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*reviews of Perry Anderson by
Eric Hobsbawm & Douglas Bourn*

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In the next issue Nan Greem and A. M. Elliot will examine the problems posed by the struggle against fascism in Spain 1936-39.

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The cover reproduces the *Celestial Globe* by J. Hondius (1600) in the Sheepvaartmuseum, Amsterdam.

FEUDALISM, CAPITALISM AND THE ABSOLUTE STATE

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It is not often that one has the occasion to discuss a major contribution to Marxist discussion in the field of history, and I'm happy to say that at the moment, with Perry Anderson's two books, we have. And the criticisms which I have made, and may go on making, should not disguise the fact that we are here talking about an extremely important piece of work. If I may quote from a review of it by Ralph Miliband in the latest **Socialist Register**: "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."¹

At the same time I think I should say that in a way my observations on Anderson's books are unfair, because I'm trying to discuss them in the context of a discussion or discussions which have gone on for quite a long time in the British and international Marxist world, but which are not necessarily on the same topic as that which he is debating. As I need not remind you, Anderson's main interest is in the problem of the state; whereas the discussions into which we naturally feel we would like to fit him have been about the nature of modes of production, and the transition between various pre-capitalist modes, and finally from feudalism to capitalism. So it is slightly unfair to discuss these books as though that is entirely what they are about. Nevertheless of course, even Anderson's own discussion about the role of the state in general and the absolutist state in particular makes no sense unless the great problem—the problem of how humanity evolved from primitive communism to capitalism and beyond it—is clarified.

1. The Debate on Modes of Production

These discussions have gone on for a very long time, and we need not take the history of them any further back than the end of the War when Maurice Dobb published his **Studies in the Development of Capitalism**, which dealt at considerable length and controversially with the question of the development of capitalism out of feudalism, particularly in England. Out of Dobb's *Studies* there grew a number of discussions of which the best known (though actually it has not been the best studied because for a very long time the material was not available) is the so-called Dobb-Sweezy controversy, which was provoked by some criticisms of Paul Sweezy in 1950 and in which various English and Japanese, and eventually French and Italian Marxists took part. This particular discussion dealt largely with the nature of the period between the first obvious crisis or collapse of feudalism in the 14th Century and the period when capitalism was equally clearly developing and flourishing—say the 18th Century. The nature of this intermediate period provided the basis for a series of further discussions. These more specific discussions centres on the so-called crisis of feudalism: why feudalism tended to break down, what happened during that breakdown or restructuring; and then somewhat later, an attempt to break this intermediate period further down into sub-periods by the discovery of, as it were, **three** phases—the phase of feudal crisis in the 14th-15th Centuries; the phase of a renewal and expansion of feudalism

* This is the text of a talk given to the conference on Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production, organised by the History Group in October 1975.

(the exact nature of which remains open to debate—there are some people like Wallerstein today who regard it as absolutely crucial) in the 16th Century; and yet another phase of general crisis in the 17th Century out of which finally the untrammelled development of capitalism—the run-up as you might say to the Industrial Revolution—took place. This discussion was largely an Anglo-Saxon discussion, and also to some extent one conducted, at least for the later Middle-Ages, by non-Marxist historians.

Then, from the middle 1950s, the end of Stalinism brought with it a very considerable thaw in the ideological structures of Marxism as then known, and this introduced a new and much wider element into the discussion of the historic origins of capitalism. For one thing, it led much further back. You may recall that the original statement on which most of these discussions are based, in Marx's Preface to **A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy**, establishes after primitive communism the so-called Oriental mode of production, slavery, feudalism and capitalism as so many progressive epochs in the development of the modes of production. This had been for various political or other reasons simplified down in the course of the Stalinist period. The Oriental or Asiatic mode had been eliminated, in the 1930s, and attempts to somewhat broaden and establish a rather simple model of the slave mode of production had been made. A passing reference by Lenin to slave revolts had been latched on to by Stalin and it was then believed that the slave mode of ancient production had collapsed because of some kind of revolution of the slaves against the slave-owners, and so on. The whole matter had, as it were, frozen, and it was now thawed out.

At the same time as it was unfreezing, one of the major texts of Marx, which had hitherto not been very accessible—the **Grundrisse**, which discusses these matters—also became known. The first effective publications of any kind were in the early 1950s, the first translation of the relevant passages in English occurred in the early 1960s, and this again increased the possibilities of new interpretations. The major form of these took, and this was an international discussion although primarily it centred initially in France, Hungary and one or two other places, was the so-called rediscovery of the Asiatic mode of production. Probably of all the modes of production which Marx mentions in his Preface, this is the one which has had the most intensive and massive literature devoted to it in the past twenty years or so. But at the same time there was a good deal of rethinking about the ancient mode of production—the slave societies of Greece and Rome. The fact that this was not a universal phase through which all societies passed became accepted even in the end in the Soviet Union. And finally there came to be new doubts and discussions about the nature and definition of feudalism itself. The Communist Party History Group, together with **Marxism Today**, organised in the early 1960s a series of discussions on this very subject, which produced several articles in **Marxism Today**. If you look back at this you can see the then state of the argument, at least in this country, clearly displayed.

Now finally, from the 1960s on, a new element entered into the discussion of what you might call the periodisation of the development of human history; and this came, I submit, through the Third World revolution and the concerns with the Third World revolution. Here we have a series of discussions of which Andrew Gunder Frank's various books on the nature of the early colonial system in Latin America are the best known, and probably Imanuel Wallerstein's **Origins of the Modern World System**, which appeared quite recently, is the most important. These start off from the view that we are dealing with a world economic system in which certain parts of the world—the developed world—developed as it were on the backs of the rest and in which development in one part generates underdevelopment of another, and where a certain global hierarchy, and stratifications as you might say, is thus established.

Now I think against this background it is perhaps not surprising that in the late 1960s and early 1970s the entire Marxist discussion of phases of development, of changes from one social formation to another, suddenly blossomed out. A very large number of books in various countries are now attempting in some way or other to draw the whole thing

together. Among those, which attempt to draw all the threads of these discussions together, I think Perry Anderson's is clearly one of the most important—perhaps to date **the** most important.

That is my first background point, and it is important to establish at least some of the historical setting within which these discussions took place. Now these debates were really of two kinds although one type I think predominated. Basically this dealt with the question which Gordon Childe once defined in the title of one of his books as, "what happened in history". How did primitive communism give way to whatever it might be: the Asiatic mode of production, or feudalism, or whatever was thought to be most suitable? How did feudalism develop into capitalism—what was it about feudalism that made it break down and generate capitalism? And so on. But at the same time of course a conceptual problem was also inevitably raised: namely what exactly do we understand by a socio-economic formation, what do we understand by a mode of production, by the internal laws of modes of production, and so on? Now I think it is important to notice, particularly at the present moment, that these two discussions are not quite the same. And I would therefore like to distinguish between the question "what happened in history?", and other questions like "what is a mode of production?", or "under what exact heading can we classify Europe in the late 14th and 15th Centuries —was it feudal or was it capitalist, was it declining feudal, was it neither?" This latter type of question is of course in some sense as essential to answer as the first because any kind of analysis implies making classifications, periodisations and certain formal distinctions. Nevertheless it is also in some ways a metaphysical discussion, which can be completely separated from the question what happened in history. That is to say, how did man, starting with the cave-man, develop into the kind of people who sit here in this room in 1975? How did primitive communism develop, at least in one part of the world, until today the modern highly-technicised bureaucratic capitalism on the one hand and socialism on the other are transforming what remains of the world. This question, as I say, can be separated from the abstract question about what modes of production are.

And here I would like to say a word or two about Paul Hirst's and Barry Hindess' book, **Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production**, which seems to me to demonstrate the possibilities of this separation very clearly. Indeed, they spend an entire book on pre-capitalist modes of production while flatly denying that the purpose of these concepts is, I quote, "to serve as tools or research devices for the investigation of concrete historical societies,"² and indeed they argue, I quote again, that "the study of history is not only scientifically but politically valueless."³ Logically it thus seems that the study of the mode of production can be completely sundered from history as most of us know it. And indeed among such extreme, I suppose, Althusserians one could say that the present is the only bit of history to which Marxist analysis is applicable, which means that we can when dealing with the past freely play about with all the various bits of the Lego set named modes of production until we get the construction which fits whatever policy happens to suit one at the moment. I don't say that this metaphysical or abstract approach has no value. Indeed it seems to me that Hirst and Hindess, in the course of their analysis of past Marxist discussions, make some extremely sound points, criticising some of the debates which I have very briefly referred to. For instance they suggest, as I have done myself, not merely that Marxism implies no unilinearity but even, within a very wide limit, it does not imply any particular necessary succession of modes of production. And when Hindess and Hirst say, polemically, that there is nothing in the concept of the capitalist mode of production that requires it to be preceded by feudalism we should listen, though it still does not mean that in real history, where capitalism **did** evolve out of feudalism, the problem of **how** it evolved out of feudalism, and why feudalism broke down, loses its significance.

Now without going into the question of Marx's theoretical models further, let me say firmly that **real history**, **concrete history**, what **really happened** and why, and what didn't happen and why it didn't, were very much to Marx's point and to ours, and I should add politically as well as purely theoretically valid. Otherwise, incidentally, Marx would not

have devoted a good deal of **Capital** to a large discussion of historical questions. Now the object of analysing the composition and dynamics of various modes of production is not taxonomic—it is not to draw up a list of all possible modes of production, though actually this has its value—but I think, contrary to what some extreme theorists think, it is to start with real history and to get back to real history. It is to explain the many-sided, uneven and complicated development of human society. And here I think one must say that Anderson's discussion of the problem of modes of production and socio-economic formations is within what you might call the main tradition. He is concerned with what really happened and why, indeed essentially so, rather than making purely abstract distinctions; although one of the pleasures of reading Anderson is that one is reading a person who is constantly theoretically aware and who knows what he is doing—what the theoretical implications of his various statements are.

2. Problems of Pre-feudal Modes of Production

As for Anderson's views of these various modes of production, I am inclined very strongly to agree with his long, elaborate and excellent excursus on the Asiatic mode of production, in which he demonstrates, I think correctly, that non-European development "cannot in any way be reduced to a uniform residual category, left over after the canons of European evolution had been established."⁴ In other words, not to put too fine a point on it, that Marx was wrong in supposing that all Asia was under a single kind of ancient mode of production characterised by non-development as against the development of feudalism in Europe. But of course the object of this exercise of Anderson's is to clear the ground for analysing "the real modes of production whose complex combination and succession defined the actual social formation of these huge regions outside Europe."⁵ Again, when Anderson analyses the concept of feudalism, it seems to me he applies some very powerful critical methods. He is equally negative and he thinks that there is no such thing as feudalism as a single world-wide phenomenon. The object of this is again the same. It is to determine the elements which are found only in the European type of feudalism, which there and there alone—with the possible exception of the rather similar Japanese case—allowed capitalism to develop or caused its development. The basic point of Anderson's argument is that, like it or not, the full development from primitive society to capitalism took place in only one part of the world, namely in Europe; and consequently, if there is feudalism all over the world, then you either have to explain why capitalism didn't develop anywhere else or, more likely, you had better abandon any broad, catch-all classification of this kind.

Now personally I think he goes a bit too far here. Unlike the Asiatic mode of production, I think there is a point to which feudalism **can** be seen as a worldwide phenomenon, and it is worth investigating. But nevertheless the basic argument that Anderson makes is correct enough. Even if we can analyse feudalism as something which arises out of the disintegration of primitive society, or conceivably out of the relapse or disintegration of more advanced societies, this particular mode of production cannot in itself explain why capitalism developed, because in lots of parts of the world capitalism **didn't** develop out of it and didn't even look like developing out of it; and so we still have to find out what is specific about the **European version** of feudalism, or the European experience, to allow us to explain this.

On the other hand I think it is a pity that Anderson has not devoted an equally acute and lengthy analysis to the ancient slave mode of production. And here I detect a certain gap in his argument. You see, it seems to me quite essential to the Anderson thesis that you know a great deal about ancient societies since he argues that it is precisely the concatenation of the ancient heritage with the specific feudalism of Western Europe which explains what is particular about European development. But his discussion of ancient society is a good deal more cursory than his discussion of feudalism, and I think there is a bit of a vacuum here. I am not even sure from his discussion how far we can regard it as a social formation essentially characterised by slavery. This has been doubted, though I think it may be plausibly maintained. And what is more the link between this ancient mode and its decline and feudalism and the development of capitalism, though it is omnipresent in the

discussion and is quite crucial to it, seems to me to be a bit vague. What emerges is the persistence of certain ideas, institutions and patterns derived from antiquity—certain ideological and cultural elements—which in the first place in some sense shape the specific form of feudalism which develops in the West, and which then re-fertilise from time to time its development; and if I understand him correctly and this is so, I can't help thinking that this is not totally satisfactory.

Of course I suppose Anderson would also agree that the straight political factor played its part. Insofar as the ancient mode of production, the Graeco-Roman one, led to something which has not appeared anywhere else in the Orient, namely the collapse of a long-lasting empire which was never afterwards reconstructed, it must have a direct effect on the development of feudalism. Remember, most of the ancient oriental empires east of the Middle East—the Persian, the Indian, the Chinese, and if you like the Byzantine Empire too—persisted in one way or another. They collapsed, disintegrated, but were then reconstructed, and until the 19th Century they were always there in one form or another. But there were certain types of them and most notably the west Roman Empire which briefly arose, became enormously important, and then collapsed never to revive again, even though the attempts which Anderson rightly notes to maintain a certain tradition of empire through the Church and others are constantly there in the Middle Ages. But I hope to return to this point in connection with a different argument.

3. The Dynamic of Western Feudalism

When we come to the dynamic of specifically Western feudalism I think Anderson's point is not so original, because one thing about Western feudalism is that on the whole the time scale, the periodisation, and a good deal of the actual data are not very controversial. We know, for instance, that there was an enormous expansion of population, production, trade and so on between say the 10th and 13th Centuries. There is virtually no doubt that in the 14th and 15th Centuries there was a tremendous crisis, and so on. The argument is about interpretation. As I read Anderson, the dynamic of feudalism in Western and Southern Europe derives from four factors: lords and peasants in the socially predominant agrarian sector, towns, and a rather negative factor, governments. The peculiarity of Western Europe—I hope I am not grossly oversimplifying—is that there was no empire and that cities were independent, and that the rights of lords were in some respects limited. Now the point about the independence of cities is not new, although Anderson very rightly stresses it, but the point about the relative limitations of the rights of lords I think he stresses more than other people have done this specificity, namely that in a lot of other feudalisms there was not much in the way of demesne agriculture—i.e. the bit of the lord's estate cultivated by the lord for the lord's economy with serf labour. The dynamic of economic growth, he argues (if I may short-circuit a very long and complicated discussion), comes both from the lords who were in some sense entrepreneurs seeking income from the demesnes and from monopoly technical services like mills as well as from direct exactions from the serfs, and from the peasants who had both a certain scope for improving their holdings and also an incentive to do so. Both, he suggests, were engaged in a silent struggle for land, which greatly expanded the cultivated area between about the years 1000 and 1300. The independence of towns permitted the growth of a sort of bourgeoisie within them; the growth of the agricultural income, especially among lords whose market demands were rather larger *per capita*, encouraged urban development; and the absence of empire—that is to say of effective states with bureaucracies—left each of these other groups free to develop the economy with a minimal diversion of resources.

This I think seems fair enough, although there are some questions about it which are by no means clear. Why was this particular agricultural economy technologically so dynamic in the Dark Ages? In actual fact was it technologically so dynamic? Nowadays it is the habit of everybody to point to the invention of water-mills and horse-collars and that kind of thing; but in fact do we not find a comparable technological dynamism in a lot of other agricultural economies, for instance in China? More important, why in this particular economy did feudal lords turn themselves into a sort of agricultural entrepreneur with

demesne cultivations, manorial mills, and so on? Did this happen elsewhere too? It does not seem to have to anything like the same extent, but if it didn't, why then did it happen in this particular instance? Can this be discussed without also discussing the wider question of the growth of the division of labour, the regional and inter-regional markets, the pattern of trade, which accounts for the rebirth of cities? This is of course a long-standing puzzle for Marxists and everybody else. One of the, so to speak, ghosts behind this entire discussion is one we can trace back to Dobb. There have always been two kinds of tendencies in discussing not merely the transition from feudalism to capitalism but most other transitions: the one which takes the natural view that it has mainly to do with trade and the market, and the other which takes the view that this may or may not be so but that it is slightly unfair to look at it from the point of view of trade, because in this case we can't determine the exact specificity of modern capitalism since, as Max Weber used to say, there were traders and bankers in ancient Egypt too, and therefore we must look at it from the point of view of production, and look at the exact relations at the point of production. And somehow the 'productionists' and the 'marketeters' have been engaged for the past thirty years in a constant dialogue (sometimes a dialogue with themselves since clearly both elements are important), depending on the politics of the period. The traditional orthodox Marxist view, which comes out very clearly in Dobb, has been to stress the production side. This goes back to some of the arguments against merchant capitalism that were made in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s. This duality—the two elements which are constantly being uneasily combined—is something we must always bear in mind when we think of these discussions, up to and including Anderson's.

How far this dynamic expansion, which is not denied, produced a situation which could be expected to give birth to capitalism directly is not much discussed, though it seems to me clear—it was clear to Marx—that by the 14th Century in some of the Italian or Flemish cities it looked as though a capitalist enclave at any rate was beginning to develop. But then came the feudal crisis, another much-discussed episode. I don't want to deal with Anderson's own interpretation of it, but I would like to mention at least one of his more brilliant observations apropos of this feudal crisis, which deserves to be quoted: " ... contrary to widely received beliefs among Marxists, the characteristic 'figure' of a crisis in the 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 existing relations of production; these then must themselves first be radically changed and re-ordered **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."⁶ The general crisis of feudalism led to a recession, and it was only after the social relations of production had been once again, as it were, straightened out that the forces of production were able to push ahead.

Now this, if it is true of general crises—we may presumably have occasion in the course of our lifetimes to test this ourselves—is a significant point. But in fact transitions from one mode of production to another are not Anderson's main concern, as I said at the beginning. So in a sense my criticisms may be partly beside the point. He is concerned primarily with the state. And at this stage you may forgive me if I say a word about another element in this type of discussion which is rather important, namely the political aspect of these kinds of analyses. In bad Marxist analyses the political element is dominant, and people make an analysis **in order** to demonstrate a particular political point. People abolish the idea of an Asiatic mode of production **because** they say, we do not wish to provide any justification for 'Asiatic exceptionalism'—for Indians saying we mustn't make a Bolshevik revolution exactly like they did in Petrograd in 1917.

But nevertheless even in good Marxist discussion this political element, the idea that what we are discussing has a political aspect to it, is always present. To take an extreme case, although not a very good case, there is the example of Gunder Frank in the 1960s. The

theory about development generating underdevelopment, and the nature of the colonial societies found in Latin America, comes directly out of a political discussion—the arguments against the policies of the official Communist Parties in Latin America. The official Party policy was a broad front policy of uniting in an anti-imperialist front—with what was called the national bourgeoisie—for certain democratic reforms against an alliance of what were believed to be the backward feudal landowning oligarchies and imperialism. And so the people who argued against this, and who were in favour of a much more insurrectionist view, believed that what they ought to prove is that in fact the bourgeoisie was already the ruling class in these countries: there were no feudalists because there had never been any feudalism, and right back to the Spanish Conquest, they argued, the colonial system had never been feudal at all because even the very first of the *haciendas* were engaged in trade for the market, and so on.

So here the link, if you like, between what is an interesting contribution to the discussion of Marxist formations and a specific political situation is quite clear. In Anderson's case there clearly is no distortion of the actual historical material, let alone the theory. For one thing, Perry knows much more about history and has done a lot more reading to better effect in this field than Gunder Frank, who is nevertheless a very bright man with some very good ideas. Nevertheless there is a selection of questions. This is quite in order— whoever treats a particular subject selects questions and aspects of it. And the preface to Anderson's second volume says that the state has been chosen as the main subject because revolution is political and not economic or cultural; because, I quote, "... it is the construction and destruction of states which seal the basic shifts in the relations of production, so long as classes subsist."⁸ This is by the way a rather highly condensed and cryptic formulation which I'm not sure I completely understand. But secondly the major theme of Perry's books—the specificity of European history, and within this the secular distinction between Eastern and Western Europe—has one significant political consequence of which he is aware. The bourgeois state has only, according to him, come into existence in Western Europe, or in parts of Central Europe: Germany is the sort of case where in a sense the weight leans over on the side of the bourgeois state. The Soviet Revolution overthrew a feudal absolutist state; while where there was a bourgeois state—Gramsci might say "civil society" as well as a state—it resisted overthrow successfully in the revolutionary period after 1917. And so therefore the argument runs the experience of 1917 does not provide a guide to the question how the capitalist state is to be overthrown, since it was not a capitalist state which had been overthrown.

A variety of possible political, strategic, tactical or theoretical consequences may follow from this, from extremely moderate to extremely insurrectionist ones, but that is neither here nor there. But the point I wish to make is that there is here a link with current political debates and preoccupations. However, I would like to leave this aspect of Anderson's discussion aside, and concentrate on what he seems to me to neglect somewhat, namely the economic mechanism of the transition to bourgeois society. So let us, taking a specific subject—the question of absolute monarchy—look at two possible approaches to it from these two different angles, to illustrate as it were how the same subject can be regarded by Marxists differently.

4. Two Views of Absolutism

Absolute monarchy is the main theme, really, of both Anderson's volumes, and there are plenty of reasons for studying the subject. But the question what role did absolutism play in the development of the capitalist economy is a somewhat different one. The question which Perry chiefly considers is the class nature of the absolutist state, which he thinks to have been basically feudal in this period, and I think most people today would agree with him. He does not believe that it was a state which floated, so to speak, independently above the classes, balancing between a rising bourgeoisie and a declining feudal state. It was basically feudal.

But about the question how the absolutist monarchy—which predominated in Europe from

the 16th to the 18th Centuries— contributed to the transition from feudalism to capitalism, he can only tell us the following. **First**, through developing the standing army absolutism increased the capacity of states to accumulate surpluses by conquest. But, as he implies, though this could also aid the accumulation of capital it did not necessarily do so. Moreover, absolutism was not actually needed for aggressive war by capitalist states: Britain in the 18th Century waged more aggressive wars than anybody else but it had ceased to be an absolutist state. **Second**, through taxation, largely via a bureaucracy which purchased its offices in order to make profits out of them, the absolutist state could divert a share of the surplus into the hands of a potential or actual bourgeoisie. But, as Anderson points out, those who accumulated in this way became the defenders of feudal interests by their very position. “Absolutist bureaucracy”, I quote him, “both registered the rise of mercantile capital, and arrested it.”⁹ **Third**, and this is I think a more valid point, through mercantilist policies, which undoubtedly aimed at the construction of a single national market and industrial development. This is obviously crucial; although Anderson is right in seeing it not so much as a bourgeois transformation of absolutism as utilising the bourgeois elements within feudal society, and in doing so strengthening them. They in turn benefited from this because, since neither merchant nor manufacturing capital rested on the mass production characteristic of machinery proper, neither in themselves demanded a radical rupture with the feudal agrarian order.

Yes, but—in the first place mercantilism did not necessarily require absolutism. Merchant cities were mercantilist, and the post-revolutionary Britain of the 17th-18th Centuries was aggressively so. And the very quotation which Anderson chooses from a spokesman of the French absolute monarchy—the Foreign Minister, the Duc de Choiseul—demonstrates how fragile were the links between absolute monarchy and capitalist development during this period. This is the quotation, or at least most of it: “Upon the navy depend the colonies, upon the colonies commerce, upon commerce the capacity of a State to maintain numerous armies ... and to make possible the most glorious and useful enterprises.”¹⁰ Now you see, neither in naval nor in colonial activities, nor even in commerce, did absolutist monarchies compare favourably with non-absolutist states like the Dutch or the British, although the absolutist states clearly utilised these methods as much as they could. So you could say that absolutist monarchy was not incompatible with capitalist development, and if there was enough of it could even manage to do a bit of it, but this doesn't demonstrate why it was **essential** to it. Of course, Perry tells us a great deal more in a different context about absolutist monarchy, but I'm not concerned with the other things he says about it.

Now let me look at an alternative approach to exactly the same problem, which happens in a sense to be partly complementary to Anderson's one, which is suggested by Wallerstein's book on the origins of the modern world system.¹¹ Wallerstein, who actually knows less history than Perry, and has absorbed his historical knowledge considerably less well than Perry and dominates it less well, is in some ways very useful because he is, as you might say, a rather good model-builder. He suggests that there are only two ways of organising any economy larger than a small community on the basis of an advanced division of labour: a so-called “world empire” and a so-called “world economy”. A “world empire” doesn't have to cover the whole world: the Chinese Empire was a world empire in the sense that everything outside it was “outer-barbarian”. It is only in the 20th Century that world empire and world economy are genuinely global. We may incidentally see from Anderson's analysis, and this is one point where the two analyses converge, why West Europe after the fall of the West Roman Empire never saw another world empire. Now a world empire, according to Wallerstein, won't do, because while it guarantees a very efficient appropriation of the surplus from within the empire by taxes and from the outside by trade monopoly, the cost of maintaining the apparatus for appropriation—for instance an imperial bureaucracy—is excessive, and it diverts resources from what otherwise might be feeding capitalist development or possibly diverts them from any kind of economic growth.

But a world empire in which the world economy is not co-extensive with a single political

organisation—a 'world economy'—would be highly unstable unless it rested on an international state system: that is to say a number, but not an excessively large number, of political units of uneven strength. If there are a large number of states, this gives capitalist development room for manoeuvre internationally because no single state is strong enough to control the total area of the world economy. As we know, a good deal of capitalism is in a sense interstitial in origin—it grows up in the pores of feudal society: big trading cities like Venice which are in between larger areas—and his argument is that this, so to speak, transnational activity of capitalism would have a greater chance in such a state system. On the other hand this world system must be a **state** system because state power is essential to ensure for the capitalist within a territory certain favourable terms of trade, for instance through mercantilist monopoly, or as we shall see, for other reasons. Furthermore the states have got to be of unequal strength. If all were equally strong they could be in a position to block the operation of transnational entities based on some other state, such as the Dutch or the English merchants. If all were equally weak, that is to say if there were too many—if the world were too balkanised—the possibility of concentrating the surplus accumulated from the entire economy in one or more of these states would be extremely small. You might say that a place like Venice is too small, as it were, to provide the basis for the primary accumulation from which eventually capitalism will be launched.

The social costs of accumulating the surplus through state apparatuses of different states: he is not very good on that, but one would infer that it would be smaller than in an empire, partly because these state apparatuses would be weaker, partly also because the successful states would be able to appropriate some of the surplus accumulated by the state apparatuses of the unsuccessful ones in the way the Dutch and later the British got hold of some of what the Spaniards accumulated in their own empire—the gold and silver from America which ran through Spain and eventually benefited the Dutch and the British. So an unequal state system provides the best chance internationally of capitalist development. Now such states, he goes on to argue, are bound to turn into territorial states, later national states, because (and here is a weakness in the Wallerstein argument into which I don't want to go, although intuitively one can see how he arrives at it) whereas and I quote, "in an empire, the political structure tends to link culture with occupation, in a world-economy political structure tends to link culture with spatial location."¹² This is because the local state structure is the first point of political pressure available to groups. You press against the local authority; although in a world empire, as it were, Peking or Rome are so far away that for practical purposes they are not an effective centre of politics, whereas in, say, Tuscany or Belgium it is. Again this is open to argument. Furthermore such territorial states need to be strong not only to impose policy against sectional interests and against international rivals and competitors, but also to keep the lower orders in place, not so much by coercion as by preventing the emergence of class polarisation. And so, adding all this together, strong absolutist territorial states in one part of the world but not strong, not necessarily territorial and not necessarily absolutist states in another part of the world are both crucial to the emergence of a world economy. And under the circumstances of the 15th-18th Centuries it is only natural that most of these states would turn out to be feudal absolutist monarchies.

5. Capitalism and Empire

At this point the very different analyses of people like Anderson and of people like Wallerstein converge. And both, as it were, end up at the same point, namely that absolutist monarchies prevail and are the important stage through which people pass on the way to capitalism. But the Wallerstein type of argument, or something like it, is necessary because it links the emergence of the European state system functionally to that of a capitalist world economy and the Anderson argument does not, at least not to my satisfaction. The main link is of course one rather neglected by Anderson, namely the world economy as a world economy—the expansion of the European system both overseas and overland. For instance it is perhaps no accident that (I may be mistaken by going by the index) there is only a single reference to colonial empires in **Lineages of the Absolutist State**. In fact Anderson actually does not believe that there was an international world economy in the 16th-17th Centuries—if I read the passage in **Lineages** correctly this is what he says¹³—and

so clearly he could not adopt this particular argument. But this is a matter of discussion. Perhaps I should also add in fairness to authors whom I have criticised and whose efforts seem to me to be largely wasted, namely Hindess and Hirst, that they also do try to establish why an absolutist state is necessary for capitalist development and not just, as it were, why it coincides with the transition. Why in other words, to quote them, "the transition from feudalism to capitalism is possible only from the absolutist variant of feudalism"¹⁴ though I think their discussion on this point is considerably less impressive than Wallerstein's.

Let me put the difference another way. Wallerstein is inspired in his work by two historians: by the French historian Fernand Braudel, who did the great work on the Mediterranean in the 16th Century, and by the Polish Marxist Marian Malowist who has dealt at considerable length with what you might call the structure of the international world system; the difference between the developed and the underdeveloped areas; Poland as an internal colony of the developed countries of the East; the African and American colonies as external colonies of the developed countries of the West. Now there is no reference to either of these authors in Anderson's *Lineages*, and a single reference to each in *Passages* does not deal with their major interest which is an articulated world system. So while Anderson is very good, in fact better than anyone else I know, in showing how the different parts of Europe developed differently but were nevertheless linked at the political level by the spread of institutions, by military conquest, by a sort of mixture of different kinds of politico-social formations, what one misses in his books is the sense of an international division of labour in the more strictly economic sense which links these various parts. I repeat, since if I understand the passage on pp. 196-7 of *Lineages* correctly, he actually seems to doubt whether such an international Euro-centred economy existed in the 16th and 17th Centuries whereas Wallerstein's point is precisely that it came into being then.

Be that as it may, there is the difference between these two approaches. My point is not that one should choose between the two approaches but that they are in fact complementary. But to neglect the one approach nevertheless has its weaknesses. And if I may repeat the point which I made in my review of Anderson's books in the *New Statesman*, even if we suppose for instance that the difference between European and Japanese feudalism was due to something outside the feudal relations which both shared, must it be due entirely to the classical heritage of Europe which the Japanese did not have; could it not be due to the difference, which Anderson actually notes, between a self-isolated state developing exclusively within its national boundaries and a sort of heterogeneous regional economy which expands into an unlimited world outside. It could be; but the point is that the Andersonian slant on it makes it difficult for him to consider this particular alternative.

I conclude by repeating that what I have said about Perry Anderson's books is deliberately unfair insofar as I'm not criticising his books, but I'm criticising, as it were, a ghost book which he might have written in connection with a long and continual discussion in Marxist circles; and I hope he will perfectly well understand that that is what I'm doing. So I can only repeat that if you actually look at the book itself you will I think find it, one can safely say, as Miliband has put it, in a class of its own. It is a very formidable work indeed, it is a most impressive piece of Marxism. I simply repeat it because I don't think Perry requires to be reminded of it, but it is possible among Marxists and even desirable to criticise even those books for which one has the very highest respect. Perry himself, in his own treatment of the classics in his book, gives a good example. He has unquestionably the highest possible respect for Marx and for Engels, but he is prepared to look at them critically and to point out where he thinks that further Marxist discussion could advance or clarify the problem, and where they are wrong. So I know that the critiques I have been making here will not be misunderstood by him, but I do not wish them to be misunderstood by anybody else either.

FOOTNOTES

1. R Miliband, "Political Forms and Historical Materialism" in R Miliband and J Saville, eds, **The Socialist Register 1975**, (London 1975) p.309.
2. B Hindess and P Hirst, **Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production**, (london 1975) p.308.
3. Ibid, p.312.
4. P Anderson, **Lineages of the Absolutist State** (london 1974) pp.548-9.
5. Ibid, p.548.
6. P Anderson, **Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism**(London 1974), p.204.
7. For example A Gunder Frank, **Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America** (New York 1968)
8. Anderson, **Lineages**, op. cit, p.11.
9. Ibid, p.34.
10. Quoted, ibid, p.41.
11. I Wallerstein, **Origins of the Modern World System** (New York 1974), esp. pp. 67 f.
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13. Anderson, **Lineages**, op. cit. pp.196-7.
14. Hindess and Hirst, op. cit, p.299.

PERRY ANDERSON AND THE USE OF THEORY

Douglas Bourn

In recent years there have been two important developments 'surrounding' Marxist history. First there has been a significant increase in the actual number of Marxist historical writings. These include major developments in the discussions on the transition from feudalism to capitalism, particularly in regard to absolutism, and the nature of capitalist development in Britain since the eighteenth century.¹

Secondly and to some extent independent of these developments has been the revival of interest in and discussion of Marxist theory, particularly around the problems of the nature of historical materialism. The publications in English of the writings of Gramsci and Althusser particularly have had a significant impact.² But hitherto few British Marxist historians have discussed the relationship of these theoretical developments to their own historical research.³ Indeed some historians have recently been criticised for neglecting Marxist theory, tending to be more concerned with 'academic respectability' and just producing detailed works on concrete historical areas.⁴

Within these two developments the recent publication of Perry Anderson's works, **Passages From Antiquity to Feudalism** and **Lineages of the Absolutist State** are of considerable importance for they are attempts to synthesize these changes or as the author says "to explore a mediate ground between the two".

The two studies are intended to show the relationship of antiquity and feudalism to the absolutist state.

The first volume is particularly concerned with the actual and political world of classical antiquity, the nature of the transition from this to the mediaeval world and the consequent effects on the evolution of feudalism in Europe. The second volume continues with an analysis of the development and nature of the absolutist state which Anderson believes to be the legitimate political heir of feudalism.

The two volumes are conceived as part of a longer study of the history of and the development of variant forms of the state. As Anderson rightly says, the question of the state is one that has been sadly neglected by Marxists, particularly in an historical context. The volumes then are not primarily concerned with the economic and social changes in the means of production. They are mainly concerned with the political, for he suggests that it is at this level that the class struggle is decisively fought out and resolved and where the relations of production are transformed.

It is with these two areas that I want to here in this review discuss in relation to Anderson's works, the relationship of historical materialism to concrete historical research and the question of an historical analysis of the state.

1. The Use of Theory

Firstly then the general theoretical problems. Anderson does not hide the fact that he is not a professional historian. He says that he sees himself as a Marxist intervening in historical debates. Consequently neither of the texts produce any new historical material, although they do refer and use secondary sources from Europe, particularly from socialist countries, which hitherto most historians had ignored.

Anderson also, does not see the works as in any sense complete or final: they are he says, "brief sketches for another history—elements for discussion". He hopes, also, that the works will be discussed mainly within the arena of historical materialism.

But whatever Anderson's intentions may have been and despite his use of the 'new' Marxist

terminology, the two volumes have as their object history. They are in structure and form little different from most historical works. There is no initial discussion in either work of the theoretical problems which he is raising, or of a resume of the recent discussions at a theoretical level of the nature of historical materialism. For example although the works are in the long-term concerned with the state there is no direct reference to the debates around the writings of Gramsci, Althusser or Poulantzas on these questions. The works are set squarely within a historical framework, discussing the development of feudalism and absolutist states in various countries and comparing them.

It is this failure to clearly specify his theoretical concepts that I think results in many of the weaknesses and inconsistencies within the books. For example he appears to have a very confused notion of the general relationship between 'theory' and concrete historical knowledge. He suggests in the foreword to **Lineages of the Absolutist State** that one has abstract theory on one side and concrete reality on the other and all one has to do is to relate them, or as I have already mentioned to mediate between them. Marxism would be based on a theory, a science of historical materialism, but surely most Marxists would suggest that Marxism has more than some vague relationship with concrete reality. Anderson criticises Marxist writing hitherto for not discussing the relationship of 'abstract generalities' to particular local cases, but he appears to suggest that theory is purely abstract, unrelated to concrete problems and reality being merely that which is known. How they are to be brought together he offers us no real suggestions.

This failure, I think, to clearly specify his theoretical approach leads Anderson into elements of a non-Marxist and particularly a Weberian approach when discussing social formations and the nature of the absolutist state. In **Passages From Antiquity to Feudalism**, he writes of a **typology** of social formations and again in the second volume, he constructs what he terms an **ideal average**. Instead of developing a theoretical construction of the absolutist state, in the same way that Marx does for the capitalist mode of production in **Capital**, he produces an ideal average by a comparative survey of different absolutist states. Indeed one of the reasons for the length of the two volumes (combined they come to nearly nine hundred pages) is the necessity to analyse several different countries in order to produce this ideal average.

Anderson's confusion over the relationship of historical materialism to 'history' is seen when he uses the concepts 'mode of production' and 'social formation'. He appears to agree with some of the recent debates on historical materialism, particularly in relation to opposing an evolutionary conception of history based around a succession of modes of production. But he does not go on to suggest how one should view the development of history. Is history a history of social formations as distinct from a history of modes of production? Anderson tentatively agrees with the latter but throughout both volumes the word social formation is constantly used, but never defined. This lack of clarity leads to serious errors, particularly in relation to a discussion of the absolutist state with the combination of several modes of production and the relationship of the economic base to the state in a given period of time.

When Louis Althusser discusses the term social formation—he defines it as a grouping of classes in any given historical situation with three instances or types of activity—economic practice, political practice and ideological practice. For Althusser it is an error to suggest that any of these forms of practice is a simple reflection of one another or that they can be reduced to one another. Althusser rejects the often assumed notion that political and ideological practices are simple reflections of the economic level.⁵

Anderson appears to agree with Althusser concerning the relationship of the political and ideological to the economic in that they are not simply reflections of one another, but he does not go to specify what he sees a social formation to be, or does his actual historical writing give us any further clues. Indeed they tend on the contrary to show even more confusion. For example he uses the term social formation when discussing Ancient Greece, but

not in relation to a specific period but more to give a descriptive survey of the emergence of the Hellenic state over a period of a thousand years. Similarly later in the first volume he talks of the social formation at the time of the Norman Conquest, but all he mentions is the effects of 1066 in terms of political changes. His conception then of social formation appears to be more a substitute for the term society than any theoretical construct, the concept social formation is one that is surely of fundamental importance to all Marxist historians, but is here just used in such a vague form to render little use as a Marxist term.

2. Theoretical Problems of the State

The second major theoretical problem of the two volumes is the validity or otherwise of talking about a history of the state or its variant forms. The problem of the role of the state and particularly the questions concerning the relationship of the economic base to the political and ideological superstructure have been discussed by several Marxists in recent years.⁶ But until Anderson, the historical questions in relation to this had not been discussed at any length. Anderson, although he does discuss absolutism and the variant forms of the absolutist state at some length, does not discuss the concept of the absolutist state in relation to the theoretical problems concerned with the relationship of the base to the superstructure within a given social formation. He uses the terms "dominant" and "determinant" occasionally. These terms come from Althusser who proposes their use in preference to the concepts "base" and "superstructure" which he sees as inadequate. For Althusser in any particular social formation, the economic or the political or the ideological could be dominant. The role of the economic base, says Althusser, is to determine which instance is dominant, by which is meant the instance in which social conflicts are formulated.⁷ But Anderson whilst using these terms does not go to explain what they mean or to apply them to concrete historical situations.

Instead when Anderson does discuss the absolutist state in general, he only refers to it in relation to feudalism. The absolutist state he says, was "essentially a redeployed and recharged apparatus of feudal domination". Although Anderson accepts that capitalist development and the rise of the bourgeoisie had important effects on absolutism, he rejects any capitalist characterisation of the nature of the absolutist state. He notes that Marx himself suggested that absolutist states were a "peculiarly bourgeois instrument". But he goes on to suggest that a more careful study of the structure of absolutist states in Western Europe does not confirm Marx ideas. Anderson says that in the early modern epoch, the dominant class was still the feudal one and it was not until the end of absolutism that this domination was dislodged. The developments that did occur were only changes in the nature of feudal exploitation. With the breakdown of serfdom and parcelized sovereign states, Anderson says that the absolutist states became the main form of reinforcing feudal relations and ensuring the servitude of the peasant and plebian masses.

These ideas however are not that original and despite Anderson's intentions, his perspective here is very similar to many Marxist historians today. Indeed this similarity in ideas reflects Anderson's failure to come to terms with his original idea of posing some of the theoretical problems concerning the development of the state to concrete history, something which, he says, Marxist historians were tending to neglect.

One of the few historians who has, I think, posed the question of absolutism within the context of the social formation has been the Soviet historian, A D Lublinskaya, in her writings on France in the seventeenth century. Although her writings suggest more the capitalist nature of absolutism, she does note that her ideas have validity only in France, and that it is based on an analysis of a concrete social formation.⁸ She says in a recently translated article that the "essence of absolutism lies in the real relationship of classes" and continues, "one's conception of absolutism must develop from the specific concrete investigations of the history of individual countries." For her, a failure to specify clearly the structure of the social formation can lead to serious errors in the characterisation of absolutism especially in its state form.⁹ Anderson discusses absolutism in relation to specific countries, but it is not based on an analysis of the social formation in that

particular country. His conception of absolutism is based on a comparative analysis of state forms in relation to the antecedents of feudalism.

Some of the limitations and political implications of Anderson's volumes can be seen in the small section on Russia in **Lineages of the Absolutist State**. Here Anderson suggests that from his 'model' of absolutism, the Czarist state in 1917 was still a feudal one and that the Russian Revolution was not made against a capitalist state. From this he goes on to suggest that the Provisional Government never had time to develop a bourgeois state apparatus and that the Bolsheviks were never confronted with the main enemy of the workers' movement in the west, the capitalist state. Anderson reduces the character of the state to its forms of apparatuses. The question of the dominant class in 1917 in relation to the apparatuses is ignored. Apart from the question that an analysis of 1917 should be based on analysis of the concrete social formation at that time, the implications of Anderson's argument are that failings of the Bolsheviks to confront the bourgeoisie and the capitalist state meant that the legacy of authoritarianism and statism from the feudal state continued after 1917.

There are several other important theoretical questions which Anderson's books raise in relation to the origins of capitalism in the west, the nature of pre-capitalist modes of production. Here one should note the useful section in **Lineages of the Absolutist State** on the Asiatic Mode of Production where he discusses the writings of Marx and Engels on developments in Asia. Anderson does not go as far as Hindess and Hirst in their recent book¹⁰ in regarding the Asiatic mode as an unscientific concept, but he does suggest that a great deal more research is needed on this area before one can come to any definite conclusions.

This review has deliberately concentrated on the more theoretical problems raised by Anderson's works because they are the areas which have tended to have been neglected by most reviewers of the volumes. Also at a period in the development of Marxist history which is beginning to become aware of the wider theoretical problems, there is need to analyse and criticise attempts at 'theorising' of history rather than simply welcoming them as has unfortunately happened with a lot of the discussion on these volumes.

Marxist history, after many years of being on the defensive, is at long last beginning to break into new areas; but these advances should not be made at the expense of concessions to what appears 'fashionable' or a failure to come to terms with the new developments in Marxist theory.

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3. John Foster in his **Class Struggle and Industrial Revolution** (1974) does discuss ideas of class and class-consciousness in the light of recent Marxist debates. Martin Jacques in his article on the effects of the General Strike in **The General Strike**, ed. J Skelley (London 1976) uses some of Gramsci's ideas in relation to class-consciousness. But Althusser's ideas have not yet been fully taken up by historians in this country.
4. See Gareth Stedman Jones 'History—the Poverty of Empiricism' in R Blackburn (ed.) **Ideology and Social Sciences** (London 1972); P Vilar a French Marxist historian does discuss some of the wider problems in 'Writing Marxist History' in **New Left Review**, No. 80, 1973.
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