Politics and History After the Fall

Introduction

Perry Anderson’s writing has, for a long time, occupied a central place in the Marxist culture of the Anglophone world. Indeed, Anderson’s oeuvre constitutes a major expression – perhaps, if one includes his guiding hand as long-time editor of the New Left Review, the major expression – of the development of this region of Marxist culture since the end of the Second World War. The claim that Anderson is ‘one of the foremost contemporary Marxist thinkers’, Gregory Elliott rightly says, ‘would command common consent’. The fortunes of Anderson’s Marxism are, therefore, of interest beyond the details of his particular career, which, in any case, represents unfinished business. But what are the appropriate terms of evaluation? For Anderson, as for Elliott, the relevant criteria are those established by Marx and the tradition of classical Marxism: namely, that Marxism is both a theory of history, specifically, a theory of capitalist society; and that it simultaneously serves as a guide to an emancipatory socialist politics, socialism being understood as the determinate negation of the alienation and exploitation inherent under capitalism. This is surely to be welcomed, for, as Alan Carling has well said, ‘any account which is to count plausibly as Marxist must contain both a theory of society and a politics of emancipation in an intrinsic relationship with each other’. Whatever the precise nature of the relations between the politics and the theory, the two stand or fall together: it is the actual possibility of a socialist future that licenses the theoretical characterisation of capitalism as a realm of exploitation and alienation; if the theoretical apprehension of present reality and future possibilities is in error, then a known alternative cannot be made; and, if the putative alternative is either inconceivable or unreachable, the critique lacks force.

1 For an important survey of the wider field of Marxist culture, see Therborn 1996.
3 Carling 1997, p. 769. See also Wright 1993 and Therborn 1996.
Evaluated in these terms, the exact status of Anderson’s contribution to contemporary Marxist culture is, in fact, very difficult to pin down. But any attempt to do so must now start with Elliott’s fine and meticulous study: ‘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”’.

This ambition carefully circumscribes the compass of Elliott’s work, which is only reasonable, given the near polymathic range of Anderson’s writing, to say nothing of its unfinished, incomplete character. Understandably, Elliott is not concerned to evaluate Anderson’s contributions across the range of areas where they might be argued to have much to offer – in the debates over the origins of capitalist development in Europe, for example, or in the field of comparative historical sociology. But, far from this specific focus being a limitation, it precisely defines the importance of *Perry Anderson* to a Marxist audience. In what amounts to a major effort of politically engaged and informed political and intellectual history, Elliott seeks to evaluate Anderson’s work at full-stretch, against its contribution to a specifically Marxist culture and politics for the Left.

In some respects, Anderson has already offered his own judgement on these matters: nothing less than a sober and honest admission of defeat. Since the early 1990s, Anderson has been arguing that the regnant capitalist order and its accompanying liberal hegemony are at the zenith of their power, ruling virtually unchallenged across the globe, while socialism has suffered a series of historical defeats. Launching the new series of the *New Left Review* at the start of 2000, Anderson pointed to a ‘radical discontinuity in the culture of the Left, as it – or if it – renews itself’. ‘The only starting-point for a realistic Left today’, Anderson averred,

> is a lucid registration of historical defeat. Capital has comprehensively beaten back all threats to its rule, the bases of whose power – above all, the pressures of competition – were persistently under-estimated by the socialist movement. . . . Whatever limitations persist to its practice, neo-liberalism as a set of principles rules undivided across the globe: the most successful ideology in world history.\(^5\)

However, Anderson has not – as yet – drawn from these political defeats of socialism any specific conclusions regarding the theoretical component of Marxism – the theory of historical materialism. Always sparse and formulaic at the best of times, Anderson’s comments on historical materialism have asymptotically tended to zero.

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\(^4\) Elliott 1998, p. xvi.  
\(^5\) Anderson 2000, pp. 16, 17.