

# Notes on the 'Nairn-Anderson Theses'

What follows is an initial and provisional assessment of the strengths and weaknesses, ellipses and omissions, and contemporary relevance of the series of texts that have come to be known as the 'Nairn-Anderson Theses'.<sup>1</sup>

The key tenets of the 'Theses' in my view can be broken up into three essential themes.

1. *An articulation of the notion of British 'particularism'*. Even though in the political tradition from which I come expressions of British particularism have been viewed as somewhat heretical, I think it is the case that without a very basic grasp of the fact that in certain fundamental historical respects Britain/England is 'different' (concretely, by way of contrast with Europe, and in particular with 'western' Europe) then one is faced with great difficulties in any attempt to unpick the root elements of present-day British reality and the essentially *British* historical process which underlies it. The problem faced by British socialists has never been the idea of British 'particularism' as such but rather that of British *superiority*: in the sense of both the concrete reality of the bourgeois society facing it, and in the way that the British left has in successive waves incorporated the reactionary assumptions behind the reality (Labourism; British Stalinism; Healy, Grant Cliff et al). But a British Marxism which rejects the notion of British particularism in the name of a disavowal of British superiority will actually end up reinforcing the very idea of the latter: in much the same way as the 'great-power' internationalist's disavowal of 'narrow nationalism' actually reinforces the chauvinism of the great power itself, or as the revolutionary syndicalist's abstention from the political struggle actually reinforces the position of the bureaucrat.

It is necessary to say at this point that there is not as a consequence of this some particular 'British' road to socialism (although this is a conclusion that some have drawn). The socialist revolution, in the last analysis, only has real meaning as an international revolution (despite its invariable initial political target being a national bourgeois state), and socialism as a system is supra-national by definition. But the observation that capitalism too is 'international' - that 'capitalism one country' is as much of a fiction as 'socialism in one country' - is true *only up to a point*. Capitalism - uniquely - is *congenitally* nationalist, and English capitalism so *a fortiori*. The 'internationalism' of capitalism is a *contradiction*: a principal motor towards its demise. The international nature of capitalism and the international nature of socialism are in *essence* only as congruent as the market and the plan.<sup>2</sup>

2. *The English Revolution stands out as distinct from bourgeois revolutions in general as a result of its 'prematurity'*. As a consequence, the resultant constitutional settlement - in which the 'gentry' were ascendant and the 'bourgeoisie' willing subordinates - the English/British state acquired at birth a 'pre-modern character'. This obtains today, and finds its expression in:

- the structure of the state (monarchy, House of Lords, Civil Service, links with the private education system, etc.);

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<sup>1</sup> The principle texts of its original statement and subsequent updatings being Tom Nairn, 'The British Political Elite', *New Left Review*, 23 (1964), Perry Anderson, 'Origins of the Present Crisis', *New Left Review* 24 (1964), reprinted in *English Questions* (London, 1992), Nairn, 'The English Working Class', *New Left Review* 24 (1964), 'Anatomy of the Labour Party', *New Left Review*, 27 and 28 (1964) and 'The Fateful Meridian', *New Left Review* 60 (1970), and Anderson, 'Figures of Descent', *New Left Review* (1987), also reprinted in *English Questions*.

<sup>2</sup> 'The national state created by capitalism in the struggle with the sectionalism of the Middle Ages became the classical arena of capitalism. But no sooner did it take shape than it became a break upon economic and cultural development. The contradiction between the productive forces and the framework of the national state, in conjunction with the principal contradiction - between the productive forces and the private ownership of the means of production - make the crisis of

- the continuing existence of conflicts of interest within the bourgeoisie between (overseas) financial operations and manufacturing);
- politics (culture and ideology), both at the level of bourgeois society and of the working class.

This model of the English Revolution poses problems in a whole host of areas: I will outline only four of the most important in what follows.

First, the very use of the concept of the 'bourgeois revolution' itself. The most telling complaint made against Anderson's 'Origins' - by E. P. Thompson in 'Peculiarities of the English'<sup>3</sup> - was to ask by what standard was the English Revolution being judged? If it was, for example, by comparison with the French - as the best known and most commonly referred to bourgeois revolution - then, even by Anderson's own yardsticks (relative social weakness and the lack of ideological clarity of the bourgeoisie, representation of non-bourgeois forces in the Revolution itself, a post-Revolutionary settlement featuring apparently pre-capitalist social and political forms) then even the French Revolution itself (not to mention all the other bourgeois revolutions) appears somewhat atypical.

There are two ways out of this problem. The first, and the one that Thompson seems to favour, is a rejection of any use of the concept at all, regarding actual bourgeois revolutions themselves merely as events: unique and contingent, particular to the social formation in which they occur. (The most extreme form of this approach is found in the school of 'revisionist' historiography, in which the very idea that 'revolutions' of any character took place is denied.) Clearly, such an approach is incompatible with Marxism.

The other way lies down the road of a more systematic exposition of the typology of the bourgeois revolutions, with the aim of identifying what is common and what is specific to each particular instance, in order to construct a theoretical understanding of the dynamics of the whole chain of European bourgeois revolutions against which concrete manifestations of the phenomenon can be analysed. Although there have been a number of attempts at this, the surveys of the bourgeois revolution that we have to hand tend to remain anchored to the level of *narrative*, with either no attempt at a theoretical systemisation of the phenomenon, or the construction of a theoretical 'model' so abstract and schematic as to be of little use.<sup>4</sup> Two surveys of merit do deserve mentioning, however. Anderson himself, in an essay called 'The Notion of the Bourgeois Revolution',<sup>5</sup> outlines a possible *approach* to the resolution of the problem, while Alex Callinicos's 'Historical Materialism and Bourgeois Revolutions',<sup>6</sup> while worthy, eventually fails in the end to break out of realm of the contingent. Interestingly enough, Anderson's own study of the state - *Passages From Antiquity to Feudalism* and *Lineages of the Absolutist State*<sup>7</sup> - were themselves only intended as parts one and two of a four-part series, part three of which was to 'deal specifically ... with the chain of the great bourgeois revolutions, from the Revolt of the Netherlands to the Unification of Germany.'<sup>8</sup> For good or ill, however, Anderson never, for whatever reason, completed the task (and, considering his present-day concerns, it is unlikely that he ever will). In the foreword to *Lineages*, however, he outlined the theoretical parameters and pitfalls of the task of Marxist historiography so clearly that it is worth quoting at length:

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capitalism that of the world social system.' Leon Trotsky, 'War and the Fourth International', *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1933-34*, 304.

<sup>3</sup> *Socialist Register* (1965), reprinted in Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory* (London, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> See Robert Lochhead, 'The Bourgeois Revolutions', *Notebooks for Study and Research* 11/12 (1989) (especially 9-16) for a representative example.

<sup>5</sup> *English Questions*.

<sup>6</sup> *International Socialism* 43 (1989).

<sup>7</sup> Both London, 1974.

<sup>8</sup> *Lineages*, 11.

On the one hand, 'abstract' general models are constructed, or presupposed ... without concern for their effective variations; on the other hand, 'concrete' local cases are explored without reference to their reciprocal implications and interconnections. The conventional dichotomy between these processes derives, doubtless, from the widespread belief that an intelligible necessity only inhabits the broadest and most general trends in history, which operate so to speak 'above' the multiple empirical circumstances of specific events and institutions, whose actual course and shape becomes by comparison largely the outcome of chance. Scientific laws - if the notion of them is accepted at all - are held to obtain only for universal categories: singular objects are deemed the domain of the fortuitous. The practical consequences of this are to render general concepts ... so remote from historical reality that they cease to have any explicative power at all; while particular studies ... fail vice versa to develop or refine any global theory. The premise of this work is that there is no plumb-line between necessity and contingency in historical explanation dividing separate types of enquiry - 'long run' versus 'short run' of 'abstract' versus 'concrete' - from each other. There is merely that which is known - established by historical research - and that which is not known: the latter may be either the mechanisms of single events or the laws of motion of whole structures. Both are equally amenable, in principle, to adequate knowledge of their causality. ... One of the main purposes of the study undertaken here is thus to try to hold together in tension two orders of reflection which have often been unwarrantably divorced in Marxist writing, weakening its capacity for rational and controllable theory in the domain of history.<sup>9</sup>

(As an aside, it could also be argued that a similar deficiency of analysis exists for the general concept of the *proletarian* revolution, all of whose concrete instances - bar one - are commonly referred to as 'exceptions' (Eastern Europe, Yugoslavia, China, Cuba, etc.), and whose standard comparative 'model' - 1917 - may not be itself hardly 'typical' if measured against a projection of the kind of revolutionary overthrow that will in the future be necessary for the heartland of capital in western Europe and northern America.)

The second significant problem with the Nairn-Anderson interpretation of the English Revolution centres on the view of the class character of the forces that both made the Revolution and emerged triumphant from it. In 'Origins' Anderson rejects the schema of the Revolution as a 'clash between a rising bourgeoisie and a declining aristocracy' as 'clearly untenable', preferring instead to see a conflict between 'two segments of a leading class'<sup>10</sup> - of unspecified class character. He recognises the existence of a 'rationalised agrarian and commercial capitalism ... in England for a century before 1640', only later to judge that only '*after* a bitter internecine struggle', did 'the landed aristocracy ... *become* its own capitalist class'.<sup>11</sup> The resulting settlement created 'a permanent political interpenetration of the "moneyed" and "landed" interests, which maintained the political and social subordination of merchant capital', notwithstanding the fact that 'mercantile capital, the only true bourgeois kernel of the revolution, inherited the fruits of victory'.<sup>12</sup> Anderson returned to the theme in his later defence of the original model - 'Figures of Descent' - but limited himself to the acknowledgement of the 'emergence of a capitalist farming geared to the market ... already in the course of the sixteenth century',<sup>13</sup> preferring instead to concentrate on the class structure of nineteenth-century Britain.

This is not a small problem: failure to establish precisely the class character of the forces that both led and emerged triumphant from the Revolution has the potential to undermine the whole analysis, since it is the particular character of the Revolution itself that is its cornerstone. Resolution of the difficulty would appear to lie in the direction of a more detailed analysis of the character of development of capitalist economic relations in England

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>10</sup> *English Questions*, 17.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 17, 20 (my emphasis).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 19, 18.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 130.

*prior* to the Revolution, Marx himself points the way in this (although his writings on the progress of English/British capitalism are, as Anderson himself has pointed out, far from consistent):

The puzzle of why the English Revolution was conservative in character ... is to be attributed to the permanent alliance between the bourgeoisie and the greater part of the big landlords, an alliance which essentially differentiates the English Revolution from the French - the revolution that abolished big landownership by parcellation. Unlike the French feudal landowners of 1789, this class of big landed proprietors, which had allied itself with the bourgeoisie and which, incidentally, had arisen already under Henry VIII, was not antagonistic to but rather in complete accord with the conditions of life of the bourgeoisie. In actual fact their landed estates were not feudal but bourgeois property. On the one hand, the landed proprietors placed at the disposal of the industrial bourgeoisie the people necessary to operate its manufactories and, on the other, were in a position to develop agriculture in accordance with the state of agriculture and trade. Hence their common interests with the bourgeoisie; hence their alliance with it.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, at the *outbreak* of the Revolution the landed aristocracy was already 'feudal' only in appearance: *socially* its dominant sections were based on capitalist relations of production. It is the mechanism whereby this was accomplished that is worthy of more attention (which is an area already the subject of extensive debate), and which needs to be squared with the problem of the need for an analysis of the typology of the bourgeois revolution outlined above.

It also points to the third area of difficulty with the Nairn-Anderson model: the suggested conflict of interests *within* the bourgeoisie in the centuries following 1689. The argument goes something like this: the 'hegemonic' bloc of agrarian and commercial capital established during the Revolution and consolidated by the settlement of 1689 created - through the expansion of capitalist agriculture - the conditions favourable to the process of industrialisation which began a century later; the *industrial* bourgeoisie which emerged during this period was excluded from the political structures already established, and was, bar the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, unable to stamp its influence on bourgeois society; when other countries began to industrialise (Germany, the US, etc.) and British capital thus had to *compete* with other capitalist economies on an international scale (for the first time in its history), the industrial bourgeoisie was hampered by its political exclusion from state and government and it was those sectors of capital - principally commercial and financial - more closely tied through historical social and economic connections with the old aristocratic nexus which prospered; this further reinforced the relative decline of British manufacturing which itself in turn progressively enhanced the dominant position of commercial capital - centred on the City of London - within the bourgeois bloc. That this state of affairs still persists until well into the twentieth century is witnessed by the Thatcher government, whose crash and burn approach to British manufacturing was combined with the explosion of speculation in the City in the 1980s.

Now, this argument is not without appeal: it appears to explain some clearly observable features on British economic development - late-nineteenth century decline, international significance of the City, etc. Other writers too have been attracted to this type of model of the British capitalism: John Ross's history of the Tory Party<sup>15</sup> is based almost entirely on an amended version of it, while Geoffrey Ingham's *Capitalism Divided?*<sup>16</sup> (in which he argues that dominant within British capitalism is a City-Treasury-Bank of England 'nexus') is explicit in its acknowledgement of Anderson and Nairn.

However, problems with this approach do remain. The concentration and centralisation of capital which ushers in the emergence of monopoly capitalism at the turn of the century sees the appearance of *finance* capital as the

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<sup>14</sup> 'A Review of Guizot's Book, "Why Has the English Revolution Been Successful?"', Marx and Engels, *Articles on Britain* (Moscow, 1971), 93-4.

<sup>15</sup> *Thatcher and Friends* (London, 1983).

<sup>16</sup> London, 1984.

predominant form of capital for our epoch. Finance capital is the product of the greatly increased interpenetration of commercial and industrial capital, but in its developed form *transcends* both of its constituent elements (as it does the economic constraints of its nationally determined birthplace). With its emergence (and only then) is the *complete* internationalisation of the capitalist mode of production as a world system possible. In this period of nineteenth-century capitalism capitalist relations only find international expression through a world market which links domestic centres of capitalist production by means of *trade*: in other words, it was only the *realisation* of surplus value that took on an international form. But with the development of finance *capital* and monopoly *capitalism*, which begins to reach its highest stage only during the later post-Korean war boom (witnessed by, among other things, the rise of the multinational corporation), the *production* of surplus value (and, as a consequence, both the ownership of capital and the purchase of labour power) took on an international form; at which point, in other words, the capitalist mode of production in all its elements became truly 'international'.

Now, in this model of twentieth-century (*monopoly*) capitalism there is of course clearly little room for a conflict within a *single* national bourgeoisie between different fractions of capital (as implied by Anderson and Nairn, and as explicitly stated by Ingham and Ross). The peculiarities of capitalism as it operates in the Britain of the twentieth century - for they undoubtedly exist - must be explained by other means.<sup>17</sup>

The final area of difficulty with the conception of the English Revolution in Anderson and Nairn lies in the sphere of politics. One could argue (as some have) that if the English bourgeois revolution is in some sense 'incomplete', and that, as a consequence, the British state is in need of 'modernisation' (or, as 'Origins' puts it, 'that the unfinished work of 1640 and 1832 must be taken up where it was left off'<sup>18</sup>), then the 'completion' of the bourgeois revolution - that is, 'modernisation' of the state - could itself be accomplished under capitalism, without its overthrow. The way is then open for a political project that is not even social democratic, but liberal-bourgeois. It is indeed regrettably clear that the more mature Anderson is receptive to such a project, as the attention he pays in his later work to the ideas produced by the circle of intellectuals around *Marxism Today*, and to Charter 88, makes clear.

However, a political conclusion such as this is not an inevitable one (although it is particularly unfortunate for partisans of the original Nairn-Anderson analysis that its exponents have today collapsed into social-democracy and liberalism respectively). Recognition of the existence of democratic deficiencies under capitalism does not necessarily imply a bourgeois solution (even if one were possible) since, in our conception of politics, the fight for democratic demands is the task of the working class. What form such an approach would take today is a matter worthy of discussion, and would be contingent upon the particular conjuncture, but our discussions on the national question in Britain seem to indicate the kind of approach that is necessary.

What is certainly the case is the fact that that a *denial* of the significance (or even existence) of 'democratic' questions in order to insulate oneself from the dangers of bourgeois reformism is not Marxism but *economism*, an example of which was offered by Alex Callinicos in an article directly responding to Anderson's 'Figures'. For Callinicos, the problem with Anderson's analysis is that it

places at the top of the left's agenda the perfection of British parliamentary democracy through such devices as devolution or proportional representation. *Leaving aside whether such measures would be intrinsically desirable*, such a strategic focus could only reinforce the deep-seated parliamentary cretinism of the British left, and encourage their resistance to the fundamental truth of classical Marxism ... that the path to socialism lies the revolutionary destruction of the state, not its reform.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The most systematic demolition of the 'competing capitals' argument is to be found in Simon Clarke, 'Configurations of Dissent: Fractions of Capital, Class Struggle and the Decline of Britain', *Social History* (April 1988).

<sup>18</sup> *English Questions*, 47.

<sup>19</sup> 'Exception or Symptom? The British Crisis and the World System', *New Left Review* 169 (1988), my emphasis.

3. *The fact that Britain was the first industrial nation had a particular formative effect on its working class; in particular, the third quarter of the nineteenth century, following the defeat of Chartism, during which British capitalism enjoyed its greatest period of international industrial supremacy ('The Fateful Meridian') marked the early working class - thus far - irrevocably, and provides an explanation for the particular form of the dominant political expression of working class identity in Britain: Labourism.* Since the British working class was the 'first' it had no already existing models of theory or organisation to turn to: Marxism was yet to come. It did not even have a tradition of radical *bourgeois* ideology, forged in a struggle against absolutism, to guide it, and, moreover, the early stages of industrialisation itself coincided with all-out counter-revolutionary war against its continental version. (The contrast with France, and the influence of the radical-democratic ideals of 1789 on the early French utopian socialists, is striking.)

By 1848 working class resistance in Britain was temporarily foreclosed: partly through the sheer exhaustion of defeat, and partly as a result of its own political deficiencies. It was at this point that capital, having worn down working class insurgency, now found itself in a position to incorporate ideologically into bourgeois society the very class that it had fought for so long. The material basis for this process was the strength of British capital on a world scale. Nairn's description of the period which followed indicates its contours: 'In this unique conjuncture, the British economic revolution was carried outwards successfully while a social counter-revolution triumphed at its heart.'<sup>20</sup> When the ensuing caesura in working class organisation and resistance was ended some quarter of a century later, it took the form of the expression of the self-interests of an *aristocracy* of labour, corporatist to its boot-straps, forged out of historic defeat, in the most ideologically conservative social formation in the world. The political legacy of this experience remains with us to this day, explaining the unique degree of constitutional cretinism and paternalist insularity of British social democracy, and the weakness of any indigenous resistance to it.

It is interesting to note that the summary above is drawn more from the work of Nairn than it is from that of Anderson. Indeed, there is apparent a certain division of labour at work here: Anderson's focus is at the level of the *structural*: hence the sweeping, synoptic (and sometimes schematic) character of his work. Nairn, on the other hand, is more concerned with the *ideological*: with the political and the cultural. The subsequent evolution of their concerns - Anderson into his study of the state, Nairn's increasing obsession with nationalism - are clearly refigured here.

But perhaps it is this element of the Nairn-Anderson model - the historical analysis of Labourism - that is its most stimulating (at least for revolutionaries) since it touches directly on some of our practical concerns today: how to engage with the level of consciousness and types of political forms that obtain in the present. Nairn's analysis provides a powerful explanation of why what exists actually does exist - and in what form - and is a type of 'history' most amenable to being forged into a weapon of change.

There is, however, one massive, gaping void in the whole analysis: there is nothing - barely one single word - on Stalinism. Anderson does, in places, pay tribute to the historians associated with the Communist Party's History Group of the 1940s and 50s: Hill, Hilton, Hobsbawm, Samuel - and rightly so, since their contribution to British historiography is - quite literally - seminal<sup>21</sup>. But Anderson's eye is drawn to their existence as *historians*, not as Stalinists, or even particularly as 'Marxists'. And apart from this, and a few fleeting references to *Marxism Today* in his later work, the CPGB is, for both Anderson and Nairn, written out of existence.

Anderson has, of course, spilt a great deal of ink elsewhere on the question of Marxism in western Europe<sup>22</sup> - and for Anderson the Marxism that is his concern is that which developed out of or alongside the Communist Parties. It is even more curious, therefore, that there is no conception in any of the work of either Anderson or Nairn of the contours of a 'British Marxism'. Now, of course, Marxism in Britain never reached the level of implantation in the working class movement that it did in much of the rest of Europe, its small Communist Party emerging

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<sup>20</sup> 'The Fateful Meridian', 5.

<sup>21</sup> See *English Questions*, 55, 195, 282.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London, 1976).

congenitally influenced by syndicalism; and its intellectuals never reached the dizzy dialectical heights of an Althusser or a Sartre, preferring the more workaday task of historiography. But to simply state this is *precisely* to indicate the contours of a tradition of 'Anglo-Marxism' (a tradition that Anderson denies even exists as such): as peculiar a phenomenon in its own way as any of the other features of the British social formation discussed above.

It should, of course, broach no argument that an account of the formation of the working class in Britain which has no reference to the CPGB of the 1920s and 30s is not adequate. The gap is a surprising one, and all the more peculiar given much of the rigour of the other elements on the overall analysis.<sup>23</sup>

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There is, of course, another yawning gap in the Nairn-Anderson model - more forgivable perhaps since it was never something that was promised (and a subject worthy of rather more attention than this note). The account offered is of the development of *British* society, but, in reality, for Anderson and Nairn Britain is only Britain insofar as it is *English* (this is obviously not the case when we turn to Nairn's later writings, but these are far more unreliable in their political conceptions). Now, if we accept the overall conclusions of Nairn's and Anderson's historical analysis - and I think, with modifications, we must - they will need to be substantially augmented by taking account of the development of capitalism in the other national formations that make up the multi-national state that the mature Nairn dubbed 'Ukania'.

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<sup>23</sup> Any attempt to fill this gap should begin with the work of Brian Pearce and (especially) Michael Woodhouse in the Healyite journal *Labour Review* and elsewhere - see in particular Woodhouse's 'Marxism and Stalinism in Britain' in Woodhouse and Pearce, *Essays on the History of Communism in Britain* (London, 1975); and Sam Bornstein and Al Richardson, *Two Steps Back* (Ilford, 1982).