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By James Heartfield

Duncan Thompson's book, *Pessimism of the Intellect: A History of the New Left Review*, painstakingly reconstructs the journal's long-term engagement with the British left from its post-Prague Spring reconstitution up until today. Despite the intra-left skirmishes and role reversals, the bigger picture that emerges, writes James Heartfield, is of the British left's historical inability to act

The late John Merrington told me a story about his first day on the editorial board of the *New Left Review*, being interviewed by Perry Anderson in an office with a large map of the world behind him. All over the map were little red flags stuck in with pins. 'Are those all outlets', asked Merrington in wonder? 'No, they are places that we have written about', said Anderson.

The *New Left Review* started life as a college-based journal mostly edited by dissident members of the Communist Party of Great Britain, notably the historian E.P. Thompson and the founder of Cultural Studies Stuart Hall in 1960 – an amalgamation of two preceding titles, the *Universities and Left Review* and Thompson's *New Reasoner*. The duo that gave the journal its style though were two younger recruits, Anderson (Eton and Oxford educated, who edited from 1962 to 1983, to take up the reins again in 1999) and Robin Blackburn (also Oxford educated, who edited it in between, 1983-99). Anderson's Anglo-Irish father made some modest fortune as a customs official in China, capital which would subsidise the magazine in its early years.

The *New Left Review* was possibly more important than its editors understood at the time, becoming the defining voice of the *New Left*. It was the *New Left Review* that opened up the possibilities of a radical left that was organisationally distinct from the official Communist movement, and denouncing the suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968, avoided responsibility for the disgrace that all-but destroyed the membership haemorrhaging CPGB.

The journal was carried on a wave of trad-jazz listening, duffel-coated CND activists, radicals who felt as constrained by the strait-jacket of East European Stalinism as they did by the thirteen wasted years of Tory misrule (1951-64). Embarrassed by the pedantic style of the CP-influenced trade union leaders, these (then) younger radicals fed on the satire boom, and looked forward to a left that was, well, cool and trendy. The *NLR* sustained a reputation for exotic and challenging work, introducing British audiences to such European intellectuals, living and dead, as Antonio Gramsci, Georg Lukacs, Claude Levi-Strauss, Mikhail Bakhtin, Lucio Colletti, Louis Althusser and Walter Benjamin, as well as giving a launch pad here for Francis Mulhern, Terry Eagleton, and Americans like Mike Davis, Doug Henwood and David Roediger. Anderson's commitment to translating and popularising these different thinkers helped the journal to be more than a political journal. It served the growing Cultural Studies movement that was developing across North America, and today *NLR* is financially buoyant because of the library subscriptions from American colleges.[1]

The longevity of the *NLR* meant that one did not always pay attention to the editorial line that was often buried under some otiose rhetoric. When political conflict was high in Britain, the *NLR* sometimes seemed like so much irritating background noise – a reaction that might be philistinism, or just common sense. In writing this admirably clear and compelling book Duncan Thompson seems to have done the obvious and remarkable thing: he has read through the *NLR* in its entirety. His access to the internal documents sheds some light, but most compelling of all is his reconstruction of the intellectual journey the review took over its 47-year history.

As well as a determination to educate the English philistines, Anderson showed a talent for setting out the big picture, and was not bad at asking the question where are we at, particularly homing in on the paradox that the Communist left had won out in the worst possible circumstances, the underdeveloped East, while capitalism held sway where the working class was most advanced. But despite the grandiose statements, the underlying weakness of the *NLR* was its own sense of inadequacy to the moment, which gave rise to a tendency to invest great hopes in new social forces. An internal bulletin written in 1980 summed up the problem astutely:

‘Ever since the early sixties, the review had looked with hope to one potential agent after another to unhinge the ruling political order in England – each time overstating its radicalism or staying power.[2]

At various points the academics that made up the *NLR* editorial board glommed on to passing trends. Harold Wilson’s Labour Party was ‘the dynamic left-wing of European Social Democracy[3] and leading figures in the administration like Richard Crossman and Thomas Balogh were invited to write for the review. The left’s investment in Wilson’s white heat of the technological revolution was bound to be disappointed as he accommodated himself to power, and rather like Tony Blair he became in turn a great hate figure (moral support for the Vietnam war being emblematic for the left).

‘Build Red Bases’, wrote the *New Left Review* in January 1969, echoing Mao’s call for dual power in the countryside, except they were talking about the universities, hot with Vietnam protests, and echoes of the May Paris student riots. We must ask ourselves, wrote Robin Blackburn ‘whether the complex structures of late capitalism do not contain areas, sociologically inaccessible to the repressive forces of the ruling class which can become growing points of revolutionary power’.[4] Student activism was important, but in sociological terms it was not independence from capitalism that marked it out, but an openness to change that just as readily launched Richard Branson’s Virgin Records and Tim Puttnam’s Enigma Productions as revolutionary sloganeering. And though its explicit political ambitions for the students did not come to pass, it did the *NLR* no harm to insert itself into the consciousness of the sixties radicals that would go on to make up the culturati.

Duncan Thompson makes much of Peter Sedgwick’s criticism of the ‘Olympian detachment’ of the *NLR*. Sedgwick, who had been involved with the early *Universities and Left Review* went on to join the International Socialists (today’s Socialist Workers’ Party). For them it was the *NLR*’s stand-offishness from working class struggle that was the issue. There is some sense to the argument. It was ‘Olympian detachment’ that drove Tom Nairn’s disdain for Britishness, and his preference for the Common Market, and led to a preference for covering the struggles in the Italian labour movement to those in Britain’s. But much more important a failing was the *NLR*’s mundane attachment to whichever radical current offered itself as a vehicle for change.

Far from being too theoretical the Review was not theoretical enough. The tendency to manufacture deep sociological explanations for transient events certainly showed literary productivity, but it would be wrong to see that as necessarily representing theoretical work. ‘Theories’ were produced that in the end only echoed contemporary trends, without really criticising them. So between them Anderson and Tom Nairn manufactured the theory that Britain’s political revolution was, unlike its Continental counterparts, incomplete; an argument that became known as the Nairn-Anderson thesis. The idea was that the emerging capitalist class in Britain had done a deal with the old aristocracy to gain influence, leaving the old pre-democratic power structures in place; the inordinate influence of the City of London over the British economy, with its old-Etonian clubbishness, Nairn and Anderson thought, was evidence of the persistence of a ‘Gentlemanly Capitalism’.

Today it is not hard to see that they had just created a radical version of Harold Wilson's demotic denunciation of the Tories, with its ideological abandonment of class struggle in favour of 'modernisation'. The wholly false characterisation of Britain's gentlemanly capitalism that Nairn and Anderson formulated continued to confuse radicals for a generation. In 1988, *NLR* Editorial Board member Anthony Barnett distracted a disappointed left into the desert of Constitutional Reform to complete the bourgeois revolution with the organisation Charter 88; in 1995 Will Hutton retailed a version of the Nairn-Anderson thesis in his book *The State We're In* effectively drafting Tony Blair's apolitical modernisation agenda.

Of course, the *NLR* was capable of getting the answer formally right, and often did. Anderson himself noted that Wilson's criticisms of capitalism suffered a 'consistent displacement of attention from essential to inessential', but then followed him anyway.[5] *NLR* contributors like Michael Barret Brown and Ernest Mandel rejected the Third Worldist argument that there was an inherent conflict between the working class in the West and the poor of the Third World.[6] But such points were lost in the rhetorical fervour for a Third World revolution led by Castro, Guevara and Mao. These were in fact critical reflections on the journal's own tendency to lionise the Third World revolution while remaining sceptical about the potential of the British working class. On similar lines, Thompson points out an intriguing 1971 article on feminism arguing, rightly, that the 'ideology which characterises the women's liberation movement', is 'often explicitly and bitterly anti-Marxist'[7] – a criticism not often made today.

None of the core editorial team, though, had much familiarity with Marx's critique of political economy, and Thompson puts it fairly when he says they were 'less interested in economics and more attuned to political and questions of political strategy'.[8] Of course social processes, like the course of the economy, demand a lot more reflection, whereas politics is all on the surface and everyone can be an expert. In practice the editorial team found it easier to defer to boffins like Bob Rowthorn and Ernest Mandel to handle the economics, which tended then to be treated as a discrete subject.[9] Leaving the economics to someone else was a failing that would leave the Review accommodating to Geoffrey Hodgson's fashionable rejection of Marx's theory of economic crisis at the exact moment that it was strikingly confirmed.[10] That socialists had such faith in the durability of capitalism is at least part of the reason that the system did survive a crisis whose outcome was far from certain. Today, at the point that the capitalist economy has stabilised, the Review gives table room to Robert Brenner's impressionistic predictions of financial melt-down.[11]

Another striking blindspot was the *NLR*'s lack of coverage of the British military occupation of northern Ireland from 1969 (the British Army's 'operation banner' was only formally wound up in August 2007). Where student rebellions, Wilson's government and the Scottish National Party were all lauded as a challenge to the British state, the one profound challenge to state power by the Irish Republican Army was ignored. Despite the existence of a 'full-scale civil war' an internal bulletin admitted that 'a tacit impasse' on the editorial board meant that 'by common consent', the question of Ireland was 'avoided in the *NLR*.[12] What was the nature of the 'common consent'? At the time many of us thought that it was Anderson's own Anglo-Irish background, which he shared with another board member, Fred Halliday, that gave rise to the Review's silence on the repression in Ireland. Certainly Halliday and Blackburn indulged the pro-Unionist Workers' Party's characterisations of Republicanism as a reactionary force, and support for the national claims of unionism. In the end the personal loyalties were less important than the fact that this was one issue where the British left entirely abdicated responsibility.[13] In the case of the *NLR*, Thompson works out, the silence lasted twenty-five years, broken only by the publication of an article by the Workers' Party fellow-travellers Henry Patterson and Ellen Hazelkorn in 1994. Imagine if *The Village Voice* had given the American military a pass on its war in Vietnam, or *Counterpunch* refused to comment on the invasion of Iraq.

The shortcoming in the Review's claim to novelty were exposed in the 1980s, when it rallied to the cause of the Labour left in its struggle for the party leadership. This radical turn in the Labour Party was in fact an after-effect of the country's swing to the right. The leftists had all re-joined Labour, where they were well-represented in the constituency organisation, just as the Party's trade union paymasters (who had been a moderating influence) withdrew, fed up at the Callaghan government's attacks on them. The left's leader Tony Benn, and his revivalist, back to 1945 socialism was lauded in the Review: 'A new labour left with impressive rank and file strength is engaged in a pitched struggle with the quasi dynastic authority of the parliamentary party'.[14]

Joining Benn's bandwagon pulled the *NLR* onto unfamiliar ground – left wing traditionalism. The Communist Party of Great Britain, still smarting at their losses in the struggle for the youth of 1968, adopted a pointedly revisionist pose with the relaunch of their journal *Marxism Today* edited by Martin Jacques. The roles were reversed: *MT* was trendy, *NLR* fusty. It was a difficult time to be on the left, caught between the Scylla of *MT*'s specious 'new thinking' (Blairite de-politicisation before its time) and the Charybdis of Tony Benn and Arthur Scargill's 'resolute Left'. On the Review, funnily enough, it was the late Ralph Miliband, father of New Labour ministers Ed and David, who led the assault on Jacques' new thinking along with Goran Therborn and *University and Left Review* veteran Raphael Samuel. Samuel made some strong points against the 'filofax Marxists' and 'Designer socialists' *Marxism Today*: 'taking its cue from feminism, it counterposed "new social forces" to the "pre-historic" ones ... Workers, at any rate male workers, appear as objects of contempt, "racist" and "sexist," beer-swilling and pot-bellied, loud-mouthed and according to *Marxism Today*'s fashion writers, the wearers of shapeless clothes'.[15] Of course the category 'new social forces' (more often 'new social movements') was a short-hand for the constituencies that the *NLR* itself had lauded previously: students, CND activists, Third Worldists, minority nationalisms.

The problem with this rearguard action against the 'filofax Marxists' was that the *NLR*'s resistance to 'anti-welfare state, anti-union and anti-party' ideologies was boxing it into a defence of the very organisations that had failed the working class – the welfare state, the trade unions, and the Labour Party. Defensiveness bred conservatism, when only a forward-looking policy could have presented a real challenge to the emergence of a *Marxism Today*-scripted New Labour Party.

The all-too-predictable failure of the resolute left, shunned by the very class it claimed to defend, left the *NLR* in disarray. Thompson gives a good account of the internal dissent that wracked the Review, which explains a lot of the subsequent trajectory of many embittered leftists today. It is intriguing, for example, to discover that some of the key ideologues of the left's humanitarian intervention policy, the husband-and-wife team Quintin Hoare and Branka Magas who spear-headed the case for intervention in Bosnia in 1996, and Euston Manifesto blogger Norman Geras were the International Marxist Group's faction on the *NLR* editorial board. In *Marxism Today*, Fred Halliday lent support to the 1991 war against Iraq on the grounds that this was a UN war, not an imperialist one. Anderson, though, had the good sense to pull the Review back from the radical trend for supporting humanitarian imperialism.

Interesting, too, is the relationship that the Review had with the organised left-wing parties, flirting with Maoism and Trotskyism in turn, but never losing the organisational independence of the Review, which according to one insider acted as a 'fantasy politbureau'.[16] Perhaps surprising, given the Review's defining role in the formation of the New Left, is how they saw it as largely a movement outside of them, that they were intervening in, seeking to win over. When Anderson surprised everyone by resuming editorial duties in 1999 he wrote 'the life-span of journals is no warrant of their achievement' in the kind of reflective editorial he was best at: 'A couple of issues, and abrupt extinction, can count for more in the history of a culture than a century of continuous publication'.[17] The *New Left Review*'s contribution to the intellectual life of the English-speaking world has indeed

been profound. But on the essential question of the working class challenge to the survival of capitalism, the *NLR*'s intellectual heritage summarises the left's failure to act.

James Heartfield writes and lectures on economic regeneration. He is also a director of Audacity.org, campaigning for the building of new homes

Footnotes

[1] Since the late sixties, one 1984 editorial memo noted, 'between a half and two-thirds of the Review's readers have been overseas, with a particular concentration in North America, Northern Europe, Australia and Japan', Thompson, p 211.

[2] Thompson, 99

[3] *NLR* September 1964, Thompson, p 27

[4] Thomson, 54

[5] *NLR* September 1964, Thompson, p 27

[6] Thompson, 35

[7] Thompson, 94, the author was Branka Magas

[8] Thompson, 74; rather late in the day, Blackburn wrote a long book about pension funds, *Banking on Death*, 2002

[9] This is perhaps why the *Bulletin of the Conference of Socialist Economists*, later *Capital and Class*, which in political outlook was hardly that 10 distinct from the *NLR*, survived as a specialist journal.

[10] 'The theory of the falling rate of profit', *NLR*, March 1974; Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, 115;

[11] See Heartfield, *Zombie Anti-Imperialists vs. the 'Empire'*, <http://www.spiked-online.com/Articles/0000000CA6BA.htm>

[12] *A Decennial Report*, 1974; Thompson, 95

[13] See for example the account of the *Guardian* newspaper's aggressively anti-Republican stance in Murray McDonald's comic masterpiece *50,000 Editions of the Imperialist, Warmongering, Hate-Filled Guardian Newspaper*, 2007

[14] *NLR* September 1981; Thompson, 116

[15] Thompson, 128; *NLR* September 1987

[16] Thompson, 123

[17] January 2000

Info

Duncan Thompson, *Pessimism of the Intellect: A History of the New Left Review*, Merlin Press, 2007