Document généré le 11 oct. 2024 22:37

Labour
Journal of Canadian Labour Studies
Le Travail
Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes

Remaking E.P. Thompson

Wade Matthews

Volume 72, automne 2013

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1020758ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)
1911-4842 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cette note

Matthews, W. (2013). Remaking E.P. Thompson. *Labour / Le Travail*, *72*, 253–278.

All Rights Reserved © Canadian Committee on Labour History,

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

https://www.erudit.org/fr/

REVIEW ESSAY / NOTE CRITIQUE

Remaking E.P. Thompson

Wade Matthews

Scott Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory: E.P. Thompson, the New Left and Postwar British Politics* (Manchester 2010)

Numerous books, special collections, and journal articles on E.P. Thompson's scholarly work and legacy appeared soon after his death in 1993.[1] Since then, however, interest in Thompson has waned. The reasons for this are perhaps easily enough summarized. Today, Thompson's histories are viewed as old-fashioned, while his socialist politics are believed extinct.[2] Class is considered neither a fruitful concept of historical analysis nor an appropriate basis for an emancipatory politics.[3] Nuclear weapons proliferate, but no anti-nuclear

1. John Rule and Robert Malcolmson, eds., *Protest and Survive: The Historical Experience. Essays for E.P. Thompson* (London 1993); Michael Bess, "E.P. Thompson: the Historian as Activist," *American Historical Review*, 98 (Feburary 1993), 21–38; Bryan D. Palmer, *E.P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (London 1994); Michael Kenny, *The First New Left: British Intellectuals after Stalin* (London 1995); Nick Stevenson, *Culture, Ideology and Socialism: Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson*, (Avebury 1995); and Gavin McCann, *The Political Thought of E.P. Thompson* (Avebury 1997). See also the conference papers (by Marilyn Butler, David Eastwood, Mark Philip and Barbara Taylor) on "E.P. Thompson and the Uses of History," *History Workshop Journal*, 39 (Spring 1995), 71–78, 79–88, 89–101, and 102–112. And, slightly before his death, Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland, eds., *E.P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (Cambridge 1990).

2. The most obvious references here are Gareth Stedman Jones, "Rethinking Chartism," *The Languages of Class: Studies on English Working History* (Cambridge 1983), 90–178; and Joan Scott, "Women in *The Making of the English Working Class," Gender and the Politics of History* (New York 1988), 68–92. For a recent argument that Thompson's history-writing is outdated, see Mark Bevir and Frank Trentmann, "Social Justice and Modern Capitalism: Historiographical Problems, Theoretical Perspectives," *The European Legacy*, 6 (Spring 2001), 141–58.

3. Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, *The Future of Class in History: What's Left of the Social?* (Ann Arbor 2007).

Wade Matthews, "Remaking E.P. Thompson," *Labour/Le Travail*, 72 (Fall 2013), 253–278.

movement grows up alongside their proliferation. Civil liberties are a minority, and increasingly "radical," interest in the age of the "war on terror." Internationalism, as ideology and practice, is the preserve of capital not labour.[4] At the beginning of the twenty-first century, then, Thompson seems out of place.

As a counter to this view, we now have Scott Hamilton's *The Crisis of Theory: E.P. Thompson, the New Left and postwar British politics* (Manchester 2010).[5] Far from out of place, Thompson, Hamilton argues, is a "contemporary figure,"[6] even an "urgently relevant figure,"[7] from whose political and intellectual activity we have much to learn.[8] This is particularly the case for socialists, Hamilton suggests, "forced to search in diverse places for alternatives to the dogmas of both Stalinism and old-fashioned social democracy."[9]

The question of relevance, however, is only briefly argued, and then unsatisfactorily, in the books' introduction and conclusion. At the center of *The Crisis of Theory* is a "remaking of E.P. Thompson" based on the idea of a break between Thompson's "early" and "late" writings. Before 1978 or so, Hamilton argues, there was an essential unity to Thompson's political and scholarly work grounded in a set of "hardcore beliefs" drawn from the "decade of heroes" (1936–46), when the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) "[offered] a bridge between the radical liberal tradition of the 'freeborn Englishman' and the twentieth-century struggle against fascism and decrepit capitalism."[10] Following a long period of crisis, Hamilton believes, this unity unraveled during the late 1970s as Thompson's politics became more and more irrelevant and "the burden of the past finally became too heavy to bear."[11] Thompson's final years, Hamilton concludes, were characterized by "intellectual decline"[12] and the "[abandonment of] all hope of realizing the vision that had sustained him since his youth."[13]

4. An excellent account of the ideologies of internationalism can be found in Perry Anderson, "Internationalism: A Breviary," *New Left Review*, II/14 (March–April 2002), 5–25.

5. Scott Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory: E.P. Thompson, the New Left and postwar British politics* (Manchester 2010).

6. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 4.

7. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 3.

8. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 277.

9. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 5.

10. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 39.

11. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 42. A similar argument appears in Michael Kenny, "Socialism and the romantic "self': the case of Edward Thompson," *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 5 (February 2000), 120–1.

12. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 3.

13. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 2.

The Crisis of Theory illuminates this remaking through a contextual analysis of *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (1978), a collection of Thompson's more important historical and theoretical essays. According to Hamilton, "The Poverty of Theory" (1978) marks a breach between the "early" and the "late" Thompson. Other essays in the collection, he suggests, can be best read through the grid of his re-interpretation of Thompson's life. "Outside the Whale" (1959), a defence of 1930s communism against turncoat poets and writers, reflects the revolutionary confidence Thompson exhibited during the early years of the New Left; "The Peculiarities of the English" (1965), a polemic against New Left comrades, represents Thompson's move into political quietism, under influence of "English exceptionalism," following the breakdown of the original New Left; and "Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski" (1973), Hamilton believes, was Thompson's unsuccessful attempt to pull himself out of his self-imposed political isolation.[14] "The Poverty of Theory," Hamilton concludes, "[records] a fundamental break in Thompson's thought."[15] After, Thompson "was never able to connect his political and scholarly work in the old way, nor connect history with the present in the way that *The Making of the English Working Class* could do."[16]

The Crisis of Theory is a fairly straightforward exercise in the history of ideas, which places Thompson's intellectual and political thought in a series of ever-expanding contexts, from the minutiae of New Left personality politics to the mid-twentieth century crisis of socialism. In this way, the book, perhaps, makes oblique reference to current methodological disputes in the history of ideas.[17] However, Hamilton is much less careful about putting his own interpretation of Thompson's ideas within the context of other discussions of Thompson's political and intellectual thought. It is not that Hamilton has neglected the voluminous secondary literature on Thompson; he engages many of the discrete arguments of others. It is that he hasn't placed his interpretation of the evolution of Thompson's thought within the context of other interpretations, and explained how those other interpretations are misconceived or wrongheaded.[18]

14. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 147.

15. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 252.

16. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 253.

17. For a recent overview of, and contribution to, these disputes, see Ellen Meiksins Wood, *From Citizens to Lords: A Social History of Western Political Thought from Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (London 2008).

18. For the argument of "continuity" see Kate Soper, "The Socialist Humanism of E.P. Thompson," *Troubled Pleasures: Writings on Politics, Gender and Hedonism* (London 1990), 89–125. Hamilton suggests that he places his reading of *The Poverty of Theory* in a number of

As a history of Thompson's ideas, *The Crisis of Theory* is a somewhat strange book though, and this because Hamilton is not really interested in Thompson the historian. There is little discussion of Thompson's histories or his historical practice in *The Crisis of Theory*, and what discussion there is relates only to Thompson's political thought. In reality, Hamilton has written a history of Thompson's political ideas. Yet, he provides little discussion of Thompson's Cold War writings or his peace politics. In volume, Thompson wrote a great deal more on issues of war and peace than he wrote on the New Left, although the two subjects were, of course, often connected in his writings. In this sense, *The Crisis of Theory* is a history of Thompson's political ideas, but as these relate to questions of socialism, perhaps even primarily to "Marxism." Thus *The Crisis of Theory* provides a somewhat narrow treatment of Thompson's thought, and this despite Hamilton's suggestion that he opposes the tendency of others (those others aren't named) "to consider Thompson in a 'selective way'."[19]

To begin, there are a number of minor problems with *The Crisis of Theory*. Thompson studied at Cambridge not Oxford.[20] His decision to work as an Adult Education tutor in Leeds after the war should not be equated with George Orwell's exploration of working-class life in *The Road to Wigan Pier*.[21] Thompson did remain immersed "in the day-to-day business of Communist political activism"[22] while he was writing *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* and Hamilton is wrong to suggest otherwise, just as he is wrong to suggest that Thompson "laid claim" to the Angry Young Men.[23] "Romanticization" is too-easy a description of Thompson's approach to English working-class history.[24] There is a problem, too, with some of Hamilton's choices of words. "Heroes"[25] doesn't adequately capture Thompson's intellectual relationship to Morris and Blake. To refer to those who broke with the Communist Party in 1956 as the

---

contexts "which have not been identified by most other commentators." However, he provides no reference to who those other commentators are. See Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 268.

19. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 1. The argument for treating Thompson's intellectual and political product as a whole is an old one. See David Eastwood, "History, Politics and Reputation: E.P. Thompson Reconsidered," *History*, 85 (October 2000), 640. Even earlier, the argument was central to Bryan D. Palmer, *The Making of E.P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism and History* (Toronto 1981).

20. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 36.

21. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 52.

22. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 2.

23. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 54.

24. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 276.

25. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 190.

"dearly departed"[26] is rather condescending, while Hamilton's assessment of Thompson as a "flawed giant"[27] has something of the cliché about it.

These are relatively minor issues. However, the central propositions of Hamilton's book can be contested too. For a start, he has not adequately explained, in his own terms, Thompson's continuing relevance. Indeed much of *The Crisis of Theory* seems to prove the opposite. I disagree, too, with Hamilton's "remaking," especially the suggestion that there was a significant break in Thompson's work after "The Poverty of Theory," though my complaints reach back to his illumination of Thompson's "hardcore beliefs." Finally, objections can be made against Hamilton's interpretation of the essays collected in *The Poverty of Theory*. Indeed, Hamilton's critique of these essays – variously, "idealism," "moralism," "parochialism," "English exceptionalism," and "rhetorical excess" – not only rehearse old and commonplace criticisms of Thompson but misinterpret Thompson's purpose in *The Poverty of Theory*.

The centrality of "the decade of heroes" to Thompson's intellectual and political evolution is the key around which the argument of *The Crisis of Theory* turns. Hamilton argues that Thompson found in the Popular Front era a set of "hardcore beliefs" that "connected his scholarship and politics" up until the late 1970s.[28] Among these hardcore beliefs Hamilton counts a trust in the "continuity between England's liberal and Romantic traditions and Marxism;"[29] "a belief in the necessity of a political unity that transcends the barriers of class"[30] ("the people") based on the ideology of the Popular Front; a political voluntarism grounded in a faith that "subjective factors" rather than "objective interests" motivate "the people" to political action;[31] and a commitment to English literature and culture and to the "Popular Front view of English progressive history."[32] Not only would these "hardcore beliefs" give to Thompson's various writings a basic unity; but also much of that writing would constitute an attempt to defend those beliefs in radically changed social and political circumstances.

There is something not quite right about Hamilton's description of Thompson's hardcore beliefs, no matter how plausible they appear at first sight. Immediately, *The Crisis of Theory* understates the import of Thompson's

26. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 52.

27. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 275.

28. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 2.

29. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 40.

30. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 40.

31. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 40.

32. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 40.

socialist internationalism. All Hamilton's hardcore beliefs point away from this significance, toward parochialism and nationalism, weaknesses often attributed to Thompson's political thought.[33] At one point, even, he suggests that the telos of Thompson's politics was "national salvation."[34] Yet if there was a hardcore to Thompson's political beliefs, sustained over decades, then it was an internationalism steeped in anti-imperialism, anti-fascism, and the idea that socialism was an "international language."[35] Internationalist solidarity was a structure of feeling Thompson took from both his father and his brother, and something he lived during the war years and immediately after, whether on the battlefields of Monte Cassino or labouring on Yugoslav railways.[36] Hamilton suggests at one point that one gift given by the older to the younger brother was a respect for "Englishness." Perhaps the more resonant inheritance, however, was a sense of internationalism gifted to Edward by Frank shortly before his execution at the hand of Bulgarian fascists.[37] "How wonderful it would be to call Europe one's fatherland," Frank Thompson wrote in 1943, "and think of Krakov, Munich, Rome, Arles, Madrid as one's own cities…Not only is this Union the only alternative to disaster. It is immeasurably more agreeable than any way of life we have known to date."[38]

There is, though, nothing peculiar about Hamilton's suggestion that Thompson took from the Popular Front era, and from his "family tree," a commitment to, and respect for, English verse and history. Yet this is not all we might say about Thompson's relationship to literature, even though supposedly thoroughly English figures, such as Blake, Wordsworth and Morris, shadow his work from beginning to end, whether as inspiration or object of study. There is, for a start, Thompson's commitment to the Hungarian and Polish poets of socialist humanism, and the matter, too, of how much his writings on socialism humanism in the 1950s owed to insights from Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* and, particularly, Vladimir Dudintsev's *Not By Bread Alone*.[39] Early editions of *The New Reasoner* were stacked with poems and short stories

33. The earliest critique along these lines can be found in Perry Anderson, "Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism," *New Left Review*, I/35 (January–February 1966), 2–42.

34. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory,* 33.

35. E.P. Thompson, "The New Left," *The New Reasoner*, 9 (Summer 1959), 9.

36. For a discussion of this familial inheritance see Palmer, *E.P. Thompson*, 11–51.

37. Confirmation of this gift can be found in Peter Conradi, *The Death of an English Hero: The Making of Frank Thompson* (London 2011).

38. Cited in E.P. Thompson, *Beyond the Frontier: The Politics of a Failed Mission: Bulgaria, 1944* (Stanford 1997), 102. See also *Beyond the Frontier*, 57–78 which explores Frank Thompson's communism, his immersion in the classics, his wide-knowledge of European languages, and his relationship with various East European nationalities.

39. See E.P. Thompson, "Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines," *New Reasoner*, 1 (Summer 1957), 138.

by Eastern European and Soviet writers.[40] The modern poet he felt closest to was Thomas McGrath, an American he first encountered after the war.[41]

Thus, it might be better to place the stress less on *English* literature or *English* culture in a way that implies parochialism, than on literature (and particularly poetry) and culture as creative resources which, Thompson believed, countered other ways of thought – a vision of literature that undoubtedly owed much to his encounter with the romantic tradition, but equally to his immersion in a milieu of communist writers in the 1940s and 1950s.[42] As Thompson once said, it was "exactly this defence – of use values, of idealized old community against new competition – that we find in some of the most interesting works of English literature."[43] Creative writing, Thompson rehearsed repeatedly, was not just associated with "the undogmatic perception of social reality;"[44] it was also a bulwark against abstraction and mechanical materialism and the most likely reserve of needs and desires – the utopian and moral imagination, value choice, and lived historical experience – crucial to any worthwhile socialist society. It is why Thompson once described himself as "a self-confessed agent of the Swingler-Rickword-Slater Literary Centre permeating the ranks of True Marxist History."[45]

There is a potentially more serious problem with Hamilton's suggestion that Thompson was committed to the "Popular Front view of English progressive history…as a sort of treasury of radical democratic struggle, and a living model and inspiration in the present."[46] There is more than an implication here that Thompson pursued the past through the lens of present politics, establishing (perhaps inventing?) a "useable past" for socialist struggle. Of

40. See, for example, Tibor Dery, "Odysseus," *New Reasoner*, 4 (Spring 1958), 58–67; Adam Wazyk, "The Railway Carriage," *New Reasoner*, 6 (Autumn 1958), 32–4; and Lajos Tamasi, "A Rhapsody," *New Reasoner*, 7 (Winter 1958), 75–7.

41. E.P. Thompson, "Homage to Thomas McGrath," *TriQuarterly*, 70 (Fall 1987), 158–192.

42. These connections took place around the journal *Our Time*. It was in this journal that Thompson's earliest publications appeared, including a poem. A discussion of these publications can be found in Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 228–33. Arnold Rattenbury provides an insight into this milieu of communist writers in "The Old, Bad Civilisation," *London Review of Books*, 23 (4 October 2001), 28–30.

43. E.P. Thompson, "Country and City," in Thompson, *Making History: Writings on History and Culture* (New York 1994), 249.

44. See E.P. Thompson and John Saville, "Editorial," *The New Reasoner*, 1 (Summer 1957), 2.

45. Letter, E.P. Thompson to Ralph Samuel, 1980, Raphael Samuel Archive, University of North London. See also Thompson, "Edgell Rickword," *Making History*, 234–41.

46. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 40. Hamilton provides a generally unsatisfactory discussion of Thompson's historical methodology. See, in particular, *The Crisis of Theory*, 41–42, where he suggests that "Thompson owed no methodological debt to…the number crunching of the likes of Maurice Dobb." This is wrong for two reasons. Thompson owed much to Dobb; and Dobb's most influential text, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, was largely free of number crunching in the sense meant here by Hamilton.

course, Thompson's histories were influenced by the context – political, social, intellectual – in which they were written, and by his own predispositions and preoccupations, as indeed all historians' histories are. However Thompson never subordinated his histories to the political needs of the present, and this should be said. Thompson understood that the historian could not "choose to be without values because he cannot choose to sit somewhere outside the gates of his own historically-given human nature."[47] But he also believed in a historical *discipline* – rules of evidence, the proper handling of sources, and the argument between concept and actuality – that provided a check on the necessarily subjective process of historical reconstruction.[48] He believed, too, that the past existed outside the historians' head. And he believed these things, as a historian, because "otherwise we are simply using history as a mirror and glimpsing within it projections of ourselves."[49] This was not just the mature historian talking. As early as 1956, in response to James Klugmann's request for his attendance at a Party school on history, Thompson demonstrated his impatience with historical practice reduced to a political banner. "The danger of our [communists'] study is this: that in search of inspiration we return precisely to those periods of history where the class struggle has been most open, militant, where the facts of class power stand most clearly revealed, where the betrayal of social-democracy is most evident: we pass rapidly over those periods where the class struggle has been muted, where social democracy has won apparent concessions from the capitalist class, where that class has shown its capacity for withdrawal and conciliation. BOTH are part of our history: BOTH influence our position to-day…."[50]

Hamilton's stress on "the people" in Thompson's political vision also risks rehearsing arguments about Thompson's supposed populism, arguments first made by Tom Nairn and Perry Anderson in the early-to-mid-1960s.[51] Left without qualification, Thompson's commitment to "the people" might be assimilated either to an orthodox "Popular Frontism" or to an anti-socialist populism. Neither fit Thompson. Thompson discovered his sense of "the people" in the British Army in the Second World War, while part of an international communist youth brigade in 1946 in Yugoslavia, and again while teaching adult education in Yorkshire in the late 1940s and 1950s. And he found "the people" while a communist activist in the north of England,

47. E.P. Thompson, "Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski," *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York and London, 1978), 347. The essay first appeared in *Socialist Register* (1973).

48. A good overview of Thompson's conception of historical practice can be found in "The Poverty of Theory," *The Poverty of Theory*, 37–50.

49. Thompson, "Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski,"*Poverty of Theory*, 349.

50. Letter, E.P. Thompson to James Klugmann, May 1956, Communist Party of Great Britain Archives, Labour History Centre, Manchester.

51. See Anderson, "Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism," 35. For a later example see Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain* (London 1977), 303–4.

in protests against the Korean War and in working-class self-activity.[52] This sense of "the people" was associated with voluntary association from below, *not* with the top-down populism characteristic of the CPGB's Popular Front. As he explained to Lawrence Daly, shortly after Daly's 1959 General Election campaign: "We talk a lot about the potentialities of working people, in the abstract: but here [in West Fife] one felt it in the concrete, and it has given me added faith in the real meaning and force of socialism, when people start acting for themselves below."[53]

Still, Hamilton has a point. It is difficult to read Thompson's New Left polemics – such as "Revolution" and "Revolution Again" with their division of society into "the monopolists" and "the people" – without recalling the "socialist populism" characteristic of the Popular Front.[54] Although he wrote little about the Popular Front in his published writings, Thompson would nonetheless defend the idea in an interview from the 1970s. "I was convinced of the authenticity of the popular front *then* [1946]. It was very soon broken by the orthodox, Russian-trained Communists…all that [genuine popular alliances] closed down in the cold war…,"[55] suggesting he remained committed to the strategy if not to the actuality of the original version of the Popular Front. In "Where Are We Now" he would describe his New Left politics as "populist," though with the caveat that this was a populism "in which a socialist resolution alone is possible."[56] Arguably, Thompson's "populism" had more to do with the sense recalled by Raymond Williams of staying with rather than repudiating "existing resources" than a populism which had swapped class struggle for class consensus.[57]

There is something amiss, too, with Hamilton's stress on political voluntarism as among Thompson's hardcore beliefs. Flatly, Hamilton describes Thompson as a "voluntarist."[58] Thompson certainly believed that politics could not be reduced to the calculation of objective interests and that the "moral

52. "Interview with E.P. Thompson," in Henry Abelove, ed. *Visions of History* (New York 1983), 11. I think Hamilton is wrong to suggest that Thompson was not "closely involved in the concerns and campaigns of organized labour." For this judgment, see Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 186.

53. E.P. Thompson to Lawrence Daly, 11 October 1959, Lawrence Daly Papers, Modern Records Centre, Warwick University.

54. E.P. Thompson, "Revolution," *New Left Review*, 3 (May–June 1960), 3–9; and E.P. Thompson, "Revolution Again!," *New Left Review*, 6 (November–December 1960), 18–31.

55. "Interview with E.P. Thompson," 12.

56. E.P. Thompson, "Where Are We Now?," Unpublished Memo, John Saville Papers, University of Hull Library Archives, University of Hull.

57. See Raymond Williams, "Notes on British Marxism since 1945," *New Left Review*, 100 (November–December 1976), 87.

58. Letter, E.P. Thompson to James Klugmann.

appeal" was an important aspect of socialism.[59] He did believe that "man's will is not a passive reflection of events, but contains the power to rebel against 'circumstances'…."[60] He also believed, nonetheless, that politics involved people being "placed in actual contexts which they have not chosen, and confronted by indivertible forces, with an overwhelming immediacy of relations and duties and with only a scanty opportunity for inserting their own agency."[61] If he sometimes placed a stress on the importance of subjective factors then this was because an alternative accent on objective interests and circumstances had reduced socialism to a "historical necessity." But the more important point, perhaps, is that Thompson never imagined that "subjective factors" and "objective interests" could be sensibly separated in political action – and this because he believed the "history of class struggle" was at once "the history of human morality."[62]

There is, finally, something awry with Hamilton's emphasis on Thompson's commitment to the continuity between "liberal traditions" and Marxism as among Thompson's hardcore beliefs. No doubt, Thompson defended what Hamilton considers "liberal" traditions, most obviously during 1956. Something of Thompson's respect for liberal traditions during the Popular Front era is indicated by the esteem in which he held Edgell Rickword and Jack Lindsay's *Handbook of Freedom* (1940), a compendium of primary sources that illuminated a "local [English] tradition of democratic assertion and organization."[63] But he never supposed a continuity between "liberal traditions," as liberals would understand them, and socialism. According to Thompson, it wasn't so much that there was a continuity between liberal traditions and working-class politics as that working-class politics had always made liberty of the individual and civil rights central to its endeavours and aims. Thompson was always quick to defend socialism's relationship to liberal traditions; but the defence was most often constructed against liberalism.

"Long before '1956,'" Thompson once wrote, "there were centres of 'premature revisionism' among Communist intellectuals and others who resisted the didactic methods of the Party's officers, the wooden economism of its

59. Thompson, "The New Left," 13.

60. E.P. Thompson, "Outside the Whale," *The Poverty of Theory*, 239. This essay first appeared in E.P. Thompson et al., eds., *Out of Apathy* (London 1960).

61. E.P. Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English," *The Poverty of Theory*, 279. The essay first appeared in *Socialist Register* (1965).

62. Thompson, "William Morris," *Making History*, 75.

63. Thompson, "Edgell Rickword," *Making History*, 240.

policies, and the correct positivism offered as 'Marxism'."[64] In another place Thompson described a running, most often submerged, battle between "Marxist orthodoxy" and "creative Marxism" during the 1930s and 1940s.[65] It was this "premature revisionism" or "creative Marxism" that was among the formative influences on Thompson, helping to explain not only his response to "1956" but also the general structure of his intellectual thought. In his account of Thompson's relationship to the Popular Front era Hamilton leaves this largely untouched, thereby neglecting some distinctive features of Thompson's analytic and political sensibilities.

Premature revisionism, given the peculiar circumstances in which it emerged, was vulnerable to the charge of *post-hoc* reconstruction, as Thompson well knew.[66] Nonetheless Thompson illuminated concrete moments where it arose before 1956, whether in the work of the Communist Party Historians' Group, in the interdisciplinary writings of Christopher Caudwell and the creative writing of Ralph Fox, Edgell Rickword and Monty Slater, or in those polemics which sometimes featured in *Left Review* and *Modern Quarterly*.[67] Opposed to philistinism and anti-intellectualism, Thompson described creative Marxism as a "living body of ideas, in constant touch with reality"[68] that ensured that socialist theory wouldn't become dogma nor context or circumstance overwhelm moral autonomy or the utopian imagination. It conceived the "arts as the supreme expression of man's imaginative and moral consciousness"[69] and thus sought to rescue creative writing and morality from what Thompson considered the tiresome and tyrannous tedium of orthodox communism's "evasion of realities," "falsetto utopianism," and its mechanical interpretation of the base/superstructure metaphor.[70] It abjured, then, a conception of socialist praxis that bracketed off questions of politics from questions of value.

Above all, however, Thompson associated creative Marxism with dialectics, "a way of seeing coincident and opposed potentialities within a single 'moment' and of following through the contradictory logic of ideological process."[71] Dialectics, thus defined, was a "habit of thinking" allergic to stasis and attuned

64. Thompson, "Edgell Rickword," *Making* History, 237.

65. Letter, Thompson to Samuel, 1980 and Thompson, "Christopher Caudwell," *Making History*, 85.

66. An illumination of this context can be found in Thompson, "Edgell Rickword,"*Making History*, 235.

67. See Thompson, "Christopher Caudwell," "*Left Review*," and "Edgell Rickword," *Making History*, 32–33, 231–2, and 237–8.

68. Letter, E.P. Thompson to Adrian Ganther, 10 September 1956, Communist Party of Great Britain Archives, Labour History Centre, Manchester.

69. Thompson, "Socialist Humanism," 122.

70. Thompson, "Christopher Caudwell," *Making History*, 132–3.

71. Thompson, "Christopher Caudwell," *Making History,* 90.

to process;[72] it was also, Thompson supposed, an identifiable aspect of social reality which the poorly bred concepts of Stalinism were nowhere near subtle enough to comprehend. Dialectics was a way of coming to terms with the relationship between structure and agency in socialist theory, and prompted Thompson to conceive history as a product of human making with unintended consequences. Thompson learnt the importance of dialectics not just from Blake, Morris and Marx; he also learnt it in his struggle against Communist orthodoxy during the 1950s.

It would be against the spirit of creative Marxism to reduce it to a formula, a set of principles, or to a series of texts. But if there was a "textbook" of creative Marxism or pre-mature revisionism then it might have been *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Selected Correspondence* (1934), a compilation of Marx and Engels' letters edited by Dona Torr ("working ten hundred miles outside of academia,"[73] as Thompson wrote later). These letters would certainly have an important influence on Thompson (and the tradition of British Marxist historiography), as did their editor, who Thompson always considered a creative force within the British communist tradition. Alongside a particular conception of dialectics, Thompson found in the *Selected Correspondence* testament to Marx and Engels's respect for the "empirical mode" and for the necessary interaction between theory and actuality in historical and political analysis; evidence of their rejection of "neat systems" and teleology; and a spirited defence of the integrity, "relative autonomy," and historical affectivity of the "superstructure." He also found evidence for an understanding of historical materialism not as a set of procedures but as a set of questions to which answers had to be found out.

Still, some part of creative Marxism was about the elaboration of what Thompson would later call "the real silences in Marx."[74] The importance and integrity of moral values, and the imbrications of "the moral" with all other aspects of society, including "the economic," was among the most deafening of those silences which creative Marxism was supposed to voice. Illuminating the legitimacy of "the moral critique of society" (something that Thompson learnt from Morris, but perhaps no less from his family tree) and the part morality occupied in human emancipation did not imply any repudiation of materialism or social determination. "Economic relationships," Thompson wrote in a short lecture on Morris, "are at the same time moral relationships; relations of production are at the same time relations between people, of oppression or of co-operation; and there is a moral logic as well as an economic logic, which derives from these relationships."[75] It meant, for Thompson, that socialism

72. E.P. Thompson, "The Poverty of Theory," *Poverty of Theory*, 115.

73. Thompson, "The Poverty of Theory,"*Poverty of Theory,* 115.

74. Thompson, "The Poverty of Theory," *Poverty of Theory*, 165.

75. Thompson, "William Morris," *Making History*, 75.

would not be made from bread and steel alone. In this sense socialism did not mean just more things, more evenly distributed, but the liberation of people from the compulsions associated with a society based on the production of things for profit.

However, in Thompson's understanding, premature revisionism or creative Marxism was as much a sensibility as a set of ideas. Some part of this sensibility is captured in Thompson's (1957) assertion "of the right of the moral imagination to project an ideal to which it is legitimate to aspire; and the right of reason to enquire into aims and ends of social arrangement, irrespective of questions of immediate feasibility…"[76] But it also had something to do with "combative polemic" and what he called in relation to another tradition of thought "a nexus of attitude, stance, attack."[77] Thompson pointed to moments where this sensibility arose before 1956, for example in Ralph Fox's 1935 *Left Review* polemic against the art historian Francis Klingender. "Mr Klingender," Fox wrote,

> is sure that the best way to "help" Tsapline is to tell him he is a misguided bourgeois with a very, very naughty tendency towards carving out mollusks and fishes. I am sure the best way to help Mr Klingender would be to deprive him of pen and ink for the rest of his life… Where in all this conception is dialectic? In this horrible jumble of rigid moral and sociological conceptions, where is the idea of inner development, where the real connections between form and content?[78]

For sure, this sensibility informed Thompson's response to "1956." Tone and argument, alongside what he once referred to as "severe self-criticism," was as important to Thompson's political and intellectual sensibility as dialectics. Indeed, in many ways, he considered them sides of the same coin.

There were numerous ambiguities and tensions that inhabited Thompson's creative Marxism. Most obviously, it is not clear whether Thompson considered "creative Marxism" as a return to the "real" Marx shorn of the corrupting "dogmatic orthodoxy" characteristic of Stalinism or, as a melding of Marx with other traditions of thought, whether the tradition of English radicalism or the romantic tradition.[79] Without doubt, though, the negotiation and exploration of this tension would always inform Thompson's political and historical thought. He suggested as much in the 1970s.[80] Indeed, wrestling with the silences in Marx and the Marxist tradition, not least around the question of "value systems" and their relationship to productive relations, would

76. E.P. Thompson, "Agency and Choice," *The New Reasoner*, 5 (Summer 1958), 91.

77. E.P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (New York 1993), 226 and 224.

78. Cited in Thompson, "*Left Review*," *Making History*, 231.

79. There is a good discussion of this in Soper, "The Socialist Humanism of E.P. Thompson," 90–110.

80. See "Interview with E.P. Thompson," 20–1.

constitute the thread running throughout Thompson's intellectual production in general and *The Poverty of Theory* in particular.

The Poverty of Theory was a collection of essays that were linked not just by a set of common themes and concerns – "1956," the New Left, Marxism, the nature of history and historical practice, and the relationship between structure and agency – but also by a common, by degrees irreverent, dismissive, and caustic, tone. Each of the essays was written as a polemic. "Polemic," as Perry Anderson once wrote, "is a discourse of conflict, whose effect depends on a delicate balance between the requirements of truth and the enticements of anger, the duty to argue and the zest to inflame. Its rhetoric allows, even enforces, a certain figurative license. Like epitaphs in Johnson's adage, it is not under oath."[81] Always passionate, sometimes overzealous, polemic often involves elisions and exaggerations and leans heavily on irony and humour. Prone to hyperbole, it can be bad-tempered and unreasonable too. As Thompson explained the genre in a review of Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution*: "Burke abused, Cobbett inveighed, Arnold was capable of malicious insinuation, Carlyle, Ruskin and Lawrence, in their middle years, listened to no one."[82]

It is perhaps Hamilton's failure to consider the *The Poverty of Theory* as a collection of polemics that leads him down some doubtful paths in his assessment of Thompson's essays. For example, his complaint that "Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski" and "The Poverty of Theory" are characterized, and marred, by "rhetorical excess."[83] "Rhetorical excess" is precisely to be expected from the genre. As a polemic against socialist apostates, and their assumption that change was impossible, "Outside the Whale" was not meant to provide a "fair" reading of the work of Auden and Orwell. In this sense, it might be considered beside the point whether Thompson's "assessments of the political and literary trajectories of Auden and Orwell"[84] were "correct" or not. Thompson used Auden and Orwell instrumentally to demonstrate a wider cultural shift – "a more general pattern of regression"[85] – and to irradiate the capitulation by disenchanted intellectuals before Natopolitan ideology. It was not meant as a piece of literary criticism. Democratic and argumentative, as much a matter of political theory as of literary style, Thompson's polemical voice mattered; and it mattered because, as Thompson explained in the case of Cobbett, it was a

81. Perry Anderson, *Spectrum: from right to left in the world of ideas* (London 2005), 179.

82. E.P. Thompson, "The Long Revolution," *New Left Review*, 9 (May–June 1961), 27.

83. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 146.

84. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 74.

85. Thompson, "Outside the Whale", *Poverty of Theory*, 221.

guard against assimilation to consensus and power.[86] By reducing this tone to "rhetorical excess" Hamilton leaves too much out.[87]

"Outside the Whale," as Hamilton deftly demonstrates, was a contribution to a series of New Left debates – about the relationship between politics and art and about the meaning and nature of political commitment.[88] However, Hamilton counts "Outside the Whale" a failure – both to lay claim to the "decade of heroes" and as "a 'softcore' defence for 'hardcore' ideas which he [Thompson] had adopted during the 'decade of heroes'."[89] This was not Thompson's only failure. According to Hamilton, the essay was spoiled by "idealism" and "moralism" too. On the one hand, Thompson placed too much emphasis on ideas and over-estimated "the potential influence of New Left intellectuals on the course of the future."[90] On the other, Thompson reduced history to morality, a reduction that prevented him from providing an adequate historical explanation for the drift of intellectuals to the Right in the 1950s.[91] In the end, Thompson's failure in "Outside the Whale," Hamilton decides, could be counted a "moral default," not least because Thompson, like Auden and Orwell before him, would shortly travel down the road of political quietism.[92]

It is difficult to judge the merits of some of Hamilton's criticisms of "Outside the Whale,"[93] but I think the charge of "idealism" misplaced. To be sure, Thompson believed that ideas were important, and he also believed, whether rightly or wrongly, that what intellectuals said was important too. However, I'm not sure either of these beliefs is enough to accuse Thompson of idealism. Briefly, it forgets that "Outside the Whale" explicitly referred to the materialist context in which ideas arose. Natopolitan ideology, according to Thompson, "grew by its own logic within a social context conducive to its growth," a context dominated by Cold War divisions and "exhausted imperialism." "An

86. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London 1968, org. 1963), 822–3.

87. A good discussion of this can be found in Stefan Collini, "Enduring Passion: E.P. Thompson's Reputation," in Stefan Collini, *Common Reading: Critics, Historians, Publics* (Oxford, 2008), 182.

88. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 53–61. But it was also about what Thompson pictured as a "crisis of poetry" which "could be understood only in relation to the spiritual withdrawal consequent upon the disenchantment with Communism, as well as the numbing inertia of the Cold War." See Thompson, "Commitment in Poetry," *Making History*, 334.

89. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 86.

90. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 84.

91. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 86.

92. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 86.

93. For example, Hamilton's complaint that Thompson "avoids a careful analysis of the defeat of the Republican cause in Spain" and his suggestion that Thompson didn't understand the politics of the Spanish Civil War. See Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 69 and 79.

ideology," he said, speaking on a broader canvass, "is constructed not only by those who work with ideas; but as those ideas are passed through the screens of economic interest and class power. Ideas are transmitted by educational institutions, inextricably involved in the context of power; they are fed through mass media owned by millionaires interested in maintaining the *status quo*."[94] Here it might be argued that along the idealism-materialism spectrum Thompson tilted the other way.

The charge of "idealism" against Thompson is an old one, first pressed on him during the mid-1950s (it was the most common response of CPGB intellectuals to *The Reasoner* and his "Socialist Humanism" article), and later by Anderson and Nairn in the mid-1960s. The "moralism" charge is equally old, and descends from the same sources. However, I think there might be something said in Thompson's defence here too. Paradoxically, "moralism" was the charge that Thompson leveled at Auden and Orwell in "Outside the Whale." According to Thompson, Auden and Orwell had placed the aspirations of 1930s communists outside "the objective context of European crisis" and had reduced political ideals to "suspect motive." They failed, he said, to understand the "political context" of the era in which men and women were forced to make choices. Instead they reduced political motive to "neuroses." From another angle, it was Thompson's purpose in this essay to reintroduce morality as a crucial aspect of historical practice and of socialist politics. Not to suggest that morality was all there was to say about the past or about present politics but to suggest that mention of "circumstances" was not enough. "For the history of political power and the human nature," Thompson argued, "have always been interdependent."[95]

"Outside the Whale," as Hamilton argues, was written at a time (1959–1960) when Thompson's hopes for the New Left were at their highest. These hopes entered a rapid descent soon after, reaching a nadir in 1962–3. If Thompson had been critical of *New Left Review* soon after its first issue was published, and then increasingly so during 1960–1, he became even more critical of the team – led by Perry Anderson – which succeeded Stuart Hall as editor in 1962. As Hamilton demonstrates, Thompson's disillusionment with the 'new' *New Left Review* was expressed in a lengthy (unpublished) memorandum to the editorial team, "Where Are We Now?," and in his historical polemic, "The Peculiarities of the English," originally published in *Socialist Register* in 1965. In "The Peculiarities of the English," according to Hamilton, Thompson "[used] his new-found academic renown [he'd recently published *The Making of the English Working Class* and moved to Warwick University to head up the Center for the Study of Social History] to settle scores with some of his enemies from the first New Left…."[96] It was a product, Hamilton argues, of

94. Thompson, "Outside the Whale," *Poverty of Theory*, 213–214, 235.

95. Thompson, "Outside the Whale," *Poverty of Theory*, 227, 229, 240.

96. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 272.

"defeat" and the failure of Thompson's strategic and political role in the first New Left. A "paradoxical text," "The Peculiarities of the English," according to Hamilton, marked Thompson's move into political quietism.[97]

In his discussion of "The Peculiarities of the English" Hamilton seems to want Thompson to have written a different essay. He argues that "The Peculiarities of the English" evades "the problems of the contemporary left," abjures "programmatic political argument," and focuses over much on history. As such, it was destined to lack "political impact." This is an odd set of criticisms, almost as odd as Hamilton's suggestion that the essay "contains very few references to the New Left." As a response to Anderson and Nairn's thesis on English history from the seventeenth-century onwards, it would have been strange if Thompson had not engaged historical issues. But as a reading of "The Peculiarities of the English" would show, Thompson believed that these historical issues had political consequences. If the essay did not re-write *The British Road to Socialism*, it nonetheless offered a political basis, at least Thompson argued, from which such a programme would have to be written. It was Thompson's contention that the "Origins of the Present Crisis" and "The Nature of the Labour Party" effectively offered socialism in Britain a road to nowhere, and this mostly because they deliberately eschewed the idiom in which political discourse was conducted in Britain.[98]

But Hamilton's primary criticism of "The Peculiarities of the English" is that it developed an unhelpful "English exceptionalism," a stance and rhetoric, according to Hamilton, that not only led Thompson to neglect serious issues for the Left, such as the Third World,[99] but also drove Thompson into political isolation.[100] Hamilton is not wrong to spot the presence of "English exceptionalism" in Thompson's essay. One part of it, surely, was simply an argument about historical interpretation. This related to Thompson's criticism of the Anderson-Nairn theses' employment of a model of history based on the French experience. "I am objecting," Thompson wrote, "to a model which concentrates attention upon one dramatic episode – *the* Revolution – to which all that goes before and after must be related; and which insists upon an ideal type of this Revolution against which all others may be judged."[101] Yet this is not the "English exceptionalism" at which Hamilton (and many before him) balks. Rather it is Thompson's defence of the "English idiom" and "English ideology," and his insistence that the socialist tradition in Britain was not

97. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 94 and 124.

98. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 93–94, 121.

99. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 123. It should be said that (as Hamilton acknowledges) "Where Are We Now," something like a companion piece to "The Peculiarities of the English," did deal extensively with the Third World.

100. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 122–3.

101. Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English," 257.

completely bereft of creative impulses that seems to have drawn the sting in the tail of Hamilton's comments.

The matter of Thompson's "Englishness" needs to be considered carefully, and Hamilton is right to raise the question of its influence on Thompson's intellectual thought in general, and its role in the argument of the essays which make-up *The Poverty of Theory* in particular. In one sense, Thompson's "English exceptionalism" was more muted in "The Peculiarities of the English" than Hamilton leads us to suspect. For example, Thompson stressed that "hermetic divisions between national cultures" were "unreal" and suggested that London was a "great *European* capital," precisely against the reverse "English exceptionalism" of Anderson and Nairn. He also reflected that English intellectual culture was suffused with imperialism and that English intellectual traditions had characteristic "limitations."[102]

Still, there are clear instances of "Englishness" at work in the essay. However these instances are not indiscriminate and appear when Thompson is most interested in declaiming intellectual absolutisms and *a priori* reasoning, when he is repudiating authority and intellectual elitism, and when he is questioning the undialectical condemnation of whole traditions of thought and political practice. Something of this strategy was at work in "An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski" and "The Poverty of Theory" too. In the former Thompson constructed himself as an English Jester to refute absolutisms, to pick out the particularisms that hide behind supposedly universal forms of thought, and to stress the value of a morality based on "objections, qualifications, ambiguous metaphors;"[103] and in the latter to defend the value of empirical research, the legitimacy of the "moral critique of society," the affectivity of human agency, and to advance an understanding of history as process. But it must be said: these instances of "English exceptionalism" were dwarfed in *The Poverty of Theory* by Thompson's intellectual and political engagement with the arguments, on their own terms, of Anderson and Nairn, Kolakowski, and Althusser. Indeed, it might be considered something of an irony that Thompson is charged with "English exceptionalism" precisely at those moments when he is engaging with the thought of other intellectuals either from other intellectual traditions or informed by intellectual traditions from elsewhere.

Thompson's Englishness, however, was never simply a defensive strategy. Thompson offered two explanations for his "Englishness," neither of which Hamilton sufficiently considers. The first appeared in "Where Are We Now." "I belong to an intellectual grouping," Thompson wrote, "which gave its political allegiance to the CP in the late Thirties or early Forties, but which was nonetheless repelled by the alien and schematic manner and matter of its thinking."

> Since the conditions of CP intellectual life discouraged controversy, the form which our 'premature revisionism' took was to accentuate the 'Englishness' of our preoccupations.

102. Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English," *Poverty of Theory*, 267, 285.

103. Thompson, "Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski," *Poverty of Theory*, 316.

> One reason why some of us turned to English history … was in an effort to connect Marxist ideas with British contexts, and to humanize and make concrete the abstract schema of Communist orthodoxy.[104]

Englishness in this meaning was thus counterposed to communist orthodoxy. Aside from an anti-Stalinist reflex, he offered an alternative explanation of his Englishness in the "Foreword" to *The Poverty of Theory*. Here he argued that Englishness, like a birth defect, was something that couldn't be helped. It was simply the idiom in which he was fated to think, although he did not think it was a matter of fate alone.[105] To reject that idiom completely meant "the evacuation of the real places of conflict within our own intellectual culture, as well as the loss of real relations with our own people."[106]

But whether we understand Thompson's Englishness as an affect of Stalinism or as unavoidable aspect of his political and intellectual formation, it is not true as Hamilton claims that it resulted in an "exceptionalism" where he was unwilling to a "make the case for the direct relevance of English history to the contemporary world."[107] This is an awkward formulation but its meaning can be contested. Thompson did draw direct links between England's position in international affairs and the politics of other nations both before and after the publication of "The Peculiarities of the English." Whether in his *New Reasoner* or *New Left Review* articles, in *May Day Manifesto*, or in his peace writings of the 1980s, Thompson consistently connected the struggle for socialism and peace in Britain with the struggle for socialism and peace in other countries. This was no less true of "Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski" and "The Poverty of Theory."[108]

The "awkwardness" of Thompson's political commitments often drove him into political isolation, out on a ledge as Thompson once put it.[109] Hamilton explains this as "political quietism." However, "political quietism" is not a good description of Thompson's political evolution after 1965. There was, of course, his involvement in the May Day Manifesto movement (acknowledged by Hamilton) in 1967–70, which points against any categorical judgment. His engagement in a minor moment of student radicalism at Warwick, where he'd taught since 1965, might also be recalled. Finally, there is the increasing volume of his political journalism in the 1970s, later collected in *Writing by Candlelight*. In *Arguments within English Marxism*, Anderson would refer

104. Thompson, "Where Are We Now?".

105. Thompson, "Foreword," *Poverty of Theory*, iv.

106. Thompson, "Foreword," *Poverty of Theory*, iv.

107. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 124.

108. For example, see Thompson, "An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski," 334; and "The Poverty of Theory," *Poverty of Theory*, 169.

109. See the "Conclusion" to Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origins of the Black Act* (London 1975).

to this journalism, and specifically to his writing on the state and the rule of law, as "[representing] perhaps the most effective *political intervention* by any socialist writer in England in recent years – forcing to public attention, by sheer eloquence and learning, processes otherwise neglected or unobserved on the margins of conventional consciousness."[110] Being a "solitary walker,"[111] in other words, did not imply quietism. In the immediate years after the fall of the New Left, and not least in the detail of "Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski" and "The Poverty of Theory," there was something of Wordsworth in Germany about Thompson, "pitting himself against all inclination to thresh the grain of humanism from the chaff."[112]

To highlight the break in Thompson's thought after "The Poverty of Theory" Hamilton selects a number of texts to make his case, including *Customs in Common* (1991), *Witness against the Beast* (1993), *Beyond the Frontier* (1997, though based on lectures delivered in 1981), and some of Thompson's Cold War writings, most of which appeared in *Exterminism and the Cold War* (1982) and *The Heavy Dancers* (1985). He suggests that Thompson's late thought was characterized by a "deep pessimism" about political change from below, by "a resistance to generalization across historical and cultural contexts," by a lack of confidence, and by a "gradual abandonment of Marxist concepts" and a consequent rapprochement with liberal historiography.[113] After 1978, Hamilton claims, the threads, initially woven during the 1930s and 1940s, that connected his politics and his intellectual work were severed, leading him to jettison beliefs and hopes that had sustained him since "the decades of heroes."

Thompson never really gave up the habits of a lifetime. He was as critical of liberal and conservative historiographies in the 1980s as anytime before. A review of J.C. Davis's *Fear, Myth and History: Historians and the Ranters* published in *London Review of Books* in 1987 is a case in point. Thompson's review is a forthright defence of Christopher Hill's Marxist-inspired interpretation of England's seventeenth century against a book which, Thompson argued, set out to show "that the Ranters did not exist."[114] Davis – moved to respond to Thompson's review in a letter to *London Review of Books*

110. Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism* (London 1980), 201.

111. "Solitary walker" was Thompson's description of Mary Wollstonecraft. See E.P. Thompson, "Mary Wollstonecraft," *Making History*, 9.

112. E.P. Thompson, "Disenchantment or Default? A Lay Sermon," *The Romantics: England in a Revolutionary Age* (London 1997), 73.

113. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 254–256.

114. E.P. Thompson, "On the Rant," *London Review of Books*, 9 (9 July 1987), http://www.lrb.co.uk/v09/n13/ep-thompson/on-the-rant.

– characterized it as "long and violent."[115] This might be considered a slightly hysterical characterization of Thompson's piece. It was, though, an abrasive polemic against historical revisionism in the best Thompsonian style. "He [Davis] rounds it [the book] off with sixty pages of reprints from the worthless and salacious 'yellowpress' anti-Ranter tracts. This is like tying a large lead weight to the neck of whatever weakling kitten of the imagination has survived immersion in the tedium of his text, and sinking it finally to the bottom of the pond."[116]

Davis's book was an example of conservative historiography and Hamilton might thus consider it no refutation of his argument. It is true that Thompson's review of Linda Colley's *Britons* was more ambivalent. But not, I would argue, evidence enough to clinch Hamilton's case. For sure, Thompson praises Colley's book, sometimes fulsomely. Indeed, he suggested that it constituted a "significant study"[117] and that it deserved to exert an influence on the field of late-18th-and-early-19th century British history. Although generous, the majority of Thompson's review contests Colley's thesis. Indeed, Thompson is even prepared to defend the argument of *The Making of the Working Class*: "I am not ready to capitulate," he wrote. "I cannot find one univocal nation of Britons." Asking the question "which Britons?" signaled Thompson's discontent with any too-easily established conception of a "loyal British consensus" in the early nineteenth-century, though he was prepared to admit where Colley was "probably right"[118] (though not necessarily in contradiction with his own views).

Other evidence could be mounted to prove the point. The introduction to *Customs in Common*, the essay on William Thewall that appeared posthumously in *Past & Present*, or some of Thompson's late reviews that were printed in *The Romantics*: here historiographical judgments and interpretations – whether of the enclosure movement and customary rights, of capitalist political economy, of William Godwin, of the apostasy of romantic poets, or early-nineteenth-century Jacobinism – demonstrate a consistency of heuristic and methodological purpose across decades.[119] Thompson's politics of historiography, in short, remained relatively unchanged. In a letter to Christopher Hill in 1977 he wrote: "You are trying to convince liberal-minded empirical academic chaps, like Stone, Hexter, et al., that the notion of a bourgeois revolution is one which a sensible chap can hold. I would have

115. J.C. Davis, "Letter," *London Review of Books*, 9 (17 September 1987), http://www.lrb.co.uk/v09/n13/ep-thompson/on-the-rant.

116. Thompson, "On the Rant."

117. E.P. Thompson, "Which Britons?," *Making History*, 319.

118. Thompson, "Which Britons?," 326, 321.

119. See Thompson, "Wordsworth's Crisis," "Benevolent Mr. Godwin," and "Hunting the Jacobin Fox", *The Romantics*, 75–95, 96–107, and 156–217.

preferred a slightly crosser and more polemical Hill facing all these reasonable chaps."[120] Whether before or after 1978, Thompson never entered into any rapprochement with "sensible liberal-minded empirical chaps."

For a socialist, and for a socialist historian, living in Britain, there was a lot to be pessimistic about in the 1980s. But Thompson seemed relatively immune, in any absolute sense, from this structure of feeling. As Cold War tensions grew in the late 1970s and early 1980s, he was certainly less than hopeful about the survival of humanity, as instanced in his "Exterminism: The Last Stage of Civilization?," justifying Hamilton's belief that his writings took on an increasingly apocalyptic tone after the mid-1970s. But as Kate Soper has suggested this essay is best read "as a parable to capture political imagination at a moment when the maximum mobilization of opposition to the deployment of INF was clearly called for."[121] Thus Thompson's response to the "exterminism thesis" was anything but pessimistic – work with the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation and CND and a prominent role in the establishment of European Nuclear Disarmament (END). If some of his "second" Cold War writings provide evidence of pessimism, it was a pessimism that (again) pushed him out of any sort of isolation into an international dialogue of refusal and dissent.

If Hamilton can be contested on these points, it's not so easy to counter his suggestion that Thompson's relationship to Marxism underwent a significant change after 1978. Thompson's interest in Marxism certainly dissipated after "The Poverty of Theory." He was no longer, he said in 1985, interested "in Marxism as a Theoretical System."[122] But he'd consistently derided attempts over the years to establish Marxism on this footing and this statement probably meant he had no intention of re-writing "The Poverty of Theory" or "Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski." In a contribution to The New School for Social Research's conference on "radical history" he said he was more comfortable with the term "historical materialism." "And also," he went on, "with the sense that ideas and values are situated in a material context, and material needs are situated in a context of norms and expectations, and one turns around this many-sided societal object of investigation." In the same essay he reaffirmed that the Marxist concepts of "class, ideology, and mode of production" remained "difficult but still creative concepts."[123] Something of this position was reflected in *Customs in Common* too.

But the changing nature of Thompson's relationship to Marxism over time should not obscure the tenacity of his political commitments, not least

120. Letter, E.P. Thompson to Christopher Hill, 1977, Christopher Hill Papers, Balliol College, Oxford University.

121. Soper, "Socialist Humanism," 113.

122. E.P. Thompson, "Agenda for Radical History," *Making History*, 360.

123. Thompson, "Agenda for Radical History," 361.

a consistently held hatred of capitalism. This was a fault-line of Thompson's politics that had seams both rich and deep. "[N]o word of mine," he said in his letter to Kolakowski, "will wittingly be added to the comforts of that old bitch gone in the teeth, consumer capitalism."[124] None ever were, either before or after 1978. In a review of Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City* he would affirm Williams's position that "resistance to capitalism is the decisive form of the necessary human defence."[125] Alongside an enduring hatred of the profit motive and utilitarian values, we might add Thompson's sustained polemic against "capitalist ideology" and "modernization theory," as forthright in *The Making of the English Working Class* and "The Poverty of Theory" as it was in *Customs in Common*. Indeed, Thompson kept watch against many "beasts" throughout four decades and more – imperialism, racism, nuclear war, anti-intellectualism and theoretical closure among others. It is the character of these political commitments, and the sense of responsibility that sustained them, which should stand out in any consideration of Thompson's political and intellectual evolution.

Since it is essentially a subjective judgment, the issue of Thompson's "lack of confidence" in his last years is more difficult to examine. However, I find no evidence for insecurity in his late work, whether in historical works such as *Witness against the Beast* and *Customs in Common* or in book reviews and contributions to *London Review of Books*. There was certainly no evidence of insecurity in his peace writings, which, as David Eastwood has suggested, "resonate with a polemical passion which was part of his authentic voice."[126] Passion and a lack of confidence are unlikely bedfellows. Perry Anderson described "Ends and Histories," which contested the "end of history" judgment of Francis Fukayama and the US State Department, as "visionary"[127] – a sensibility, once again, antipathetic to insecurity.

There was also no significant dis-connect between Thompson's 'political and scholarly work' after *The Poverty of Theory* (though it is true that we have much less evidence to call upon, since Thompson wrote little history after the 1970s, mostly because his time was taken-up with peace politics and because he suffered severe bouts of ill-health from the mid-1980s until his death). While it was not all he originally hoped it to be, *Customs and Commons* nonetheless foreshadowed a new conception of "the commons" which has become central to post-Soviet Left politics.[128] He reaffirmed in a different way, too, that

124. Thompson, "Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski," *Poverty of* Theory, 392.

125. Raymond Williams cited in Thompson, "The Country and the City," 249.

126. Eastwood, "History, Politics and Reputation: E.P. Thompson Reconsidered," 640.

127. Anderson, *Spectrum*, 186.

128. See Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All* (Berkeley 2008). Interestingly, "the politics of English history" was not irrelevant to Subcomandate Marcos.

socialism could not depend on capitalism's sense of "the economic" to achieve its aims.

> As capitalism (or 'the market') made over human nature and human need, so political economy and its revolutionary antagonist came to suppose that economic man was for all time. We stand at the end of a century when this must now be called into doubt. We shall not ever return to pre-capitalist human nature, yet a reminder of its alternative needs, expectations and codes may renew our sense of our nature's range of possibilities. Could it even prepare us for a time when both capitalist and state communist needs and expectations may decompose, and human nature may be made over in a new form?[129]

A sensitivity to human ecology, linked to his continued critique of modernization theory, also informed some part of *Customs in Common*, as it would his political interventions. "Do we," he wrote in 1985, "have the right to pollute this spinning planet any more? To consume and lay waste resources needed by future generations? Might not nil growth be better, if we could divide up the product more wisely and fairly?"[130] Thompson's "late work" instanced an adaptation of his fundamental beliefs to new forms of politics. Late research on Occum Sampson would no doubt have confirmed this view.

Finally, throughout his last years, Thompson stayed true to those features of creative Marxism, and to those tensions that characterized his peculiar conception of it, which he inherited from the 1930s and 1940s. *Witness against the Beast*, his last book, was perhaps Thompson's clearest statement of his understanding of dialectics as "co-existent contraries."[131] It was no less a reaffirmation of Thompson's long-standing assertion of the necessary dialogue between education and experience and his belief that the New Jerusalem would not be built by reason alone. Thompson's commitment to voluntary association from below was demonstrated by his involvement in END and the vision he had of Left politics "beyond the Cold War." Thompson's writings or political practice in the 1980s demonstrated no diminution in his "belief in the power of ordinary people to determine the course of history" – for example, whether rightly or wrongly he believed that the peace movement had. A realistic conception of the enemy, whether the state or capital, was not inconsistent with this belief.[132] *Beyond the Frontier* was homage not just to Thompson's brother but also to the historical agency of that generation of communists who'd fought with distinction against European fascism. Based on lectures delivered at the height of (second) Cold War tensions in 1981, *Beyond the Frontier* deliberately recalled the spirit of "democratic anti-fascist alliance" in the 1940s as a counter to seemingly incontrovertible present-day forces of destruction.

129. E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London 1991), 14–5.

130. E.P. Thompson, *The Heavy Dancers* (New York 1985), 3.

131. Thompson, *Witness against the Beast*, xv, 14, 44–6, and 222–9.

132. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 36, 261.

It has long been supposed that Thompson was a "volatile" and "difficult" character, a force for division and argument in the political movements with which he was associated and a brutal and overbearing polemicist to boot. *The Crisis of Theory* confirms this view. According to Hamilton, Thompson's "crankiness" "derailed his political ambitions, and ultimately made him a somewhat isolated, bitter figure." He "mistrusted" and "antagonized" comrades. Sometimes he was "enraged" by them. Indeed, according to Hamilton, Thompson played "an increasingly divisive role in the [New Left]" and, eventually, "he helped [to] sink [it]."[133] These character flaws were reflected in his literary style. Thompson, Hamilton tells us, wrote with "typical hyperbole" and his polemics were by degrees "ponderous," "rambling," "malicious," and "venomous."[134]

There is a grain of truth in some of these judgments (a reading of the available correspondence between Thompson and Saville and Thompson and Hall would confirm this) but the grain is rough, old and ill-considered nonetheless. It presents a one-sided, and ultimately distorted, view of Thompson. Not only does it forget that making social movements often, appropriately and necessarily, involves vigorous argument and sharp disagreement but it also neglects the substantive political issues. For example, why is there no discussion of the dispute over differing attitudes to the Labour Party that divided Saville and Thompson in the late 1950s? Why no discussion of *New Left Review*'s submission to the Pilkington Commission which divided Hall and Thompson in the early 1960s? These kinds of substantive political issues, and disagreements around them, are central to how Thompson is assessed and remembered, and in avoiding them Hamilton's assessments seem stripped of some important input. In any case, others have remembered Thompson in ways that are strikingly different than what Hamilton puts on offer. Dorothy Greenald, for example, remembered him as inspiring. His students at Warwick remember him as an exacting mentor but also as a scholar who was incredibly generous with his time and experience. Sheila Rowbotham, Clancy Sigal, Eileen Yeo, Bryan Palmer, and many others remember Thompson in ways that seem to fit uneasily with Hamilton's pronouncements.

"History is the memory of a culture," Thompson once said, "and memory can never be free from passions and commitments. I am not in any sense inhibited by the fact that my own passions and commitments are clear." These passions and commitments, and the refusals they implied, inflected all of Thompson's writings. They are what made him, in the words of Penelope Corfield, "utterly

133. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 275, 96, 99, 101, 59, 276.

134. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 12 and 121.

distinctive."[135] Anderson referred to him as "the greatest rhetorician of the age,"[136] and certainly part of his distinctiveness lay in his literary style and tone. But it also lay in the moral quality which undergirded his histories and his political interventions. Part of that quality was the "glimpses of other possibilities of human nature, other ways of behaving" that they gave us. In this way, as Stefan Collini has suggested, Thompson is perhaps more relevant than he ever was.[137]

135. Penelope Corfield, "Dorothy Thompson and the Thompsonian Project," 2 <http://www.penelopejcorfield.co.uk/what-is-history.htm> (10 May 2013).

136. Anderson, *Spectrum*, 181.

137. Collini, "Enduring Passion," 186.