

However, whatever its flaws, this collection does make very clear that the relationship between colonialism and literary modernism is deep and consequential — and thus deserving of further study. It is a good beginning.

WORKS CITED

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Gregory Elliott. *Perry Anderson: The Merciless Laboratory of History*. Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 1998. Pp. 340. \$39.95.

There can be no doubt that Perry Anderson is one of the most important Marxist critics in the Anglo-American world today. The author of more than ten books, the editor for many years of the influential London journal *New Left Review*, Anderson has produced a body of writings reflecting on history, national cultures, Marxist theories, poststructuralism and postmodernism. Under Anderson's leadership, New Left Books (now Verso) embarked on an ambitious project to translate both classical studies and contemporary interventions within Western Marxism into English; the series made the writings of Berthold Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Jean-Paul Sartre, Louis Althusser, Nicos Poulantzas and others available to a wider English and North American readership, influencing developments in literary, cultural and social theories across a range of disciplines. In *Perry Anderson: The Merciless Laboratory of History* Gregory Elliott provides a useful assessment of this important contemporary thinker, whose work is not as well known as it deserves to be in literary and cultural studies.

In the auspicious summer of 1968 Anderson published "Components of the National Culture," an article in which he undertook to analyze, drawing on an Althusserian-inspired methodology, the contradictions and overdeterminations in British academic culture and their implications for the development of leftist strategies. He locates a dual absence in the intellectual traditions of his national culture: first, there has been no important Marxist thinker in Britain, and, second, there is no sociological theorist to compare with European theorists such as Emil Durkheim or Max Weber. What this points towards in Anderson's suggestive argument is the ideological domination of British empiricism over any theoretical traditions which lay claim to investigating totalities. In Elliott's phrasing, "Components of the National Culture" is "a remarkable essay in cultural mapping" (52-53), one whose audacious scope gestures towards a beginning of the kind of intellectual tradition missing in British culture. While poststructuralist and postmodernist thinkers have attuned readers at the end of the century to suspect Anderson's stress on

totality and totalization, his analyses nevertheless remain a cautionary tale about the dangers of an overpowering focus on empiricism and localism. Indeed, as other Marxist thinkers such as Fredric Jameson have insisted, totalization, conceived not in the sense of an overarching master narrative, but as a partial summing up that attempts to grasp the complexities of relations at work in a social formation or cultural logic, is an indispensable concept for emancipatory thinking.

"Components of the National Culture" functions as a complementary argument to Anderson's more historical reflections, "Origins of the Present Crisis," published four years earlier. There Anderson had analyzed the determinate conjunctures of British history that had resulted in an impasse in socialist theory and politics. The prematurity and incompleteness of the English Revolution in the seventeenth century, the early development of the industrial revolution and its coincidence with the anti-French nationalism of the Napoleonic wars, the domination of British imperialism in the second half of the nineteenth century — all of this, in Anderson's words, "welded aristocracy and bourgeoisie together in a single social bloc," (qtd. in Elliott 15). While the working classes had valiantly resisted industrial capitalism, the compelling hegemony of the ruling bloc, together with the English ideological complex of traditionalism and empiricism ("the one venerating the past, the other abolishing any future" in Elliott's succinct phrasing, 16), combined to prevent the development of a Marxist-inspired socialist movement.

"Origins of the Present Crisis" and "Components of the National Culture" lay the groundwork for Anderson's subsequent writing. The systematic critique of British culture and politics begun by Anderson and taken up by the group around *New Left Review* drew on the Gramscian conception of a counter-hegemony to attempt to develop and elaborate revolutionary cultural practices. The revolutionary transformation of British society entailed not only changes in political power and economic production, but also in the family, education, art, culture, and other social institutions. An active emancipatory movement, Anderson argued, is predicated on revolutionary culture and theory. Building on this prescription, in the years following 1968 Anderson produced an impressive series of interventions: the historical analyses of European development (*Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism, Lineages of the Absolutist State*); the reflections on contemporary Marxist theories (*Considerations on Western Marxism, Arguments within English Marxism*); the engagement of *New Left Review* with a wide range of social movements from political developments throughout the world to emergent counter-hegemonic cultural practices. However, as Britain moved into the 1980s and the long decades of Conservative government under Thatcher and Major, Elliott argues, Anderson was compelled to reflect on and rethink the interconnections between theoreticism and activism. In 1990 he published two articles examining "a culture in contraflow," revisiting the deep and persistent

impasse to emancipatory politics in Britain. The trenchant and unflinching analyses he brings to the blockage of political transformation in contemporary Britain reveals a bleak gridlock: in Elliott's description, "without propitious circumstances (*any* significant political movement), no fully adequate ideas; without fully adequate ideas, no propitious circumstances (effective opposition)" (202). What was crucial from Anderson's perspective towards the end of the 1990s was to retrieve the Enlightenment energies of political and intellectual critique. "The vocation of theory" in his later works, Elliott suggests, is not so much "to express a practical movement of social transformation, but to explain — and criticize — the existing state of affairs" (242-43).

What does the work of Perry Anderson, which has focused almost entirely on Britain and Europe, offer to scholars interested in postcolonial literatures? The answer to such a question might take various forms. First of all, Anderson's analyses of the 'condition of Britain' in the postwar period provides a detailed and nuanced example of theorizing situated historical moments. Second, his critical examination of poststructuralist claims (see especially *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*) is an important reminder that such claims ought to be precisely located within the western philosophical discourses they address, and globalized to different political conjunctures only with vigilance and caution. Third, in his own life and work — although he now holds a professorial chair at the University of California in Los Angeles, much of his writing was produced without the security of an academic position — provides an exemplary instance of an oppositional intellectual who has attempted to embody "moral resistance and political innovation" (qtd. 244). In the final chapter Elliott cites what Anderson has called "the figures in the mirror," a number of different, even contradictory, positionings that critical intellectuals in the west have taken up in the centuries following capitalism's emergence: "Jesuit, Leveller, Jacobin, Liberal." The uncompromising zeal of the believer, the radical challenge to social hierarchies, the committed energy of the revolutionary, the freeplay of the critical intellect — these are positions of situated knowledges and actions which the history of the West offers. As "figures in the mirror," they reflect back options and possibilities, not simply to be uncritically emulated, but as a history which cannot be bypassed and must be rethought and reworked for contemporary conjunctures.

Elliott's account of Anderson's intellectual and political interventions offers detailed analyses of the writings of this important contemporary thinker: those who are familiar with Anderson's work will find challenging and complex arguments; those who have not yet read his books will discover an accessible introduction. It is unfortunate that Elliott was not allowed access to the documents and archives of the *New Left Review*; such materials would have deepened our understanding of a commitment which engaged him for many years. Nevertheless, *Perry Anderson: The Merciless Laboratory of History* is a book which deserves wide reading across disciplines.

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