RESEARCH ONLINE

University of Wollongong
Research Online

Faculty of Arts - Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts

2005

Review - Perry Anderson, Marxism and the New Left

Anthony Ashbolt
University of Wollongong, aashbolt@uow.edu.au

Recommended Citation
Ashbolt, Anthony, Review - Perry Anderson, Marxism and the New Left, Labour History: A Journal of Labour and Social History, 88 2005, 270-271.
http://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers/248

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

RESEARCH ONLINE

Paul Blackledge, *Perry Anderson, Marxism and the New Left*, Merlin Press, 2004. pp. xiii + 210. £16.95 paper.

Perry Anderson is a towering figure in the annals of contemporary Marxism. As such, he deserves a special sort of intellectual history, one that engages and illuminates and challenges. Blackledge only succeeds in a partial and rather unsatisfactory way. In a sense this is a book in two parts, even though it is not divided as such. The first deals with the Anderson of the 1960s and 1970s, the second with Anderson's later developments. The first part is very dry and somewhat confused intellectual history, the second has a few acute observations about the shifts in Anderson's thinking. I suspect this division in the book reflects the fact that Blackledge came to political maturity in the 1980s and is able to engage with this period and beyond in a more direct fashion.

The first part of the book has many weaknesses. Rather than breathing life into Anderson and his *oeuvre,* Blackledge drains them of vitality. Moreover, the prose is often so leaden that it leaves the head spinning. Cynics might quip that this is because he quotes Anderson regularly. The problem, however, is with Blackledge himself and with the editors (if, indeed, editors exist at Merlin Press – there are numerous typographical errors in the book). Howlers and semi-howlers abound.

To say, for example, that 'Anderson was not unaware of the split within the Second International' is a bit like suggesting Anderson was not unaware of Marxism (p. 62). Trotsky appears at one stage as an authority on May 1968: 'Anderson thus required a non-Hegelian revolutionary theory that could both explain May as Trotsky and Sartre had done, in their different ways' (p. 56). Very different – Sartre was still alive. He throws around the word 'Hegelian' without ever really exhibiting an understanding of it: 'Ironically, given Anderson's anti-Hegelian framework, it appeared that his conclusions mirrored those of the ultra-Hegelian and spontaneist ex-Trotskyist CLR James' (p. 65). James is just one of a cast of hundreds who make a brief appearance only to be caricatured. And yet there are also significant absences. Early on in the discussion of the debates about English history in the pages of *New Left Review* (*NLR*), Blackledge slides completely past Tom Nairn only to slip him in peremptorily on three occasions with no inclusion of his Christian name and always in the company of Anderson. This almost constitutes impoliteness but it indicates a more general weakness. Anderson's colleagues on the editorial board of *NLR* mostly do not exist.

The intellectual context within which Anderson moved is thus stripped of life. When he refers to the 1971 split in the board, which resulted in the Maoists departing, it comes as something of a surprise due to the fact that the nature of the board had not been brought to light before (p. 57). And a few pages later there is a reference to those members of the Board who belonged to the International Marxist Group (IMG). Yet IMG receives no real treatment. It

might seem that this criticism of Blackledge is unfair because he is simply doing an exegesis of Anderson's work. Intellectual history, however, has to be more than an exegetical account of someone's writings. And Blackledge does promise in his title a book of far more scope and depth than we get.

Unlike the second part, the first is studded with stylistic infelicities. Take this sentence: So in just the same sense that Stalinism remained a legitimate interpretation of Marxism, albeit vulgar on account of Russia's backwardness, then, despite their split, Kautsky and Lenin could both be regarded as Marxists, albeit rooted in different national contexts (p. 62).

One wonders whether 'sense' is the right word here. Why the prose improves is a puzzle but it is as if the first part has not been modified in the process in which a doctoral dissertation was turned into a book. It also reflects the fact that Blackledge is more comfortable with the material from the 1980s on. And in this part of the book he does some deft tracing of Anderson's transitions from revolutionary Marxism to reformism and from a critic of the pessimism of western Marxism to a defender of its spirit. Blackledge argues that Anderson's Marxism was never grounded in political realism. Overly optimistic in the wake of 1968, he was almost destined to retreat to pessimism later on. To Blackledge, in his revolutionary days he never did the hard yards of forming a revolutionary bloc and this left him politically impotent. That is asking a bit too much of him. And when Blackledge criticises Anderson's increasingly Adornoian response to contemporary culture, the postmodern cultural studies bells start ringing loudly. Anderson does not, you see, appreciate the degree to which ordinary people do their own critical readings of television. He is simply out of touch with modern society. Poor Perry – he fails to form a revolutionary movement and then ends up wallowing in the pessimism of culture industry critique.

The weaknesses in the first part of the book do tend to outweigh strengths evident in the second part. Reading Anderson in the original is far more rewarding than wading through this book.

University of Wollongong
ANTHONY ASHBOLT