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Cultural Politics

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Perry Anderson

The Merciless
Laboratory of History
The publication of this book was assisted by a bequest from Josiah H. Chase to honor his parents, Ellen Rankin Chase and Josiah Hook Chase, Minnesota territorial pioneers.

Extracts from this book originally appeared as "Olympus Mislaid? The Patience of Perry Anderson," in Radical Philosophy, no. 71 (May/June 1995, pp. 5-19), and a review article on the New Left, in Radical Philosophy, no. 68 (autumn 1994, pp. 45-48).

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Published by the University of Minnesota Press
111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290
Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520
http://www.upress.umn.edu

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Elliott, Gregory.
   Perry Anderson : the merciless laboratory of history / Gregory Elliott.
   p. cm. -- (Cultural politics ; v. 15)
   Includes bibliographical references and index.
   3. Intellectuals—Great Britain—Biography.  I. Title.  II. Series: Cultural
   politics (Minneapolis, Minn.) ; v. 15.
   HX244.7.A7E48 1998
   335.4'092—dc21 98-29687

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Deutscher's work continues to represent an irreplaceable source for the culture and politics of socialism. The reasons lie in the eminent combination of its qualities. First of all, perhaps, the serene political fortitude with which Deutscher met the contingencies of his own period—his unshakeable fidelity to the ideals of Marx and Engels, amidst so many conflagrations in which one edifice of the Left after another burnt down, or had to be rebuilt. That fortitude was the product of his absolute independence of thought—the complete freedom of his person and outlook from those fashions and phobias which have typically swayed the conformist intelligentsias of the West in one direction after another—successively Stalinist or Maoist, structuralist or post-structuralist, apostles of the New Working-Class or the New Social Movements, eurocommunism or eurosocialism. But this spiritual independence was the very opposite of sectarian or pharisaical isolation. . . . serene olympian, visionary iconoclast, shrewd politician. He had an element of each in his own make-up. A socialist movement will only flourish if it can encompass all of the ideals they represent.

Perry Anderson, preface to Isaac Deutscher, Marxism, Wars, and Revolutions (1984)
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Longtime editor of the *New Left Review* and cofounder of New Left Books; diagnostician of English exceptionalism and historian of English 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 generally acknowledged. Writing in 1992, before the deaths of Edward Thompson and Ralph Miliband, and even as the productivity of Christopher Hill and Eric Hobsbawm showed no sign of flagging, Terry Eagleton could nominate him 'Britain's most brilliant Marxist intellectual'. 1 Whatever our estimate of that verdict, a more recent claim to the effect that Anderson is '[o]ne of the foremost contemporary Marxist thinkers' 2 would command common consent.

Yet his is a career that remains curiously underexplored. A variety of reasons might be adduced for this. Not least of them is the deterrence to detailed scrutiny afforded by the work of a polyglot polymath conversant with at least seven or eight living languages (not to mention two dead ones), and possessed of the 'olympian universalism' he has attributed to the founders of historical materialism. 3 In an age of specialists, Anderson is a generalist—but quite the reverse of an amateur. If, as one sardonic critic would have it, he has produced 'a synoptic œuvre stretching from 800 BC to last week', 4 it is a tribute to the quality of this œuvre that it should have commanded the respectful attention of the relevant authorities (whether on 800 B.C. or last week). Olympian, in substance and style alike, Anderson unquestionably is (the superlative has become a commentator's cliché); and, as de Gaulle once remarked, 'a summit is not a crowded place'.

Compounding inhibitions of intellectual competence, any survey of Anderson's career faces formidable obstacles of evidence and method. For a start, it risks blatant prematurity. Why should Anderson, still short of sixty, not emulate E. H. Carr, the vast bulk of whose *History of Soviet Russia* appeared after he had entered his seventh decade? 5 or—perhaps more germanely, pending resumption of the history project launched with *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* in 1974 and expansion of *The Ends of History* announced by Verso in 1993—Hobsbawm, who has concluded his trilogy on capitalist modernity, and rendered it a quartet, since reaching the age of seventy?
As if this—the incompletion of Anderson's exoteric oeuvre—were not enough, lest it indulge the fetish of the signature, any comprehensive account would have to trace other, quasi-esoteric dimensions of his work, in their intricate combination. These might baldly be itemized thus: (1) the overall editorial evolution of the *New Left Review* (NLR), which Anderson edited from 1962 for some twenty years and in whose councils he appears to have been first among equals thereafter; (2) anonymous or pseudonymous material contributed by him to the *NLR*; (3) unpublished manuscripts—some of them book-length; (4) the programme of the *NLR*'s imprint (New Left Books, subsequently Verso) from its inception in 1970, and associated publishing ventures with Fontana and Penguin; and, finally, (5) related political and cultural activities (in, say, the student movement in the late 1960s, or the Socialist Society in the early 1980s). Discriminating where necessary, and possible, between Anderson's individual and the *NLR*'s institutional positions, the totality would require proper contextualization—in tellectual and political, international as well as national.

The release in spring 1992 of two substantial collections of Anderson's essays—*English Questions* and *A Zone of Engagement*—signalling a 'turning point' in his politico-intellectual development, offers an opportunity for something considerably less ambitious but hopefully not devoid of all value: an elementary reconstruction of that development to date. For while neither volume affects completeness, each possibly obscures as much as it illuminates about its author's evolution since his debut in 1960.

In the foreword to *A Zone of Engagement*, Anderson notes the contrast between its first three chapters, classified as 'intra-mural surveys within the intellectual world of the revolutionary Left', and the remainder, culminating in a long essay on Francis Fukuyama that extracts a rational kernel from the mystical shell of his philosophy of modern history. Anderson's dawning scepticism about the revolutionary Marxist tradition, from the mid-1980s, attached to both its analytical resources and its political purchase. Historical materialism had come under challenge as a 'theory of historical development' from the Anglo-Weberian school of Gellner and Giddens, Runciman and Mann; revolutionary socialism had been discomfited by the 'societal ascendancy of the West', certified by the implosion of Gorbachevite perestroika in the East.7

Symptoms of an altered stance were registered in the reception of Anderson's selected essays. A decade earlier, Alex Callinicos had detected an 'Americanization' of the *NLR*, observing that '[o]nce it straddled the Channel in an attempt to save us from British parochialism; now it hovers somewhere in mid-Atlantic in Olympian solitude', and he had compared...
Anderson to Plekhanov. Eight years later, critics were prompted to ponder whether Anderson was still a Marxist or socialist of any species, never mind a revolutionary one, and to suspect the emergence of a deutero-Anderson—one aligning himself with the Anglo-American academy while pursuing, via the European Commission, 'a kind of social-democratic Leninism'. Where, some wondered, did the partisan of Lenin and Trotsky, the scourge of academicism and Eurocommunism, now stand? Had Anderson embarked upon the 'smuggler's road to socialism' reportedly decried by him in the 1980s?

Trotsky wrote of Lenin that he 'thought in terms of epochs and continents, [whereas] Churchill thinks in terms of parliamentary fireworks and feuilletons'. Something similar might be said of Anderson (especially since, in the interval, a day in politics has become a long time, the latest opinion poll a historic event). In consequence, Anderson has always taken the long view, played the long game, exhibiting the 'ability to wait' enjoined by Trotsky, in opposition to reformist pragmatism or revolutionary messianism. Indeed, it may be that part of the attraction for Anderson of a certain form of Trotskyism precisely lay in its representing, as Sartre put it in debate with Ernest Mandel in the 1950s, 'a waiting art'. Whatever, in his case that art was invariably attuned to an ineluctable reality stated with typical bluntness by a professed member of the British Old Left in 1969: 'Being a revolutionary in countries such as ours just happens to be difficult'.

Notwithstanding the significant discontinuities—other turning points—by which Anderson's career has been punctuated, there are equally profound continuities, disclosed by recurrent historico-political themes and patterns of response. Erstwhile Castroite sympathizer, Anderson appreciated then, and respects still, the spirit motivating the Havana Declaration of 1962: 'The role of Job does not behove a revolutionary'. Today, however, 'amidst so many conflagrations in which one edifice of the Left after another [has] burnt down'—in his own time, those of Guevarism and Maoism, Eurocommunism and Eurosocialism, Trotskyism and 'actually existing socialism'—it might seem as if Anderson has heeded a version of the counsel given to disabused Communists by Deutscher in 1950. In a review of The God That Failed, in which he commended the trio of qualities invoked by Anderson in the passage that serves as my epigraph, Deutscher wrote:

> It seems that the only dignified attitude the ex-communist can take is to rise au-dessus de la mêlée. . . . This is not to say that the ex-communist . . . should retire into the ivory tower. (His contempt for the ivory tower lingers in him from his past.) But he may withdraw into a watch-tower instead. To watch with detachment and alertness this heaving chaos of a world, to be on
PREFACE

a sharp outlook for what is going to emerge from it, and to interpret it sine
ira et studio.  

Interpreted thus, the author of *English Questions* and *A Zone of Engagement* would appear less a deutero- than a Deutschero-Anderson, chastened by his own previous illusions in varieties of ‘Third Worldism’, the potential for democratic regeneration of the Second World, and the seasonableness of revolutionary socialism in the First. But in one sense Anderson has not withdrawn to the watchtower (though he may now inhabit an ivory one). For unlike Deutscher—who was Trotsky’s prewar collaborator before turning his postwar biographer—he has been stationed there all along.

Despite youthful impetuosity and occasional intemperance, the historical perspectives of Perry Anderson have been primarily secular, synchronized, if not with the *longue durée* as such, then with what he himself has called ‘longer durées’. Underlying an inconsistency of orientation, induced by the shifting imperatives of successive conjunctures in which a sharp outlook for the ‘weakest link’ has been a consistent feature of Anderson’s politics, is a settled *attentisme*, ultimately distanced from the contingencies and vagaries of the immediate. Anderson would never subscribe to Fernand Braudel’s provocation that ‘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 maintained:

> 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?

Almost sixty years on, and a few hours into that lifetime, Anderson’s declared source of inspiration is the stoicism of Gramsci, whose ‘strength of mind . . . [i]n the depths of his own defeat . . . was to bring moral resistance and political innovation together. In related circumstances, this is the combination needed today’. *Comparaison n’est pas raison*—or not always. Yet whatever the identity of the figure in the Andersonian mirror, it reveals an enduring fidelity to the ideals of a lifetime: a modified yet undiminished zone of engagement in the cause of an international socialist culture and politics.

If this is an accurate depiction, it shifts the burden of attention away from suspicions of incipient heresy (e.g., hankerings after meliorist European
bureaucracy), to the maintenance—in the absence of any of the political co-
ordinates that 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
both to class himself among that ‘portion of the bourgeoisie’ which, accord-
ing to the Communist Manifesto, ‘goes over to the proletariat’—’in particu-
lar, a portion of the bourgeois ideologists, who have raised themselves to the
level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole’\(^\text{19}\)—
and to speak in the name of an imaginary international that never found sat-
sfactory embodiment. However, with the debacle of socialist traditions in
the twentieth century, and with the crisis of Marxism—at first strenuously
denied, at length reluctantly conceded—Anderson’s position has become
more precarious, for ever more deracinated.

Contrary to Hegelian variants of Marxism, Anderson tended to conceive
of ‘scientific socialism’ as the external conjunction of a theoretical research
programme and a practical movement, rather than as ‘the theoretical ex-
pression of the proletarian movement’\(^\text{20}\). Predicated, even so, upon what the
early Lukács designated ‘the actuality of the revolution’\(^\text{21}\), in its mature form
Anderson’s Marxism construed historical materialism as the explanatory sci-
ence 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 agents in the adoption
of viable strategic means toward the feasible socialist end. In the second
register, without regressing to the ‘utopian socialism’ that Marx, Engels, and
their successors reckoned to have superseded, Marxism not only provided
reasons for opposing capitalism but also ought (so Anderson urged in the
early 1980s) to explore the institutional shape of a desirable socialism.

What becomes of this prospectus with the nonactuality 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 com-
umnism but global capitalism, and when its trophies include the traditional
agencies and strategies, parties and programmes, of its historic antagonist\(^\text{22}\)?
The permissive conditions of what a critic (privately) dubbed ‘Andersonian
Meta-Trotskyism’ have evaporated; its habits die hard. (Witness the unruf-
flled serenity with which possible scenarios for socialism are scanned in ‘The
Ends of History’,\(^\text{23}\) for all the world as if none of its instantiations had ever
elicted Anderson’s own critical support.) It is the tenacious consistency and
integrity of Anderson’s project, resolutely focused on epochs and continents
amid so many vicissitudes, that raises the most intriguing questions.

The present work essays no more (to borrow an Andersonian phrase)
than a 'rudimentary diagram' of his career, neither pretending to exhaust its past trajectory nor presuming to preempt its future curve, under the action of similar or different forces. It is undertaken in the belief that this career, in and through its very singularity, conforms to some of the wider contours of Anglo-Marxism since 1956; and that a portrait of the individual instance may cast some light upon the collective phenomenon. Its unfashionable approach to the history of ideas will be that of Anderson himself, articulating 'internal' and 'external' histories of his texts in their contexts (albeit with what might strike some readers as undue cross-Channel, rather than transatlantic, bias). As Anderson writes of the essays in *A Zone of Engagement*, distinguishing his own procedures from rival methodologies in intellectual history,

They are centred on individual authors... whose works they aim to reconstruct, so far as possible, as an intentional unity, situated within the intellectual and political currents of their time. They assume neither automatic coherence nor inherent dispersion in the writing of their subjects. Rather they try to locate specific contradictions of argument where these occur, generally treating them not as random lapses but as symptomatic points of tension, either within the body of thought itself, or with the evidence beyond it.25

Like many of its subject’s texts, this study is ‘situated midway between the historical and the political—an attempt to mediate some of the requirements of scholarship and others of partisanship’.26 Concerning the scholarship, it will suffice to invite correction of errors of fact, interpretation, and evaluation by others better qualified. But a further word is in order as regards the partisanship. The work of an independent Marxist, *Perry Anderson: The Merciless Laboratory of History* aims to deliver an immanent critique, measuring the ‘performance’ of Anderson’s Marxism against its ‘prediction’, in its own attempts ‘to approximate to a general truth of the time’27—an ambition intimated by my subtitle, borrowed from Trotsky.

Whether Anderson has succeeded in understanding the history he has elected to interpret is the central—though not sole—question governing my assessment. For if, for example, in view of his employment of the criterion to judge the oeuvre of others, his own failure to unite intellectual work with political activity cannot simply be ignored, neither should it be indiscriminately laboured. This is not only because to do so would deservedly court the charge of tu quoque; it also derives from the consideration (underlined by Michael Sprinker)28 that a range of options inferior to the Lenino-Trotskyist ideal can be, and has been, pursued by figures with whom Anderson might
legitimately be contrasted—for example, those directly influential in his formation and development, from Sartre and Deutscher (unaffiliated Marxists), via Althusser (critical Communist), to Mandel (Trotskyist leader). However couched, the facility of generic allegations of theoreticism, academicism, substitutionism, and so on, against Marxist intellectuals is in inverse proportion to its utility. It substitutes moralistic deprecation for materialist explanation of an objective state of affairs, incorrigible by any amount of voluntarism (as if a magical injection of 'practice' could remedy a distemper of 'theory'). Insofar as the vice is in circumstances, the fault consists more in being oblivious of that vice than in making a virtue of necessity and seeking to interpret the world aright, when changing it proves intractable. At all events, it is only fair to advise prospective readers that no set of totally correct positions will be counterposed here to Anderson's errors or misdirections. Whatever their quantity or gravity, he will often be found to have addressed the crucial problems and should not be reproved for perplexity as to their resolution—something that has not thus far been forthcoming from any other quarter.

The aspects of Perry Anderson sketched in this book would have been fewer and less rounded, were it not for the access I have had to unpublished documents, as well as the testimony of former colleagues on the NLR. In addition, with much conjecture (and not a little speculation), an attempt has been made, within limits, to identify texts published under another signature that may presumptively be attributed to him. (Where I have erred, I apologize to those concerned.) As one of the publisher's readers of my manuscript has suggested, the very existence of such material in the case of a journal—as opposed to a political party or group—is, at first blush, a cause for some surprise. However, it underscores the extent to which the internal life of the NLR assimilated certain features of the modus operandi of a semiclandestine revolutionary organization. Over and above the predilections of its sometime editor and his colleagues, such practices doubtless derive from the persistence—even amongst the anti-Stalinist Far Left—of a destructive legacy of historical Communism.

Further reflections on this score will occur as and where they seem appropriate. In utilizing the sources available to me, I have proceeded as follows. In the case of personal unpublished manuscripts that are signed, whether by Anderson or fellow editors of the NLR, I have not quoted but rather have paraphrased and cited page numbers. Contrariwise, where documents bear no signature and possess an institutional character, it has seemed reasonable to make direct use of them. (This applies, for example, both to the NLR's constitution and charter and to three editorial reports, covering
the years 1962–82, circulated within the editorial committee.) Whether this is an elegant solution may be left to the disinterested parties to determine. One obvious danger it risks is a conflation of individual and institutional positions. But in the absence of any automatic way of resolving this difficulty, it is best to engage—and then see. Given such indeterminacies of authorship, I have not included any unpublished items in the bibliography of Anderson's writings appended to this study. The bibliography does, however, encompass a good number of the anonymous or pseudonymous texts—often very brief, but no less instructive for that—I have referred to. Yet it should not be taken as infallible or complete. (More research would, for example, enhance the number of original foreign-language publications.) While on this subject, it is worth pointing out that extensive quotation from primary sources is further encouraged by the current unavailability of three of Anderson's books—Considerations on Western Marxism (1976), Arguments within English Marxism (1980), and In the Tracks of Historical Materialism (1983)—and by the comparative inaccessibility of some key essays (e.g., 'Problems of Socialist Strategy' [1965]).

A final disclaimer before proceeding. Readers anticipating a contribution to the black legend of the NLR attendant upon the various crises in its history will be frustrated. (The last, inciting charge and countercharge in the liberal and Fabian press, was amply aired.) This is not simply out of tact or discretion. In 1949 Deutscher regretted that 'Clio, the Muse of History, has failed to obtain admittance to the Kremlin'. Five decades on, she has been granted limited admission there but is still barred from Meard Street. It will be for a future historian to seek, and maybe to gain, entry.
Acknowledgements

Such is the depth, and breadth, of my indebtedness to others that an economy of (alphabetical) acknowledgement and exoneration seems indicated. Accordingly, excluding those who requested anonymity, I thank Neil Belton, Simon Bromley, Sebastian Budgen, Tom Hickey, Quintin Hoare, Martin Jenkins, John Kraniauskas, Francis Mulhern, Peter Osborne, Bruce Robbins, Justin Rosenberg, Michael Sprinker, and Duncan Thompson for critical advice and miscellaneous aid. Lisa Freeman, as well as her successor and colleagues, kept an editorial watch from abroad, Lucinda Tavener an affectionate one at home, where Hector and Paris resent any condescension to dead languages.