The Antinomies of Perry Anderson

The best way to describe my present thinking is to run through the sequence of events that have led me to be, intellectually speaking, where I am now.

At some point in the early 1990s I read Perry Anderson’s essay ‘Origins of the Present Crisis’. I can remember it having a profound effect on me. What Anderson had argued (the essay was written in 1964) was that, contrary to the accepted historical wisdom of both the right and the left, what typified British society was its relative backwardness—social, political, cultural—and what explained British backwardness was a premature and backward seventeenth-century bourgeois revolution. British historical development was, in this respect, cast as unique within Europe. Anderson followed ‘Origins’ in the 1960s with further essays pointing up the consequences of British cultural and political backwardness; along with essays by Tom Nairn pursuing a similar vein, their central conclusions are what has come to be known as the ‘Nairn-Anderson Theses’.

These ideas seemed to me at the time to explain so clearly the nature of contemporary British reality that Anderson’s basic framework marked my thinking on British politics and history from that point on. It also reinforced many of the ideas that I had picked up from old IMG-SL debates, especially in relation to, amongst other things, the political ‘backwardness’ of the British working class movement. When I went to university in 1996, Anderson’s essential thesis provided me with my basic intellectual framework—in my first year we studied a good deal of British history—and I did not find it wanting.

My problems began in my second year in university, in which I studied much more European history: specifically that of nineteenth-century German unification, and of French absolutism. German history I could not get to grips with at all at the beginning, at least until I came across a book called The Peculiarities of German History, written by two British German specialists, David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley. This superb book was an intervention, from a marxistant perspective, into the debate in German historiography on the historical roots of Nazism—a debate of some charge and importance, especially in Germany itself.

The form that the debate had taken up to the intervention of Blackbourn and Eley was this. Against the immediate post-1945 German historiographical interpretations of Nazism developed by the older generation of Weimar historians that held that Nazism represented a fundamental break in German historical continuity, by the 1960s a school of thought—coming from a younger generation of German historians writing from a left-liberal or social-democratic perspective, yet paradoxically standing objectively within the consensus established by the most reactionary and xenophobic currents within the then existing Anglo-American school of German historiography—postulated that Nazism had in fact deep roots within German history, roots which could be traced back to the formation of the modern German state in the nineteenth century. Always implicitly, and frequently explicitly, this school of thought planted the seeds of Nazism in an original sin of defective and abnormal bourgeois revolution. The object of Blackbourn and Eley’s intervention was precisely this interpretation: in my mind, they completely and convincingly destroyed it, arguing, with reference to the nineteenth-century process of German state formation, that if Germany had failed to comply with the norms of the accepted model of bourgeois revolution, then this was also the case throughout western Europe, even in France, the country with reference to which the conventional model had been developed. Blackbourn and Eley’s own account of German history resolved my doubts on this subject and governed my subsequent thinking.

My problem should now be obvious. In relation to Britain I was a partisan of a view which attributed a fundamental explanatory role to an abnormal and defective experience of bourgeois revolution for subsequent historical development; in relation to Germany I found myself a devotee of a view methodologically diametrically opposite. Something had to give.
My university studies of French absolutism—a cycle of history which concludes with the great French revolution of 1789, the seat of the conventionally accepted normal model of bourgeois revolution subsequently adopted by (amongst others) Anderson and convincingly rejected by Blackbourn and Eley—gave me the opportunity to test my doubts. I tried to write an essay on the causes of the French revolution following the orthodox (Marxist) model of bourgeois revolution, which postulated the revolution as a more or less open fight between a rising capitalist bourgeoisie and a declining feudal aristocracy, and found myself unable to do so, since this theory simply did not appear to accord with the facts.

My by now multi-layered doubts in relation to these problems led me to write a special subject dissertation on the matter in my final year. The conclusions that I came to, which I still generally hold today, are these:

- That the attempts to find an explanatory role for subsequent development in a pattern of abnormal bourgeois revolution—something that has been attempted with regard to literally every country which is generally held to have had a bourgeois revolution—have failed.
- That the fundamental methodological difficulty with this approach is that if every experience is an exception, then whence the norm? The norm can not be a norm if what is typical is deviation.
- That the root of this methodological difficulty lies in the fact that the norm on which these accounts of exception were erected, constructed by a series of Marxist historians of post-World War Two Communist Party extraction, is wrong; that, specifically, this model is wrong in good part because it bases itself dogmatically and schematically on a fundamentally distorted and misapplied historical materialism, a vulgarised Marxism betraying deep roots in Second International and—crucially—Stalinist revisionism.

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There are two fundamental lines of work that for me flow from these conclusions and the thinking behind them.

First, an assessment of the work of Perry Anderson, who has, in my view, provided us with one of the most important interventions in historical materialism in English of the twentieth century. For this rather outlandish claim, a word of explanation is necessary.

Anderson was the leading force in the group of young turks that assumed the leadership of New Left Review in 1963. The subsequent achievement of New Left Review in opening up English speaking left intellectual circles to a Marxism relatively free from the constraints of Stalinism from this point up until fairly recently cannot be gainsaid.

What was Anderson’s specific contribution within this project? In 1964, as mentioned, came ‘Origins of the Present Crisis’, followed by further essays pointing up the consequences of British cultural and political backwardness. Then in 1974 came the simultaneous publication of Passages From Antiquity to Feudalism and Lineages of the Absolutist State, an enormous (nearly 1,000 pages combined) survey of European history covering the rise of ancient Greece to the height of the powers of the European absolutist state. The concluding section of the latter volume set out the two central themes of Anderson’s discourse: first, that ‘what rendered the unique passage to capitalism possible in Europe was the concatenation of antiquity and feudalism’, that is, that the capitalist mode of production germinated in western Europe and nowhere else because of the unique ‘perdurable inheritance of classical antiquity’; and, second, that the lack of a classical heritage in eastern Europe
condemned it to a development fundamentally divergent to that experienced in the west: ‘representing distinct historical lineages from the start, the Absolutist States of Western and Eastern Europe followed divergent trajectories down to their respective conclusions [...] The consequences of the division of the continent [...] are still with us.’ The introduction to this latter book also outlined the overall nature of the whole project as Anderson then saw it: couched in terms of a history of the modern state, Anderson projected a further two volumes, the third taking up where the second one left off in accounting for the European bourgeois revolutions and a fourth surveying the present-day capitalist state.

Anderson never developed the project beyond the publication of these two volumes of 1974. In 1976 he produced the essay ‘The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci’, in which he developed the theme of a structural difference in the manner of bourgeois rule ‘east’ and ‘west’, and a consequent necessity of a differential socialist strategy across the two spheres; Considerations on Western Marxism, written in 1974 but published, with an updated postscript, in 1976, in which Anderson surveyed the development of European Marxist thought following the drawing of the veil of Stalinism; and Arguments within English Marxism—a fine book—in 1980, in which, piece by piece, Anderson demolishes the pseudo-Marxist intellectual outlook of E P Thompson, one of his earlier critics.

In the 1976 postscript to Considerations Anderson was already expressing doubts as to some of the basic formulations of classical Marxism—specifically with reference to what he saw as omissions within the work of Marx, Lenin and Trotsky with regard to the Marxist theory of politics, an ellipse which for Anderson was to bear fruit in a catastrophist cast in later Marxism; without doubt Anderson’s doubts here coincide with the concerns expressed in ‘Antinomies’. Although Anderson’s devastating critique of Thompson in Arguments was scrupulously couched in fidelity to the canons of classical Marxism, one almost has the feeling that Anderson is more trying to convince himself rather than Thompson or the reader as to the efficacy of Marxist theory; that for him he rather tested the theory to destruction is witnessed by his In the Tracks of Historical Materialism (1983), in which the rather token lip-service paid to historical materialism is strongly overcast by a treatment of French structuralism. This incipient break with Marxism was attested to all too clearly by the early 1990s with Anderson’s embrace of the neo-Weberian sociology of Michael Mann. The publication in 1992 of two collections of his writings spanning 1964 to 1992—English Questions and A Zone of Engagement—appears to be his definitive signing off from Marxism. His writings after this point have indeed verged on the incoherent, bother literally as well as intellectually, as his loss of theoretical bearing pushed his anyway rather over-wrought sentence structure and lexical extravagance beyond the limits of intelligibility. Anderson’s degeneration is all the more troubling given the heights from which he fell.

The critical point in this trajectory appears to be 1974; the works from this point to 1983 we can call, to borrow a phrase from Althusser, ‘the works of the break’, as the already accumulated contradictions in Anderson’s thought unravel.

What went wrong? Since Anderson is either unwilling or unable to tell us himself, we shall have to hypothesise. I hypothesise thus. From 1964 the central organising principle in his work was the concept of the ‘normal’ bourgeois revolution and its absence on the British scene. It is this, I suspect, that led him to the Passages/Lineages project, a work, given its breathtaking range of sources, a number of years in the making. Anderson aborted the project on the verge, historically speaking, of the European bourgeois revolution: I suspect that on consideration he came to realise that the concept of the bourgeois revolution which he had embraced up to this point now revealed itself to him as misguided. Rather than go back to the beginning and re-order his concepts, to develop a new conception of the bourgeois revolution more in tune with the principle theme opened up by the Passages/Lineages project—the historical differentiation in Europe between east and west—Anderson practically abandoned fresh historical writing, and ultimately found himself breaking from Marxism. Maybe this decision was reached in part out of a disappointment with the theoretical apparatus of Marxism which seemed to be letting him down. In addition, maybe his subsequent evolution was encouraged by an extrinsic disappointment wrought by the inability of the European Trotskyist movement to capitalise on the openings created by the radicalisations of the post-1968 period: 1974 was of course both the high point and the
point of reversal of this period, and while the 1974 main body of the text of Considerations was fulsome in its estimation of the growing Trotskyist movement as a potential resolution of what Anderson posited as the central weakness of post-World War Two Marxism—the forced rupture of the unity of theory and practice—the book’s 1976 postscript is stringent in its concern at the dangers of what Anderson called an unintentionally ‘activist’ reading of the main body of the text.

That not all of the above may be pure speculation on my part is evidenced in the 1992 collection English Questions, which contains a short essay, previously unpublished, but dated 1974 and cited as a ‘talk’, entitled ‘The Notion of the Bourgeois Revolution’, in which Anderson drew the conclusion that what was typical of the bourgeois revolutions was their non-typical nature and their deviation from a ‘normal’ pattern of development: ‘every one,’ he declares, ‘was a bastard birth.’ I think of this essay as the preparatory first steps of the third volume of the Passages/Lineages project, the volume, of course, that never was.

But this is not to belittle Anderson’s contribution, especially that of 1974. Taken together, the Passages/Lineages project marks in my view the most important and effective intervention by a Marxist into mainstream historiography yet seen; and in good part this is so because it manages to escape the theoretical delimitations of an otherwise practically ubiquitous Stalinist historiographical orthodoxy. The questions that Anderson raises in these works are fundamental ones for Marxists today: the origins of capitalism; the nature of capitalist social and political structures in the eastern and western European sectors: key issues for those wishing to map out a revolutionary strategy today. But, as we have seen, in the body of his work lies a central contradiction: the notion of the ‘defective’ bourgeois revolution versus fundamental ‘normative’ models for historical change east and west. It is a shame that discussion of Anderson’s work on the left limits itself to other works. I suggest that a critical assessment of the problems and contradictions posed by the Passages/Lineages project would be a fundamental step forward in the necessary task of the re-establishment of a tradition of non-Stalinist Marxist historiography.

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My observation that what was outstanding about Anderson’s historiographical interventions was they way in which they largely escaped the intellectual straitjacket of Stalinist perversions of Marxist theory brings me onto my second theme. I have come to the conclusion that the overwhelming bulk of what has passed itself off as Marxism up to now is no such thing, and that it is necessary a fundamental re-explanation and re-statement of the fundamentals of Marxist theory. Again, given the rather outlandish nature of this claim, some words of justification are necessary.

It is no accident that the terms Marxism and historical materialism are often regarded as practically interchangeable. Allowing for the fact that Marxism is at root a tool for changing the world, it is so because it is a science of the mechanisms of social change. (Science in the sense that Marx used the word: ‘All science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided.’) It is consequently also a science of history, and given that ascertainable historical evidence pertains solely to he past, a fundamental test of Marxism’s efficacy vis-à-vis its claim to be the key theoretical weapon in the struggle for social liberation in the future paradoxically lies in the proof of its effectiveness as a tool of historical enquiry and explanation of the past. I pose it in this way, because, contrary to common wisdom, it is a fallacy to claim that the ‘historical’ properly speaking pertains solely to the past: the present is, so to speak, merely the historical-in-formation and the future the present that is yet to come. In this way, Marxism’s pretensions with regard to the future that it seeks to bring into being is, in literal terms, truly ‘historical’, and, by the same token, the fundamental reference that the past holds for Marxism no mere contingency. Marxism is, plainly put, an effective science of history or it is nothing.
In this respect, then, how has twentieth-century Marxism measured up to these claims? Not well. It is necessary to claim here that ninety per cent of what today is labelled ‘Marxism’ is, under the influence of the semi-religious conceptions of Stalinist-manufactured ‘dialectical materialism’—in which both dialectical thinking and plain materialism are strikingly absent—for our purposes of little value. And in the vulgarisation of Marxist concepts, both the Stalinist bureaucracies of the Soviet Union and the ‘people’s democracies’ and those who operated under their political and ideological influence world-wide borrowed heavily from the mechanical and crude innovations developed under the auspices of the Second international. In this respect we can draw a line of continuity that runs from Plekhanov and Kautsky right up to Soboul, Hill and Hobsbawm in the near present, a continuity characterised by a vulgarised materialist conception of history, a national-‘Marxist’ interpretation of historical processes, and a dogmatic schematism of the prospects for future historical transformation.

Naturally, the uncritical reception of this ‘Marxism’ has not been unanimous. The Trotskyist movement itself arose on a world scale as an opposition to Stalinist practice and methodology; the New Left Review project was born as an attempt at a resuscitation of theoretical Marxism; the American journal Monthly Review and its associated writers have also tried to effect a rehabilitation of Marxist concepts in the field of historical research; the early Althussarian school too engaged in a process of rethinking and reformulation of historical materialism’s core concepts; the historian E P Thompson and those who claim his mantle of ‘humanist’ Marxism—Geoff Eley, Eugene Genovese and Ronald Suny come to mind as typical—have engaged in historiographical exposition within the field of Marxism but in a manner openly hostile to dogmatism and schematism. Yet all of these projects have been unable to effect the necessary revitalisation: they have found themselves sucked back into the Stalinist miasma; or they have constructed a Marxism so gutted of its scientific premises that it retains very little that could properly be called ‘theoretical’; or, horrified at the grotesque vulgarity of the treatment of the classical Marxist historical tools at the hands of Stalinist or Stalinist-inspired historiography they have thrown the proverbial baby out with the unedifying water of vulgar materialist dogma and abandoned Marxism in its entirety.

In good part this collective failure lies in the fact that, despite best intentions, each intervention was blind to the fact that it was precisely the pernicious influence of Stalinism on Marxism that was at the root of the prevailing ills. For the Trotskyist movement, purported to be the linear continuation of the theory and practice of Marx and Lenin, came to see itself as but one critical component within a broader ‘Marxist’ continuity. Thus the Trotskyist tradition has defined itself not on the positions it has taken on all questions but on the positions it has taken in opposition to Stalinism. The defining features of Trotskyist Marxism are thus held to be, for example, against the idea of socialism in one country, against the two-stage theory of revolution, for inner-party democracy, and so forth. On other questions, where there has been no apparent and immediate conflict between itself and Stalinism, it has simply accepted uncritically the best of the ‘Marxism’ that was already on offer. But it forgot that ninety per cent of the Marxism on offer was tainted to a greater or lesser degree by the theoretical concepts of Stalinism. Stalinism always carried a hugely greater capacity to influence, and the truth is that Stalinist ideologies and practices never remained hermetically sealed within the governmental apparatuses of the former ‘people’s democracies’ and within the Communist Parties but rather tainted a good deal of ostensible non-Stalinist thinking and practice to a greater or lesser degree. The present ideological disorientation of present-day Trotskyism is in good part explicable by its poor standards of ideological hygiene and the considerable excess of Stalinist baggage it has unwittingly found itself carrying.

As for Anderson and the New Left Review project, the failure of the Trotskyist movement to break out of its isolation cut short the innovative attempt to refound a non-Stalinist Marxist tradition. In addition, it is noteworthy that the whole conception of ‘bureaucracy’—be it of social democratic or Stalinist origin—has formed a curious if central ellipse in his work (in this respect the political writings of his erstwhile collaborator Tom Nairn have frequently proved superior). For the current around Monthly Review, which arose in the United States in the 1940s, the stringent conditions of Cold war, McCarthyism and the arrested political development of the mature white United States working class undoubtedly inhibited a critical reception of Stalinist thought, native and external. For Thompson and those who have followed his example, their interventions have been
marked by a strident rejection of concepts of classical Marxism—intemperately so in Thompson’s case—to such a degree that in place of theoretical rigour all we are left with is little more than liberal sociology. In this last case, however, the fact that horror at the consequences of the ‘Marxist voodoo’ of Stalinist thought resulted in such an unbridgeable rupture between Marxism itself and intellectuals of the calibre of Thompson indicates starkly the seriousness of the situation.

This, in outline, then, is my current train of thought. Where does it lead? The necessity of a rehabilitation of Marxism is for me urgent enough. But I do not have in mind a dry, abstract regurgitation of ‘principles’: of that we have had enough I think. And here I come back to the question of the bourgeois revolution. For the bourgeois revolution is not just another area of historical debate. Rather, it is a question which holds a fundamental significance for Marxists. It is no mere contingent fact that when a school of professional Marxist historiography first cut its teeth in western Europe it did so on this very question: Lefebvre and Soboul in France, Hill and Hobsbawm in Britain. And given the central significance of historical explanation for Marxism, it is in this arena that this ‘Marxist’ historiography first and most thoroughly exposed itself as empty dogma. Neither is it simple contingency that Anderson truncated his historiographical labours on the eve of the European bourgeois revolutions: for it would have been on precisely this issue that a fundamental critique of extant Marxist historiography would have been necessary, and it is exactly this fence that Anderson—be it for extrinsic or intrinsic causes—balked at.

But the bourgeois revolution stands not only as an object of historical enquiry for Marxists, though to be sure as an object of historical enquiry it is important enough; the ramifications of historical interpretations of this event weighs heavy on the minds of the living too, for at the heart of interpretation of the bourgeois revolution lies an assessment of the historical role of the modern bourgeoisie, and assessments of the historical role of the modern bourgeoisie lie at the heart of practically every difference between Marxists and non-Marxists, and between Marxists and themselves: popular frontism, the two-stage theory of revolution, the very necessity of revolution itself, the place of the struggle for ‘democracy’ in the overall struggle for socialism, and so forth. Indeed, for example, it has been suggested, and in this I feel there is a good deal of truth, that the particular outline form of the ‘orthodox’ Marxist model of bourgeois revolution drawn up in the 1930s, 40s and 50s owed much to the desire of mature Stalinism’s concerns to paint the modern—‘industrial’, ‘democratic’, ‘anti-monopolistic’—bourgeoisie in an historically progressive light.

As far as I am concerned, then, Marxism is in trouble; and, for me, it is high time it started fighting back with its fists. And for all the reasons outlined above, the historiographical arena of the bourgeois revolution is one highly important area in which it can begin doing so.

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