

Perry Anderson — *English Questions*. London and New York: Verso, 1992. Pp. 370.

Much of this review was written in anger and sorrow. The anger stems from the fact that a recurrent, if not the main, theme of *English Questions*, a collection of essays written over a 25-year period, is an explicit and implicit counterattack by Perry Anderson on E. P. Thompson's great historical polemic, "The Peculiarities of the English" (1965), which was occasioned by the appearance of Anderson's "Origins of the Present Crisis" (1964). The sorrow stems from Thompson's death in August 1993.

The main themes — which Anderson expounds, amplifies, and refines as the book proceeds — are laid out in "Origins of the Present Crisis". They can be summarized in his own words as follows:

England had the first, most mediated and least pure bourgeois revolution of any major European country. (p. 17)

England experienced the first industrial revolution, in a period of counter-revolutionary war, producing the earliest proletariat when socialist theory was least formed and available, and an industrial bourgeoisie polarized from the start towards the aristocracy. (p. 20)

By the end of the 19th century, Britain had seized the largest empire in history, one qualitatively distinct from all its rivals, which saturated and "set" British society in a mould it has retained to this day. (p. 23)

Alone of major European nations, England emerged undefeated and unoccupied from two world wars, its social structure untouched by external shocks or discontinuities. (p. 27)

Subsequent chapters elaborate these tropes. The English crisis is unique by virtue of its very existence and by its depth. Insofar as Britain had a bourgeois revolution at all, it was both premature and incomplete. The industrial bourgeoisie never did wrest hegemony from the aristocracy and the great London bankers and financiers. The working class and its main political expression, the Labour Party, have never represented an alternative to anything or anybody. State and society in Britain definitely need to be modernized. Indeed, the State has functioned as an active bulwark against modernization. Thatcherism, though pledged to modernization, has in fact accomplished nothing of the sort. Socialism never was on the agenda. Anderson concludes with a strenuous argument as to the importance of putting political reform — not just reform of the electoral system — on the agenda. In one of his most arresting passages, he actually uses the phrase Old Sarum to characterize the Labour Party block vote. He concludes with a blistering attack on those writers who have followed in the Thompsonian tradition and who continue to uphold a "pristine" version of Marxism and who thus have serious doubts and reservations about the essential thrust of his overarching thesis.

At one level *English Questions* can be read in the context of the ongoing debate on the causes of Britain's economic decline. Anderson strongly appears to see himself as making a distinctively Marxist contribution to that debate — one different from and superior to other Marxist accounts by virtue of its vigorous denial that the British case is merely an instance of the decline and crisis of world capitalism. Anderson's contribution is an important one, but there may be a bit less here than meets the eye. Although Anderson has some criticisms of non-Marxist writers, his tone toward them is on balance non-confrontational. Instead he reserves his sharpest criticism for those Marxist writers to whom he attributes the position that there is no real, specifically British, crisis to explain. Anderson paints himself into a gratuitously tight corner by his refusal to entertain the possibility that both features specific to Britain and general features are involved. He thus gives nothing to those who might wish to explore this eminently plausible possibility. Accordingly, let us look at Anderson as a historian of contemporary Britain and at his version of Marxist theory.

At the outset it needs to be said that there are a number of things which Anderson does not get right. Nothing in "Origins of the Present Crisis" or anything else he wrote before 1979 points toward the emergence and victory of Thatcherism in any way, shape, or form. One has to be fair here. Anderson quite rightly characterizes his method as

situated midway between the historical and the political — an attempt to mediate some of the requirements of scholarship, and others of partisanship, without satisfying either entirely. Interventions of this kind must always be provisional, aware of their inevitable fallibility.

Maybe a score of around 50 per cent ought to be considered excellent. A full analysis and critique of Thatcherism eventually makes its appearance in "The Figures of Descent" (1987). Its central argument, which in my opinion is both unremarkable and correct, is that as an attempt to modernize Britain, Thatcherism was doomed to failure.

Anderson also failed to predict the widespread popular revulsion that has emerged in reaction to the ongoing antics of members of the British royal family, to say nothing of the fact that part of that revulsion was orchestrated and amplified by Rupert Murdoch's *Sun*. While Anderson should not be held responsible for Tom Nairn's errors of interpretation and conceptualisation, he does go out of his way in *English Questions* to praise highly Nairn's writings on the monarchy and Ukania.

Anderson openly and disarmingly acknowledges his failure in "Components of the National Culture" (1968) to predict that the British intelligentsia would move to the left and become more open and receptive to Marxism. The fact that many of them did so is fully documented and analyzed in "A Culture in Contraflow" (1990). Contraflow is Andersonese for the phenomenon of high politics and those voters who elected the Tories moving to the right while the intellectuals were moving in the opposite direction. I am not sure that Anderson has got this quite right either. I am more than open to the argument that on balance the centre of gravity shifted

to the left. There has been a certain amount of ideological polarisation as well, however, which Anderson notes, but only as a local occurrence, in his discussion of English history writing in the 1980s. In any case he wrote "A Culture in Contra-flow" before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Finally, one notes that in a dazzling exegetical performance of digging out the views of Marx and Engels on state and society in nineteenth-century Britain, Anderson appears to cite just about everything they ever wrote on the subject except Engels's observation that "this most bourgeois of all nations is apparently aiming at the possession of a bourgeois aristocracy and a bourgeois proletariat as well as a bourgeoisie" (K. Marx and F. Engels, *On Britain*, p. 537). I do not know why Anderson omitted this citation, which is anything but obscure. Perhaps his problem is that Engels's remark has become an almost chemically pure example of Gramscian "common sense":

England always had a powerful middle class, and this class encroached both on those above and those below it. Engels complained long ago that in England even the proletariat was bourgeois and the aristocracy was becoming bourgeois as well. (A. J. P. Taylor, *English History*, Pelican, 1970, p. 227)

Quirks and errors like these can in principle exist within a theoretical framework so compelling as to override them. What are the main components of Anderson's Marxism? First, despite the fact that Anderson devotes practically the entire introduction of *English Questions* to a discussion of Gramsci's influence on his and Tom Nairn's intellectual development, one is hard pressed to find any meaningful difference between Gramscian Marxism as expounded by Anderson and 1960s-style modernization theory. I have never seen a full discussion of the affair (marriage is far too strong) between Marxism and modernization theory in the sixties. When and if it is ever written, Anderson will figure prominently. He is hence quite right to counterpoise his Marxism to more pristine strains.

Yet Anderson is not without a certain pristinity of his own. A second salient feature of his Marxism is the assumption, which admittedly is not stated bluntly but which I think is implicit throughout *English Questions*, that socialism requires the presence of certain initial conditions. As Karl Kautsky put it more than a century ago, conditions have to be "ripe for socialism". It is Anderson's view that in England conditions have not been and are not now ripe. Assumptions like these raise more questions than answers.

A third important characteristic of Anderson's Marxism is that it completely lacks anything that could even remotely be called a labour metaphysic, which among other things allows him to all but write off the British working class as an active agent of radical change. This aspect of Anderson's thinking was perhaps Thompson's main target in "The Peculiarities of the English". A Marxism that does not privilege the historic role and presence of the working class is a clear-cut deviation from the vast majority of Marxisms past and present, starting with that of Karl Marx himself.

Finally, Anderson has a consistent preference for the findings and interpretations

of non- and anti-Marxist historians. To take an example that we have already encountered, the notion that Britain, even when it was the “workshop of the world”, was far from a thoroughly bourgeois society has been a staple of non-Marxist British historiography for a long time. Anderson unwittingly appears to share the view held by many Jewish socialist garment workers in New York City in the 1920s and 1930s that the communist *Morgen Freiheit* and the social democratic *Jewish Daily Forward* told lies to the workers, but that the *Wall Street Journal* told the truth to the bosses. There may be another aspect to this problem. A tension has long existed in the Marxist tradition between Marxism as a self-contained and self-sustaining body of doctrine on one hand and as something that can and should help itself liberally to other schools of thought on the other. Anderson (and I) belong to the latter camp, but Anderson takes things to an extreme that is not often encountered.

I began this review in a sour mood, wondering whether Anderson was still smarting from the demolition job that Thompson did on him in “The Peculiarities of the English”. I was wrong. In the October 21, 1993, issue of the *London Review of Books*, Perry Anderson paid handsome tribute to Edward Thompson. It was a class act. Whatever one’s final assessment of the book, the arguments in *English Questions* were not driven by anger, spite, or an obsessive desire to have the last word.

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James Vernon — *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, c.1815–1867*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Pp. xviii, 429.

James Vernon’s monograph on English political culture between 1815 and 1867 is a provocative but ultimately frustrating book. Written from a postmodern perspective, Vernon examines the form and content of political language during these tempestuous decades, drawing his principal examples from a study of five parliamentary constituencies, namely Oldham, Tower Hamlets, Lewes, Boston, and Devon. Initially Vernon had intended to write a comparative study of these constituencies, whose social and economic structures were strikingly different and whose politics, one might presume, would register these differences. But Vernon quickly abandoned this enterprise “in order to avoid having to manufacture political differences to which I would then have to attach undue structural significance” (p. 11). In other words, Vernon rapidly rejected a research strategy that might commit him to a sociology of popular politics in which the themes of interest groups and class have routinely emerged. That would have contradicted the postmodern project in which language itself constitutes the political subject rather than being shaped by anterior realities. The result is that the five case studies, if one can call them that, fit rather oddly in a book that stridently seeks to avoid a referential methodology. Why, one might ask, if the central task is to deconstruct the commonalities of language that defined political identities, did Vernon persist with these micro-studies