



Trouble in the Last Politburo

by Patrick Wright

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Robin Blackburn, the editor of *New Left Review*, displays the experienced calm of a former Trotskyist who has weathered countless internal feuds. Sitting in his office near the top of a gracious Queen Anne townhouse in Soho's Meard Street, he warns that the truth will not necessarily be found in the nasty things former comrades say about one another when they fall out. 'We acted in a high-handed way', he admits of the most recent bust-up. But he also pleads a 'fierce survival instinct' and a determination that his journal should not go the way of *Marxism Today*, *New Socialist*, *Spare Rib*, and other defunct publications of the left.

His antagonists, meanwhile, who identify themselves as 'the former editors of NLR', were holding a 'wake' to celebrate their own 'death and rebirth'. The invitations to this symbolic event opened with a coded quotation derived, with a multitude of nudges and winks, from James Joyce: 'I come to bury you deep my cold feary father poor old perryburns arsyverso all the auld Angry-Oirish sprung from the Garden of Eton gone into the dark La La La but hark! the childer is astirring Finn again wake!' Welcome, then, to another story of our times.

New Left Review was launched in 1960. It promised, or so E.P. Thompson advocated in the first New Left Book, a total offensive against apathy. It wanted a youthful uprising against bureaucracy and the torpid plodding of a much defeated Labour Party: as contributor Dennis Potter declared that year, 'it is impossible to be young in a dead land'. The first issues, which still have a terrific dust-defying energy about them, were edited by Stuart Hall. He had come to Oxford from the West Indies to write a doctorate on Henry James, but here he was a few years later championing the 'humane and democratic socialist' movement he wanted to see 'thrusting forward' inside the unions, 'pushing within CND', 'picking up the quick tissues in society, sloughing off the dead'.

As it set out in anti-Stalinist pursuit of 'humane and democratic socialist revolution', the new magazine hoped to break down the gulf between 'intellectual and industrial workers'. Dismayed by the anti-intellectualism of



the British left, it used theory in an admirably grounded way to clarify the challenges facing those who worked in education, housing, the health service, architecture and town planning. The 23 person editorial board included novelists Doris Lessing and Mervyn Jones, as well as figures like Raymond Williams, Ralph Miliband and Dorothy and E.P. Thompson. A network of New Left Clubs was formed by readers as ‘rallying points of disturbance and discontent within the local community’.

Perry Anderson, who was a contributor from early on, took the helm of this ambitious but financially precarious project in 1962. The Eton-educated son of an Anglo-Irish family with significant private means, he was in the position to refinance the ailing magazine and relaunch it with himself as editor (a position he held until the early eighties) and Robin Blackburn on the much reduced three-man editorial committee.

Shortly afterwards, Anderson published his own comprehensively scathing review of British intellectual life and then swept his readers into a high-minded remedial course that would run for a full twenty years. NLR and Verso, as New Left Books came to be called, produced streams of translations of European Marxists who would help build an intellectual opposition worthy of the name. The long and, since it has never really ended, fortunately pensioned march through the polytechnics and universities had begun. NLR may never have exceeded the very first print-run of 9,000 copies, but by the late seventies it had achieved considerable international standing as a theoretical journal of the ‘independent’ left.

New Left Review has been prone to schisms ever since Anderson relaunched it in that act of what one by now thrice-deposed member still recalls as ‘raw power’. But the most recent bust-up, which resulted in the resignation of the entire editorial committee, was unusually thorough-going. Former committee members speak of it brutally as ‘the coup’.

Interpretations differ sharply, but the events themselves are simply described. In 1990, and in a genuine attempt to reach beyond what Blackburn himself once described as the ‘steely Leninist core’ that Anderson had given it, NLR’s editorial committee set about expanding its membership. The new body, which was certainly more diverse than its predecessors, soon started to assert itself in a manner that one former member now regrets as partly ‘mistaken’, but which others defend strongly as entirely in line with the constitution.

Both Anderson and Ali are said to have discouraged this expansion, but it was not until last November’s AGM, when committee members expected to receive shares in the company, that the old guard struck back. Armed with



proxy votes, which they had quietly gathered in from dissociated veterans, they took control from the editorial committee and vested it to a new shareholders' trust controlled by Perry Anderson, his brother Benedict, and Ronald Fraser, the distinguished oral historian who now lives in Spain.

Shortly afterwards, the production editor, who had not been getting on with Robin Blackburn, was declared redundant on financial grounds, and the editorial committee was told, in only a few more words, to lump it or leave. Faced with this barrage, the entire editorial committee - amazed newcomers as well as grim-faced loyalists who had silently tolerated previous schisms and sackings - walked away from what one of their number now dismisses as the Few Left Review.

There is a long-established right wing sport - probably descended from fox-hunting - that consists of beating away at the tight thicket of militant names listed on *New Left Review's* masthead and then shrieking with exaggerated laughter at the old Etonians, millionaires and rebellious sons of leading banking families who are eventually flushed out.

With the recent bust up, however, the intellectual flagship of the Western left seemed to be sinking into its very own sea of farce. Here, as Professor Ellen Meiksins Wood (a former committee member) wrote at the time, were the scourges of capitalism resorting to 'the shabby tricks of hostile takeovers, leveraged buy-outs and boardroom coups' to stay in control. And here too, as Blackburn riposted, were a few diehard marxists on the editorial committee recouring to what they themselves were still inclined to dismiss as 'merely bourgeois' law in an attempt to resist them.

Meanwhile, as his victims ask, which Tariq Ali was it who waded in to bounce the editorial committee out through the door? Was it the unreconstructed militant who, only a few years ago, was still pouring vitriol on the 'pink professors' of the liberal academy? Or was it the laughing satirist who, in 1990, sent up *New Left Review* in a coded novel named *Redemption*, turning it into the New Life Journal - so named, as Ali explains with a heavily ironic chuckle, because of the rejuvenation that would be felt by all who joined is tortured editorial committee? Against this background, it is perhaps not surprising that former members of that extinguished body should be dressing Ali in dark glasses, epaulettes and braid, and denouncing him as the frontman of a disreputable junta.

Robin Blackburn is understandably keen to put the whole mess behind him, but he does draw a number of possible explanations through the murky details of the story - rather as a cautious fisherman might cast lures over a



weedy river, testing to see how far they will go before the line breaks. Partly, he suggests, it was a matter of defending the review's increasingly open-minded approach to the present crisis of the left against those on the committee who were behaving like 'gatekeepers' and generally carrying on as if NLR were 'the last politburo' rather than a magazine of ideas.

Tariq Ali expands on this. 'As far as I was concerned the choice was very simple. Ever since the late sixties, the NLR editorial committee had thought of itself as a kind of Leninist central committee'. This pattern of behaviour persisted 'long after the game was up'. As he says, 'the whole project around which NLR's map was drawn up - which goes back to the Russian Revolution of 1917 - has gone to the winds' and 'all that remained was posturing'.

Ali declares himself intrigued by the way 'People in small rooms acquire a sense of self-importance, and become very pompous and self-regarding'. There it was - a committee talking the language of democracy, when in fact it was made up of appointees who were accountable to no constituency at all. 'We looked and decided it was now or never. Either we transferred these problems into the legal structure of the company, or we faced them and sorted it out once and for all'. So NLR's satirist put on his boots and the unflinching look that one victim remembers as 'not a pretty sight', and went to work.

The bruised ejects dismiss these arguments as mere rationalisations. As one says of their unanimity on the issue, 'all we have in common is that we saw what was going on in there'. The financial crisis was 'massaged', suggests another, adding that the committee was abolished not because it was an imploding collective that put its own self interest before the survival of its project, but because it was a place of rational discussion, where decisions had to be justified, and office procedures could be properly examined.

There was a will to compromise, insists a third, adding that Blackburn's attempt to dismiss them as 'a bunch of adolescent incompetents' with inadequate business skills simply won't wash. For the committee members, some of whom only joined in order to help Blackburn break with the 'clandestine' culture of previous years, the row was less a matter of perestroika than a case of Perry Strikes Again.

The fact that Anderson never once turned up to argue his case, is taken to confirm his mythical status as 'the invisible hand' of NLR. It is said that he will not go on television, that he refuses to be photographed, and that he is one of those rare men who can actually step *back* into the limelight.



Over the years a formidable cult has been built up around Perry Anderson. It begins with boundless admiration for the gifted man who seemed to promise a future for Western Marxism, but it has turned nasty at every crisis. Former acolytes found themselves writing long and probably also footnoted papers about the 'dark side' of their erstwhile idol's personality, condemning this tireless examiner of other people's drafts and fragments as the destructive 'invigilator' of their endeavour.

Others, who left after earlier bust-ups, trace this morbid pathology back to the seventies, by which time NLR was already squandering the vast promise of the late sixties in a terrible Leninist psychodrama. They talk of an agonising situation in which an unyielding revolutionary politics came to be augmented by endless rounds of psychotherapy, and of the further miseries that followed as the distribution of manuscripts for ruthless comradely criticism came to be accompanied by exchanges of an altogether more personal kind.

People spent years drafting vast books - on Internationalism, Cuba, Vietnam - that never got completed. Partly this was the failure that has always attended such totalising ambition (Marx himself left a heap of uncompleted works). But it was also, or so one of these authors reckons, the consequence of the strict Leninist line that Anderson, Ali and others were at that time determined to impose. The project failed, this witness suggests, because of a striving for the correct line and the attendant lack of intellectual freedom.

Well into the eighties, NLR still ran its affairs along the lines of the Communist International. Kremlin-like 'Commissions' would be despatched to investigate problems in some outer Siberian section of the tiny office, and long 'plenum' meetings were held to decide whether or not Verso should print footnotes at the bottom of the page. Survivors remember Anderson condemning those who had embarked upon 'the smugglers' road to socialism' - a deviation which consisted of avoiding the hard language of class struggle and writing for compromised papers like the *Guardian*, *New Statesman* or *Marxism Today*.

Anderson was also quite capable of calling out heretics during those agonising years. Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér were leading members of the dissident Budapest School, which tried to assert a Marxist humanism against the Stalinist state. They recall a 'passionate and very unpleasant shouting match' in London towards the end of the seventies. As Fehér describes, Anderson 'declared the mass murders of the Bolshevik era to be the - sometimes necessary, sometimes not so necessary - cost for the "development of the forces of production"', and then denounced Agnes Heller as 'an agent of imperialism'.



Meanwhile the office seethed like a pressure cooker, erupting into regular steamy explosions. Neil Belton, the former Verso editor who is now at Jonathan Cape, remembers ‘a permanent atmosphere of tension’ with no less than ‘three episodes of financial crisis, accompanied by sackings, resignations and accusations of incompetence and worse levelled at the purges’.

These storms were ‘always followed by a will to believe that the worst was over and hung-over proclamations of an era of goodwill’; indeed, the new dawn was invariably also accompanied by ‘miraculous financial recovery’, and a bevy of new recruits who came in ‘with a militant song in their hearts and the conviction that their predecessors must have been a pretty unstable and unsavoury bunch’. This impression was, he suggests, ‘a necessary part of the psychological induction process’.

The historian Raphael Samuel, who supported the recent takeover, insists that even when the Leninist line was at its strongest, NLR and Verso, its associated publishing imprint, remained organs of reason rather than mere rectitude. The relationship between purity and contamination was certainly handled in a singular way. NLR kept a hard, anti-revisionist line well into the eighties.

It rallied a somewhat ghoulish coalition of Trotskyist and near Stalinist elements against Stuart Hall’s argument about the real cultural force of Thatcherism; and it tried, rather more nobly, to stem the rising tide of post-modernism by insisting, in the spirit of Ernest Mandel, that this strange deformation was really ‘late capitalism’ after all. Meanwhile, Verso became a leading publisher of just such dubious, backsliding material. From Habermas to Baudrillard and Virilio, the books would be brought out and then, if they posed a serious threat, dismantled at vast length in NLR and chucked into a bulging dustbin labelled the Retreat from Class.

Verso emerged from this as a lively independent publisher with a healthy market in North America, but where does *New Left Review* go now? The translator Quintin Hoare, who had been on the committee since early in Anderson’s editorship, may feel angered by the thought of a journal which ‘in the sixties and seventies, had a radical and indeed revolutionary project’, drifting into ‘eclectic directionlessness’.

But Blackburn, who has always been more pluralist than some of his colleagues, is undeterred. ‘We are not’, he replies firmly, ‘a journal for recycling an already established truth’. He speaks of the need for a ‘redefinition of the core programme’, and doubts - with another of his former



colleagues clearly in mind - that the cause is much furthered by radical professors for whom the class war is primarily about preventing 'revisionist' thoughts entering the seminar room. Tariq Ali joins him in looking forward to an engagement not just with social democracy but also with thinkers in the liberal tradition. 'Quite honestly', he says, 'you've got to look around and see what there is'.

And what of Perry Anderson? He is presently far away in Los Angeles, where he teaches at UCLA for six months of the year. So we can only join those members of the former editorial committee who line up to put their questions to his most recent books, *English Questions* and *Zones of Engagement*.

Both are characteristically large-minded and brilliant. The man who printed *New Left Review's* more worldly articles in a section called 'scanner' - a rudimentary *camera obscura* bolted onto the high altitude airship he made of the journal - is still flying at an incredible elevation. He scans continents, countries, and tracts of history alike. He flies over the works of eminent philosophers and sociologists, spotting the tiny shadows that reveal where fatal flaws have been insufficiently camouflaged. Even his footnotes have a lofty quality, amounting to what one observer calls a 'Dean's list' of everything that is not beneath serious notice.

But while Anderson rises up with breathtaking virtuosity to find the last word on *The End of History*, Thatcher's economics, and the ideas of Sir Isaiah Berlin, he is somewhat less forthcoming about his own trajectory. Indeed, as Fred Halliday - who baled out of NLR after the bust-up of 1982 - observes drily, you would hardly know from these books that Anderson himself has spent thirty years at the helm of a more or less revolutionary project.

Greg Elliot, who was blown out with no parachute in the explosion of 1986, goes further. Noticing that Anderson admits to having 'shorn' his reprinted essays of 'bombast and excess', he suggests that this shearing seems also to have altered the political character of the essays - taking them from a revolutionary marxist position to the altogether milder socialism of one who has become a star in the American academy.

Francis Mulhern, who outlasted Halliday but had resigned by the time of Elliot's departure, wonders whether Anderson is really making any concessions at all. He may describe the working class as 'a fading memory of the past' and declare baldly that 'None of the political currents that set out to challenge capitalism in this century has morale or compass today'. But as Mulhern remembers, Anderson was 'never one to burn out his project on short term illusions'. His views on the decadent state of parliamentary



government remain as unyielding as ever, even if they do now lead him to put Jacques Delors's idea of a strong federal Europe in the hopeful place where the revolutionary proletariat used to be.

I phoned Anderson at his Californian home in Bel Air, finding him just about to set off for the campus. I told him about the little group of ex-committee members who were gathered around his latest books trying to figure out his course through these confusing times. Was he now committed to the kind of revision promised by Blackburn and Ali, or did he remain, as Ferenc Fehér wonders, and not without a certain respect for the 'theoretical mettle' involved, 'the last Mohican of a now luckily defunct position'?

It was, said Anderson very reasonably, something of 'a tall order' to expect him to answer that lot in five minutes. We agreed to talk again the next morning, but by then the answerphone was switched on. Eventually, a house-sitting colleague phoned back to explain that Perry was giving a guest lecture in Phoenix, Arizona, and would not be back until late next week.

Back in Meard Street, heavy manuscripts are still dropping through the letter box. Robin Blackburn is pressing on with the familiar mix in his post-coup issues: a prominent Czech historian getting to grips with nationalism; an economic analysis of the present Russian crisis; an ornate study of computer games as they might have been played by hallucinating theorists from the mid-century German Frankfurt School; and a long look at the 'Chinese road to capitalism', which puts its limited hopes in such constraints as might be exercised by workers and bureaucrats rather than those notoriously unreliable students.

Tariq Ali is there too, remembering Balzac as he attacks 'market realism' and puts the case for political engagement in literature.

The resigned committee members, meanwhile, are still working towards their own announced 'rebirth'. They have yet to come up with a title for their new *New Left Review*, but suggest it will be a quarterly, more 'accessible' and altogether less 'Delphic and Olympian' than Blackburn's organ, with its first issue appearing in the Autumn. A few of the former editors, however, have found their own quiet ways back to Blackburn's door. At least, says this veteran whose 200th issue is now due, 'We are still here'. These are pluralistic times for the left: let two flowers bloom.

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