



A ZONE OF
ENGAGEMENT

Perry Anderson

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Foreword

The engagement to which the title of this book refers needs a few words of explanation. The texts below are critical essays on a variety of thinkers of the post-war period. In disciplinary range, these figures include historians of different fields, from antiquity to the recent past; sociologists who have taken the set of human societies as their subject; philosophers and critics of the political and cultural problems of modernity. In geographical setting, the writers involved have worked in what is still the principal region of intellectual production at large: the four leading countries of Western Europe – German, France, England, Italy – and the United States. If the contrasts in interest and outlook among the individual figures discussed are often wide, the ideas of all pass, in one way or another, by the crossroads between history and politics. This is the area that has taken up most of my intellectual life, and explains the cast of this volume.

The selection of authors considered here is partly a product of circumstance, as opportunity or solicitation arose. But it also corresponds to a temperamental choice. Out of the various possible motives for writing about the work of others, one combination has typically prompted me. The principal impulse behind these essays is one of admiration. Without this, none would have been written. In a general intellectual survey, I can be as hostile or dismissive – to the point of destruction – as anyone. The condition of a specific engagement, however, has always been respect. But I also need to feel a significant dissent. Without that, the precipitant of the form most natural to me seems to be lacking. So while this book is a record of different admirations, it is not an inventory of affinities or influences. The one exception is the piece on Isaac Deutscher, written as an introduction to a posthumous collection of his essays, rather than as a critical assessment of his major work, and so in a category apart. Generally speaking, I find it difficult to write about those to whom I feel, in one way or another, too intellectually close: which explains why, for example, this volume contains no appreciations of Eric

Hobsbawm, or Fredric Jameson, or Sebastiano Timpanaro, about all of whom I would like to have written. Some grain of resistance seems necessary to irritate a liking into a capacity for writing.

In recent years, intellectual history has become a battleground of rival procedures. The approach adopted below is at some distance from most of these. Roughly, three antagonistic programmes now dominate the field. The first and most long-standing takes single concepts or themes as its unit of enquiry, tracing their vicissitudes across time in the work of successive thinkers. This is the method practised by Isaiah Berlin, and discussed in the chapter here devoted to him. The second studies 'discourses' as the collective language of ideologies current at any given time, rejecting any extrapolation of particular notions from them, and subordinating the contribution of individual authors to historically limited moves within them. Quentin Skinner has been the leading advocate of this way of treating, in particular, political ideas. Thirdly, of course, there is the deconstruction of texts developed by Jacques Derrida, which refuses stability of meaning to anything that is written, seeking to show the systematic dependence of all that is enounced on what it denies, and the dissolution of the author into an infinite chain of unauthorized significations. The essays collected here are of different lengths and registers, but they imply a common norm of reading that is distinct from these modes. They are centred on individual authors – not concepts, discourses or texts – whose work they aim to reconstruct, so far as possible, as an intentional unity, situated within the intellectual and political currents of their time. They assume neither automatic coherence nor inherent dispersion in the writing of their subjects. Rather they try to locate specific contradictions of argument where these occur, generally treating them not as random lapses but as symptomatic points of tension, either within the body of thought itself, or with the evidence beyond it. Such contradictions can take the form of capsizals of meaning, but they need not do so. They may indicate a limitation of reasoning, or a complication of it; be signs perhaps of a critical infirmity, or a productively unresolved complexity, of argument. There is no general rule for reckoning their upshot: each case has to be judged on its own merits.

The first attempt I made at an intellectual history of this kind was an essay on Antonio Gramsci, written in 1976.¹ Gramsci, as it happens, was a writer whose notes in prison were rife with extreme contradic-

1. 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', *New Left Review*, 100, November 1976–January 1977, pp. 5–78; published as a book in Italy under the title *Ambiguità di Gramsci*, Rome 1978.

tions, of concepts and of arguments, that a circumspect secondary literature had looked away from. Reading them closely led me to something like an analytic tableau – formalizing the logic of the sliding bases of his key notions: hegemony, civil society, war of position, and others – and at the same time, to a detailed reconstruction of the historical debates – involving Delbrück, Kautsky, Luxemburg, Axelrod, Lenin, Trotsky, Lukács, Bordiga and others – that proved to be a condition of understanding his oscillations. The result was an approach allying elements of what could be thought of as the deconstructive and discursive programmes – in the service, however, of a rational decipherment of the originality of one, supremely deliberate, thinker. The historical method and findings of this essay seem to me to have lost none of their validity. But its aim was also political. Written in the wake of the Portuguese Revolution of the mid seventies, after the better part of a decade of radical ferment in Western Europe, this was an account of Gramsci that sought to draw a balance-sheet of the last great strategic debate of the international labour movement, for struggles still pending. That, at any rate, was my expressed intention. When it appeared, however, I received a letter from my friend Franco Moretti in Italy, the country still most buffeted by social turbulence, telling me that I had written a farewell in fitting style to the revolutionary Marxist tradition. In those days, this was not a verdict I was disposed to accept. But, not for the last time, his judgement proved better than mine.

In the next years, I found myself facing problems in the history of ideas in a second setting. If the heritage of European Marxism was one tradition in which I was formed, leading to reflections on Gramsci, the experience of the New Left in Britain was another background. Its leading thinkers were Raymond Williams and Edward Thompson. In 1978 I collaborated in the production of a volume of interviews with the former.² The result was a critical dialogue, across texts and contexts, reviewing all of Williams's writings to that date – a sustained exchange of a kind that is still perhaps unusual; certainly one essential to an understanding of the writer. Soon afterwards, a book about Edward Thompson sought to marry the form of the polemic, of which he is a master, with that of the profile, which calls for another kind of balance, in an attempt to capture his record as a Reasoner.³ Theoretical and historical issues were mainly at stake. Politically, the conclu-

2. Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters*, London 1979.

3. *Arguments within English Marxism*, London 1980.

sions of that work, though not unduly insisted on, remained close to those of the retrospect of Gramsci.

Such was roughly the starting-point of the essays in this volume. The first three of these, on Geoffrey de Ste. Croix, Isaac Deutscher and Marshall Berman, written in the early eighties, are substantially continuous, in concern and conviction, with texts of the seventies. The first two deal with eminent Marxist historians, the third with a cultural theorist of *soixante-huitard* sweep, whose work took its title from the *Manifesto*. These were, so to speak, intra-mural surveys within the intellectual world of the revolutionary Left, from a particular standpoint within it – one criticized by Marshall Berman, in his rejoinder to my account of him.⁴ It was by now clear, politically, that the unrest of the recent period was over – that the end of fascism in Portugal had been a conclusion, not a harbinger; and intellectually, that Latin Marxism, at any rate, had expired. Registering these general changes at the time, my view was that the tradition of historical materialism could only benefit from losing pretensions, which had always been untenable, of absorbing the culture of socialism; but that it would retain its central position on the intellectual map of the Left so long as no alternative theory of historical development, genuinely comparable in scope, emerged to challenge it – something that not even the greatest classical sociology had produced.⁵ Meanwhile, the international scene looked once again much as it had done before the disturbances of the sixties.

It was these conditions that changed abruptly in the second half of the eighties. The fourth and fifth essays below mark the turning-point in my own reactions. With the publication of the first volume of Michael Mann's historical sociology of power, it was immediately clear that there now existed a developed analytic theory of the pattern of human development, exceeding in explanatory ambition and empirical detail any Marxist account. Some of the criticisms that can be made of it are set down here; others developed elsewhere. But no work in a Marxist tradition could ignore the magnitude of the theoretical enterprise it represented. At the same time, against the background of perestroika, the political coordinates of the post-war world were starting to shift, as the societal ascendancy of the West became increasingly uncontested. The philosopher of the Left who, more than any other, came into his own in this new conjuncture was Norberto Bobbio. The distinctive synthesis of liberalism and socialism for which he stood had

4. See 'The Signs in the Streets: A Response to Perry Anderson', *New Left Review*, 144, March–April 1984, pp. 114–123.

5. See *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, London 1983, pp. 86–88.

no exact counterpart elsewhere. Defended since 1945, through the Liberation and the Cold War, it first acquired influence in Italy in the context of debates affected by the Portuguese Revolution – the same background against which my survey of Gramsci, whose conclusions Bobbio's arguments could have been directed against, had been written. A decade later his case appeared in a different light, and the insight of his work a benchmark of the difficulties facing the Left. Bobbio's origins and certainties, but also his hesitations, are the object of the reconstruction attempted here. Bobbio commented on this account in an exchange of correspondence subsequently published in Italy, which clarifies points of difference and of convergence between us.⁶

The change of focus in these texts gives the direction of the rest of the essays in this volume. For anyone working on broad comparative enquiries into the past – in my case, centred around the division of Europe, after the epoch of absolutism – the emergence of a formidable body of historical sociology was the most significant intellectual development of these years. The essays on W.G. Runciman and Ernest Gellner, with Weber as a common ancestor, pursue this interest. Further considerations on the trio of English sociologists discussed in these pages can be found in the companion volume to this one, which canvasses works not dealt with here.⁷ Political concerns of these years are reflected in overlapping fashion, with two principal areas of emphasis. The liberalism Bobbio sought to wed to socialism takes less radical, yet still markedly original, forms in the writings of Isaiah Berlin and of Ernest Gellner. The most imaginative recent challenge to it has come from Roberto Unger, whose politics rest on a historical interpretation of the past equivalent to another macro-sociology. At the same time, modern liberalisms have typically involved a commitment to value-pluralism, whose most explosive problem is posed by the nature and record of nationalism. The relations between the two are a recurrent theme explored here in the work of Weber, of Gellner and of Berlin. Beyond them, the issue of national identity itself has become a crux of contemporary debate in Europe, not least in the final books of two leading historians of their countries, Fernand Braudel and Andreas Hillgruber.

Set against all themes of cultural difference, on the other hand, is the pursuit of human nature. The most striking historical investigation of this issue in many years is Carlo Ginzburg's account of the millennial

6. 'Un Carteggio tra Norberto Bobbio e Perry Anderson', *Teoria Politica*, V, nos 2–3, 1989, pp. 293–308.

7. See *English Questions*, London 1992, pp. 205–238.

persistence of shamanistic motifs in popular imagination. The essay devoted to his work takes the liberties of friendship, to which he has warmly responded.⁸ What it does not say, though it is a general lesson from a range of writers considered here, is that a significant research programme is never spent as soon as its critics suppose. This has proved true of the tradition of structuralism, adapted by Ginzburg; of evolutionism, renewed by Runciman; of functionalism, animated by Gellner; of existentialism, socialized by Unger. All these doctrines were regarded as back numbers in the recent past. Today, in cases like these, it is their vigour which impresses. The future of Marxism is unlikely to be different. Its most powerful intellectual challengers, the various historical sociologies now arrayed against it, share a blind side whose importance is constantly increasing. They have little, if anything, to say about the dynamics of the capitalist economy that now rules without rival over the fate of the earth. Here the normative theory which has accompanied its triumph is equally – indeed avowedly – bereft: the Hayekian synthesis, for all its other strengths, disclaiming systematic explanation of the paths of long-term growth or of structural crisis. The come-back of historical materialism will probably be on this terrain, where already the signs of trouble are accumulating.

The last chapter in this book, unlike the others in considering a number of authors, brings some of its strands together in a survey of the different ways in which the end of history has been imagined since Hegel. The contemporary version of greatest force is that of Francis Fukuyama, in which a liberalism of the Right seeks to make sense of the times as the final victory of capitalist democracy. In this enterprise another intellectual tradition, dismissed for much longer, has displayed unexpected strength – German idealism. The end of history has been conceived in rival doctrines as well, and the essay tries to situate these, and their relationship to the Hegelian variant, in the context of the long-term development of liberal capitalism. From the mid nineteenth century onwards, this was a discourse that always also alluded to the destiny of socialism, sometimes with remarkable insight, in its sounding of the future. The book concludes with some reflections on where the socialist tradition stands today.

8. See his reply in the *London Review of Books* 13, 1, 10 January 1991; *Micro-mega*, 3, 1991, pp. 225–229. There is an attractive further glimpse of Ginzburg's theme in his forthcoming essay, 'Gli Europei scoprono (o riscoprono) gli sciamani'.

For, and against, Franco Moretti

Contents

Foreword	ix
1 Geoffrey de Ste. Croix and the Ancient World	1
2 Marshall Berman: Modernity and Revolution	25
3 The Legacy of Isaac Deutscher	56
4 Michael Mann's Sociology of Power	76
5 The Affinities of Norberto Bobbio	87
6 Roberto Unger and the Politics of Empowerment	130
7 W.G. Runciman: A New Evolutionism	149
8 On Emplotment: Andreas Hillgruber	169
9 Max Weber and Ernest Gellner: Science, Politics, Enchantment	182
10 Nocturnal Enquiry: Carlo Ginzburg	207
11 The Pluralism of Isaiah Berlin	230
12 Fernand Braudel and National Identity	251
13 The Ends of History	279
Index	377

Geoffrey de Ste. Croix and the Ancient World

The appearance of Geoffrey de Ste. Croix's *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* alters, significantly and unexpectedly, the image of materialist history in Britain. Part of this change lies simply in the surprise of the author itself. It would have been reasonable to think that the remarkable company of Marxist historians formed in the years immediately before or during the Second World War had long since become a finite pleiad, its names familiar to every reader of *History Workshop Journal*. But it is now clear how mistaken such an assumption would have been. Alongside Hill or Hobsbawm, Hilton or Thompson, Ste. Croix must be entered as a comparable magnitude. The paradox is that he is older than any of these.¹ The great work before us – avowedly designed for ‘students of Marx’ and the ‘general reader’ as well as for specialist scholars – was written during his seventh decade.

The second change that Ste. Croix's book brings is to widen once again – one hopes once and for all – the horizons of historical materialism to embrace the classical world as a central field of intellectual enquiry. Raphael Samuel has pointed out how important the ‘class struggle in Antiquity’ was for the terms of intellectual and political debate among Marxists around 1900 – yet how ‘almost entirely forgotten’ it became afterwards.² The reasons for this shift will have been complex. But among them, ironically, may have been the very rise of ‘people's history’, in its modern sense. The term lends itself, perhaps inescapably, to national horizons and definitions more easily than to universal ones: for obvious reasons, it is difficult to stretch the notion

1. Ste. Croix was born in 1910; Hill in 1912; Hilton in 1916; Hobsbawm in 1917; Thompson in 1924.

2. ‘British Marxist Historians, 1880–1980: I’, *New Left Review* 120, March–April 1980, p. 29.

from, say, the English 'people' back to the Roman *populus*. The peculiar pattern of evidence that has survived from the classical past, too, is drastically taciturn on the lives of the exploited and oppressed – providing little immediate purchase for the kind of detailed and imaginative investigations of them associated with the best of 'history from below'. But whatever its causes, the result of this shift of sensibility and interest has commonly been to separate Classical from 'European' – let alone British – history, in the mental repertoires of many Marxists. Such intellectual separation, of course, itself reproduces the institutional division between Ancient and Modern History (every other type) entrenched in academic departments. The effect of Ste. Croix's work is to overturn this situation. It restores the classical world to a natural and central position within the explanatory universe of Marxism.

It does so, however, in an especially pointed and challenging way. For its proposed reintegration of Antiquity involves more than simply a 'temporal' expansion of materialist historiography: it also invites a reconstruction of its concepts. *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* is one of the most strenuously theoretical works of history ever to have been produced in this country. Direct exposition and sustained critical discussion of Marxist concepts, at a very high level of analytic rigour, occupy a position in the overall design of Ste. Croix's book without equivalent in the practice of his peers. For that reason alone its repercussions will make themselves felt wherever social classes and the conflicts between them remain an organizing theme in the writing of history. It seems only appropriate that one of the incidental hallmarks (and pleasures) of Ste. Croix's writing should be the liberty and pungency of his topical asides – on the Conservative Party or the Welfare State, the Cold War or the Christian religion.

Two inter-related facts appear to have set Ste. Croix apart from his generation, among Marxist historians. He started his career much later, studying as an undergraduate in his thirties at University College, London (1946–1949), under A.H.M. Jones; and he came to classical studies after a decade of professional life as a solicitor before the War (1931–1939).³ His first book – his only one till *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* – was a survey of *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War*, published in 1972. This brilliant study, already revealing many of his gifts and idiosyncrasies, advanced a radical reinterpretation of the springs of the conflict between Athens and

3. See the entry in *Who's Who*, 1982.

Sparta in the fifth century BC, whose upshot was to shift primary responsibility for the outbreak of the war from the former to the latter, while emphasizing the unappeasable nature of the long-term antagonism between the democratic and oligarchic polities of these two slave-owning societies. Methodologically, the distinctive feature of the book is the extraordinary delicacy and precision of the textual analysis it deploys, in scrutinizing and revising the evidence for the origins of the Peloponnesian conflict. The two *tours de force* – one technical, the other philosophical – of Ste. Croix's approach here were his demolition of the traditional view of the Megarian decrees (generally seen as vindictive economic reprisals by Athens against a neighbouring city that provoked hostilities in Greece, which he argued were in all probability religious sanctions of rather limited significance, exploited for propaganda purposes by Sparta), and his reconstruction of Thucydides' vision of history at large. His sombre account of the Thucydidean thought-world, especially its conviction of the essential amorality of the relations between states, is of unforgettable power.⁴ It alone gives *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* enduring importance for the general reader.

In these passages, as throughout the book, the marks of the highest kind of legal training are unmistakable: a capacity to analyse, with the utmost ingenuity and vigilance, the finest nuance and most elusive context, by means of comparison or precedent, in a contradictory set of written documents, in order to arrive at the most plausible final rendition of meaning or event. At the same time, a lawyer's presentation is not always, as everyone knows, the easiest for a layperson. *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* shuns the attractions of any narrative. Its chapters are severely organized by problematics, virtually discontinuous from each other, with a minimum of linkage. Discussion of *res gestae* is constantly interwoven with criticism of accounts of them, in a manner more usual for a specialist article than for a book: other authorities are cited and cross-examined in detail, over many pages, within the body of the text itself. The title bears a somewhat wilful relation to the contents of the book, which include reflections on the end of the Peloponnesian War, and even the fall of Sparta or Athens a century later. Moreover, in what must be some sort of record for a recent historian, indifference to conventional expectations of storytelling, or even argument-setting, generates no fewer than forty-seven appendices, covering well over a hundred pages, after the conclusion of

4. *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War*, London 1972, pp. 22–25.

the main narrative itself – a formidable cliff for any reader, perhaps even the contemporary classicist, to scale. A more substantive criticism of the book, finally, might be that an element of involuntary advocacy creeps into Ste. Croix's allocation of responsibilities for the Peloponnesian War: Spartan policy, at all events, earns a series of judgements and epithets – 'selfish', 'cynical', 'expansionist', 'aggressive', 'repressive'⁵ – from which Athenian is generally exempt, even at times directly exculpated. Here the sympathies of the historian are at variance with the axioms of politics he draws from Thucydides, whose central lesson was that the logic of contention between all states in the ancient world was so implacable that their external policies could by nature never be other than ruthless and rapacious. With more reason to distribute political blame, for a catastrophe from which he suffered himself, Thucydides yielded less to it.

The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World is a very different kind of work. Constructed on a monumental scale, it surveys 1400 years of history – from 'Archaic Greece to the Arab conquests' – across 700 pages; and what pages. In a prose of exhilarating sharpness and clarity, Ste. Croix attacks the huge task of unravelling the successive class structures that spanned the evolution of the Ancient World. To this end the book summons up a fabulous range of sources. Classical historians have in some ways always needed to be more polymathic than most of their colleagues, for the stock of evidence that has survived from the Ancient World can be regarded in most respects – effectively all save its archaeological residue – as a closed inventory. Just because that quantity is for many purposes so limited, it tends to impose exceptional qualitative dexterity on those who investigate it: that is, an ability to move – and arbitrate – between different sorts of evidence that in later periods of history would rarely be brought together within the compass of any one programme of research. In *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, these peculiar skills are practised in virtuoso style. Ste. Croix mobilizes his evidence from lyric poems, municipal inscriptions, legal corpuses, imperial constitutions, patristic polemics, narrative annals, philosophical discourses, medical anecdotes, biblical texts, senatorial correspondence, popular tombstones, administrative papyri, numismatic slogans – not indiscriminately, but in each case incisively and critically. Some of the idiosyncrasies of his earlier writing persist. The title of the book is again misleading – more so, indeed, since Ste. Croix in no way confines himself to the

5. Ibid., pp. 158–166.