

# Homage to E.P. Thompson

July 22, 2016

E.P. Thompson (1924–1993) wore several hats during his life. His magnum opus as a historian was *The Making of the English Working Class*, one of the greatest history books written in the twentieth century in any language. He fought tirelessly for nuclear disarmament in the 1980s, which almost surely took years off his life. He may well be least remembered for being a founder of the British New Left. For this reason, Cal Winslow's selection of Thompson's writings from the late 1950s to the early 1960s is especially welcome and timely—though not surprising, since Winslow was a student of Thompson's at the University of Warwick and is a longtime activist and writer.



To understand what Thompson's overarching arguments are and where they came from, an understanding of the context—political, economic, ideological, cultural—in which they were written is absolutely crucial. Granted that the 1950s is a pretty long time ago even if you are old enough to have been alive during that ambiguous decade. Britain was still a heavily industrialized country, meaning among other things that a large majority of its citizens were manual workers, and that fact was the starting point, but in Thompson's view far from the whole story, of what determined their life situation and their relation to the rest of British society.

In 1959 Harold Macmillan's election campaign mantra was "You never had it so good." This was actually true up to a point, if only because the Tories, who had been in control since 1951, didn't dare touch the completed edifice of the 1945–1951 Labour government's welfare state and Keynesian macroeconomic policies. But from a leftist perspective things did not look good at all, starting with the fact that the Conservatives had defeated the Labour party in the general elections of 1951, 1955, and 1959, each time by a larger margin. The Tories were still trying to hold onto what was left of the British Empire, for instance in their failed attempt along with France and Israel to regain the Suez Canal in 1956. The Labour Party's right wing was (as it has been for most of its history) solidly in control. The same went for the leadership of Britain's biggest trade unions, which despite everything were far stronger than British unions today due to a number of factors of which full employment was the most important. The Cold War appeared to be permanently entrenched with no end in sight in the opinion of just about everyone—left, right, and center. The "military industrial complex" had yet to be so named but was already flourishing. Some Marxists at the time thought that a permanent arms economy was the main cause of western capitalism's apparent successes and stability since the war. Even Aneurin Bevan—undisputed leader of the left wing of the Parliamentary Labour Party and the architect of Britain's National Health Service, the crown jewel of the 1945–1951 Labour government's reforms—vehemently opposed unilateral nuclear disarmament. As he notoriously put it, he would not go "naked into the conference chamber" to negotiate with the Soviets.

But the catalyst that galvanized Edward Thompson was (in addition to all of the above) the events of 1956, which shook the world of Soviet Communism to its core. Up to then Thompson was known outside of the Communist Party of Great Britain Historians Group and adult education students and teachers in West Yorkshire only as the author of a wonderful if very long book, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955). But 1956 utterly changed all that, starting with Khrushchev's secret speech to the twentieth party congress in February, followed a few months later by the Hungarian Revolution.

Eric Hobsbawm has vividly called the impact of these events on the CPGB a "collective nervous breakdown." Hobsbawm himself stayed in the party. But Thompson did not have a political nervous

breakdown. On the contrary, when the demands by him and likeminded comrades that were published in the *Reasoner*, soon to become the *New Reasoner*, for honest answers from the CPGB did not receive a response, Thompson and his comrades angrily resigned from the CP. In a story that cannot be adequately told in a short review, they built a movement out of the wreckage—a New Left. The essays in this volume are thus both the expression and analysis of a major political crisis and a stunning political achievement, which for reasons of manageability I propose to divide into discussions of revolution, class, socialism, and the New Left—concluding with an overall assessment of that achievement. What I am not going to do is voice any sustained criticism of Thompson's thought. Over the past half century he has been subjected to so much criticism from so many angles that I do not believe that many fresh critical insights remain. Moreover, that body of criticism is easily accessible and, incredible as it may sound, hasn't even stopped yet.

## Revolution

Edward Thompson was a revolutionary socialist. These days I have not been hearing many leftists calling themselves revolutionaries—at least not in Pittsburgh, where I live. Nor have I been hearing the expression “late capitalism” recently. To be sure, many people see no credible strategy anywhere in Western capitalism for seriously reforming the system by incremental, parliamentary methods. Nor do most of them think that capitalism is going to hang around either for the next several centuries or forever. But, to repeat, they do not see any halfway plausible way forward. Where is an early twenty-first century update of Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* I leave it to the reader to bring in his or her own answer.

But as these essays make clear, Thompson was deadly serious in his contention that revolution in Britain was thinkable and then some. His starting point was that Britain—and by extension Western capitalism tout court—had become overdeveloped societies, a term I mistakenly thought that Paul Gilroy was the first to use. And yet capitalism in Britain was surprisingly vulnerable. In one of many remarkable turns of phrase, Thompson speaks of Britain as a working-class country that despite what Raymond Williams called the privatized mobility of life under late capitalism, is still “warrenred” (my italics; look up the meaning of this quintessentially Thompsonian term if it is unfamiliar) with democratic processes—committees, voluntary organizations, councils, and the like, of which the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was the period's towering example. Moreover, Thompson was among the few socialists in the 1950s who argued that direct industrial action by even a few strategically placed workers could give the bosses fits and throw a monkey wrench into the system, though of course the theory and practice of syndicalism and direct action were first formulated in the early 1900s. By the 1960s and 1970s the spread of shop-stewards unionism and rank-and-file militancy had become defining characteristics of the British industrial relations system, so much so that it requires strenuous exercise of the historical imagination to recall today that in the late 1950s what Thompson was saying was by no means the obvious conventional wisdom within the British left. Industrial militancy taken by itself is regarded by most as an inadequate scenario for revolution. And indeed Thompson was not advancing a syndicalist blueprint. Neither was he proposing a “seizure of the Winter Palace” scenario. I take this to be a continuation of his project to make clear his differences with and opposition to Stalinism, which were deep and implacable. Nor was it clear that the CPGB thought itself to be revolutionary any longer. Many people on the non-Stalinist left had come to the conclusion that the Stalinist commitment to revolution was only skin deep or hopelessly opportunistic at best. The closest I have seen to a carefully considered view of this matter by communists is in *Labouring Men* (1964), where Eric Hobsbawm argued that the British working class had ceased to be revolutionary but, thank goodness, still voted Labour. I don't know whether he thought he was bucking party orthodoxy.

At any rate, a “seizure of the Winter Palace” model was the only one that the CPGB (and most others) had to offer. And this model Thompson unequivocally rejected.

I'd go so far as to say that this was the first of his two big bones of contention with British Trotskyists, the second of course being their espousal of a Leninist form of organization. In short, I see his reaffirmation of the need for and the possibility of revolution as one part of his final settling of accounts with the CP.

In addition to rejecting the "classic" revolutionary scenarios, Thompson dismissed with equal vigor a parliamentary road to socialism. At this point one may be forgiven for asking whether he had painted himself into a hopelessly tight corner. Was there anything with which to replace the old and increasingly implausible revolutionary scenarios? His answer was that we need no longer think of disaster as the potential revolutionary situation. In one sense, we are now constantly living on the edge of a revolutionary situation, with unrelenting pressure. The number of people who are wholly and unambiguously interested in the defense of the status quo is small. Alongside the industrial workers, we should see the teachers who want better schools, scientists who wish to advance research, welfare workers who want hospitals, and actors who want a national theater. These people do not want these things only and always, any more than all industrial workers are always "class conscious" and loyal to their great community values. But these affirmations coexist.

This was red meat. Winslow has wisely chosen to include Thompson's reply to his critics who thought that he was more or less out of his mind. But he was more than partially vindicated in May 1968 when in France a series of events fit his revolutionary paradigm snugly and almost brought down the administration of Charles de Gaulle. What we have here then is an account of how revolution in a mature capitalist society might emerge, written at a time when virtually everyone else had either put revolution on the back burner, taken it off the stove altogether, or had never put it on the stove in the first place. In my opinion, Thompson's account has never been improved upon to this day.

## **Class**

The one idea that Edward Thompson is most famous for comes from the preface to *The Making of the English Working Class*. Many people (in the history trade, anyway) know by heart that "Class is a relationship, not a thing." And again, "Class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs." But necessary as these formulations are to Thompson's understanding of class, they are a starting point and not the whole story.

In V.G. Kiernan's vivid phrase, Marx and Engels "cast the horoscope of the working class" back in the nineteenth century. If one's view of Thompson on class came only from a reading of *The Making* with its unforgettable "bottom line" of all roads from 1832 leading to Chartism, one could easily conclude that Thompson does exactly the same teleological thing. But Thompson's writings on class in these essays reveal unambiguously a far less monochromatic, linear, and teleological view of the working class's supposed historic mission. He deems it a serious mistake to "assume that the working class is a given entity with a 'fixed' characteristic consciousness which may wax or wane but remains essentially the same thing—a working class which emerged as a social force somewhere around 1780 ... which has thereafter grown in size and organization but has not changed significantly in form or in its relationship to other classes."

On the contrary, Thompson sees several phases or chapters or periods—he even calls them epochs—in the history of the English working class, each sharply different from the other. The Chartist era was a unique and indeed unprecedented moment in the history of the world. By 1850 it was in terminal decline due to political defeat and economic recovery. Not until the 1880s did a new kind of working class consciousness and values emerge centered around the factories, docks, and

mines and expressed as the revival of socialism and the New Unionism of unskilled and semi-skilled workers. This led first to the formation of the British Labour Party and ultimately to the landslide Labour victory of 1945 and its completion of the welfare state and Indian independence.

I cannot stress strongly enough that Thompson does not expound a version—sophisticated or crude—of the “forward march of labor.” In the 1950s it indeed looked as if the forward march of labor had been halted—the three consecutive Labour defeats being everybody’s starting point. The supposedly “classic” manual working class (which as noted above really dated only from the 1880s) had long ceased to grow as a percentage of the entire society. Moreover, the “classical” working class or what was left of it were simply no longer in the market for radical change if indeed they ever were. Especially influential in spreading this idea was Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), which is still in print. Hoggart advanced a powerful argument, based on his 1930s childhood in a very poor neighborhood of Leeds, that most people were concerned above all with getting on with their lives and that their class consciousness did not go beyond recognizing and accepting an essentially unbridgeable distinction between Us and Them. The mass media, to which Hoggart attributed great importance, were deeply complicit in encouraging and reinforcing this view of the world.

Thompson acknowledges that Hoggart and others had more than a point: “I think it is foolish to dispute the general weight of this evidence.” But they did not have the whole story. He makes the crucially important point that there was always to be found a minority of actively class-conscious people in working-class neighborhoods throughout England—trade unionists, cooperators, socialists, and others. The good old days when men were men and militants were militants—most of them, anyway—never existed. Thompson follows on with a series of interrelated considerations of the important changes that were already visible in the 1950s and why it is wrong to conclude that they put an end to socialism in our time. He points out that there is nothing inherently socialist about coal and machine tools. Socialists should welcome the growth of the economy’s service sector provided that it results in “more and more people being involved in the exchange of valuable human services (welfare, education, entertainment, and the like) and not (as at present) in salesmanship, packaging, and bureaucratic administration.” In addition, the supposedly good old days were not all that hot to begin with. He dismisses “false consciousness”—past or present—out of hand. Finally he categorically rejects C. Wright Mills’ hint that intellectuals and not the working class are going to be the agents of change in our time.

The considerable amount of ink that has been spent in trying to figure out how Marxist or otherwise is Thompson’s approach to class strikes me as mostly a waste of effort. One can plausibly maintain that Thompson accepts Marx’s distinction between “Klasse an sich” (class in itself, with its structuralist overtones) and “Klasse fuer sich” (class for itself, with its emphasis on consciousness and self-activity). Alternatively, one can argue that Thompson is a practitioner of the New Working Class theory before that theory’s articulation and leave it to others to debate its Marxist pedigree. But what stands out above all is Thompson’s reaffirmation of working people as a presence in human affairs and not just bystanders, at a time when so many ideologically motivated writers were proclaiming and continue to claim the exact opposite.

## **Socialism**

Socialism is (literally) back on the front page because of Bernie Sanders’ claim that he is a democratic socialist. But he has been all but completely silent about what he means by democratic socialism. Hence I was not surprised to see that the *New York Times* recently asked a learned academic for guidance and clarification. The academic’s response (I paraphrase broadly) was that if it makes you happy, you can call Bernie Sanders a socialist. But if you want to be accurate, he’s really a left-wing liberal and a Keynesian. That is plainly correct. Which is not to berate Sanders for

claiming to be something that he's not, but to argue that his campaign has done hardly anything to further anyone's political education on the matter of what socialism is and isn't and why you should be a socialist and call yourself one. I wouldn't be surprised if readers are at this moment muttering under their breath "duh," or words to that effect.

Edward Thompson was also a socialist, but not in the pages of this book a self-proclaimed one. He understandably and correctly assumed that readers would take his commitment to socialism as a given. After all, in mid-twentieth-century Britain there were millions of self-defined socialists to say nothing of even more people who were not socialists but whose definition of socialism was probably not all that different from the people who said they were socialists. In yet another utterly remarkable passage, he makes it clear that the goal of socialism

has been for the creation—not of equality of opportunity within an acquisitive society—but of a society of equals, a cooperative community. The prerequisite for this is the replacement of production for profit by production for use. A socialist society might be underdeveloped or overdeveloped, poor or affluent. The distinction between socialist and capitalist society is to be found, not in the level of productivity, but in the characteristic relations of production, in the ordering of social priorities, and in its whole way of life.

These words are a painful reminder of how far we have to go in order both to recover ground lost during the past fifty years and to advance the frontiers of what is politically thinkable and doable.

## **The New Left**

Winslow in his introduction provides a useful introductory overview of the rise and fall of the British New Left. Thompson himself, to my knowledge, never wrote a history of the New Left. But in his 1959 essay he mounted a powerful attack on the shortcomings of the old lefts, East and West, which because it defies summary needs to be quoted extensively:

It is the bankruptcy of the orthodoxies of the Old Left, and particularly their imprisonment within the framework of Cold War ideology and strategy, that has contributed to the characteristic political consciousness of the postwar generation—the sense of impotence in the face of the Establishment. Because there has been during the past decade no determined and effective grouping ... challenging these orthodoxies, frustration has given way to disillusion, and disillusion to apathy. ... Such groupings are appearing in different forms, in a dozen different countries, East and West.

This of course was extremely negative criticism of institutions and ideologies that Thompson deemed to be incorrigible. He then proposed a long list of positive tasks for the British New Left beginning with winning over the labor and nuclear disarmament movements to what he called an "internationalist outlook of active neutrality." New channels of communication needed to be found in order to facilitate debate and discussion by like-minded comrades at home and abroad. A "renaissance of socialist theory" was required in order to create a "unified and consistent body of ideas by which the New Left can be identified in any country."

While these challenges were being met, pitfalls needed to be avoided starting with a complete rejection of sectarian vanguardism. The New Left must under no circumstances become an alternative faction. It should not think of itself as a party or pre-party formation. "But the New Left must not stand aside from the labor movement and from its immediate preoccupations and struggles." Above all, the New Left must insist that "socialism can only be built from below ..., that working people are not the passive recipients of economic and cultural conditioning, but are intellectual and moral beings. ... It will cease to postpone the satisfactions of socialism to a period 'after the Revolution.'" Two words that come to mind for thinking on this scale are grandiose and

utopian. I prefer utopian and indeed Thompson included disciplined utopian thinking in his call for newer and better theory. Rather than being a weakness or oddity, it should be seen as one of his most important insights.

### **Thompson's Legacy**

A magazine called the *New Left Review* was started in 1960 and is still being published. It is far and away the leading English language journal edited and written by an international left intelligentsia. Edward Thompson was one of its original editors. Some of the current erudite—not to say brilliant—contributors to the NLR are major public intellectuals. Perry Anderson is one. Tariq Ali happens to be my favorite. But today's *New Left Review* is not the kind of journal with the kind of politics that Thompson had in mind. It launches no campaigns. It organizes no strikes, protests, or demonstrations, and writes and signs no petitions (though many of its contributors do). Its influence does not extend much beyond its own narrow constituency.

How Thompson tried his hardest but failed to avoid the NLR turning into the kind of journal I have just described can be found in a letter to the editors, "Where Are We Now?" which has never been previously published. Winslow's decision to include it is alone worth the price of the book. As he says,

Thompson defends the New Left, or what came to be known as the "first" New Left. ... Much of it is in response to what [he] sees as the adoption of a "Third Worldism," [a shift which] seems to include, he suggests, abandoning both the revolutionary traditions in the "West" as well as any commitment to present practice.

Who won and who lost in conventional terms has for most people never been in doubt, including Thompson himself. He wrote in a letter to C. Wright Mills shortly before Mills' death in 1962 that "we failed to implement our original purposes or even to sustain what cultural apparatuses we had." Not that Thompson threw in the towel. He continued to write far from ineffective polemical counterattacks that included "The Peculiarities of the English," directed against Perry Anderson, and "The Poverty of Theory," directed against Louis Althusser. But the idea that Thompson was defeated and, worse yet, is irrelevant, has continued—literally right up to the present. In the November 19, 2015, issue of the *New York Review of Books*, Michael Ignatieff specifically named Thompson as a participant in debates and polemics of the 1960s and 1970s that once were, in his view, "gripping and vital" but appear today "as distant as the disputations of medieval scholastics."

I am not going to leave the last word on Edward Thompson to Ignatieff, who can most charitably be described as a twenty-first-century liberal imperialist and less charitably as an apologist for torture. Even after granting that Thompson is not the only political heavy of half a century ago who is still well worth reading and that in no way could he have predicted and addressed all of the cataclysmic socioeconomic, ecological, and cultural changes of the past half century, which rank with the early decades of the Industrial Revolution in England, what must strike us is the sheer brilliance, courage, and originality of the man and his contributions. He should be, but for some reason never is, bracketed with Antonio Gramsci as one of the boldest and most original socialist thinkers of the twentieth century. It is safe to predict that there will be a Next New Left inspired in large measure by E.P. Thompson, and that the contents of Cal Winslow's admirable anthology will be among that movement's most important texts.