

the present as 'jumbo history': a review article

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Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism, by Perry Anderson
(London, New Left Books, 1974), 293 p. £5.

Lineages of the Absolutist State, by Perry Anderson
(London, New Left Books, 1974), 549 p. £8,50

*The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins
of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*, by
Immanuel Wallerstein (New-York and London, Academic Press,
1974), 386 p. \$ 16,50.

Anderson's effort to trace the lifeline of the modern state and Wallerstein's treatise on the origins of transnational capitalism in the Age of Discovery have been described, derisively, as "Jumbo History" -throwbacks to historical speculation in the grandiose manner of Toynbee and Spengler. Yet they are not speculative; nor, for that matter, are they history books, if by history one means analytic narrative of events. They are studies in political theory, disciplined by the test of fact. Anderson and Wallerstein are not out to write history, but to explain it; not to narrate details, but to make new and better sense of the details others have compiled. Hence they construct models of social change as history, viewed on a large scale and over a long term. Their stated goal is to bring the problems of the present into focus through study of their formation in the past; to see, in Paul Sweezy's excellent phrase, the present as history. Thus far, one main stream of social thought has followed this course: Marxism. Both Anderson and Wallerstein draw upon its method of posing questions and conjecturing answers. They look to the ways in which the organization of social production is bound up with the organization of power; how control over the means of production ties up with works of synthesis. As both authors are quick to point out, synthesis is justified when it goes beyond other people's research to say something new. What do they come up with?

Anderson makes at least three interesting contributions. He gives a decent burial to the old sub-Marxist idea of "Univer-

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sal history" (popular in the Stalin era) whereby all societies are seen to develop through a fixed set of evolutionary stages defined by modes of production - "Slavery", "Feudalism", "Capitalism", etc.- each of which, its duty done, gives way to an appointed successor. He works up useful comparisons between historic modes of production (ways of working, ways of life) and forms of state across Eurasia, from Britain to Japan. And in the process, he sharpens up some of the familiar Marxian conceptual tools - showing, among other things, that the "super-structures" of kinship, religion, law or the state necessarily enter into the constitutive structure of the mode of production in pre-capitalist social formations' (*Lineages*, p. 403). He thus provides a plausible, if tentative, solution to the 'basis-superstructure' problem which has plagued Marxist thought ever since Marx's self-proclaimed disciples succeeded in freezing these elementary distinctions into canons of secular theology. This is no small accomplishment. But because the interest and impact of Anderson's books are dulled by bad organisation, needless displays of erudition, and a writing style so affectedly elegant that it often stumbles into bombast, it may help to scan of the high points of his argument.

Reading his two volumes is like sitting through a long movie whose plot remains obscure because one missed the opening scene. Though his study opens with a whirlwind tour of classical antiquity, whose great empires are shown to rise and fall with their capacity to mobilize slave labour, it takes him another two millennia and 600 pages to make clear what he's been driving at. At that point we arrive in the streets of Petrograd, 1917. Why, he wonders, did the Bolshevik Revolution come off when all other worker's insurrections in the immediate aftermath of the First World War were beaten down? Taking his cue from Lenin's successive redefinitions of the agrarian question and an elliptical remark of Gramsci's that 'in Russia the State was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous'. Anderson answers: 'The Russian Revolution was not made against a capitalist state at all. The Tsardom which fell in 1917 was a feudal apparatus; the Provisional Government never had time to replace it with a new or stable bourgeois apparatus'. Thus it was the Bolsheviks' good fortune that 'from beginning to end they never confronted the central enemy of the workers' movements in the West' (*Lineages*, pp.358-59, his emphasis). The autocracy was a political dinosaur whose counterparts had disappeared from England in the 1640s, from France in 1789, from Germany by 1871. It was a 'feudal' state ruling over what by 1917 had become a composite social formation dominated by the capitalist mode of production'. The rapid growth of industrial capitalism under state auspices had not brought the bourgeoisie to power; the dominant class remained an obsolescent aristocracy still dependent on 'a labyrinth of traditional forms of extra-economic surplus extraction, embodied in customary rights and dues', to milk a backward peasantry (*Lineages*, p. 348). Teetering on a narrow basis of social support, the state toppled once its victims stirred in unison.

Then the bourgeois revolution was nipped in the bud by the Bolsheviks. Where, on the other hand, bourgeois regimes had come to power, workers' movements were coopted or crushed. Anderson finds the key to the different outcomes in the class constitution and organizational characteristics of the states in question. This is hardly a startling conclusion. Still, it does provide a resting point for a long and tortuous argument.

For to 'situate' the Russian case, Anderson undertakes a comparative survey of political development in the absolute monarchies of West and East Europe, arguing that absolutism 'was the natural and normal form of noble class power after the late Middle Ages' and represented the rule of the feudal nobility in the epoch of familiar stuff. Anderson then traces the variations of absolutism back to their roots in the different response of regional nobilities to the general crisis of feudalism in the fourteenth century (when economic depression was joined by wars, famines, Black Death, and agrarian revolt to chop down the population by two-fifths): 'The crisis of feudalism in the West produced an Absolutism which succeeded serfdom; the crisis of feudalism in the East produced an Absolutism that institutionalized serfdom' (*Lineages*, p. 358). Again, a sense of *déjà vu*. The plot thickens, however, as Anderson considers the different course of feudalism in the two halves of Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire. His treatment of feudalism is the core of the work, though space limitations prohibit even a bald summary of the argument, the major conclusions deserve mention. Feudalism happened as a synthesis of two anterior modes of production -primitive communalism and slavery- which 'collided' as it were, when the tribal federations of northern Europe conquered a decadent Roman Empire. In the fifth century AD. As a mode of production, feudalism involved direct domination of enserviced peasants who turned over dues in labour or kind to military landlords in exchange (theoretically) for protection. Such was unimaginable, Anderson maintains, without the *parcellization* of sovereignty, which vested private power and public authority in the same person -quite different from bureaucratic empires where a central state apparatus enforced the upward transfer of surplus from peasant to landlord. Fragmented sovereignty also meant breathing space for towns, free of direct control by kings, landlords, or the Church. Hence the dynamic interplay of town and country which formed the seedbed of capitalism. The feudal configuration of parcellized sovereignty, dependent tenure, and autonomous towns happened in only one other place -Japan, which, as Anderson is quick to point out, was the only other 'social formation' hospitable to an indigenous capitalism. But there are still wider ramifications. The union of 'basis' and 'superstructure' in pre-capitalist modes of production has already been mentioned. Another is that there is no automatic progression from one mode of production to another, however much one way of organizing social existence may condition what comes from its dissolution. European feudalism, again, took

place as the *contingent* outcome of the historic 'collision and synthesis' of the ancient and primitive modes, just as capitalism emerged from a singular configuration of structural features and historical circumstances. Conversely, similar modes of production -European and Japanese feudalism- can come into being as part of quite different historical sequences.

Whith that, Anderson has finished off the old dogma of universal history, which generalized a stereotype impression of European developments to all humankind. To quote the Gospel according to St Iosef from the *fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism*: 'All peoples travel what is basically the same path'... The development of society proceeds through consecutive replacement, according to definite laws, of one socio-economic formation by another.' This alone would make Anderson's work worth reading.

There are problems with Anderson's method, however, and they stem from his skill at spinning clear definitions and at poking logical holes in defective concepts. (His concluding essay on 'the Asiatic Mode of Production', for example, is a fine piece of demolition work and in many ways the best chapter in the book). Fondness for sharp definitions and typologies sometimes leads Anderson to confuse taxonomy with explanation ('naming it is taming it'). By contrast with his dynamic picture of feudalism and its metamorphoses in *Passages*, the comparisons of royal absolutism in *Lineages* are at once rigid and episodic -formal definition combined with narrative political history. Though he constantly reiterates that absolutism was government of, by, and for the landed nobility, he has no coherent explanation of how a territorial warrior aristocracy was transformed into a class of effete courtiers. The question of how dynastic states acquired a monopoly over the means of physical coercion -which, remember, had to be tugged out of the hands of military landlords- goes unasked and unanswered. Anderson's identification of absolutism with noble class rule may in some sense be true over the long run, but he gives little insight into how such nobles learned to swim with the tide and make the state their own. His implication that they finally found out what was good for them begs the key question.

One particularly regressive feature of Anderson's book is his tendency to invoke the term 'over determination' whenever important but untidy facts imperil the neatness of argument. Althusser, from whom Anderson takes this expression, can get away with using it because as a forthright obscurantist he never explains anything and consequently remains immune to disproof. But for Anderson, obliged to account for empirical connections, say, between capitalism and absolutist regimes, 'over-determine' becomes simply a pretentious synonym for 'complicate' and 'exacerbate' -a cop-out from the task of explanation.

Wo Begriffe fehlen,
Da stellt zur rechten Zeit ein Wort sich ein

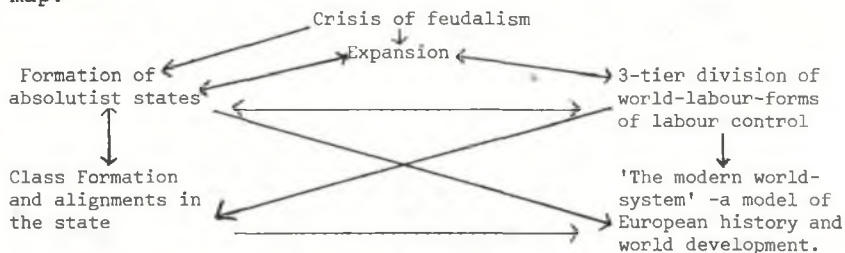
About Wallerstein's *The Modern World-System* there is less to say because it is one of those rare books that really must be read rather than reviewed. Which is not to say that it is perfect; far from it. But Wallerstein's is, quite simply, the most daring yet realistic work of American social thought since Barrington Moore threatened to inaugurate a new sociology almost a decade ago with *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*. Its aim is no less than to outline the contours of the capitalist world-economy, as it took shape in the 'long' sixteenth century from 1450 to 1640, and then to reanalyse in relation to it the critical turning points of European social history - a tall order. And, as almost every page contributes to the overall picture, we must be content to mention only the most prominent features.

Basically, Wallerstein takes up the well-worn problem of 'the transition from feudalism to capitalism'. Yet what he proposes by way of a solution is new - or at least more sustained and comprehensive than previous plays of the same hunch. For the general crisis of feudalism was not resolved within continental Europe alone. As European landlords, city merchants and emergent dynasts each improvised parochial solutions to the terrible contraction of population, production, and -hence- revenues, the unplanned outcome of their disparate gropings was the creation of a capitalist world-economy. To bring this about, three things were required:

an expansion of the geographical size of the world in question, the development of variegated methods of labor control for different products and different zones of the world-economy, and the creation of relatively strong state machineries in what would become the core-states of this capitalist world-economy. (p. 38).

The emergent world-economy -radiating from north-west Europe to incorporate the Americas, the west coast of Africa, the Mediterranean, and East-Europe- was differentiated into three main zones of productive activity, each of which spawned characteristic forms of labour exploitation and control. In the core area (north-west Europe), the primary extractive mechanism came to be wage labour; in the periphery -East-Europe and the Americas- it was 'coerced cash-crop labor' (serfdom and slavery); and in the semi-periphery of central and southern Europe, sharecropping fell into place as an intermediate form. Different modes of labour control, in turn, shaped the identity of the dominant classes, which in different zones of the world-economy had quite different orientations toward the strengthening of central authority. In the core areas, capitalist landlords and mercantile interests drifted together and found strong states to their advantage; in the periphery, however, where landlords themselves repressed the peasantry and cornered the export market in collaboration with foreign merchants, both central authority and native bourgeoisie were squeezed out. Put another way, *dependencia* meshed the vested interests of western manufacturer and eastern magnate in the

sixteenth century. Thus, argues Wallerstein, the simultaneous rise of free labour in the West and coerced labour in the East were not simply divergent outgrowths from the regional histories of feudalism, but integral aspects of the same enveloping social process: the creation of a capitalist world. Even in grossly oversimplified paraphrase, shorn of convincing detail, Wallerstein's argument is not easy to follow. Hence the following diagram of its main elements and lines of inter-connection may serve the prospective reader as a kind of road map:



By viewing the social history of primitive accumulation in world perspective, Wallerstein is able to show connections between events that more conventional approaches -Anderson's included- cannot but miss. Take for instance what happened to Poland and Russia. Reading Anderson, who groups them under the rubric of Eastern feudalism cum absolutism, one wonders why they should both see the rise of serf agriculture yet have such different patterns of state-formation. In the sixteenth century, when Polish aristocrats held the would-be sovereign at bay, Ivan the Terrible was building a police-state. How so? Here Wallerstein's explanation is interesting. For, he argues, Russia remained outside the orbit of the European world-economy and would not, in fact, be drawn into it for some time yet. Meanwhile, the Tsars could set about consolidating rule over their own central Asian world-economy. Russian serfdom itself grew up, not to feed cash crops into the European market, but to assure state servitors a steady income. The very policies of Ivan IV that Anderson writes off as the nihilistic thrashings of a lunatic appear in Wallerstein's account as the costly but necessary means of preserving Russian independence.

Such unexpected shifts in perspective make up but one of the many interesting aspects of Wallerstein's book. Another is the new light his model of the world-economy sheds on the social meaning of the Reformation, the Revolt of the Netherlands, the English Revolution, the rise of political anti-semitism, the decline of Spain, and many more. But perhaps his most lasting contribution is negative: by organizing and interpreting a huge bloc of social history, Wallerstein has driven a handful of nails into the coffin in which theories of 'modernization' are about to be buried.

Though stylistic criticism of serious books may seem like

petty carping, radicals who would communicate must remember that the medium is much the message in literary scholarship. Hence it is particularly regrettable that Wallerstein and Anderson choose to present their material in such a way as to make learning from them a chore. More's the pity because on occasion they each give ample evidence of being able and interesting writers. Wallerstein's scholarly apparatus weighs heavy. Mercilessly overloaded with quotations and footnotes (which together take up half the book), his prose stumbles from point to point like a tortured beast of burden. Nevertheless, because his arguments are intellectually exciting, one can get into the right head and play his text (as one clever friend put it) like the bead-game in *Magister Ludi*. Anderson succumbs to the temptation of a different vice. His books make simpler reading than *The Modern World-System*, in good measure because he took trouble to distil and paraphrase where Wallerstein preferred to quote en bloc. But he squanders his literary gifts by showing off erudition as if it were jewelry. At times, his sentences turn into parodies of academic chatter at its worst. Let one bad example suffice:

the complex *imbrication* of economic exploitation with extra-economic institutions and ideologies creates a much wider gamut of possible modes of production prior to capitalism than could be deduced from the relatively simple and massive generality of the capitalist mode of production itself, which came to be their common and involuntary *terminus ad quem* in the epoch of industrial imperialism (*Lineage*, p. 404, his emphasis).

Thankfully, this is not Anderson at his best.

This is not to say that critical theory ought to be domesticated and turned into the handmaiden of propaganda, as philosophy was once bent to serve theology. That would obscure and cripple both, for incompetent theory can only be boiled down into worse agitational pamphlets. There is no substitute for rigorous analysis. But all social investigators, and radicals in particular, owe their readers -not all of whom have the leisure to spend hours decoding oblique arguments- clear, concise summations of their principal findings. What is simple must be left simple; what is complex must be clarified. Here it is to Wallerstein's credit that he sandwiches a lengthy and difficult exposition between an introduction and conclusion that are clear, forceful, and intelligible to any literate adult. All the more unfortunate that what falls between should be so rough to swallow, much less digest -not because it is left raw and unseasoned.

Lamentably, the insights of the present volumes may well remain privy to a restricted circle of initials. *The Modern World-System* makes ideal reading for advanced graduates students who can test their intellectual agility against its verbal obstacle course. Anderson's books are more likely to be studied by individuals (alas not many) who are willing to put up with a show-off as the price of viewing his interesting fossil collection of extinct political forms. Ordinary and

activist readers, on the other hand, if they trouble to begin these studies, are unlikely to finish them. Worse, they may find themselves alienated from the analysis of collective history rather than attuned to it. Faced with a murderous world that demands action now, they may well conclude that all such inquiries waste precious time better devoted to immediate, practical involvements. For them, history remains a nightmare from which they struggle to awake. But creative commitment requires clear insight into real possibilities and limitations; one must interpret the world -see how it has come to work- in order to change it. Here there is a place for studies that dare to ask and attempt to answer really important questions about society as history. For such insight depends on knowledge of how long-range historical developments -the creation of a capitalist world-economy, the formation of national states, and the connections between the two- laid the tracks for the locomotive of modern politics. 'That kind of knowledge', writes Wallerstein, 'would be power... a power that would be most useful to those groups which represent the interests of the larger and more oppressed parts of the world's population' (p. 10).

Half a thousand year ago, north-west Europe was a marginal outpost of human habitation. World history since that time has been mainly the history of North Atlantic capitalism's reorganisation of social existence on a global scale -and of resistance to it. Now, when high officials blithely describe and use food and fuel as political weapons, when millions starve as multinational agri-business thrives, when growing numbers of state-managers dispose over nuclear devices whose use would spell the end of planetary life, there is sufficient reason to inquire how this state of affairs could come into being. For the process is still in motion, and the present remains history - Jumbo History.