

BOOK REVIEW

Anderson, Perry. 2009. *The New Old World*. London and New York: Verso. ISBN 18446373124. Cloth: 50.00 CAD. Pages: 592.

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Long associated with *New Left Review*, Perry Anderson has built a resplendent career as one of the world's foremost Marxist essayists. Beginning with his famous essays on England's 'present crisis' with Tom Nairn in the early sixties and continuing with his work on the multilinear transitions from antiquity onwards, the red thread running through his output has been the combined and uneven development of Europe as a polity, an economic entity and a set of ideas. Going beyond a simplistic analysis of the European Union as merely an executive body for the capitalist class, the EU 'may be regarded as the last great world-historical achievement of the bourgeoisie' (78) involved in a war of manoeuvre that would indeed show that reaction could make manifest what was impossible to achieve by revolution.

The New Old World collects essays¹ written since the collapse of the Soviet bloc, both on the totality and form of the 'Europe question' as well as the content of various polities and ideologies. Combining the literary panache that is the hallmark of the Anglophone Marxist tradition and a penchant for humorous quips, these essays are necessary reading for anyone seeking a critical understanding of the EU. With 'no' votes in referenda to harmonize Europe-wide neoliberalism, the uprising of the 'Banlieue' in France, the election of a Communist government in Cyprus, militant uprisings in Greece, and the recent rebuke to the European Union's rich countries and banks by the government of Iceland, socialist inquiry ignores Europe at its peril.

While readers of the *London Review of Books* and *New Left Review* may find these essays familiar, if fleshed out, the architecture of this book is quite novel, forming a narrative from general to particular and back to a more fully informed generality. The first essay, written against the backdrop of the origin of the EU, gives a synoptic prediction of its subsequent development. The second essay, in which the former's predictions have largely been borne out, was written in 2007 and updated

¹ Mostly from the *London Review of Books* as well as *New Left Review* and *The Nation*.

for the book. Anderson draws upon Alexandre Kojève's early Cold War prediction that either capital or labour would transcend the nation state. This quasi-deterministic approach implies an inexorable law of history, determined by the development of the productive forces, which seems to go against the far more nuanced historiography found in Anderson's work on antiquity and absolutism.

In fact, this is Anderson's central framework with which to understand Europe, the once-accepted, now-controversial 'bourgeois paradigm' of rising and declining classes in a unilinear trajectory, in which England had been held back from completing a 'Bourgeois Revolution' by an entrenched aristocracy.² Whatever methodological flaws this conception of history may contain, it is notable that Anderson tries to show readers that the EU is not merely reducible to capitalist social relations, and as a political project is a zone of contestation, inspired as much by sincere Leftists and Cosmopolitans as by Europe's elites. Going even farther back, he cites the genesis of the idea of a United Europe in the continental bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century, and the utopian (non-Marxist) socialism and cosmopolitanism of the nineteenth century.

Inter-imperial, inter-ruling class struggles form the basis of Anderson's analysis of 'great power politics' within Europe and the re-emergence of Germany as a regional power. Also notable is Anderson's portrayal of the reduction of Eastern Europe, subsequent to its incorporation in the Union, to an equivalent of the American South, a low-wage zone within a continent of high union-density. The overall concentration on horizontal class struggle is also in keeping with Anderson's project of half a century. As he points out in his magnum opus, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (Verso, 1974), modes of production must be understood as much in regards to relations between ruling elements as between ruler and ruled.

Indeed, to Anderson, the classical Marxist historiographical approach in which 'the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles' is applied, quite properly, to horizontal as well as vertical class struggle. This being said, what runs through the totality of Anderson's output (and *The New Old World* is no exception) is the incompleteness of an 'ideal type' of capitalist development, such development being blocked by the privileges of old landed aristocracies

² For a critique of the Anderson/Nairn thesis and the 'bourgeois paradigm,' see Wood, Ellen Meiksins. 1991. *The Pristine Culture of Capitalism*. London/New York: Verso.

and inter-ruling class competition. While some may be critical of this concentration, a sort of Historical Materialist *realpolitik*, it is not dissimilar to the spirit of the great works on 19th century Europe by Marx and Engels, notably the latter's sorely under-utilized *Role of Force in History*. Anderson's understanding of force, as opposed to hegemony, informs his exemplary approach to the social history of European political thought, which, in a passage of a few pages, moves from Montesquieu's early pan-Europeanism to competing modern leftist approaches to Europe.

If one critique could be made, the question of 'what is to be done' is lacking. Yet to a certain extent this is a blessing. Indeed, in Anderson's logic, another Europe is possible, embodied in the pan-European rejection of top-down neoliberalism. This would seem to suggest a growth of unity between social movements, labour and the intelligentsias of Europe to continue to play what would seem to be a historic role in developing a social Europe. Yet, hearkening back to the possibility of reaction playing a revolutionary role (and drawing on the work of Van Der Pijl and the Amsterdam theorists of the 'transnational capitalist class'), Anderson suggests that the possibility of another Europe is being heightened by its unity.

As of the current conjuncture, however, the prospects for such a refoundation seem bleak. Anderson approvingly cites neoconservative theorists such as Robert Kagan and Christopher Caldwell in criticizing officially sanctioned 'multiculturalism' and contrasting the apparent success of the United States in integrating immigrant communities with Europe's (apparent) failure on this front. This is a telling point, in regards to Anderson's current perspective, which seems to dismiss the potential of these migrant communities to contribute to, or perhaps even help lead, a project for another Europe.

A focus on issues such as uneven patterns of migration and inter-bourgeois skulduggery are in keeping with Anderson's overall model of what can be seen as permanent bourgeois revolution, something that must be completed on a global scale, seemingly, before any truly international socialist alternative can occur. The flaws of this conception are numerous, but it has the virtue of internal coherence. In the final analysis then, this, like all of Anderson's work, is of great seriousness and analytical virtue, if characterized by a sort of pessimism. Contra Anderson and the bourgeois paradigm, history, as Benno Teschke among others points out, is only retroactively intelligible, while current situations, in particular the risings in Greece and the rebellion of Iceland, may add a touch of optimism of the will to the prospect of another Europe.