

# The cunning of capital explained?

Neil Davidson, *How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?*, Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2012, xxi + 812 pp., £22.99 pb., 978 1 60846 067 0.

In 'The Notion of Bourgeois Revolution' (1976) Perry Anderson wrote: 'Among the concepts traditionally associated with historical materialism, few have been so problematic and contested as that of bourgeois revolution.' Neil Davidson's book may be considered a long and exhaustive response to Anderson's more punctual reflection, in which he sets out to write the concept's life history – from beginning to end – while simultaneously recovering both its analytic saliency and its political relevance. Fundamental to Davidson's argument is thus not only the past historical significance of *bourgeois* revolution – that is, its social content in its various manifestations or forms – but also the continuing significance today of *revolution* itself, the more or less explicit political point of the book.

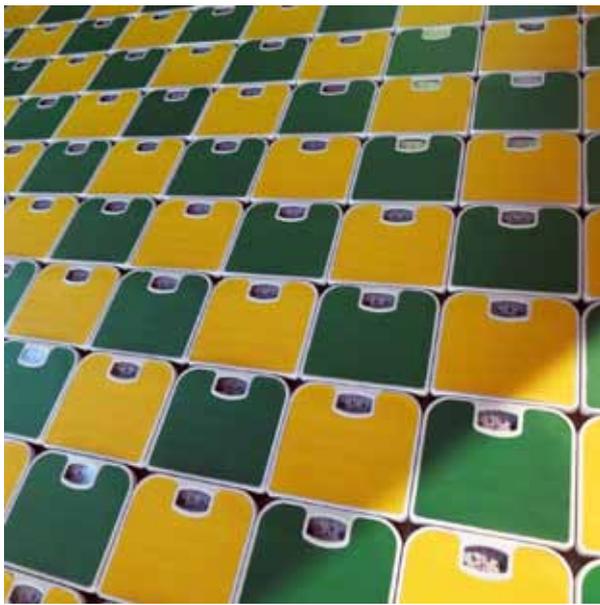
Anderson's earlier essay sets out a condensed history of the idea of 'bourgeois revolution', in which, for various reasons, it is always threatening to fall apart. This in part explains the main topics of Davidson's expanded monumental version. Anderson suggests, for example, that Marx and Engels rarely use the term, despite witnessing, after the failures of the popular revolts in Europe of 1848, the 'actual political revolutions of their time that inaugurated a new epoch in the life of capital': the Risorgimento in Italy, the Unification of Germany under Bismarck, the American Civil War and the Meiji Restoration in Japan that took place between the late 1850s and early 1870s. This is because, Anderson suggests, they were more interested in identifying the possibilities for a proletarian revolution; precisely because of the *bourgeois* failures of 1848. Indeed, the notion only re-emerges after their deaths, towards the beginning of the twentieth century (in the context of the failed 1905 anti-absolutist revolution in Russia, in particular), in the form of a 'retro-projection whose model was the proletarian revolution'. In this regard, it becomes a concept whose temporality is paradoxically over-coded by an emergent Bolshevism: even past bourgeois revolutions are read through a hoped-for future socialist one. Importantly, however, it is precisely out of this sequence of events from 1848 to 1905 that the idea of 'permanent revolution' – first

hinted at by Marx, later developed by Trotsky, and so important to Davidson's account – emerges.

Moreover, Anderson continues, when past bourgeois revolutions actually become the object of independent inquiry by professional Marxist historians, 'it proved difficult to locate an unequivocally bourgeois class, direct carrier of an ascendant capitalist mode of production, as the central subject of these upheavals'. This same difficulty led to an outright rejection of the existence of such a subject and epochal process by the various Cold War revisionisms that subsequently emerged in the UK, France and the USA; notably in the work of Hugh Trevor-Roper, for the English case, and Alfred Cobban and François Furet, for the French. These, Davidson insists, even influenced recent Marxist historiography, such as that of Anderson himself, but especially the work of Robert Brenner, Ellen Meiksins Wood and Benno Teschke, all associated with what has become known as 'political Marxism'. The latter (including Anderson in this respect) constitute the principal objects of Davidson's criticism – and ire, when it comes to Wood. An added effect of such revisionist interventions into history, Davidson maintains, is to question the existence of the subjective historical class 'consciousness' underpinning the notion of revolution itself, resulting in the undermining of the sense of agency it requires, and leading, for example, to its replacement by the socially weaker term of political 'rebellion'. Translated into the language of political Marxism: there may have been a *transition* to capitalism, there may even have been *political* revolutions in which regimes were indeed changed, but such change was achieved without *social* revolution – the sense of the bourgeois revolution that Davidson defends and attempts to reconstruct. For political Marxism, forms of capital accumulation either pre-existed revolution (as in England) or did not exist in ways sufficiently to determine it (as in France); and in any case, for both the bourgeoisie – as a social class (representing capital) *in* and *for itself* – was politically irrelevant. Such questioning of the bourgeois subject of revolution further entails the dis- or re-aligning of the political and the social dimensions of revolution with regard to the

state: who is wielding power, and for what, if *not* the bourgeoisie for its own purposes?

The problem, then, is not merely that in the relation between concept and thing there is always something left over, as in Adorno's version of dialectical thought, but that here the 'thing' – the social processes involved in epochal historical transformation – threatens to break its concept – 'revolution' – apart altogether, and reveal it as a mere subsuming imposition of thought. Alert to this problem already in 1976, Anderson produced his own 'alternative approach' to the conceptualization of bourgeois revolutions: an attempt, he says, 'to construct the theoretical



concept before exploring its historical incarnations'. Anderson adopted Althusser's thoughts on the revolutionary 'conjuncture' (Lenin's 'concrete situation') and succinctly suggested a quartet of 'necessary – not contingent – "overdeterminations"' of bourgeois revolutions: an overdetermination *from above*, an overdetermination *from below*, an overdetermination *from within*, and an overdetermination *from without*.

Although Davidson repeatedly refers to and leans upon Anderson's essay, he does not mention his theoretical construction as such. This is because, although he agrees with many of the criticisms aimed at orthodox Marxist history (which he conceives as a Stalinist production) that the post-revisionist heterodox version articulate, he no doubt rejects Anderson's theoretical formalism. The effect of this formalism – via the anti-historicist structuralism of Althusser's notion of 'conjuncture' – is both to over-politicize and de-historicize what Davidson, inspired rather by E.P. Thompson, conceives as the 'great arch' of capital's *social* history and its critical – and

necessarily lengthy – reconstruction (which his own work painstakingly assumes): an attempt to derive the concept of bourgeois revolution immanently, and dialectically, from its history, which includes the history of its necessary multiple overdetermination. Indeed, it is the latter that in large measure produces the conceptual contents of Davidson's own version of 'bourgeois revolution'. Be that as it may, Anderson's elegant suggestion acts as a useful conceptual mirror or counterpoint through which to review Davidson's argument.

*How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?* has four parts, and is composed in the classical form of a spiral, returning, almost in the premodern sense of 'revolution', to its point of departure, but only so as then – almost in the modern sense of 'revolution' – to transcend it. As the dialectical shape suggests, Davidson's working through is thus also marked by substantial repetition (which threatens over its hundreds of crammed pages so to wear the reader down as to welcome the site of its epilogue, a Scottish cemetery, from which it offers a final summary). The excellent first part sets out the emergence and subsequent disavowal of the modern bourgeois concept of social revolution against the background of the Dutch, English and French Revolutions via the writings of Hobbes, Locke and, most notably for the thinking of the social contents of capitalist transformation in England and France, James Harrington and Antoine Barnave, as well as Burke – revisionism's precursor – where, of course, the disavowal of revolution sets it. Crucial to the modern sense of revolution are the ideas of property, the right to resist absolutist monarchy (which marks the Dutch Revolution as an anti-imperial struggle), and thinking history as a line of development or secular progress through stages – in view, particularly, of the appearance of a society whose wealth is increasingly defined by commerce.

Ideologically, this period is marked by a shift from thinking history and 'revolution' through religion (and the Reformation) in the United Provinces and England to its increasingly 'scientific' interpretation in France – with the history of Scotland providing a useful counter-example to England throughout in these regards, as well as an illuminating example of uneven development. This history of the emergence and waning of bourgeois revolution is repeated over parts two and three. These are dedicated, first, to the historical interpretations of classical Marxism – from Marx and Engels, to the emergence of Bolshevism (the 'Russian Crucible'), its Stalinist encoding as 'orthodoxy' and critical reactions to it (by Trotsky,

of course, but most notably those by Gramsci, Benjamin and, most surprisingly and welcome, the young Lukács); and second, to various revisionist and post-revisionist alternatives, including world systems theory (very briefly), the above-mentioned political Marxism (most importantly), and Davidson's preferred version: 'consequentialism'. The latter then provides the background to the final part of the book in which Davidson reconstructs the concept of bourgeois revolution through its historical rewriting via the notions of passive and permanent revolutions; including the latter also in a 'deflected' form, exemplified in various kinds of 'state capitalisms': Soviet, Chinese, Cuban and so on.

The difficulty with Davidson's approach lies in its tiresome length. More positive are the ways in which it mines the Marxist tradition conceptually: instead of 'overdetermination from above', for example, we get 'passive revolution', the product here of the sequence from 1848 to the 1920s in Italy, rather than in Germany and Russia that produced, as mentioned above, the related concept of 'permanent revolution' – a possible version of what Anderson refers to as 'overdetermination from below'. For Gramsci, the term 'passive revolution' (intimately tied to his notion of 'hegemony') primarily refers to those cases, unlike the French one in his view, in which reforms leading to the consolidation of competitive capital accumulation and free wage labour (the key defining characteristics of the capitalist mode of production for Davidson) are introduced from above, mainly by non-bourgeois class and state formations – those witnessed but left uncommented upon by Marx and Engels: the Risorgimento in Italy, Bismarck's Germany and Meiji Japan. As in Anderson's version of overdetermination, this process of social transformation is politically advanced by a compromise alliance between semi-feudal and proto-capitalist 'agrarian rather than urban classes'. Passive revolution also provides an important key to the consequentialist approach outlined by Davidson, for from a Gramscian perspective the 'non-revolutionary road' (rather than the 'revolutionary road' exemplified by England and France in the orthodox accounts) becomes the modular form of bourgeois revolution, as analysed in the work of Geoff Eley on Bismarck and the Junker-led 'German Road' to capitalism. This, it seems to me, is a fundamentally important point. Despite Davidson's own repeated resort to the rhetoric of economic 'backwardness', it potentially contributes to the de-centring of Marxism's own internalization of bourgeois developmentalism in the name of 'revolution'.

Most important, from the consequentialist point of view Davidson adopts, however, is that the notion of the historical necessity of a preformed revolutionary bourgeois consciousness with a project – so important to the revisionist and political Marxist critique – is also undermined: the social logic of capital accumulation itself takes on this role, encouraging its state administration by non-capitalist classes. This is the sense in which an apparently absolutist state is also (or *really*) – in its consequences – a bourgeois state.

In this respect, the plebeian content of the English and French Revolutions further relativizes bourgeois agency, whilst nevertheless creating the conditions for the political anxiety experienced by the exploiting (feudal, tributary and capitalist) classes that produced the need for reformist passive 'revolution' from above in their attempt to forestall the dangers of capitalist social transformation being overtaken by collectivist democratizing demands. This is Anderson's overdetermination 'from below' of the bourgeois revolutions: the 'pervasive presence of popular classes' in them made up of 'peasants' and, with the increasing development of industrial capitalism, 'propertyless wage-earners'. As noted above, this is the context for the invention of the concept of 'permanent revolution' that, arguably, constitutes passive revolution's reverse side – overdetermination from above *and* from below – both of which Davidson tracks throughout *How Revolutionary*, including the latter in its 'deflected' form. The concept of 'permanent revolution' thus emerges (in Marx and Engels), as we have seen, with the perceived failure of bourgeois revolutions in 1848; and is further systematized – after the passive revolutions mentioned above, on the one hand, and the brief experience of working-class government during the Paris Commune, on the other – as a result of the experience of the failed bourgeois overthrow of absolutism in Russia in 1905.

As is well known, this is the moment in which Trotsky, Lenin and the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party begin to theorize the *bourgeois tasks* (in Russia, essentially the 'freeing' of the serfs, but also including forms of national unification and democratization in other contexts) to be carried out and 'consummated' by the socialist revolution of the peasantry and proletariat. Such is the process begun by the Russian Revolution in 1917, which, with the 'self-annihilation' of Bolshevism after the death of Lenin and the rise of Stalin, Davidson argues (pushing his own party line), was eventually 'deflected' ('back') into state capitalism. Similar processes are at work in both China and

Cuba, but in these cases, Davidson controversially suggests, there is no 'deflection' back of permanent revolution since, unlike in the case of Russia, the revolutions in these countries did not involve a socialist transformation of the mode of production, merely a political change in regime of capitalist accumulation. (In *How Revolutionary*, 'Che' Guevara, for all his faults that are not mentioned here – his version of the 'new man' etc. – is portrayed as a company manager.)

There is no doubt much to question in Davidson's account of these historical processes, especially in so far as the notion of state capitalism is concerned. What is clear, however, is that in his renewed conceptualization of 'bourgeois revolution', there emerges a delinking of the social logics of capital accumulation from the bourgeoisie as a class, which maps more or less directly onto Anderson's quartet of overdeterminations. Overdetermination 'from within' and 'from without' have similar effects: the apparent autonomy – or abstraction – of capital from given class or political forms that seemed necessary to it. This reminds us, on the one hand, of the specificity of capitalist forms of exploitation (formally freed from the political compulsion essential to other modes of production) and, on the other, of the paradoxically real spectrality of its social inscription (as the fetishism of commodities). Capital may be a social relation, but it is also a 'thing', a self-valorizing 'automatic fetish' – as Marx says when analysing interest-bearing capital. In other words, the 'cunning' of capital's rule as it (in the inverted Hegelian sense of reason's 'unintended consequences') imposes itself qua subjectivizing machine even through the bourgeoisie's *others*. This enigmatic fact perhaps begins to explain the route of thinkers like Ernesto Laclau *out* of orthodox Marxism via the political implications of ideas such as 'permanent revolution'. Similarly, as Davidson notes, the work of Jairus Banaji on the history of hybrid 'trajectories of accumulation' into capitalism insists on the importance of dis-identifying relations of production with forms of exploitation, such that the Eurocentric emphasis on the defining character of the wage form – as in political Marxism – or on representing capital as essentially industrial is questioned. This is an important idea in the context of the financialization of accumulation today. The bourgeoisie in both Davidson's and Anderson's accounts is the least homogenous of classes when compared to the aristocracy and the proletariat: 'the pure circle of capital proper is virtually always too narrow to act alone as class force ... it must endow itself with another gravitational weight ... in some measure exterior to it.' This 'mass'

of administrators and functionaries – what Gramsci might have called 'organic intellectuals' – that depend on and serve capital, and that Davidson (leaning on Anderson, but referencing Hal Draper) refers to as the bourgeois 'penumbra' of the capitalist class proper, can be thought of as Anderson's overdetermination 'from within'.

According to Davidson, Trotsky's idea of 'uneven and combined development' is the most important concept of the twentieth century. It is not all that clear why, since all it seems to add to well-established accounts of uneven capitalist development, both within and between capitals and nations, is that they are mutually determining. In this precise sense of a combination, however, it does provide the means through which Davidson's concept of bourgeois revolution, unlike Anderson's, comes together *as a concept* in all its historicity: this version of 'overdetermination from without' combines all the others, especially 'passive revolution' (from above) and 'permanent revolution' (from below), as they are mutually mediated in each and every particular 'within'. At this point, finally, it is important to note that, against the grain of political Marxism, Davidson does attempt to reinstall a certain bourgeois revolutionary consciousness back into his concept, so that the *process* of transition to capitalism does not completely erase the violent *moment* of political change at the level of the state. In the light, for example, of Maurice Dobbs's and Rodney Hilton's work on the differentiation of the peasantry in England into a proto-bourgeois class (as well as a proletarianized one), he suggests the presence of a revolutionary class consciousness in the early Dutch and English Revolutions, which, however, for reasons of uneven and combined development, then wanes and is reconfigured in passive and permanent forms – except for the bourgeois revolution of the North against slavery in the US South, arguably, Davidson suggests, the most bourgeois and revolutionary of them all

Davidson emplots this history of revolutionary change into a philosophical narrative of the increasing adequation of consciousness to historical circumstances that makes it relevant to the political present; defined here by the *end* of the era of bourgeois revolutions, be they passive or permanent. According to this story, the transition from slavery to feudalism happens in ways that are free of class-conscious agency, whilst the bourgeois revolution that punctuates the transition from feudalism to capitalism has, as we have seen, *some*. The lesson here is that the socialist revolution has to be made,

Davidson suggests, rediscovering his orthodoxy, by a working class that is fully conscious of itself and its mission to make a society free of the exploitation that defined the others. The party-form, he weakly insists, is fundamental to its realization. Despite the obvious Hegelian source of such an idealist story, it appears ironically that in reconstructing it historically in considerable detail, Davidson may have momentarily forgotten the historical ‘cunning’ of capital so fundamental to his own concept.

*How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?* is a rich and comprehensive work of history and theory. It is one of a set of important but more or less defensive works of Marxism recently published by Haymarket Books, which are marked by times of crisis. On the one hand, and most obviously, they are marked by the ongoing crisis of capitalism; on the other, less obviously, but equally actually, they are marked by a crisis within existing forms of opposition to it, including that of the party to which Davidson belongs (the Socialist Workers Party). Like *The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism* (2009) by Peter D. Thomas and *History as Theory: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation* (2010) by Jairus Banaji, it is characterized not only by a shared critique of the work of Perry Anderson, but also by both a marshalling of existing resources and an attempt at critically generating new ideas out of new versions of old ones – without the conceptual adventure required of a genuine contemporaneity. Thomas convincingly renovates and reconfigures Gramsci’s idea of ‘hegemonic apparatus’ – a valuable task, in the manner of Christine Buci-Glucksmann’s *Gramsci and the State* (1975) – whilst, less convincingly, arguing for the contemporary political relevance of Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis.

Similarly, Banaji’s excellent collection of heterodox essays reconfigures the historical relations between capital, accumulation and exploitation in inventive and analytically important ways, but in the process also threatens so to extend the geographical and temporal limits of capitalism as a historical epoch into the past as to make it almost impossible to work with. (There the source of the book’s weakness is, paradoxically, its theoretical strength.) For his part, Davidson insists on presenting his account of ‘bourgeois revolution’, both as concept and reality, as an education in historical materialism, engaging over and over again with key debates from its history. This includes, like many before him, being nobbled by Marx’s discussion of the relative determining weight of the forces and relations of production in the 1959

‘Preface’. Such a methodology provides for both the book’s highs (the recovery of Lukács’s reflections on uneven development and revolution, for example) and lows (an overt Trotskyism which even threatens to consume Walter Benjamin, for example). In this respect, the size of the book – and if the page format were the same as the rest of the series, it would extend to over 1,000 pages – is a reflection of the breadth and depth of the crises (social, political, intellectual) that it internalizes in the very structure of its composition.

John Kraniauskas

## And the ship sails on

Alain Badiou, *Cinema*, Polity, Cambridge, 2013.  
320 pp., £55.00 hb., £17.99 pb., 978 0 74565 567 3 hb.,  
978 0 74565 568 0 pb.

To call a book simply *Cinema* is to frame its contents as a contribution to the theorization of cinema, and thus, for a certain readership, to identify it as something other than film criticism. It is, in other words, to announce its apparent participation in, or proximity to, film theory. In an interview conducted by a former editor-in-chief of *Cahiers du cinéma*, Antoine de Baecque, for the original publication in French, Badiou himself seems however, by turns, relatively modest and occasionally self-congratulatory as regards any claim to make a major intervention in the field. His entertaining and informative account of his largely solitary *cinéphilie* of the 1950s and 1960s, as a ‘young provincial’ frequenting the Cinémathèque (a few doors away at that time from the École Normale Supérieure on the rue d’Ulm), through to his work as a ‘heathen’ infiltrating the Catholic journal *Vin nouveau*, and on to his engagement with cinema through politics, contains both moments of self-regarding comedy as well as statements which identify several of the key tropes that will recur throughout the volume. Hence, of Jean-Luc Godard’s *Film Socialisme*, in which Badiou plays himself in a scene aboard a cruise ship, he comments: ‘in just a few seconds, in the scene where I’m working at the desk, I’ve never before seen images where I am so much myself. So I’m pleased with the mode of presence attributed to me in that shot’. The observation has its more obviously serious counterpart in a comment made later on in the interview when Badiou states that Godard’s invitation to appear in the film touched him, ‘[b]ecause