

Messianic America: Can He Explain it?

Michael Ignatieff
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American Foreign Policy and Its Thinkers

by Perry Anderson

Verso, 272 pp., \$24.95

Worldmaking: The Art and Science of American Diplomacy

by David Milne

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 609 pp., \$35.00



Luiz Munhoz/Divulgação

Perry Anderson at the Frontiers of Thought conference, Porto Alegre, Brazil, 2013

At the age of seventy-seven, Perry Anderson is the most distinguished living

member of a generation of British Marxist historians and theorists who dominated intellectual life on the British left from the late 1950s until the 1990s. They included Eric Hobsbawm, E.P. Thompson, Ralph Miliband, Isaac Deutscher, Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton, Stuart Hall, Raphael Samuel, and Gareth Stedman Jones. If you were a young historian just starting out in the London of the 1970s, as I was, these figures were lodestars. You didn't have to share their politics to be inspired by their work. They championed a social history that sought to rescue the poor and excluded from what Thompson called "the enormous condescension of posterity." They set out to rescue what was living and humane in Marxism from the rigor mortis of Stalinism.

Perry Anderson (Eton, Worcester College, Oxford) was an Olympian figure amid the ferment of the times, a Trotskyist with an aloof and cutting style whose editorship of *New Left Review* turned it into the most intellectually serious venue in Western Marxism. Anderson arrived at Oxford in October 1956, and the twin dramas of that moment—the Suez debacle and the Hungarian uprising—helped make him a lifelong foe of Western imperialism and an equally passionate critic of Stalinist tyranny.

This brought him into conflict with Eric Hobsbawm, who defended Communist ideals, if not the Soviet system, to the end of his life. Anderson also felt called upon to emancipate the British left from its parochial provincialism, welcoming Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar, and Nicos Poulantzas into the pages of *New Left Review* and Verso books. Anderson's embrace of French theory provoked the most brilliant of the British historians, E.P. Thompson, into a furious polemical exchange in which Thompson defended the native sources of English radicalism and excoriated the desiccated abstraction of Continental theorizing against Anderson's call for a more cosmopolitan and intellectually ambitious Marxism. In the 1970s, these debates within the Marxist canon were gripping and vital. Now, forty years later, they appear as distant as the disputations of medieval scholastics.

Anderson, now a professor at UCLA, cleaves to the ancient faith, and so his new book offers an opportunity to ask what power of illumination Marxism still retains. What was elevating about Marxism? Even those who didn't like Marxism's politics admired its intellectual ambition and its faith that history with a capital H had a discernible logic. Anderson's work has held true to this ideal of rendering the logic of historical change visible, using a Marxist approach that is idiosyncratically his own. In his most recent book, *American Foreign Policy and Its Thinkers*, he sets himself the task of developing "a connected understanding of the dynamics of American strategy and diplomacy in a single arc from the war on Mexico to the war on Terror."

The book fails to deliver on such ambitions but it remains a fluent, elegant, and occasionally mordant essay marked by biting judgments and icy humor. It is divided into two parts, the first "Imperium," his own account of the rise of the American imperium and the second "Consilium," a close reading of how American theorists have understood that ascent. In this second part, he gives a fair and careful account of figures he disagrees with, like Francis Fukuyama and Michael Mandelbaum, while seeking to resuscitate the reputations of a host of lesser-known foreign policy thinkers like Robert Art and Richard Rosecrance. Along the way, he generously acknowledges his debt to lines of radical analysis pioneered in the 1950s and 1960s by William Appleman Williams and Gabriel Kolko, but he also gives an ecumenical welcome to more conservative critics of American expansionism like Robert Tucker.

What's odd is how little of the creaking Marxist stage machinery Anderson bothers to roll out in his own analysis. You'd expect a Marxist to tell you that the dynamics behind American expansion lay in capitalism, in the drive for markets and resources of a growing American economy after the Civil War. Anderson's

account emphasizes moral and intellectual influences instead: ideologies of manifest destiny that legitimized domestic expansion and then the war to free Cuba and the Philippines from the Spanish Empire.

Anderson doesn't have much interest in the Marxist penchant for linking these worldviews back to the class origins and interests of their exponents. The ideologies he identifies as central float free of any determinate social location or any linkage to the social and economic cleavages of American society. Instead, he identifies pure ideological strains in American thought, one exceptionalist, the other universalist, and makes these the drivers of debate. The "exceptionalists" argued that America should "preserve its unique virtues only by remaining a society apart from a fallen world," while universalists were committed to a "messianic activism by the United States to redeem that world."

"Exceptionalists," like the historian Charles Beard, believed that America should stay home lest it lose its soul overseas, while "universalists," like Woodrow Wilson, sought to convince Americans that their vital interests were served by the vision of America as a global redeemer. Anderson makes an interesting connection between the rejection of Wilson's vision and the limited international exposure of the American economy at that time. In 1920, as Wilson struggled and failed to persuade the Senate to ratify the League of Nations, US foreign trade accounted for no more than 10 percent of GNP and the American domestic market was highly protected. "This disjuncture between ideology and reality," Anderson argues, "brought Wilson's millenarian globalism to an abrupt end."

By the end of World War II, however, America's wartime mobilization had vested the federal government, for the first time, with unprecedented global capacities. Millenarian ambition was now matched by equivalent state capacity. Interestingly, Anderson argues that these foreign policy ambitions always went far beyond America's narrowly economic interests. Indeed if pure economics had defined America's national interest, he suggests, American policy might have been more cautious and circumspect.

Harry Truman, for example, thought it was vulgar for an important statement of postwar American foreign policy, issued under his presidency, to put heavy emphasis on the US interest in free trade and foreign markets. It "made the whole thing sound like an investment prospectus," Truman complained, and he ordered these references struck out of the document.

Instead, for Truman and every president since, Anderson argues, the dominant national interest of the US has been messianic: to redeem the world in America's

own image. Realists have always warned against the hubris and overreach in this approach, but they have argued in vain. For Anderson, liberal internationalism remains “the obligatory idiom of American imperial power.” Realism is a subordinate discourse, the prudent fallback when liberal internationalism overreaches.

The most interesting implication of Anderson’s argument is that the long catalog of US foreign policy disasters—the overthrow of Mohammad Mossadegh in Iran in 1953, the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961, the twin quagmires of Vietnam and Iraq—were more than just errors of presidential judgment. They were the price America recurrently pays for the hubristic embrace of a messianic foreign policy, one that has never disciplined its priorities according to rationally defined national interests.

One symptom of messianic overreach, Anderson argues, is systematic exaggeration of threats. One might have thought strong countries, especially those with overwhelming military superiority, would not scare easily. Not so the United States. The Truman administration convinced itself that the Soviet nuclear threat was imminent and overwhelming. The creation of the vast “military-industrial complex” soon followed.

Anderson thinks the US elite exaggerated the Soviet menace in order to legitimize its expansionist goals. The architects of the post-1945 military buildup, figures like James Forrestal, Dean Acheson, and Paul Nitze, manipulated their presidents and American public opinion alike, but in doing so, Anderson argues, they severed policy from the discipline of a realistic estimation of the security threat posed by the Soviets.

Anderson wants us to believe that the American foreign policy elite of the 1940s and 1950s had nothing to be alarmed about. He describes Stalin’s foreign policy as “essentially defensive.” This is a curious characterization. It was understandable for those in Washington to sound an alarm. They had counted the millions of Russians under arms, watched the reoccupation of the Baltic States, the crushing of Polish, Czech, and Hungarian freedom—along with the continued surveillance and punishment of dissenters—as well as the growth of Communist influence in Italy and Greece, the collapse of the Chinese Nationalists in 1949, and the Chinese and North Korean invasion of South Korea in 1950.

Anderson’s characterization of Stalin’s foreign policy as defensive may be downright strange, especially if one looks closely at the experience of such critics

as Andrei Sakharov, Adam Michnik, and Václav Havel (all unmentioned here); but he is right to emphasize that American foreign policy elites overestimated their own weakness and overestimated the strength of the Communist system. Faced with an adversary with global ambitions, American policymakers responded not with a soberly realistic evaluation of the real threat Stalin posed, but with equally millenarian—and perhaps equally unrealistic—national ambitions:

The US state would henceforward act, not primarily as a projection of the concerns of US capital, but as a guardian of the general interests of all capitals, sacrificing—where necessary and for as long as needed—national gain for international advantage, in the confidence of ultimate pay-off.

Once America chose to create an order that defended global capitalism and not just the American variety, Anderson points out, an ever-sharper conflict arose between American national economic interests and the global order it was trying to bring into being. What Anderson calls the US imperium served American economic interests as long as American economic predominance went unchallenged, but by the 1970s the countries it had helped back onto its feet, Germany and Japan, had turned into damaging economic competitors. When Nixon took the US off the gold standard in 1971 and devalued the dollar, he did so to remind these competitors that the imperium was designed to put American economic interests first, but this did not arrest the rise of America's emerging rivals. By the early twenty-first century, the "liberal international order" of open markets and free trade had fostered the rise of China, the Asian Tigers, and the BRICS. *Pax Americana* empowered the regimes that now challenged US hegemony, both economically and politically. As Anderson writes:

American primacy is no longer the automatic capstone of the civilization of capital. A liberal international order with America at its head risks becoming something else, less congenial to the Land of the Free.

As America struggles to remain *primus inter pares* in a world of competitors that it has empowered, the task of US leadership, in the words of President Obama's deputy national security adviser, Benjamin Rhodes, is "to get America another fifty years as leader." Anderson has little doubt that America will get those fifty years. He waves away those progressives who keep predicting the imperium's demise. No such deliverance is at hand, he maintains. One reason, though he doesn't say so, why American global authority has such staying power is that it is not, as Anderson claims, an imperium, but instead an alliance system based on

varying degrees of consent.

You would have expected that a Marxist critic of American hegemony would be interested in explaining why the American left consistently underestimates the staying power of the imperium. Anderson mentions the persistent domestic opposition to American expansion overseas:

At each stage, eloquent American voices had denounced the megalomania of Manifest Destiny, the plunder of Mexico, the seizure of Hawaii, the slaughter in the Philippines, attacking every kind of racism and imperialism as a betrayal of the anti-colonial birthright of the republic.

But he has no answer to the question of why the opposition to American expansionism loses so often. He makes explanation harder by arguing that domestic political pressure has been essentially irrelevant to the shaping of US foreign policy. He tells us that American public opinion has always been provincial, with “minimal knowledge of the outside world.”

This is an odd kind of condescension for a progressive to display, and it leaves him unable to explain how these ignorant provincials took to the streets, felled a sitting president, and forced his successor to exit Vietnam. American popular suspicion of foreign adventures has been a more effective restraint on US foreign policy than Anderson acknowledges. Leaders ignore the foreign policy views of their domestic electorate at their peril. The public now opposes further military misadventures in the Middle East and this domestic reluctance effectively narrows President Obama’s policy options in the region. It’s strange for a Marxist to be so dismissive of the power of pressure from below.

If one problem with Anderson’s analysis is that it neglects pressure from below, the other is that he can’t explain why the elites decided as they did. Any broad claim that American foreign policy basically serves the interests of global capital ends up explaining almost nothing about the specific policy choices that American presidents have had to make since 1945. The choices were real, and Anderson doesn’t illuminate any of them.

The most basic of these has been to determine what instruments a liberal internationalist foreign policy precisely requires in any given situation. What, for example, did the policy of containment call for concerning the size of US military deployment? Paul Nitze won this argument and an arms buildup followed, but George Kennan, the author of the doctrine, and Walter Lippmann, the most

influential columnist of the time, thought Nitze was a dangerous warmonger. Should Truman have allowed General MacArthur to take the Korean War across the Chinese border or was he right to fire him?

These choices appear to be a matter of detail for Anderson, but they are anything but details. Any serious analysis of foreign policy has to tell us why one judgment was made and not another. Should Lyndon Johnson have sharply increased the American presence in Vietnam in 1968 or have begun to pull out? In the ferocious internal debates in 1967–1968, the pillars of the Truman foreign policy establishment—Kennan, Acheson, Clifford—told Johnson to exit the quagmire. These issues divided the country and they divided the elites.

The simple fact that most members of the American foreign policy elite believe the country is a force for good in the world, believe in free trade and open markets, and want to use American power to further the maintenance of a rule-based international order favorable to US interests, doesn't tell you much at all about what mixture of diplomacy, bilateral or multilateral pressure, or military might they chose to meet these objectives in the event. Why, for example, did Kissinger choose détente over confrontation with Russia in the 1970s? Why did he and Nixon seize the opening to China? Or today, why has the foreign policy consensus that used to prevail between Republicans and Democrats collapsed so spectacularly? The shape that American foreign policy has taken since World War II is the unplanned and unforeseen result of a myriad of contingent strategic decisions like these, not the ineluctable working out of the logic of capitalism.

To understand why American elites decided as they did, *Worldmaking*, David Milne's study of the foreign policy thinkers of America's twentieth century, makes for much more insightful reading. While it is overlong, it pays close attention to personality, argument, contingency, and elite politics, factors Anderson leaves out. All in all, since Anderson's sweepingly general analysis can't explain why actual policy choices were made, it leaves one wondering whether Marxist analysis has much to add to our understanding of American foreign policy.

This is a shame, because even a dyed-in-the-wool liberal like myself has to confess to nostalgia for the days when Marxist critiques forced those of us who have defended American liberal internationalism to face up to its dark side. It is not an exercise of bad faith for a liberal to regret the weakening of a redoubtable opponent. Marxism was also an honorable bearer of Enlightenment humanism and rationalism. Anderson himself, in an elegiac essay in the *London Review of*

Books, captures this humanist yearning when he writes:

Human beings cannot cease to strive for a social order in which they are no longer subject to the inhuman necessities of a society investing them as if it were a second nature, nor seek to relate that effort to an understanding of the logic of world history.*

Liberalism risks becoming nothing more than resigned managerial quietism unless those seeking a more liberating politics constantly challenge it to deliver more. Whatever our politics, we all stand in need of a historical vision that believes there is a deep logic to the unfolding of time. The problem for Marxists like Anderson is that they will be relegated to irrelevance if they are simply the bearers of an Enlightenment humanism and a historical vision that can't in fact explain the world we're living in. Anderson would accept that it is not possible to change the world if you cannot explain it. On the evidence in this book, he is still far from providing the explanations that are badly needed.

* "One Exceptional Person Stood Out," *London Review of Books*, July 30, 2015. ↵