No Promises

Nathan Hollier

Mark Weblin (ed.)
A PERILOUS AND FIGHTING LIFE:
FROM COMMUNIST TO CONSERVATIVE: THE POLITI-
CAL WRITINGS OF PROFESSOR JOHN ANDERSON
Pluto Press, $29.95pb, 290pp, 1 86403 2480

MOST OF US know something about John Anderson (1893–1962). He is remembered as a libertarian phi-
losopher who, during his time at the University of Sydney, influenced various individuals and groups, most
notably the Sydney ‘Push’. Writers on Sydney’s intellectual tradition tend to locate the Scottish-born Anderson at the
epicentre of this universe. Anderson is someone, however, of
whom it is true to say that he is more often referred to than
read. His major philosophical works were collected, or en-
tombed, in Studies in Empirical Philosophy (1962). Now, as
part of his ongoing attempt to resurrect Anderson, Mark
Weblin, the John Anderson Research Fellow, has collated,
edited and provided a useful introduction to Anderson’s
political writings. The volume, as a whole, raises two ques-
tions. Firstly, do Anderson’s political views remain of general
interest? And secondly, what is the place or legacy of
Anderson in contemporary Australian debate?

Anderson’s main preoccupation was with the possibility
— or otherwise — of achieving socialism. At first, Anderson
contended that socialism was not only possible and desirable
but inevitable, that those who supported capitalism, be they
conservatives or social-democratic ‘meliorists’, were stupidly
fighting the force of history, that these groups would inevita-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-
bly become agents of fascism and that intellectuals had
a responsibility to educate the working class and to take what-

over steps were necessary (even if these be over the dead
bodies of their opponents) to overcome the ancien régime.
Over time, Anderson became increasingly disillusioned: firstly
with ‘actual socialism’ in the Soviet Union, then with Trotsky’s
argument that the Communist Party’s ‘dictatorship of the prole-
tariat’ could be a temporary arrangement, with the Marxist
philosophical framework underpinning socialist practice and,
finally, with the Australian working class he had tried to politi-
cise. In some ways, the most moving passage of the book
comes from a 1946 letter that Anderson wrote in reply to an old
Trotskyist comrade:

[Y]ou will see that I am not in sympathy with your aims and
that my line is what you would call ‘collaborationist’. If you
won’t [sic] to make any comment on what I have said, I’ll read it
of course, but I won’t promise to reply. I still look back with
appreciation to the discussions of the Crown St. days, but it is
no longer 1932.

The few letters lift what can otherwise be unstimulating
reading. Anderson was enormously learned, and his formul-
tions were original and arresting. Regardless of the view
being advanced, it was delivered strongly and often accom-
panied by an entertaining onslaught against whoever had
said something ignorant or ‘incorrect’. But Anderson spent
a considerable amount of time attacking such things as the
Hegelian concept and Marxist deployment of the dialectic,
while many of the specific geo-political ‘crises’ to which he
responded (those related to the Cold War, for example) have
lost much of their urgency.

The more world-weary Anderson stands before the foot-
lights as an avowed opponent of the idea of socialism and of
any programme of change that might either strengthen the
power of the state or lead to a reduction of the numerous
groups competing against each other in the formal and infor-
mal processes of politics. Having embraced more orthodox
versions of his philosophical empiricism and political plural-
ism, and grown increasingly concerned about the size and
intrusiveness of the welfare state, Anderson ignored any
structural problems of capitalism, at times completely contra-
dicting his earlier analyses.

During his career, Anderson observed the last gasps of
intellectual high modernism. He took his professorship just
ten years after the Russian Revolution, and soldiered on into
the postmodern era. It is therefore to be expected that his
theories and views would develop and change. His philoso-
phy, which remained more stable and informs much of his
social commentary, was specialised, technical and based on
a reading of classical, Anglo-American and continental philo-
sophical traditions with which few could claim a full familiar-
ity. His work was, moreover, highly original and idiosyncratic.
In spite of his political backflips, it cannot be said that he was
weak-minded, intellectually derivative or simply contrarian.
He was always critical of elements of Marxist thought (espe-
cially the dialectic), while even after his break from the work-
ers’ movement he energetically opposed Robert Menzies’
testament to ban the Communist Party of Australia. The final
est essay here is a defence of Marx, or rather, an attack on the
straw Karl Marx erected by an author of an anti-Marxist text.

This leads to the second, more interesting question: that
of Anderson’s ongoing legacy. Andersonism is probably
most commonly associated today with the political right.
Yet this collection emphasises his earlier radicalism and
reveals the complexity of his views. The bulk of the material
comes from the period before 1940 during which Anderson
was either an active supporter of the working-class movement
or in broad sympathy with it. While emphasising the need
for social freedom, this is primarily a freedom for group,
rather than individual, activity. He rejects as oxymoronic
the notion of ‘relative truth’ and sees the role of the philoso-
pher as a truth-teller and active contributor to society
(this may partly explain both his confident espousal of
opposed political positions and the style of various
controversial public figures influenced by him: Germaine
Greer, for example). A Perilous and Fighting Life enables
a deeper understanding of Anderson’s spirited interrogation
of society. While this legacy is contested, Anderson’s
political writings will remain of interest.