

POLITICAL FORMS AND HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

by Ralph Miliband

Perry Anderson *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*. 304 pp. NLB 65.00.
Perry Anderson *Lineages of the Absolutist State*. 573 pp. NLB 68.50

The enterprise on which Perry Anderson is engaged is the production of a comparative history of the forms which political power has assumed in different parts of Europe (though not only of Europe); and of the purposes which that political power has served. In effect, he is aiming to produce nothing less than a history of political power and of the state in different social formations and modes of production, notably in slave-labour societies, under feudalism, and under capitalism, but not forgetting the "Asiatic mode of production", to which a 100-page "Note" is devoted in the second of the present volumes, *and* taking due account of many different geographical and national specificities. The two books now published carry the analysis from Antiquity to the eve of the overthrow of the Absolutist state in England in the 17th century, in France at the end of the 18th, and in Russia at the beginning of the 20th, a matter of some two and a half thousand years, with no part of Europe left out, and with chapters on the Ottoman Empire and Japanese feudalism.

This is an extraordinary undertaking, whose vastness has induced in the author a certain diffidence about the status of his work. Anderson describes these volumes as "essays", whose analyses, "for reasons of both competence and space, are rudimentary diagrams: no more. Brief sketches for another history, they are intended to propose elements for discussion, rather than to expound closed or comprehensive theses" (I,8-9).^{*} This modesty may be commendable but it is quite unnecessary: if the undertaking is extraordinary, the achievement is scarcely less so; and the analyses here put forward are anything but rudimentary diagrams or brief sketches. Anderson has a solid grip on scholarly sources in eight or nine languages. He advances swiftly and surely over terrain after terrain each of which has usually been explored only by specialist historians. He writes with limpid precision, often with controlled eloquence, and with a rare gift for the illuminating

^{*}The volumes are not numbered I and II but I will, as a matter of convenience, so number the references to them. All italics are in the original texts, unless otherwise stated

aphorism. His books are historical writing in the great tradition. But what gives them quite exceptional significance is that they are historical writing of a particular kind, in so far as they have been shaped by the perspectives and methods of historical materialism. There are by now many Marxist historians. But there are, so far as I know, not many such historians anywhere who have written Marxist history at this pitch of conceptual intensity and with such a specific and sustained consciousness of what they were *theoretically* doing. This is of course not to say that Anderson's work is beyond questioning, not least by other Marxists; and I will presently suggest one or two central questions which these volumes seem to me to raise. I am sure that many different questions will be raised about and around these books, which is as it should be. But I am also sure that, whatever reservation or criticism there may be regarding this or that thesis of Anderson's, what he has now produced constitutes an outstanding contribution to historical writing in the historical materialist mode: as Marxist historiography these volumes stand in a class apart.

The Method of Historical Materialism

In the Foreword to his second volume, Anderson notes that "Marxist historians, the authors of a now impressive corpus of research have not always been directly concerned with the theoretical questions or implications raised by their work"; and that, for their part, "Marxist philosophers, who have sought to clarify or solve the basic theoretical problems of historical materialism, have often done so at a considerable remove from the specific empirical issues posed by historians." (II, 7) This is a very delicate way of describing a situation in which Marxist historians have tended to be hazily impressionistic about the historiographical method to which they formally subscribed; and where Marxist philosophers have tried to deal with (and have even claimed to resolve) large historical questions by conceptual acrobatics as a substitute for hard historical work. Anderson has attempted, he says, "to explore a mediate ground between the two", and thus "to try to hold together in tension two orders of reflection which have often been unwarrantably divorced in Marxist writing, weakening its capacity for rational and controllable theory in the domain of history." (II, 8) I have already indicated my belief that he has done this remarkably well. But it is necessary to define wherein he has succeeded theoretically, that is to say in terms of his use of historical materialism as a method.

In one sense, the answer is quite simple, although what goes into the making of it is infinitely complex. That answer lies in *beginning* with the mode of production of a given society but in not ending there; in other words, in the attribution of a primacy to the "economic base" which does not lead to a view of the "superstructure" as a mere reflection of that "base". Anderson has taken seriously some of the guidelines provided by

Marx and Engels, starting with what has perhaps been the most influential of any text of Marx in this field, the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* of 1859, in which Marx asserts that "the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general."¹ This can be, and often has been, easily turned into a more or less primitive economic determinism. But it was not so envisaged by Marx or Engels. Marx emphatically warned that one should beware of using "as one's master key a general historico-philosophical theory", "the supreme virtue of which" he noted ironically "consists in being **super-historical**,"² and his own historical work, including that which is to be found in *Capital*, shows well enough how alien to him was the notion of turning historical materialism into a "super-historical master key." So was it alien to Engels, who was even more explicit and specific about it than Marx, as for instance in his famous letters to J. Bloch and C. Schmidt in 1980.³

Obviously, these are no more than guidelines, but Anderson has used them well, as may be seen from some direct quotations. In his first volume, he notes that it was the slave mode of production in the **Graeco-Roman** world "which provided the ultimate basis both for its accomplishments and its eclipse." "The Ancient World as a whole was never continuously or ubiquitously marked by the predominance of slave labour. But its great classical epochs, when the civilization of Antiquity flowered—Greece in the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. and Rome from the 2nd century B.C. to the 2nd century A.D.—were those in which slavery was massive and general, amidst other labour systems." (I, 21-2) But with this as a starting-point, he also has a very strong sense of the related but distinct and powerful other influences which went into the shaping of the societies in question. Thus, "the structural constraint of slavery on technology. . . lay not so much in a direct intra-economic causality, although this was important in its own right, as in the mediate social ideology which enveloped the totality of manual work in the classical world, contaminating hired and even independent labour with the stigma of **debasement**." (I, 27) Similarly, "the classical *polis* was based on the new conceptual discovery of liberty, entrained by the systematic institution of slavery: the free citizen now stood out in full relief, against the background of slave labourers." (I, 36) Again, but this time for France in the 16th century, he has a passage which shows well the "blending" of a variety of elements to explain the "far-reaching limitations of the central State," namely "the unsurmountable organizational problems of imposing an effective apparatus of royal rule over the whole country, amidst an economy without a unified market or modernized transport system, in which the dissociation of primary feudal relations in the village was by no means complete. The social ground for vertical political **centralization** was not yet ready, despite the notable gains registered by the monarchy." (II, 89) Anderson aptly sums up the approach

when he says, at the end of his second volume, that "the modes of production of any pre-capitalist social formation are always specified by the politico-judicial apparatus of class rule which enforces the extra-economic coercion peculiar to it." (II, 543) Nor does he find any difficulty, quite rightly, in accepting the fact that there are elements of the "super-structure" which historical materialism has not so far been able (or for that matter been much concerned) to integrate into its general perspectives. Thus, in a passage of compelling power and grace, he writes that "one single institution... spanned the whole transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages in essential continuity: the Christian Church. It was, indeed, the main, frail aqueduct across which the cultural reservoirs of the Classical World now passed to the new universe of feudal Europe, where literacy had become clerical. Strange historical object *par excellence*, whose peculiar temporality has never coincided with that of a simple sequence from one economy or polity to another, but has overlapped and outlived several in a rhythm of its own, the Church has never received the theorisation within historical materialism." (I, 131)

What Anderson is doing is not simply to take due account of "factors" other than the "economic factor". Such an eclectic accumulation of "factors" as a way of escaping "economic determinism" is not historical materialism. That method does include, at its very core, a notion of the primacy of the mode of production. As Marx also put it in the *Grundrisse*, in a passage which Anderson quotes, "in all forms of society it is a determinate production and its relations which assign every other production and its relations their rank and influence. It is a general illumination in which all other colours are plunged and which modifies their specific tonalities. It is a special ether which defines the specific gravity of everything found in it." (I, 27) These formulations suggest well enough the broadness of the concept—and who says "broad" does not necessarily say "loose". Certainly in Anderson's handling of it, it yields a controlled and illuminating set of results. Specialists will no doubt tell us in due course what particular weaknesses they find in his account. But no such weakness can invalidate the general method itself: to invalidate it, there would be required a demonstrably superior, analytically richer and more fruitful method.

How great is the freedom of analytical manoeuvre *inside* the realm of historical materialism is also demonstrated by one of Anderson's most telling generalisations: "... contrary to widely received beliefs among Marxists", he writes, "the characteristic 'figure' of a crisis in a mode of production is not one in which vigorous (economic) forces of production burst triumphantly through retrograde (social) relations of production, and promptly establish a higher productivity and society on their ruins. On the contrary, the forces of production typically tend to *stall* and *recede* within the existent relations of production; these then must themselves first

be radically changed and reordered *before* new forces of production can be created and combined for a globally new mode of production. In other words, the relations of production generally change *prior* to the forces of production in an epoch of transition, and not vice versa." (I, 204) Whether the process thus described is "typical" or not, the point is one of extreme importance, for it firmly helps to shift the focus of attention onto human agencies, since "relations of production" are of course the relations between producers and **owners/controllers**, in this instance in the context of slave-labour and feudal modes of production. What is involved in this process is the *expression* of manifold "contradictions" in and through the consciousness of individuals envisioned as different and antagonistic socio-economic aggregates-classes: in other words, in and through class struggle. Thus, Anderson notes that between the 9th and the 13th century in Western Europe, "both prosperous and pauper peasants were structurally opposed to the lords who batted on them, and constant, silent rent struggles between the two were waged throughout the feudal epoch (occasionally erupting into open warfare, of course. . .)" (I, 186-7)

It is class struggle which both results from, and which ultimately resolves, the "contradictions" of a given mode of production. But here too, Anderson is very careful not to over-simplify, and therefore to distort, a complex process. He rejects any interpretation which "tends to inflect **Marx's** theory of complex objective contradictions into a simple subjective contest of class wills"; and he notes that while "the *resolution* of structural crises in a mode of production always depends on the direct intervention of the class struggle", "the *germination* of such crises may well take all social classes by surprise in a given historical totality, by deriving from other structural levels of it than their own immediate confrontation." (I, 198, footnote 3) Indeed, he writes in a different connection, "no class in history immediately comprehends the logic of its own historical situation, in epochs of transition: a long period of disorientation and confusion may be necessary for it to learn the necessary rules of its own sovereignty." (II, 55) This is well said, and gives the right emphasis to the exceedingly entangled nature of the "class consciousness" which is produced by the relations of production and the "contradictions" of a given mode of production.

At this point, however, it may be apposite to enter a doubt as to whether the socio-economic aggregates dealt with in Anderson's account are sufficiently delineated and differentiated; and whether the encounter between antagonistic classes is identified in adequately specific terms. The classes which make their appearance in his analyses suffer somewhat from over-abstract treatment. Classes are rather more complicated entities than is often allowed for here; and while it would be wrong to require a detailed analysis of class structures and class struggles in an account such as this, it may be that a greater concern with questions of social stratification

would have enabled Anderson to provide more differentiated analyses of conflicts *within* classes as well as *between* them. As it is, the socio-economic aggregates to which he refers often have a bloc-like quality which obviously belies actual reality: that reality is *also* shaped—and not least shaped—by the separate and conflicting interests of different strata within given classes. The point has a considerable bearing on the question of the role of the Absolutist State (and of the state in general, for that matter), and it is to this that I now turn.

The Absolutist State and its "Relative Autonomy"

In the Foreword to his second volume, Anderson refers to the fact that it is the state which forms his "central theme for reflection"; and he recalls "one of the basic axioms of historical materialism", namely that "secular struggle between classes is ultimately resolved at the *political—not* at the economic or cultural—level of society.. . it is the construction and destruction of States which seal the basic shifts in the relations of production, so long as classes subsist." (II, 11) This is true; and the question which this volume sets itself concerns the character of the Absolutist State and the role it played in the class configuration of Europe, East and West, in the periods, different for different countries, in which it held sway.

Anderson begins with a straightforward rejection of the view held by Marx and Engels that the Absolutist State represented some sort of "equilibrium" between the landowning aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. (II, 15-16) His own thesis, which echoes what he describes as "the consensus of a generation of Marxist historians, from England and Russia", is that "Absolutism was essentially. . . a *redeployed and recharged apparatus of feudal domination*, designed to clamp the peasant masses back into their traditional social position—despite and against the gains they had won by the widespread commutation of dues." (II, 18) Anderson clearly attaches great importance to the idea of a "redeployed and recharged" state apparatus. I believe that he is right to do so. For the Absolute monarchies, which introduced, as he notes, standing armies, a permanent bureaucracy, national taxation and a codified system of law, constituted very different state forms from the political systems which had preceded them; and changes of political form, here as anywhere else, also had many different and important implications for state action and non-action. On the other hand, his reference in the previous quotation to the state and the "peasant masses" is too summary in so far as it leaves out the Absolutist State's relation to the new bourgeoisie; and Anderson himself corrects the formulation a few pages later when he writes that "the threat of peasant unrest, unspokenly constitutive of the Absolutist State, was. . . always conjoined with the pressure of mercantile or manufacturing capital within the Western economies as a whole, in moulding the contours of aristocratic class power in the new age." Indeed, he adds, "the peculiar

form of the Absolutist State in the West derives from this double determination." (II, 23-24)

What is at issue here is the very large question of the relationship of the Absolutist State to the West European bourgeoisie, and therefore the very nature and role of that form of state. What Anderson is saying is that the Absolutist State served the interests of a particular class—the class in question being the feudal nobility. This is one thing. But he is in fact saying a great deal more than that—not only that the Absolutist State was an instrument wielded for the feudal nobility; but that it was also for the most part wielded by the feudal nobility, and for the latter's own purposes. This is a very different thing; and taken as a general statement about the Absolutist State, a much more questionable one, which is in fact contradicted by many of Anderson's own formulations. The problem this raises has in recent years been much discussed in regard to the capitalist state, namely the "relative autonomy of the state"; but it is also of major importance in regard to the Absolutist State. I think that Anderson is right to argue that Marx and Engels greatly over-stated the autonomy of the Absolutist State, and that the notion of "equilibrium" is indeed a misleading one. But it also seems to me that in many of his formulations he himself greatly *under-states* the "relative autonomy" of the Absolutist State—and the fact that he tends to use inconsistent formulations on this issue suggests a weakness of conceptualisation which is, for him, most unusual, and which has fairly far-reaching consequences.

At the outset, Anderson states that "the lords who remained the proprietors of the fundamental means of production in any pre-industrial society were, of course, the noble landowners. Throughout the early modern epoch, the dominant class—economically and politically—was thus the same as in the mediaeval epoch itself: the feudal aristocracy. This nobility underwent profound metamorphoses in the centuries after the close of the Middle Ages: but from the beginning to the end of the history of Absolutism, it was never dislodged from its command of political power." (II, 17-18. Italics mine except for the word "same"). This is a very rash and simple way to describe a very complex situation and Anderson is **compelled** almost immediately to qualify the statement. "This new State machine, however," he also writes, "was also by its nature vested with a coercive force capable of breaking or disciplining individuals or groups within the nobility itself. The arrival of Absolutism was thus. . . never a smooth evolutionary process for the dominant class itself: it was marked by extremely sharp ruptures and conflicts within the feudal aristocracy to whose collective interests it ultimately ministered." (II, 19-20) At the very least, this means that the Absolutist State had a great deal more "play" ~~vis-à-vis~~ the feudal nobility than the first statement allows, and that its motivations were therefore much more complex than that statement suggests. Indeed, he notes somewhat later in relation to "nascent

absolutism" that for the whole of Western Europe except Spain "the primary pattern was the suppression of aristocratic rather than burgher revolts, even where the two were closely mingled." (II, 68) Similarly, he writes of France in the 17th century that "the very depth of the plebeian unrest revealed by the Fronde shortened the last emotional breakaway of the dissident aristocracy from the monarchy," (11,100) a formulation which obviously and rightly implies a considerable tension between that aristocracy and the monarchy.

The problem in Anderson's exposition to which I am pointing is perhaps best illustrated in the following quotation:

The kings who presided over the new monarchies could never transgress the unseen limits of their power: those of the material conditions of reproduction of the class to which they themselves belonged. Commonly, these sovereigns were aware of their membership of the aristocracy which surrounded them; their individual pride of station was founded on a collective solidarity of sentiment. Thus while capital was slowly accumulated beneath the glittering superstructures of Absolutism, exerting an ever greater gravitational pull on them, the noble landowners of early modern Europe retained their historical predominance, *in and through the monarchies which now commanded them*. Economically guarded, socially privileged and culturally matured, *the aristocracy still ruled*: the Absolutist State adjusted its paramountcy to the steady burgeoning of capital within the composite social formations of Western Europe. (II, 430. My italics).

This very fine piece of writing, which is typical of both these volumes, seems to me to be seriously flawed by the blurred conceptualisation that is present in the formulations which I have italicized. It is perfectly reasonable to maintain that the aristocracy under the Absolutist State remained a "dominant class". It is equally reasonable to stress the affinities that linked the absolute monarchs to the aristocracy, affinities epitomised by the remark of Catherine II which Anderson quotes: "*Je suis une aristocrate, c'est mon métier*". (II, 231) It is even permissible to say, in a loose sense, that the aristocracy remained a "ruling class". But to say, as Anderson does, that it "**still ruled**", in the sense that it was in charge of the state power, is not an acceptable generalisation at all. For, as suggested earlier, it deprives the Absolutist State of the relative autonomy which it enjoyed, and which it required, *in order* to fulfil the very task which Anderson assigns to it, namely the protection of the aristocracy; and the point is as valid for Eastern as for Western Europe. Anderson writes, in this connection, that "the Absolutist State in the West was the redeployed political apparatus of a feudal class which had accepted the commutation of dues. It was a *compensation for the disappearance of serfdom*, in the context of an increasingly urban economy which it did not completely control and to which it had to adapt. The Absolutist State in the East, by contrast, was the repressive machine of a feudal class that had just erased the traditional communal freedoms of the poor. It was a *device for the*

consolidation of serfdom, in a landscape scoured of autonomous urban life or resistance," (II, 195) But in *both* cases, the state power was always distinct and to a greater or lesser extent politically independent from the class power of the aristocracy.

This relative autonomy is institutionally emphasised in the case of the Absolutist State by the fact that state power was lodged in the absolute monarch and such advisers as he (or she) might choose to have around him (or her), and these were of course often drawn from outside the ranks of the feudal aristocracy. There is in this form of state an exceptionally strong element of individual, monarchical and monarchically-derived, intervention and policy-making, which further enhances the notion of relative autonomy. Anderson writes of the direct and manifold impact of French Absolutism that "Henry IV fixed royal presence and power centrally in Paris for the first time, rebuilding the city and making it into the permanent capital of the kingdom. Civic pacification was accompanied by official care for agricultural recovery and promotion of export trades. The popular prestige of the monarchy was restored by the personal magnetism of the founder of the new Bourbon monarchy himself. The Edict of Nantes and its supplementary articles contained the problem of Protestantism, by conceding it limited regional autonomy. No Estates-General was summoned, despite promises to do so made during the civil war. External peace was maintained, and with it administrative economy. Sully, the Huguenot Chancellor, doubled the net revenues of the State, mainly by shifting to indirect taxes, rationalizing tax-farms and cutting expenses," (II, 94); and there is more of the same in the French as well as in most other cases. The picture is clearly not at all one of a state closely confined within the narrow walls created for it by aristocratic class forces. Even so, it is perfectly reasonable to argue that the Absolutist State *was* the state of the feudal aristocracy—but a state, to use a necessary distinction, which acted *on behalf* of that class rather than at *its behest*.

The blurring, in Anderson's account, of the conceptual (and actual) significance of this element of independence enjoyed by the Absolutist State makes more difficult the proper perception and analysis of some major aspects of its nature and role. One such aspect is the intensity of the opposition which it had to overcome on the part of landowning aristocracies, torn between the fear of a centralised and powerful authority on the one hand, and their awareness of the need for such authority on the other. The parallel with the bourgeoisie's attitude to the state is obvious.

Another aspect that needs stressing is the crucial role which the Absolutist State played in the development of Western capitalism. The notion of "equilibrium" between aristocracy and bourgeoisie is not required to account for the reasons why and the ways in which it played that role. But the notions of "mediation" and of "relative autonomy" *are*

required for the purpose. An Absolutist State as thoroughly subordinated to aristocratic class power as is suggested by many (but by no means all) of Anderson's formulations would not, it may be surmised, have been able or willing to be as beneficial as it was to the new bourgeoisie.

Anderson argues that even though Absolutism in Western Europe "represented an apparatus for the protection of aristocratic property and privileges," "yet at the same time the means whereby this protection was promoted could *simultaneously* ensure the basic interests of the **nascent** mercantile and manufacturing classes." (II, 40) But this too understates the policy *choices* which the Absolutist State often had to make, and the *conflicting claims* which these choices had to resolve: the notion of "simultaneity" devalues this element of policy choices as between competing interests within and between classes. The absolute monarchs did make choices and could only make them because the state which they and their advisers commanded was not the mere "instrument" of aristocratic class power. Here too, Anderson hints at the point when he says, in the passage from which I have already quoted, that the Absolutist State "adjusted" the paramountcy of the aristocracy "to the steady burgeoning of capital within the composite social formations of Western Europe." (II, 430) Such "adjustments", as made by the Absolutist State, could not have been made had it not enjoyed a certain freedom of manoeuvre—nor in any case does the notion of "adjustment" seem adequate for the description and analysis of the processes and policies in question. In the end, and as a result of their combined if uneven economic, social, political and cultural development, the various strata which made up the bourgeois class found it necessary to seek the radical transformation of the Absolutist State; and this will no doubt occupy a very large place in Anderson's next volume. But it is as well to stress how much that bourgeois development had at least in part been fostered by the Absolutist State, notwithstanding its aristocratic class basis; and also that matters would have proceeded very differently had it not been able to play a "mediating" role, born of the degree of autonomy which it had, and which was further extended, of course in different measure in each case, by the absolute monarchs.

This last point too may be worth somewhat greater emphasis than it is accorded in Anderson's account. He rightly notes that "the sway of Absolutism ultimately operated within the necessary bounds of the class whose interests it secured." (II, 51) But these "necessary bounds" were not very firmly fixed, and the absolute monarchs had something to do with this fact. Clearly, what they could achieve, as individual rulers, was also circumscribed by forces and circumstances beyond their control. But even though these monarchs were only "absolute" in name, they did introduce a certain element of contingency in the historical process of which they were a part. Here as elsewhere, there is in historical materialism a permanent danger of over-determinism.

To conclude, I want to say that the reservations which have been voiced here do not in the least affect the view expressed at the beginning, namely that these volumes constitute a quite outstanding contribution to Marxist historical work in particular and to Marxist intellectual work in general. The present notice has only concentrated on a very few aspects of the work, and cannot do justice to the richness of the material presented here and to the scholarship and intellectual power with which it is handled. These books offer a double challenge: to historians and others who reject the method of historical materialism; but also to those who subscribe to it, or whose work is influenced by it. The impact of that challenge will be strongly felt for a long time to come.

NOTES

1. K. Marx, Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow, 1950), I, p. 329.
2. K. Marx to the Editorial Board of the "Otechestvenniye Zapiski", November 1877, in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow, n.d.) p. 329.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 495 ff.