1960s, the second containing retrospectives upon them – is misleading, doing less than justice to Anderson's original zone of engagement.

'Problems' established the governing Andersonian problematic: a comprehensive polarization between East and West, within which a sub-division – between the insular and the continental – was inscribed. According to its terms, differential historical temporality generates distinct social formation and dictates specific socialist strategy. The problematic permits of further discrimination and significant variation. These would occur, most obviously, with a displacement of the state (East)/civil society (West) couplet, in favour of a polarity between feudal-Absolutist state (East) and capitalist-bourgeois-democratic state (West); and a consequent reversal of verdicts on a revolutionary strategy for socialism in the West. Nevertheless, these variations are internal to an invariant geo-political problematic of European historical development.

Abstract cosmopolitanism

In 1992 Anderson repented the 'national nihilism' exhibited by his deployment of a typology of the putatively typical (France, Italy), and the allegedly exceptional (Britain), in 'Origins'.³⁸ 'Abstract cosmopolitanism' might be an equally apposite characterization of Anderson and *NLR*'s self-conception throughout the 1960s, intent as they were upon a polarization of national intellectuals and conversion of a layer of them, as the potential artisans of a socialist culture, to international traditions.

The principal contemporaneous rejoinders to the Nairn-Anderson Theses, by E. P. Thompson and Nicos Poulantzas, each entered powerful objections to them – the former to the 'inverted Podsnappery' of their typologism; the latter to their 'culturalism' – whose justice was not accepted at the time, but only obliquely conceded in 'The Figures of Descent'.³⁹

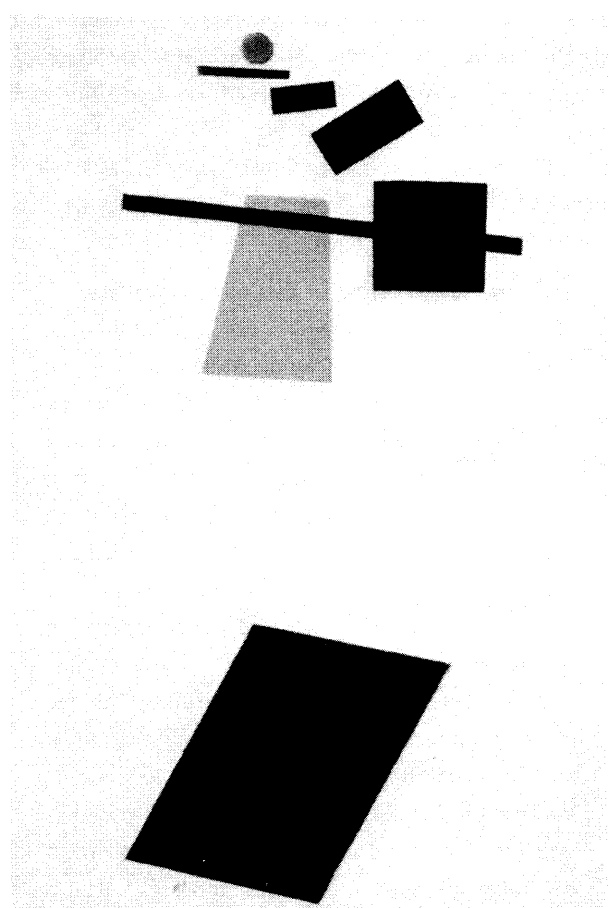
Poulantzas's Althusserian critique, which imputed a Lukácsian interpretation of Gramsci, mounted a challenge on Anderson's own chosen terrain of Western Marxism. A promised reply never materialized.⁴⁰ Experiencing the gravitational pull of Althusserianism, Anderson was doubtless inhibited by a measure of concurrence with it. In contrast, Thompson's charges provoked an animated counter-statement.⁴¹ Ultimately,

the exchange was something of a dialogue of the deaf; to switch to Anderson's metaphor, the duellists did not really cross swords.⁴² Whilst Thompson's concentration upon the details of Anderson's interpretation of the past distorted the express purpose of the Theses, Anderson's orientation to the present evaded Thompson's interrogation of an unsustainable, normative paradigm of bourgeois revolution. Yet since this, the English 1789 *manqué*, was what supposedly marked off national development as exceptional – even pathological, given the momentous consequences for British socialism deduced from it – Anderson's silence was symptomatic of difficulties eluded.

The main innovation of Anderson's apologia, far from recanting national nihilism, accentuated it. Foreshadowing the bonfire of English vanities in 'Components of the National Culture', Anderson bemoaned the absence in Britain of a 'classical sociology' and an indigenous Marxism.⁴³ Anderson's riposte to Thompson thus rendered *NLR*'s affiliation to a Western Marxist tradition patent, and from 1966 the *Review* systematically embarked upon a naturalization of the Continental schools.

Meanwhile, the Wilson government's domestic and foreign policies were volatilizing the species of reformism implicit in the Nairn–Anderson Theses. A fleeting interest in trade-unionism, as the front line of resistance to economic crisis-management, produced an essay from Anderson in 1967 which firmly demarcated socialism from syndicalism, while striking an unwontedly positive note about industrial organization and struggle.⁴⁴ But in common with their contemporaries throughout the advanced capitalist world, Anderson and co. experienced the radicalizing impact of the Vietnam War and soon turned their attention elsewhere. 1967 marked the peak of *NLR*'s enthusiasm for a revolutionary current in the Third World – Guevarism – whose theorizations by Debray were published and extolled by Anderson.⁴⁵ It also witnessed the emergence of a short-lived national student movement, in which *NLR* invested intellectually and participated politically.

Anderson's own contribution to 'studentism' was 'Components of the National Culture', published in *NLR* in the summer of 1968,⁴⁶ and preceded by an editorial which pointed to the intimate connection between its bombardment of the ideological headquarters of the bourgeoisie and the student revolt. In the essays of 1964–66 the evaluative criterion had been a revisionist/reformist Western Marxism, in whose name not only the hegemonic culture ('traditionalism'/'empiricism'), but its corporatist mirror-image ('Fabianism') and its original New Left antagonist ('populism'/'moralism'),



had been reproved. Now, however, in tacit self-criticism, that criterion was further circumscribed to *revolutionary* Marxism and the *revolutionary* socialism it grounded.

Anderson's *maoisant* motivation, conformable to notions of ideological struggle diffused by the Chinese Cultural Revolution then underway, was readily apparent from his invocation of Lenin and Gramsci: 'Without revolutionary theory ... there can be no revolutionary movement. Gramsci added, in effect, that without a revolutionary culture, there will be no revolutionary theory.'⁴⁷ The task of cultural renovation dictated a prior wave of creative destruction – 'a critique of established British culture'.⁴⁸

The basic argument of 'Components' is well known. The peculiarity of the national intellectual culture consisted in an 'absent centre': the lack of a totalizing 'classical sociology' and – crucial concomitant and correlate – the absence of a national Marxism.⁴⁹ This was ultimately attributable to the non-revolutionary mission of the industrial bourgeoisie in Britain, as a result of which Gradgrindery and Podsnappery had compounded to form *le vice anglais*. The United Kingdom boasted an 'intellectual aristocracy', which related to its society as if it were 'an immutable second nature', where other countries possessed a separate intelligentsia.⁵⁰ This configuration had been reinforced by a 'white emigration' from the turbulent Continent – Popper,

Berlin, Namier, et al. – which had achieved pre-eminence in the major disciplines – economics and literary criticism excepted – and confirmed ‘insular reflex and prejudice’.⁵¹

The details of the swingeing ‘inter-sectoral survey’ to which Anderson proceeded need not detain us. His summary conveys its thrust:

The void at the centre of this culture generated a pseudo-centre – the timeless ego. ... The price of missing sociology, let alone Marxism, was the prevalence of psychologism. A culture lacking the instruments to conceive the social totality typically fell back on the nuclear psyche, as first cause of society and history. ... Ultimately ... the twentieth century itself, with its political or cultural revolutions, becomes an impossible object.

The chloroforming effect of this configuration is general. Silently underpinning the social status quo, it stifles intellectual questioning of the existing order and deprives political opposition on the Left of the resources needed to understand its society, the condition of changing it. History has tied this knot, and only history can undo it. A revolutionary culture is not for tomorrow. But a socialist practice within culture is possible today: the student struggle is its initial form.⁵²

The antidote to the conservative national culture was Continental Marxist culture; its vector, the student movement; its vehicle, *NLR* and New Left Books. In the ‘era of revolutions’, Anderson and *NLR*’s extra-territorial self-conception crossed Sartreanism – a collective of independent, avant-garde intellectuals – with Leninism – a vanguard party of professional revolutionaries.

Actuality of the revolution?

The apparent hiatus in Anderson’s published work between ‘Components’ and his European history books of 1974, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* and *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, has erected a formidable obstacle to tracking his path from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, when he emerged as a critic of the theoreticism of Western Marxism and advocate of the Trotskyist version of classical Marxism queried in *A Zone of Engagement*. In fact, in a series of anonymous pieces in *NLR*, in internal documents, and in two lengthy manuscripts, Anderson refined and revised the revolutionary Marxism professed in ‘Components’. Initially – up to the turn of the decade – this assumed the form of an Althusserian Maoism, displaying some credence in the official propaganda of the Cultural Revolution. Thereafter, out of growing disenchantment

with Chinese foreign policy, a gradual transition to Trotskyism was set in motion.⁵³

At all events, by 1968 the prohibited strategy of 1965, no longer reduced to ‘insurrection’, had been elevated into the mandatory road to socialism in the West. The major premiss of this conclusion was supplied by the May Events in France of that year, interpreted as ‘the return of the repressed’ to the hitherto becalmed universe of advanced capitalism;⁵⁴ revolution was immanent in the metropolis. This reading of contemporary history inflected Anderson’s political perspectives for nearly a decade, retreating only with the normalization of the Portuguese ‘revolution of the carnations’ and the mobilization of the Second Cold War.

The immediate significance of May ’68 for Anderson can be gauged from a set of unpublished texts, dating from 1968–70, which take as their starting-point the ‘actuality of the revolution’ in the West. The first two are entitled ‘Document A – Theory and Practice: the Coupure of May’ and ‘Document B – Ten Theses’. Aside from its positive invocation of Maoism, the former anticipated *Considerations on Western Marxism* (1976), detecting in the emergence of two major currents of Marxism in May – Trotskyism and Maoism – the harbinger of a reunification of revolutionary theory and practice. This development – in conjunction with ongoing student radicalization in Britain – obliged *NLR* to clarify its political outlook. The ‘Ten Theses’ undertook such self-clarification, adopting an orthodox Trotskyist position on the Soviet Union (but exempting China from analogous critique); casting the industrial proletariat as the principal agency of a revolutionary strategy for socialism; stipulating the destruction of the bourgeois state and the institution of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the transition to communism.

A notable feature of the ‘Ten Theses’ is their optimism about the prospects for socialism. Two subsequent texts – ‘The Founding Moment’ (1969) and ‘State and Revolution in the West’ (1970) – investigated some preconditions for the redemption of that promise and sought, via a critique of Gramsci’s political theory, to rethink revolutionary-socialist strategy. As Anderson had already indicated in his ‘Ten Theses’, although a broadly Leninist strategy was necessary in the West, the specificity of bourgeois democracy ruled out mere repetition of Bolshevik tactics. Accordingly, ‘State and Revolution in the West’ essayed a Leninist revision of ‘Problems of Socialist Strategy’. Given the non-repetition of the French May and the waning of the student movement, certain of its conjunctural conclusions were apparently infirmed. Having, however, rectified his geo-political problematic by replacing

Gramsci's state/civil society couplet with a differentiation between capitalist (democratic) and feudal (Absolutist) states, Anderson undertook a lengthy detour via history.

In other words, 'State and Revolution in the West' was the precursor of Anderson's history project, only the first two instalments of which materialized. These comparative surveys of the 'divergent trajectories of the major Absolutist States of Eastern Europe and Western Europe' were intended to issue in two further studies: of the sequence of bourgeois revolutions that uprooted the Absolutist states; and of the capitalist states that emerged in the wake of those revolutions. In the sequels, Anderson promised, '[c]ertain of the theoretical and political implications ... will ... become fully apparent ...'⁵⁵ If, in addition, reportedly planned volumes on the socialist revolutions and post-capitalist states had ever appeared, the implications would have been transparent.

The disparity between original programme and actual outcome is massive; it possibly constitutes the single most important fact about Anderson's intellectual career – the 'absent centre' of his oeuvre. For the Andersonian history of Absolutism was no mere antiquarianism, but a genealogy (or prehistory of the present): the prelude to a comparative history of the European capitalist states, which would permit rigorous theorization of them, and thus facilitate the formulation of a viable revolutionary strategy against them – the missing programmatic link of Leninism in the West. The history project thus aspired to correct on a gigantic, continental scale the undertaking discharged, in miniature, at the local level in 'Origins of the Present Crisis': reconstruction of the effective past in order to understand the present and master the future.

What frustrated Anderson can only be conjectured.⁵⁶ In his analysis of Russian Absolutism, however, he had arrived at a conclusion with inclement implications for contemporary revolutionary socialism:

*The Russian Revolution was not made against a capitalist State at all. The Tsarism which fell in 1917 was a feudal apparatus: the Provisional Government never had time to replace it with a new or stable bourgeois apparatus. The Bolsheviks made a socialist revolution, but from beginning to end they never confronted the central enemy of the workers' movement in the West.*⁵⁷

The unstated consequent was stark: Leninism – vindicated in principle, by negative deduction from the barren record of social-democracy – enjoyed no practical confirmation as a strategy in Western social formations. The revolution had prevailed where socialism was condemned by inherited backwardness to immersion in

the 'kingdom of necessity'; it had misfired where socialism enjoyed the material and social preconditions for attainment of the 'realm of freedom'.

Anderson, then, had tabled the riddle posed by what he later called the 'Sphinx facing Marxism in the West'⁵⁸ and aimed to solve it. It manifestly confounded him. Still, in the mid-1970s, with the victory of the Indochinese Revolution, the overthrow of the Caetano regime in Portugal, and industrial militancy throughout the OECD zone, Anderson reckoned the Left's prospects to be at their most favourable since the onset of the Cold War.⁵⁹ This was the phase of rising expectations in which *Considerations on Western Marxism* appeared, rendering his subscription to a variant of Trotskyism explicit.

Composed in 1974, and published two years later with an Afterword, *Considerations* represents a public settlement of accounts with post-classical European Marxism. In effect, however, it comprises two autocritiques. The first – in the main text – retracts the counter-position in 'Components' of a valorized Continental tradition to a degraded national configuration, at the expense of a classical Marxism superior to both; the second – of the main text – qualifies its counter-position of an inviolate classical Marxism, organically bound to political practice, to an unregenerate philosophical Marxism, structurally divorced from working-class politics.

The argument of *Considerations* has been-rehearsed many times and need not be repeated here. Anderson reiterated the diagnosis – Western Marxism as the theoretical transcription of practical defeat – and prognosis – a reunification of theory and revolutionary practice after 1968 – made in 'The Coupure of May'. The contemporary incarnation of classical Marxism – Trotskyism – was in the process of revitalization, whereas Western Marxism was on the point of extinction. Any rejuvenation of classical Marxism would, however, be obliged to address what Anderson characterized as the 'incompletion of historical materialism', confronting its unresolved problems: above all, the nature of bourgeois democracy and a strategy for its supersession.⁶⁰ Their solution had a basic 'precondition' – namely,

the rise of a mass revolutionary movement, free of organizational constraint, in the homelands of industrial capitalism. Only then will a new unity of socialist theory and working-class practice be possible, capable of endowing Marxism with the powers necessary to produce the knowledge it lacks today.⁶¹

Pending fulfilment of this precondition, Marxism would

presumably remain the kind of 'second-order' discourse reprehended – yet represented – by Anderson.⁶²

Anderson's original conclusion of 1974 reverted to his epigraph from Lenin, adamant that its instruction be accepted to the letter: 'Correct revolutionary theory ... assumes final shape only in close connection with the practical activity of a truly mass and truly revolutionary movement.'⁶³ However, his inference from a hypertrophy of practice was paradoxical: occupation of a post in neither class struggle, nor academy, but in the watchtower, whence conjunctural manifestations and institutionalizations of class struggle could be scanned.

Just as Anderson's typology of Marxism idealized an undifferentiated classical tradition as the norm against which to calibrate flawed post-classical trends, so too he transfigured the Trotskyist inheritance, by casting singular exceptions as the general rule, therewith erecting an imaginary Trotskyism. Responding to these and other criticisms from colleagues on *NLR*, Anderson's 1976 Afterword, as Eric Hobsbawm noted in a review, 'retract[ed] much of the first 90 per cent of his essay'.⁶⁴ It did so in two respects: first, by revoking the stringent conditions on the union of theory and practice laid down in 1974, on the grounds that, *qua historical* materialism, Marxism was primarily a theory of history (hence of the incorrigible past), not a 'revolutionary sociology' of the present;⁶⁵ second, by scrutinizing the imperfections of classical Marxism. On inspection, these turned out to be grave enough. Anderson queried Marx's reconstruction of the 'laws of motion' of the capitalist mode of production, Lenin's indiscriminate theory of the capitalist state, and Trotsky's problematic of 'permanent revolution', before drafting an agenda of 'great unanswered problems' for Marxist theory.⁶⁶

Over a decade and a half, Anderson had successively adopted, and then qualified or rejected, various alternatives to the national intellectual culture. First of all, Western Marxism, within which he had approximately graduated from Sartre and Lukács, thence to Gramsci and Althusser. Subsequently, an attempt had been made to contrast a unified classical Marxist tradition with Western Marxism *tout court*. Now, however, the classical tradition in whose name the Western theoreticians were criticized proved more problematic than originally depicted. By 1975, classical Marxism was itself under critical scrutiny. And belying Anderson's tributes to its achievements, its 'great unanswered problems' were of such a magnitude as to render historical materialism not merely incomplete (Anderson's original judgement), not simply imperfect (his second), but 'largely a system of vacuums': the esoteric verdict of 1975.⁶⁷

Adverse conditions

In 1976 Anderson staked the reviviscence of Marxist theory upon the imminence of mass revolutionary-socialist practice. In the event, contemporary history mocked the promise of May. Consequently, for all the indemnities conferred by an intellectual independence akin to a Sartre, and a geo-political perspective even more capacious than that of Deutscher, scarred by cumulative defeats and confronted by intractable problems, Anderson's Marxism would itself slowly change colours.

In the Foreword to *A Zone of Engagement*, Anderson observes that the aim of 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', published in 1976, had been political:

Written in the wake of the Portuguese Revolution ... this was an account of Gramsci that sought to draw a balance-sheet of the last great strategic debate of the international labour movement, for struggles still pending. That, at any rate, was my expressed intention. When it appeared, however, I received a long letter from ... Franco Moretti ... telling me that I had written a farewell in fitting style to the revolutionary Marxist tradition. In those days, this was not a verdict I was disposed to accept. But, not for the last time, his judgement proved better than mine.⁶⁸

Anderson's recalcitrance persisted for a decade after the appearance of the Gramsci essay, whose principal target was the reformist reunification of theory and practice embodied in Eurocommunism. Acute interrogation of reformism did not thereby vindicate revolutionary socialism.⁶⁹ Anderson repudiated any projection of the achievement of hegemony in civil society by the working class prior to – let alone instead of – the capture and destruction of the bourgeois state, reaffirming the realism of the classical Marxist prospectus. Unlike its predecessor, 'Problems of Socialist Strategy', 'Antinomies' deliberately proceeded at a generic level, abstaining from 'concrete analysis' of any West European social formation. Conscious of the discrepancy between revolutionary theory and Western reality, it concluded by begging the question: since '[t]he masses ... [had] yet to be won over to revolutionary socialism ... the central problematic of the United Front' – implemented by the Third Congress of the Comintern in 1921 – 'retain[ed] all its validity ...'⁷⁰

The defeat of Eurocommunism in Spain, Italy and France, the termination of the Portuguese Revolution, and the manifest failure of the Trotskyist tradition to remedy the prevalent 'poverty of strategy',⁷¹ soon led Anderson to revise his sanguine short-term expectations.

Prior to this, however, it was the 'poverty of theory', proclaimed by E. P. Thompson in 1978, that engaged his energies. In the judicious response which Thompson's philippic elicited, Anderson described it as 'the most sustained exposition of Thompson's own credo'.⁷² *Arguments within English Marxism* (1980) warrants an identical verdict. Broadly welcoming Thompson's confrontation with Althusser, and the encounter thereby staged between British Marxist historiography and Western Marxist philosophy, Anderson not only arbitrated their differences, but offered an elegant restatement of classical Marxism. The possibility of social-scientific naturalism and the validity of epistemological realism; the necessity of empirically controlled theory; historical materialism as the science of social formations; mode of production as its master-concept; the systemic contradiction between the forces and relations of production as the *explanans* of epochal transitions; moral realism and consequentialism; a 'dialectical' conception of historical progress; authentic communism as the supersession of advanced capitalism; the ineluctability of political revolution in any conceivable transition to socialism – in these (and other) respects, Anderson's credo was that of a traditional, yet non-dogmatic, revolutionary Marxism. In place of the antitheses of the past, *Arguments* propounds the mature Andersonian synthesis of classical, Western and Anglo-Marxisms.

Addressing Thompson, Anderson concluded on a familiar note:

So far, our contrasting contributions to a common socialist culture have in many ways each involved restatements or criticisms of classical inheritances, more than innovative advance into unknown terrain. The reasons for that are not hard to seek: the absence of a truly mass and truly revolutionary movement in England, as elsewhere in the West, has fixed the perimeter of all possible thought in the period. But the example of Morris ... shows how much can still be done in what appear to be adverse conditions.⁷³

By 1980 those conditions included the trans-Atlantic ascendancy of the New Right, the launching of the Second Cold War, and the re-edition of the anti-Marxist ideology of the 1940s and '50s. Disputing Thompson's 'exterminism' thesis, Anderson's position on the Cold War assigned explanatory priority to the global confrontation between the contending systems of capitalism and Communism – a conflict conceived, in Deutscherite fashion, as the 'deformation' of international class struggle and its 'displacement' onto

the actual political (and potential military) contest of Western and Eastern blocs.⁷⁴ Nuclear competition was not explicable by the 'isomorphism' of equivalent 'super-powers'; it was rooted in the 'great contest' between capitalist and post-capitalist states. As to the rights and wrongs of that contest, Anderson's historical interpretation implied political recommendation: in a word, *anti-anti-Sovietism*, analogous to the 'anti-anti-Communism' defended by Sartre at the height of the first Cold War. Unequivocally, if not uncritically, Anderson's sympathies lay with the Soviet party to the inter-systemic contest.

The rationale for this stance was spelt out in a short talk on Stalinism in 1982. Following a phase of orthodox Trotskyist observance on the subject, Anderson's analysis now coalesced with the heterodox views of Deutscher. Having itemized the merits of Trotsky's assessment – in particular, the '*political balance*' displayed by his 'firm insistence ... that the USSR was in the final resort a workers' state', defensible as such against Western imperialism⁷⁵ – Anderson attended to its limitations. These centred upon its characterization of Stalinism as an international phenomenon, which had been falsified by the historical record. Right to evaluate the *internal* role of the Stalinist bureaucracy as 'centrist', Trotsky was wrong to adjudge its *external* performance purely 'counter-revolutionary':

The two major forms of historical progress registered within world capitalism in the past fifty years – the defeat of fascism, the end of colonialism – have ... been directly dependent on the presence and performance of the USSR in international politics ...⁷⁶

Whatever the cogency of Anderson's conclusions, the essential thing to underscore here, in view of the omission of this key piece from *A Zone of Engagement*, is the degree of his political investment, at the height of the Second Cold War, in the 'presence and performance' of the USSR.

The logic of this filiation was revealed in *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (1983). Reviewing the predictions made at the close of *Considerations*, Anderson found them partially fulfilled: Western Marxism had largely run its course by the mid-1970s; subsequent historical materialism had ascended to the concrete; and an Anglo-Marxism had duly crystallized. On the other hand, the reunification of theory and practice in a mass revolutionary movement had failed to eventuate, with deleterious consequences for strategic innovation. Moreover, an unforeseen development had ensued: the 'crisis of Marxism' afflicting Southern

Europe from the late 1970s.⁷⁷

To explain this reverse, Anderson entertained the hypothesis that historical materialism had been challenged and vanquished as a research programme by (post-)structuralism, on the 'master-problem' of 'the nature of the relationship between structure and subject in human history and society'⁷⁸ – only peremptorily to dismiss it. Quite the reverse of resolving the problem that had preoccupied Sartre and Merleau-Ponty on the morrow of Liberation, Lévi-Strauss and co. had reproduced it on the eve of May.⁷⁹ The matrix of Latin-Marxist crisis resided elsewhere – in political history: the twin defaults of Maoism and Eurocommunism as socialist alternatives to Stalinism.⁸⁰

That was the bad news. The good news was the alleged reversal of '[t]he traditional relationship between Britain and Continental Europe' as regards Marxist culture – tantamount, indeed, to a 'nascent Anglo-American hegemony in historical materialism today'.⁸¹ This judgement had been privately retracted even before it was publicly pronounced, in view of the manifold symptoms of an insular strain of the Continental virus infecting Marxism.⁸² Even so, it evinces a bizarre bibliocentrism on Anderson's part to tax such pro-Eurocommunist Marxists as Poulantzas with regressing to reformism, while sparing their American counterparts, corralled in the academy.⁸³ Soon, at any rate, little sign of the 'nascent hegemony' was discernible either side of the Atlantic, amid the consolidating hegemony of a post-structuralism which, contrary to Anderson's implausible hypothesis, was widely perceived as having inquired historical materialism. For all its insights, Anderson's discussion of French philosophy, excoriating work which *NLR* had once sponsored, displayed a 'negativism'⁸⁴ that preached solely to the converted.

Coupled with an insistence that Marxists explore the institutional structures of socialism as 'a future society',⁸⁵ Anderson's vindication of historical materialism posed as many questions as it answered:

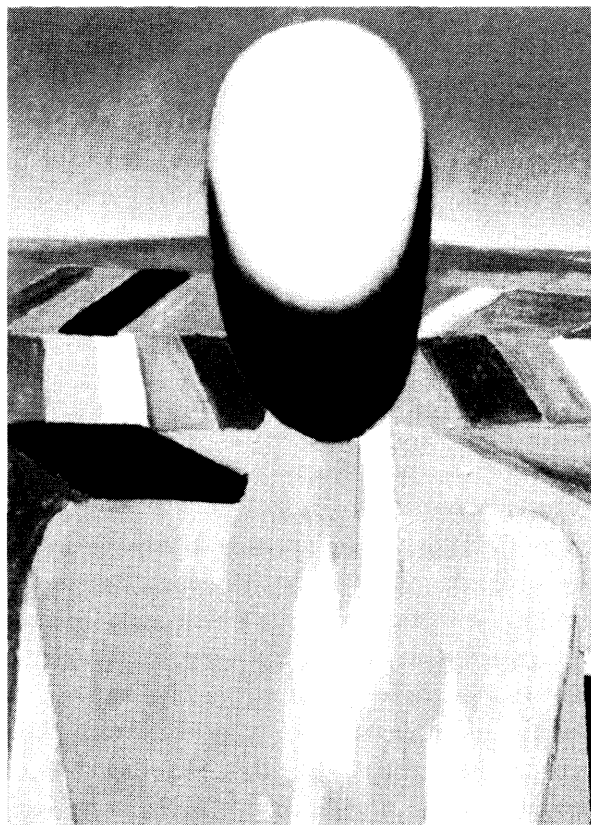
historical materialism remains the only intellectual paradigm capacious enough to be able to link the ideal horizon of a socialism to come with the practical contradictions and movements of the present, and their descent from the structures of the past, in a theory of the distinctive dynamics of social development as a whole. ... Marxism has no reason to abandon its Archimedean vantage-point: the search for subjective agencies capable of effective strategies for the dislodgement of objective structures.⁸⁶

Archimedes promised to move the Earth if allocated a firm spot. Anderson's elaboration of the conceit contradicts its pretension. It simultaneously allots

Marxism firm ground and undermines it: the vantage-point debouches into the quest for one ... To change the metaphor, by Anderson's own admission the riddles of the Sphinx extended beyond a 'poverty of strategy' for socialism, to encompass the plausibility of its proletarian agency and the feasibility/desirability of its post-capitalist goal. Compared with the 'scientific socialism' of Marx and Lenin, this was the very epitome of *terra infirma*.

And yet – now in Galilean fashion – the Earth had moved. October 1917 and its descendants conferred such empirical warrant as Anderson could muster for his reaffirmation of the rationality of revolutionary socialism. In consequence, by 1983 his estimation of the 'constitutive ambiguity' of the relationship between Western Marxism and international Communism equally applied to him:

On the one hand, this was a filiation which from its very outset ... had embodied hopes and aspirations for a developed socialist *democracy* ... Hence [its] permanently critical distance ... from the state structures of the Soviet Union ... On the other hand, this tradition nearly always had a sense of the extent to which the Russian Revolution and its sequels, whatever their barbarities or deformities, represented the sole real breach with the order of capital that the twentieth century has yet seen – hence the ferocity of the onslaughts of the capitalist states against them ...⁸⁷



Instantiating the 'sole real breach with the order of capital', international Communism thus rendered the projection of future ruptures something more than mere *Zukunftsmusik*. In the absence of other – superior – candidates, the provisional Eastern place-holder of actual socialist *practice*, imparting ballast to critical Western Marxist *theory*, reposed in the Second World. To be sure, Anderson's own aspirations were for a 'developed socialist democracy', whose privileged terrain would be the currently inhospitable zone of advanced capitalism. But he was thus left in the position identified by Ronald Aronson: '[p]rojecting the idea of socialism *against* its actual history and outcome'.⁸⁸ The crisis of Marxism and socialism could only be deflected by a gesture to the East, and a wager on the West, that bespoke its profundity.

The verdict of the world

In the Tracks of Historical Materialism is the last genuinely confident statement of Andersonian revolutionary Marxism. The next few years yielded an intervention in the modernism/postmodernism debate, a preface to Deutscher, joint interviews with Habermas, and a caustic assessment of social democracy.⁸⁹ Yet as the last effectively conceded, the Archimedean ground plotted in *Tracks* was being inundated by the flood-tides of contemporary history.

Anderson once remarked of Deutscher that, having desisted from any endeavour to reunite classical Marxist theory and revolutionary political practice after the Second World War, he had opted to become a professional historian.⁹⁰ In the late 1980s, against the backdrop of Western triumph in the Second Cold War, Anderson took the step prepared in his defence of the historian's vocation, and relaxation of the theory/practice criterion, at the end of *Considerations*, tacitly emulating Deutscher's solution.

This evolution was apparent from Anderson's post-1986 reflections on three broad topics: the essays on British politics and culture contained in the second part of *English Questions*; a series of surveys, in *NLR* and the *LRB*, of non-Marxist thinkers, mostly collected in *A Zone of Engagement*; and the long essay on Fukuyama with which that volume concluded (about to be reissued, in expanded form, as *The Ends of History*).

For close on twenty years after 1968, despite his discreet critical sympathy for Bennism in the early 1980s, Anderson preserved a public silence on British politics; unlike Nairn, he attempted no development of the original *NLR* Theses, or their revolutionary redirection in 'Components of the National Culture'. 'The Figures of Descent', a retrospect and update published in 1987, defended the central thrust of 'Origins of the Present

Crisis'. Summoning Arno Mayer's *The Persistence of the Old Regime* to his aid, Anderson reasserted the accuracy of his portrait of the hegemonic landowning class of Victorian Britain. By the same token, however, he was obliged to revoke the claims advanced for the 'exceptionalism' of the trajectory of British society in this regard: the national specificities of a *pan-continental* configuration of class power now furnished the *explanans* of the travails of British capitalism – the *explanandum*, pace Thompson, of 'Origins'.⁹¹ The record of the subsequent years had corroborated Anderson's conjectures: Labourism had burked its 'modernizing' projects in the 1960s and '70s, conforming to subaltern type; Conservatism had continued the deindustrialization of the British economy, accelerating what it purported to reverse.⁹²

Now Anderson was justified in reminding critics of the focus of the Theses: the *present* crisis. However, the striking thing about 'Figures' is the absence from it of the kind of strategic recommendations inferred from 'Origins'. These implicitly followed later, in the concluding essay of *English Questions*, in Anderson's advocacy of the programme of constitutional reform associated with Charter 88 (of which he was a founding signatory), and of a democratized federal Europe, wherein the unbound capitalist Prometheus of the twenty-first century might be tethered to social ends.⁹³ By socialist standards, such perspectives were, as Anderson readily conceded, moderate enough. But with the convulsions of Communism and the disorientation of social democracy,⁹⁴ they '[held] out the best promise of practical advances in equality and emancipation in Western Europe at large'.⁹⁵

From one angle 'The Light of Europe' might be seen as a return to Anderson's origins: it reissued the summons to a resumption of 'the unfinished business of 1640 and 1832' with which his 1964 article had ended.⁹⁶ Where it upheld 'Origins of the Present Crisis', 'A Culture in Contraflow',⁹⁷ by contrast, overturned 'Components of the National Culture', offering a *catalogue raisonné* in lieu of the fusillade of 1968.

Anderson's political measurement of the cultural climate in the late 1980s produced a remarkably positive reading: 'the political and intellectual worlds went in opposite directions ...'.⁹⁸ The first thing to note about it is that, even were the thesis of an academic-intellectual radicalization in response to the New Right to be accepted, this would not license Anderson's conclusion that it was somehow directed against 'capital', as opposed to neo-liberal (de)regulation of it. Secondly – and relatedly – the sound of goalposts being moved is unmistakable: academic resistance to political reaction

is construed as intellectual radicalization. Yet it would be equally plausible to argue that, whilst the polity moved – to the right – the academy (if not the polytechnics) stood pat, in the middle of the road (where, predictably, it got run over). The fact that Sir Keith Joseph and his ilk incriminated liberals in a collectivist complot with Marxists against the propensity to truck, is eloquent testimony to *his* radicalism (not to mention paranoia). Thirdly, however, just as the Thatcher dispensation decisively altered the parameters of party politics, so too it induced a fundamental reconfiguration rightwards of the national intellectual culture. Neo-liberal *Kulturkampf* incited no mutiny in the senior commonrooms,⁹⁹ but rather an ever-increasing moderation and normalization.¹⁰⁰ The conformities of the English would certainly have struck Anderson in 1968, even if they escaped him two decades later.

The combination of cross-Channel and trans-Atlantic interchanges registered by Anderson did indeed generate the ‘mutation’ he identified: ‘British culture became looser and more hybrid.’¹⁰¹ Yet he had once looked to Europe, not out of credence in the intrinsic virtues of cross-fertilization, but because the national culture signally lacked what the Continental abundantly possessed: the totalizing theory indispensable to revolutionary politics.

In the shape of the historical sociology of Mann and Runciman, Giddens and Gellner – stimulated, in part, by the (negative) example of historical materialism – Britain now boasted its own ‘totalizations ... of heroic magnitude’.¹⁰² For all the ceremony accorded them, however, in each instance theoretical frailties and empirical fallibilities were disclosed by Anderson’s discussions, which rendered any claim to have surpassed Marxism inadmissible.¹⁰³ Anderson’s real concern, it may be surmised, was not an implausible superiority of Mann over Marx, but their mutual incapacity – uncorrected elsewhere – to rise to the explanatory challenges posed to them as theories of ‘the distinctive dynamics of social development as a whole’.

Anderson’s panorama of domestic culture ended with a troubling contrast between the oppositional ‘high culture’ of the 1980s and the socialist ‘popular culture’ of the 1930s. To account for it, he resorted to an habitual theme:

if no convergence of terms or audiences like that of the thirties was in sight ... the ... fundamental reason was the absence of any significant political movement as a pole of attraction for intellectual opposition. ... Situations in which cultural production fails either to reflect or affect the political direction of a country are common

enough. It was Mill who wrote that ‘ideas, unless outward circumstances conspire with them, have in general no very rapid or immediate efficacy in human affairs.’ But circumstances may also circumscribe ideas themselves. Some of the necessary ones for an effective opposition were, in British conditions, still missing.¹⁰⁴

‘Components’ had been able to nominate an agency for its culturalist strategy: the student movement. Twenty years later, history had (to borrow Anderson’s metaphor) untied the Gordian knot of 1968, providing some of the resources with which to analyse British society. Yet it had tied another, no less ingenious one, for whose severance the requisite Alexander was wanting. Notwithstanding diminished political horizons – an ‘alternative of similar scope’ to Thatcherism, rather than revolutionary socialism – here, as in *Considerations* and *Arguments*, Anderson’s conclusion issued in fatalism. It deposited its readers in the political void of a circular causality, bereft of any prospective redemptive agency intermediate between high culture and low politics: without propitious circumstances (i.e. any significant political movement), no fully adequate ideas; but without fully adequate ideas, no propitious circumstances (i.e. effective opposition). In its own, non-revolutionary terms, ‘A Culture in Contraflow’ testifies to a poverty of theory, strategy and agency. The contraflow terminates in gridlock.

The indeterminacy of Anderson’s later work in these respects was unerringly detected by John Gray, in an otherwise laudatory review.¹⁰⁵ Noting that he was ‘strangely reticent on the fiasco of Gorbachev’s reformist socialism’, Gray harpooned the ‘bizarre collation’ effected in the final paragraph of ‘A Culture in Contraflow’. Anderson writes there that ‘the collapse of the Communist order in Eastern Europe and the approach of federation in Western Europe have struck away mental fixtures of Left and Right alike.’¹⁰⁶ But this is to equate the regional *modification* of the capitalist state system with the *elimination* of an antagonistic socio-economic system – an equation affording socialist consolation only to the credulous. And if any mental fixtures had been struck away, then an obvious candidate would be Anderson’s own. Although no one could have guessed it from his post-lapsarian writings – including an insouciant report on the Moscow coup and its dénouement in 1991¹⁰⁷ – the Communist order had indeed constituted a mental fixture of Anderson’s Marxism. By his criteria, its destruction represented the zonal restoration – and hence global dominion – of capitalism.

Due confirmation of this can be found in 'The Ends of History', which largely aligns itself with Fukuyama against his critics, and whose concluding section, 'Socialism?', eschews silver linings. Arguing that '[n]one of the political currents that set out to challenge capitalism in this century has morale or compass today',¹⁰⁸ Anderson seems to imply that socialism has, by classical Marxist criteria, become utopian once again. Ecological distempers may serve to demonstrate the long-run unsustainability of capitalism as a global mode of production. That does not suffice, however, to substantiate the viability of socialism. The vices of contemporary capitalism compound the quandaries of contemporary socialism, aggravating its programmatic and strategic deficits: '[t]he case against capitalism is strongest on the very plane where the reach of socialism is weakest – at the level of the world system as a whole ... in the past fifty years, internationalism has changed sides.'¹⁰⁹ At the close of the century, as at its outset, the alternative appears unambiguous: socialism or barbarism. If, however, Anderson's sympathies are manifestly with the first term, his analyses point towards the greater plausibility of the second.

The figure in the mirror

Paying homage to the qualities of Isaac Deutscher in 1984, Anderson wrote: 'serene olympian, visionary iconoclast, shrewd politician. He had an element of each in his own make-up. The culture of the Left needs them all.'¹¹⁰ Apparently resigned to the persistence of capitalism for the foreseeable future, the 'shrewd politician' in Anderson is concerned to pursue practicable reforms of it, whilst avoiding the temptation – congenitally succumbed to by two-second social democrats – of mistaking these for socialism. Anderson is not about to 'settle' either;¹¹¹ to vary one of his titles, he pertains to the intransigent Left at the end of the century. And yet it might legitimately be wondered whether, by comparison with his earlier self, he is not too much the 'serene olympian', too little the 'visionary iconoclast'.

Anderson's current vantage point is an academy in California, moonshine state: glimpsed in the mirror of *Considerations on Western Marxism*, his figure would cast a familiar image. Tempting as it is, so trite a conclusion should be resisted. For there Anderson had not only scripted his own ulterior development, but anticipated the common, insurmountable dilemma of independent Marxist intellectuals after the fall:

everything happened as if the rupture of political unity between Marxist theory and mass practice resulted in an irresistible *displacement* of the

tension that should have linked the two, towards another axis. In the absence of the magnetic pole of a revolutionary class movement, the needle of the whole tradition tended to swing increasingly towards contemporary bourgeois culture. ... the successful restabilization of imperialism ... meant that major sectors of bourgeois thought regained a relative vitality and superiority over socialist thought. The bourgeois order in the West had not exhausted its historical life-span ...¹¹²

With appropriate alteration of details, an analogous 'displacement' may be discerned in Anderson's Marxism, conceived as neither a reformist nor a 'revolutionary sociology', but increasingly confined to an alternative historical sociology. Yet the devil is in the detail. In the mid-1970s, notwithstanding his estimate of the fate of socialism in the West in the half-century after October, Anderson could assert 'the descendant position of capitalism on a global scale, in an epoch which despite everything saw a third of the world wrested from it'.¹¹³ Moreover, with the destabilization of imperialism, he could confidently expect 'socialist advance' in the metropolitan countries. Two decades later, Western prospects had evaporated; and the Eastern results with which they were inextricably bound up, had been overturned. At the 'end of history', amid the virtual societal exclusivity of the West – the uncontested position of capitalism on a world scale – Perry Anderson seems to have mislaid Mount Olympus. But in this end there may lie a beginning: an origins of the global crisis, perhaps?

Notes

The overview offered above derives from a work in progress on Perry Anderson, to which readers are referred for fuller exploration of the themes sketched and documentation of the claims advanced. Pending due acknowledgement there of my innumerable debts, I am grateful to William Outhwaite for the invitation to try out an initial version at a Sussex University seminar; to Francis Mulhern for fraternal criticism of a draft; and to Peter Osborne, for his finite patience. Needless to say, none of them should be (dis)credited with the courage of my convictions.

- 1 Eagleton's remark appears in his review of Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism* (Verso, London, 1991), in the *Guardian*, 1 October 1992.
- 2 *Considerations on Western Marxism*, New Left Books, London, 1976, p. 13.
- 3 Scott L. Malcomson, '10,000 Megalomaniacs: Perry Anderson, Man of Steel', *Voice Literary Supplement*, March 1993, p. 21.
- 4 See the Foreword to *A Zone of Engagement*, Verso, London, 1992, p. xii.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Quoted in Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast – Trotsky: 1929–1940*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1979, p. 19 n. 2.

- 7 Cf. Norman Geras, 'Literature of Revolution', *New Left Review* (NLR) 113–114, January/April 1979, pp. 14ff. on 'political impatience'.
- 8 Cf. 'The Ex-Communist's Conscience', reprinted in Tamara Deutscher, ed., Isaac Deutscher, *Marxism, Wars and Revolutions*, Verso, London, 1984, pp. 57–8.
- 9 'The USSR in War' (1939), in Leon Trotsky, *In Defense of Marxism*, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1990 (here p. 15); cited by Anderson in 'Trotsky's Interpretation of Stalinism', in Tariq Ali, ed., *The Stalinist Legacy*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1984, p. 123.
- 10 See the Foreword to *English Questions*, Verso, London, 1992, p. 11.
- 11 Engels, 'Socialism: Utopian and Scientific', in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works*, Volume Three, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977, p. 151.
- 12 In *Lenin: A Study in the Unity of His Thought*, New Left Books, London, 1970, p. 11.
- 13 Cf. *The German Ideology*, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Volume Five, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1976, p. 49.
- 14 'Cuba, Free Territory of America', *The New University* (Oxford), no. 4, 5 December 1960 (co-authored with Robin Blackburn); 'Sweden: Mr. Crosland's Dreamland', *NLR* 7, January/February 1961; 'Sweden II: Study in Social Democracy', *NLR* 9, May/June 1961. A fourth early text, co-signed with Stuart Hall, advanced a socialist case against British membership of the Common Market: 'The Politics of the Common Market', *NLR* 10, July/August 1961.
- 15 'Introduction to the Debate of the Central Committee of the Italian Communist Party on the 22nd Congress of the CPSU', *NLR* 13–14, January/April 1962, pp. 152–3.
- 16 See Michael Rustin, 'The New Left as a Social Movement', in Oxford University Socialist Discussion Group, ed., *Out of Apathy: Voices of the New Left 30 Years On*, Verso, London, 1989; and my review of Lin Chun, *The British New Left*, in *RP* 68, Autumn 1994. Anderson's diplomatic balance-sheet of the time, 'The Left in the Fifties' (*NLR* 29, January/February 1965), may be fruitfully compared with his retrospect in *Arguments within English Marxism*, New Left Books, London, 1980, chapter 5.
- 17 Published in three instalments in *NLR* 15, May/June 1962, *NLR* 16, July/August 1962, and *NLR* 17, Winter 1962.
- 18 *NLR* 23, January/February 1964; reprinted in Perry Anderson and Robin Blackburn, eds, *Towards Socialism*, Fontana/*NLR*, London, 1965 and (with minor revisions) as chapter 1 of *English Questions*.
- 19 *English Questions*, p. 16.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 *Ibid.*, pp. 17–29 (the theses are summarized on pp. 29–30).
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 25 *Ibid.*, pp. 35–7.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- 27 'Critique of Wilsonism', *NLR* 27, September/October 1964, p. 22. See also the unattributed editorial, 'Divide and Conquer', *NLR* 28, November/December 1964, marking Labour's victory in the recent general election.
- 28 See Raymond Williams, 'Notes on British Marxism since the War', *NLR* 100, November 1976/January 1977, for the distinction between 'academic', 'legitimizing' and 'operative' modes of Marxism.
- 29 'Problems of Socialist Strategy', in Anderson and Blackburn, eds, *Towards Socialism*.
- 30 *English Questions*, pp. 5–6.
- 31 'Problems of Socialist Strategy', p. 225.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 230.
- 33 *Ibid.*, pp. 237–9.
- 34 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 241.
- 35 In 'A Decennial Report', unpublished editorial report on *NLR* for 1962–74, n.d., pp. 15–17.
- 36 See 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', *NLR* 100, November 1976/January 1977, p. 27 n. 48, where 'Problems of Socialist Strategy' is cited as representative of the 'illusions of left social-democracy'.
- 37 Cf. 'The Figures of Descent', *NLR* 161, January/February 1987, p. 77; *English Questions*, p. 192.
- 38 See the Foreword to *English Questions*, pp. 4–5.
- 39 Thompson, 'The Peculiarities of the English' (1965), reprinted in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, Merlin, London, 1978; Poulantzas, 'Marxist Political Theory in Britain' (1966), *NLR* 43, May/June 1967. Cf. *English Questions*, pp. 128–9, 167.
- 40 Cf. the unattributed 'Introduction to Poulantzas', *NLR* 43, May/June 1967, pp. 55–6.
- 41 'Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism', *NLR* 35, January/February 1966.
- 42 Cf. *English Questions*, p. 4 n. 5.
- 43 'Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism', pp. 22–3.
- 44 'The Limits and Possibilities of Trade Union Action', in Robin Blackburn and Alexander Cockburn, eds, *The Incompatibles: Trade Union Militancy and the Consensus*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1967.
- 45 See the unattributed article, co-authored with Robin Blackburn, 'The Marxism of Régis Debray', *NLR* 45, September/October 1967.
- 46 *NLR* 50, July/August 1968; reprinted in Robin Blackburn and Alexander Cockburn, eds, *Student Power*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1969 and (with revisions) as chapter 2 of *English Questions*. In the Acknowledgements to the latter, Anderson confides that his early essays have been 'shorn of some of the bombast and excess of the period to render them more readable'. In the case of 'Components', the effect is somewhat to moderate the insistency and astringency of its declared revolutionary-Marxist affiliations.
- 47 *English Questions*, p. 47.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- 49 *Ibid.*, pp. 51–6.
- 50 *Ibid.*, pp. 56–9.
- 51 *Ibid.*, pp. 61–3.
- 52 *Ibid.*, pp. 103–4.
- 53 Of especial importance here were the exchanges between *NLR* editor, Nicholas Krassó, and the Fourth International leader, Ernest Mandel, over Trotskyism: Krassó, 'Trotsky's Marxism', *NLR* 44, July/August 1967; Mandel, 'Trotsky's Marxism: An Anti-Critique', *NLR* 47, January/February 1968; Krassó, 'Reply to Ernest Mandel', *NLR* 48, March/April 1968; and Mandel, 'Trotsky's Marxism: A Rejoinder', *NLR* 56, July/August 1969. Anderson's editorial input into the Krassó texts, but subsequent persuasion by Mandel's second response, are remarked in the 'Decennial Report', pp. 29–31.
- 54 Introduction to the special issue on France, May 1968, *NLR* 52, November/December 1968, p. 5.
- 55 See the Foreword to *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, New Left Books, London, 1974, pp. 9–11.

- 56 Some combination, perhaps, of extrinsic disappointments (the non-realization of revolutionary expectations) and intrinsic problems (especially those generated by Robert Brenner's recasting of the debate on the transition from feudalism to capitalism).
- 57 *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, p. 359.
- 58 *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, New Left Books, London, 1983, p. 80.
- 59 'A Decennial Report', p. 85. Cf. the unattributed editorial, 'Victory in Indochina', *NLR* 91, May/June 1975.
- 60 *Considerations on Western Marxism*, pp. 103–4.
- 61 *Ibid.*, p. 104.
- 62 *Ibid.*, p. 53. See also Anderson's 1974 'Political and Philosophical Interview' with Lucio Colletti, reprinted in *NLR*, ed., *Western Marxism: A Critical Reader*, New Left Books, London, 1977, especially pp. 348–50.
- 63 Cf. *Considerations on Western Marxism*, pp. 105–6: pages whose invocation of 'the masses' prompted the charge of 'anti-intellectual magic' from E. P. Thompson in his review, 'The Marx Claimants', *Guardian*, 16 September 1976.
- 64 'Look Left', *New Statesman*, 24 September 1976.
- 65 *Considerations on Western Marxism*, pp. 109–11.
- 66 *Ibid.*, pp. 112–21.
- 67 'A Decennial Report', p. 79.
- 68 *A Zone of Engagement*, p. xi.
- 69 As Anderson candidly acknowledged elsewhere: see 'The Strategic Option: Some Questions', in André Liebich, ed., *The Future of Socialism in Europe?*, Interuniversity Centre for European Studies, Montréal, 1978, pp. 27–8.
- 70 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', p. 78.
- 71 *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, p. 28.
- 72 *Arguments within English Marxism*, pp. 2–3.
- 73 *Ibid.*, p. 207.
- 74 See Anderson's Foreword to the *NLR* symposium *Exterminism and Cold War*, New Left Books, London, 1982, p. viii.
- 75 See 'Trotsky's Interpretation of Stalinism', pp. 124–5.
- 76 *Ibid.*, p. 126; and see the remainder of this important passage.
- 77 See *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, pp. 9–31.
- 78 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 79 *Ibid.*, pp. 54–5; cf. pp. 40–54.
- 80 *Ibid.*, pp. 76–7.
- 81 *Ibid.*, pp. 24–5.
- 82 In 'NLR 1980–1983', unpublished editorial report on *NLR*, n.d., pp. 45–6.
- 83 The imputation of bibliocentrism is adapted from Kate Soper's *Humanism and Anti-Humanism*, Hutchinson, London, 1986, p. 117 n. 79.
- 84 Anders Stephenson and Cornel West, 'The British and the Rational', *Socialist Review*, 1984.
- 85 *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, p. 97.
- 86 *Ibid.*, pp. 105–6.
- 87 *Ibid.*, pp. 68–9.
- 88 'Historical Materialism, Answer to Marxism's Critics', *NLR* 152, July/August 1985, p. 78.
- 89 See 'Modernity and Revolution', *NLR* 144, March/April 1984 (reprinted with a Postscript in *A Zone of Engagement*); Preface to Isaac Deutscher, *Marxism, Wars and Revolutions* (reprinted with a Postscript in *A Zone of Engagement*); (with Peter Dews) interviews with Jürgen Habermas, in Dews, ed., *Habermas: Autonomy and Solidarity*, Verso, London, 1986; and 'Social Democracy in the Eighties', *Against the Current*, 1986 (incorporated, with revisions, as 'The Parabola of Social Democracy' into 'The Light of Europe', chapter 6 of *English Questions*).
- 90 'Document A – Theory and Practice: the Coupure of May', unpublished manuscript, n.d., p. 9.
- 91 See *English Questions*, pp. 128–30, 121–2.
- 92 *Ibid.*, pp. 169–84.
- 93 See 'The Light of Europe', in *English Questions*, especially pp 345–53, and cf. *A Zone of Engagement*, p. 365.
- 94 See, in addition to *English Questions*, pp. 307–25, Anderson's Introduction to idem and Patrick Camiller, eds, *Mapping the West European Left*, Verso, London, 1994.
- 95 *English Questions*, pp. 352–3.
- 96 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 47.
- 97 Published in two instalments in *NLR* 180, March/April 1990, and *NLR* 182, July/August 1990; reprinted as chapter 5 of *English Questions*.
- 98 *Ibid.*, p. 200.
- 99 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 194, 200.
- 100 One example: a report from a Commission on Social Justice, instituted by the Labour Party, whose philosophical premisses owe more to Nozick than to Rawls, and by whose criteria J. S. Mill (let alone T. H. Marshall) would count as a 'Leveller'. (The pejorative use of an honourable term – not from 1917, or even 1789, but 1649 – is itself symptomatic in this regard.) Interestingly, in a survey of 'The Intransigent Right at the End of the Century' (*London Review of Books*, 24 September 1992), Anderson had shrewdly remarked Rawls's minimal 'impact on the world of Western politics', in contrast to the influence of Hayek, Strauss et al. on the New Right.
- 101 *English Questions*, p. 204.
- 102 *Ibid.*, p. 231.
- 103 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 206–30 and the essays on Mann, Runciman and Gellner in *A Zone of Engagement*.
- 104 *English Questions*, pp. 300–301.
- 105 'Enlightenment Projects', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 14 August 1992.
- 106 *English Questions*, p. 301.
- 107 See 'August in Moscow', *London Review of Books*, 26 September 1991, and (more recently) Anderson's review of Eric Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes*, 'Darkness Falls', *Guardian*, 8 November 1994.
- 108 *A Zone of Engagement*, p. 358.
- 109 *Ibid.*, p. 366. For an analogous verdict on the Fukuyama thesis, see my 'The Cards of Confusion: Reflections on Historical Communism and the "End of History"', *RP* 64, Summer 1993 (reprinted in Christopher Bertram and Andrew Chitty, eds, *Has History Ended? Fukuyama, Marx, Modernity*, Avebury, Aldershot, 1994).
- 110 'The Legacy of Isaac Deutscher', in *A Zone of Engagement*, p. 73.
- 111 See Anderson's 'Diary', *London Review of Books*, 21 October 1993, commemorating the late E. P. Thompson.
- 112 *Considerations on Western Marxism*, p. 55.
- 113 *Ibid.*, p. 56.