

Book Review

## The New Old World

by Perry Anderson, New York: Verso Press, 2009. \$39.95 US. ISBN: 978-1-84467-312-4. Pages 1-561.

*Reviewed by Aaron Henry<sup>1</sup>*

Perry Anderson's *The New Old World* (NOW) interrogates both the historical processes through which Europe emerged and the forces that structure the European Union (EU) polity today. In some respects, the historical scope, detail, and length of the text make it an impossible object to review beyond a mere recap of broad themes. So what is the theme of NOW? In two sentences: 'Europe is Dead. Long Live Europe!' The focus of NOW is the tumultuous history of Europe, its declines, its renewals, and its periods of malaise. Anderson's primary argument is that Europe has now entered a period of economic, political, social, and cultural decline.

Although decline is the guiding thread that binds this study together the structure of NOW and its method of analysis is very much in the character of comparative politics. NOW is laid out in four parts: The Union, The Core, The Eastern Question, and Conclusion. Anderson's focus is predominately on five member states – France, Germany, and Italy are used to analyze the established core of Europe; Turkey and Cyprus are mobilized not only to tilt the geo-physical borders of the EU but also point to the ahistorical nature of 'integration.' While in these individual studies Anderson develops a number of insights and detailed historical biographies, each study is used to demonstrate the stagnation or decline of the EU polity.

In what increasingly appears as an endangered method, Anderson examines his case studies through a historical materialist analysis. He deftly weaves economic transformations to ruptures in intellectual conditions - his analysis of Germany from philosophy to visual art is most striking (266-277) - cultural developments and sea-change shifts in national politics. The linkages and relations that Anderson offers between these spheres are well constructed and ensure that the

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'economic' does not emerge as an overly determinative site. Drawing on statistics of economic growth, education and art, Anderson argues that Europe is adrift, economically stagnant, intellectually torpid and falling under the thumb of American imperium. Though spanning the registers of the historical, economic, social and cultural, Anderson's erudite focus on the intellectual history of Europe is where the work shines brightest. The conclusion of the project consolidates this theme and reveals much of Anderson's purpose in *NOW*.

*NOW* concludes with a discussion of the displacement of Christendom within Europe, a shift, Anderson notes, that was not fully solidified even in the seventeenth century. Working from this transition, Anderson focuses on the making of Europe in both 'left' and 'conservative' traditions. This intellectual history combs the lives and works of Voltaire, Rousseau, Kautsky, Saint-Simon and Schlegel, and Monnet, to name but a few. This conclusion serves to align the text's case studies with a much longer historical trajectory. As Anderson outlines, the intellectual history of Europe was one characterized by disequilibrium and equilibrium, a progression of historical forces pushed by 'left' and 'right', without either ever obtaining intellectual hegemony (504). Rather, it is in the course of struggle that Europe inherited the bedrock of ideas that would cyclically create and destroy it. Knowing his audience, Anderson does not belabor this point. The history of Europe is as much bound up with the intellectual tradition of dialectics, as it is dialectical. The primacy Anderson accords between productive and vibrant intellectual thought underscores his preoccupation with the declining intellectual culture that has taken hold of Europe today.

Although the technocratic class is a running theme in *NOW*, the subtlety with which it is handled gives it an ethereal character throughout the text. Of course, Europe is no stranger to specters so it is not surprising that Anderson's account contains a few of them. We are given glimpses of its processes of class formation, a neoliberal social form born of 1980s restructuring. We see its affects on political ingenuity and its formative role in the disconnect between democratic participation and the supranational offices of the EU; however, much like in political practice, the technocratic class rarely shows face. Indeed, while the subtlety that Anderson develops in this treatment can be appreciated, foregrounding the intellectual hegemony of the technocratic class would have served to bind some elements of the project closer together.

Furthermore, in a lengthy chapter entitled "Theories", Anderson devotes nearly sixty pages in what appears to be a literature review.

However, on closer inspection Anderson develops an important point here. The chapter demonstrates that the best work in European studies is the product of American political scientists. Thus, EU funding bodies have generated an insular 'techno-academocratic' culture that is aloof to "wide public consciousness" and is in terms of its style and purpose "as technical as the regulations and directives of Brussels [itself]" (80). Thus, the review of the literature on the European Union doubles as an indictment of the colonization of the intellectual conditions in the EU by a technocratic culture. Sadly, this provocation remains underdeveloped and the reader is left with the task of mining out its significance to the project at large. Written before the 2008 crisis, *NOW* also suffers from the absent presence of the financial crisis. To his credit Anderson tries to rectify this and considers the implications of the crisis in an extended conclusion. However, this absence coupled with the rigor of the earlier analyses gives Anderson's discussion comparatively little weight in relation to the rest of the text.

The nuance of the analysis and the promise for a future politics comes through at the very end of the book. Anderson does not mince words. Europe's cultural, economic, intellectual and political decline has sent it adrift. Its place in world politics is, at the moment, aligned with a foreign policy agenda that is related to, if not in the immediate family of, the United States. For Anderson though not all is lost; decline holds a special place in Europe's intellectual history. *NOW* suggests perhaps as they have done in the past, the destructive forces of economic recession, political malaise, cultural atrophy and intellectual inertia, may "reignite the engines of political conflict and ideological division that gave the continent its impetus in the past" (547). The longstanding disequilibrium, the dialectic, of the Old World that past generations sought to conquer, to institutionalize or balance, and in so doing further propelled, have renewed Europe before. Thus, Europe's current languid state may be the forces of its very renewal. After all it is too much, Anderson reminds us, to settle on the "idea that time and contradiction have come to a halt" (547).

Anderson does persuasively demonstrate that social, economic, and political systems in EU states have weakened. However, as Anderson's analysis of Europe's intellectual history reveals, the meaning of decline has roots that extend beyond some form of empirical state. Rather, to borrow from Weber, decline is a 'demonic concept'; once summoned its powers extend far beyond the empirical conditions it is put in service of representing. Indeed, decline is a political imagination that serves to

superimpose 'THE' historical moment on the present, and historically its political currency does not fall evenly on left and right. Offering little to the left, discourses of decline were central to the ideologies of 'national rebirth' and 'new order' that shored up authoritarian regimes of the 1930s. Moreover, writing from the hundred-year anniversary of the start of WWI, it would be remiss not to add that if 'decline' revved the engines of political conflict that renewed Europe, these engines churned not only on ideas, but on blood and bone as well. Such is the melancholy truth of historical development without guarantees.