

# NEWS

## E. P. Thompson, 1924–1993

The great bustard has winged off, removing as he went one of the prime attractions of these shores, and one of the few remaining reasons for still proclaiming intellectual allegiance to them. Thompson liked to present himself as an earth-bound English creature incapable of much soaring. But he had enough of the lark in him to have died singing, as Blake is said to have done; and who knows but that he did in his own fashion, for he was of that spirit. Thompson's trust in 'experience' shared common roots with Blake's 'Auguries of Innocence'. He knew what the poet meant when he warned that 'He who shall teach the Child to Doubt, The rotting Grave shall neer get out', and he has escaped that rot, and will live with us now as one of the most inspirational voices of English culture. Thompson has been rightly acclaimed the greatest English historian of the post-war period, and his stature as a peace activist aptly compared to that of Bertrand Russell. But as a polemicist and radical visionary, he may be ranked in a canon which transcends our own century. Thompson was not simply a rill, to invoke Coleridge's metaphor, flowing with a perforation in the tanks of Blake, and Morris, Swift and Cobbett. He was himself a fountain comparable to theirs.

But perhaps the watery image is not the most appropriate. In many respects he was more like a power house; and although illness had already reduced some of the force before he died, now that he has been finally extinguished, one feels the cut in energy all the more acutely. In fact, to realise that the switches have been flicked, and that we are not going to get any more of his historical illumination, his brilliant polemic, his moral clarity, his particular spotlight on the past, the present, the future ... is to feel a certain indignation. One is not normally moved to pen a letter to that Nobodaddy editor of our times up aloft, but in this case, 'Sir, May I, writing by candlelight, protest against this latest, excessive demand on the forces of dissent, which leaves so many of us radicals so extremely inconvenienced. The alarm call to action won't go off, the Cold War's done on one side only, the realist principles are deconstructing, the Labour apparatus has gone dead on us, the rest of the protest's at best lukewarm, and there's nothing to do but to go early to a loveless bed and squint in the gloom at our copies of Fukuyama.'

Lest this provoke an epistolary *levée en masse* among the readers of *Radical Philosophy*, let me hasten to add that I have no wish to divinise Thompson as the only light in a naughty world. I intend only to pay tribute to the incandescent quality of his interventions, and to the extent to which, whether we agreed with him or not, we had come to rely on his continual recharging of the batteries.

The man who devoted his life to preempting the real termination and contesting the rhetorical 'end' of history began his own history in 1924 in Oxford, in an ambiance of Methodist dissent with strong Indian connections. Former missionaries in India, his parents were on friendly terms with Gandhi and Nehru, and one of Thompson's last projects was a study of his father's close involvement in the life and work of the poet Rabindranath Tagore.



The other great family influence was exerted posthumously by his brother, Frank, whose vision of a democratic socialist Europe remained essentially Edward's own, and whose life (sacrificed at 21 while fighting for the Bulgarian partisans) had in some sense, impossibly, to be realised through his survivor.

Thompson, like his brother, was already a member of the Communist Party by the time of the war, which he spent serving with a tank regiment in Italy. From there he returned to complete a 'war degree' in history from Corpus Christi, Cambridge. (The college, somewhat belatedly one may feel, was to honour him with a fellowship in 1989.) In 1948 he married Dorothy Towers, who remained his collaborator and companion till death, and without whose full-time career in the academy he could not have abandoned his own as early as he did. The period 1948–1965 spent in the West Riding, with Thompson working as an extra mural Lecturer at Leeds University, was to issue first in the major reinterpretation of the project of William Morris, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955), and then in the *chef d'oeuvre* of *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). But it was also the period of Thompson's early career as a peace activist, first with the British Peace Committee, then with CND on its formation in 1957; of his agitation against the wars in Korea, Kenya, Malaya, Cyprus and Algeria; and of his break, following the Soviet repression in Hungary, from the British Communist Party. He began to reason, he was to claim, only in his 33rd year, the date of the founding of the *New Reasoner*, the organ which gave English voice to the 'socialist humanism' which Thompson describes in *The Poverty of Theory* as arising 'simultaneously in a hundred places, and on ten thousand lips' in Eastern Europe.

Later to amalgamate with that other journal of 'socialist humanism', the *Universities and Left Review*, to form the *New Left Review*, the *New Reasoner* signalled the emergence of the New Left in Britain. It also marked Thompson's unswervingly non-aligned position in the Cold War, and his personal resistance movement to the 'inverted Podsnappery' of the Nairn-Anderson analysis of British history, to Continental rationalism and to Marxist anti-humanism, evidenced and documented in the bitter disputes which ensued with the subsequent editors of the *New Left Review*. All this was to culminate in 1978 in the onslaught on 'Stalinism in theory' of *The Poverty of Theory* – which ends, in effect, with a call to Marxist intellectuals to unburden themselves of this 'alp on the brain' and renew the agenda of the (old) New Left sketched in the original 'Epistle to the Philistines' of 1957.

In the meantime, the main target of Thompson's polemic had shifted, and the sixties were spent inveighing not so much against Stalinian Communism, but the philistinism of 'Natopolitanism' and the apathy of the Labour Left and Communist dissenters in leaving capitalism to 'rot on the bough' when Britain was over-ripe for socialism. This was given more concrete expression in Thompson's steadfast solidarity with the student protest against the tailoring of Warwick University (which he had joined in 1965) to the needs of industry. Resigning his post in disgust in 1971, he was never again to take permanent employment in the academy, which is not to say that he did not engage in an exhausting programme of visiting lecturing, mainly in the United States, which in the last decade of his life added to the toll of his frenetic peace movement activity.

During the seventies Thompson continued and deepened, though with an increasing note of pessimism, his campaign against the abuse of State power, both in his historical writing and in a series of Swiftian diatribes on the condition of the day. The historical accusation is most powerfully represented in *Whigs and Hunters* (1975), the contemporary in the brilliant essays collected in *Writing by Candlelight* (1980). At the same time, Thompson was brooding ever more despairingly at the Cold War cul-de-sac, but only to erupt, when the moment came, in the inspired exhortation to action of *Protest and Survive*. As the peace movement swelled in the early eighties in response to the agreement on INF deployment, Thompson ceded the writing of history to the attempt to make it. It was at this point that the logic of his demand for 'socialist humanism' as a third way between the oppositional but mirrored ideologies of the Soviet and Natopolitan systems was translated most tellingly and effectively into the call to put the agendas for peace and human rights together in a movement that would remove the weapons 'from the Atlantic to the Urals' and take Europe 'beyond the blocs'.

Indefatigable in his pursuit of the objectives of the END campaign, Thompson spent the better part of the decade as a roving ambassador on the international peace circuit. The articles, letters and memos poured from his desk in the sackful. At any moment, he might be found exhorting the masses in Trafalgar Square to 'feel their strength' or manning the bookstall at the END bazaar; playing percussion in a fund-raising concert or haggling at the Czech embassy over the suppression of the Jazz Group; dialoguing with Charta 77 or marching at the head of an anti-NATO rally in Madrid; exposing the grotesqueries of the SDI programme or railing against the skullduggery of the Soviet Peace Committee. That the CIA and the KGB would both accuse each other of funding these activities only served to reaffirm the wisdom of pressing for a process of 'citizens' detente' and for the adoption of a non-aligned position within the Western peace movement. This was to prove of critical importance, both in the

impact it had on the politics and strategies of the latter, and in the space it opened up for trans-bloc dialogue between it and the independent peace initiatives and dissident groups in Eastern Europe. This was no easy dialogue to sustain, demanding as it did a keen sensitivity to differences of political priority and to the divergent conditions under which the various peace groups in both halves of Europe were at that time working. The story of its ideological complexities is yet to be told. But when it is, it will be clear that without Thompson's sense of historical eventuation and his punctilious concern for the individuals involved in the process, certain lines of East-West communication which contributed to the dramatic changes of the late eighties would not have been opened up.

To make these claims for Thompson's agency in the making of recent history is not to suppose he was the only influence on the internationalisation of the British peace movement, or that he singlehandedly either devised or promoted the END programme. Even less is it to suggest that he was responsible for the ending of the Cold War, which is the 'absurdity' which some respondents have read into Mary Kaldor's obituary tribute in the *Independent*. What Kaldor actually claims is that, in the fullness of time, Thompson, along with Gorbachev and Havel, will be viewed as 'one of the key individuals who influenced the course of events in the 1980s', and this point is hardly refuted either by an appeal to the steadfastness of Reagan and the hard right, or to Western 'victory' in the Cold War, or even to the supposedly brute fact that the freeze ended because of the internal economic contradictions of the Soviet Union and the consequent transformation in its leadership. To argue that the Cold War collapsed because the Soviet Union collapsed is more in the order of an analytic statement than a piece of historical analysis. 'Collapses' of that order do not take place in a vacuum, but in a context shaped by shifts of atmosphere and the emergence of altered logics; a context which in turn exerts a specific influence on the direction taken by the unfolding of the events it has helped to precipitate. If it is true that *glasnost* and *perestroika* came in response to domestic crisis, it is also true that its defence and foreign policy initiatives were informed by peace movement thinking, and that the climate of reception of these both within and without the Soviet bloc had been altered by exposure to the pressures of the non-aligned anti-nuclear campaign in the West. As the major architect and spokesperson of that campaign, Thompson can certainly be said to have played a key role in shaping the historical disposition of the late eighties. Even at the time, as Kaldor notes, he was wryly predicting the historical theft of the peace movement contribution. 'This is the most serious political work I have ever done or will ever do in my life,' he wrote. 'It won't last long. If we succeed a little, the politicians will move in and take it off us.'

What also, one fears, may be taken off him post-mortem, now that it can no longer lacerate, is that 'fierce indignation' and socialist morality which made him such a thorn in the flesh of the establishment while alive. Already, in some of his obituary notices, one detects the machinery of the assimilative culture going into action in the salutes to the grand old 'British' troublemaker who kept open the lines of liberal dissent. In Paul Barker's tribute in *The Sunday Times* (which, it should be said, is that of an editor who gave space to Thompson in *New Society* at a time when few others were prepared to do so), there is little to suggest that Thompson had ever been an advocate of the thought of Morris, let alone of Marx. He was a communist for a while, Barker concedes, but this ran up against his 'wonderful unwillingness to hold his tongue'. Thompson is presented as carrying the torch of Paine,

Cobbett and Hazlitt; Leavis, Hoggart and Orwell are cited among the more contemporary figures closest in spirit to him. One would not deny that association with this pantheon captures a good deal of the quality of Thompson's dissent. But it captures it only in the form of the discriminations through which he criticised Marxist theory and much of its political legacy. What it fails to register is the distinctively socialist position from which Thompson took issue with Orwell's dismissals of the 'squashily pacifist' and 'bearded fruit-juice drinkers' of the Left, with the aspirations to a 'common culture', and with the blindnesses of a left liberal tradition of dissent to its own forms of quietism and elitism. In this process of abstraction and conflation, not only does the actual failure of realisation in 'British' society of everything which Thompson stood for go unnoticed: but so too do those contemporary forms of dissent, notably feminism, which must be allowed to trouble the argument of the troublemakers, Thompson included. Against this congratulatory emphasis (quite absent, one might say, from the fine note in *The Telegraph*), on Thompson's membership of the Awkward Squad, or on the 'humaneness' of his 'abandonment of Marxist class analysis' by the time of *The Making of the English Working Class* (*The Times*), one may well feel inclined to side with Andrew Marr (*The Independent*) in his call for a little more ire. A more suitable memorial, suggests Marr, would be to declare an annual 'two minutes pandemonium'. Yet even this, perhaps, smacks a little of containment. Thompson's own response, one may imagine, might have been 'why only two minutes?'

Of course, Thompson did, as he put it, 'share the same idiom as that of the culture which is my reluctant host', and he would have been glad that W. L. Webb (*The Guardian*) and others had noted it. On this basis, some might want to argue (wrongly, to my mind) that he invited the assimilation by the 'host', and that it is therefore a touch disingenuous of Marr to protest against its hypocrisy. There is rather more reason in the complaints of his critics against the assimilative effects of a resistance to Continental 'imports' which tended to present Sartre and Althusser, Lacan and Marcuse as all coming from the same warehouse, through the exclusive agency of the *New Left Review*. All the same, the paradox (together with some of the irony) of the 'great bastard' bluster has not always been sufficiently noticed. For of all the Left

theorists of his generation, Thompson had by far the widest international audience, and the anti-chauvinism of his peace movement perspectives and activities can hardly be disputed. We might note, moreover, that there were numerous Continental contributions (including from Gramsci, Sartre and Bourdet) to the *New Reasoner*, and that the *END Journal* provided an almost unique forum for East European dissident writings throughout the eighties. Thompson may not have been able to fly very far in theory, but he still managed to jump quite successfully across national barriers and continental blocs in thinking.

What allowed Thompson's voice to carry so far was the inherent consistency of its message. At a low point in the seventies, he himself was inclined to suppose that it was the sheer boredom of such consistency that would lead in the end to its silencing. 'Consistency is an old bore,' he remarked in his letter to Kolakowski, 'the voice of the bore is doomed in the end to tail off into silence.' But he went on to prove this wrong in the sheer persistence with which, as Sheila Rowbotham puts it (*New Statesman and Society*), he 'pitted himself against seemingly invincible forces, knowing that so many others had taken the risks of commitment'. His great political legacy to us is this refusal to submit to pessimism; and the exemplar he provides of how important it will always be to keep the past in mind if we are to find the resources to struggle for the future. There can be no poorer reason for refusing the continuous engagement with Thompson's argument than that 'postmodern' glibness which 'knows' that it is *passé* without having read a line of his writing. Fortunately, however, one may confidently predict that there will always be too many who will prove too awkward to take that 'knowledge' of their times on trust, and whose direct experience of Thompson's writing will continue to renew its spirit. Thompson has given us a resource too rich and too little boring for it not to be permanently cherished in the use that will be made of it.

Needless to say, this cannot compensate for the loss of the man to those who knew and loved him, for his great flailing gestures of mirth and contempt; for his grumpiness and tenderness, his self-irony and empathy. We shall miss very dearly this formidable thinker, with the cat around his shoulders, whose opinions he every so often saw fit to consult.

Kate Soper

## Madan Sarup, 1930 – 1993

It is with great sadness that we learn of the sudden death of Madan Sarup on 20th November 1993. Born in the Punjab, India, Madan was sent to school in England when he was nine years old. Stranded by the war, he stayed. After studying at Bristol Grammar School, he spent the 1950s and 60s working as an art teacher in secondary schools. In 1974 he took up a post as Lecturer in the Sociology of Education at Goldsmiths College, University of London, where he remained until his retirement at the beginning of the 1990s.

It was around the time of his move to Goldsmiths that Madan first became involved with *Radical Philosophy*. After attending some of its early open meetings, he started to referee articles and helped in the organisation of conferences and dayschools. It was also during this period that he began to write what would quickly become a string of books. Initially devoted to the development of a Marxist perspective in the sociology of education, the focus of Madan's writing shifted during the 1980s to register an increasing preoccupation with race and the implications for educational

debates of the insights of post-structuralist, and especially Lacanian psychoanalytic, theory – although he continued to think of himself as a Marxist, politically.

When he died, he was working on a book on identity which would have drawn together the themes of his earlier work, alongside more personal reflections on his life as writer – alienated by circumstance from the language of his birth – and a socialist, who had lived to see what he described as the 'heroic struggles' of the first half of the century rejected by a younger generation.

Madan sometimes expressed a feeling of loneliness. But this was the loneliness of the migrant and internationalist in a time of growing political parochialism; not that of a man without friends. He was a familiar figure to those attending conferences and talks on a wide variety of topics in London over the last decade; always ready with a question and a sympathetic doubt. Just one week before his death he was to be seen renewing old acquaintances and updating them on recent trips to India, at the *Radical Philosophy*

conference at Birkbeck College.

He will be remembered by all who knew him for his amiability, his modesty, the ever renewed breadth of his interests, and above all, for his intellectual generosity. We will miss him.

His publications include:

1978: *Marxism and Education: A Study of Phenomenological and Marxist Approaches to Education* (RKP)

1982: *Education, State and Crisis: A Marxist Perspective* (RKP)

1984: *Marxism, Structuralism, Education: Theoretical Developments in the Sociology of Education* (Falmer)

1986: *The Politics of Multicultural Education* (Routledge)

1989 (2nd ed., 1993): *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Post-Modernism* (Harvester)

1991: *Education and the Ideologies of Racism* (Trentham Books)

1992: *Jacques Lacan* (Harvester)

Peter Osborne

## Marxism and Modernism

Two events on successive weekends in July afforded avid conferees the opportunity to compare and contrast Marxism and Modernism in widely differing circumstances.

The Socialist Workers Party organised *Marxism 93*, in London to introduce their numerous new recruits to 'the socialist solution', and to stimulate and consolidate the commitment of longer standing members. From the point of view of attendance the event was a great success. All the auditoria were packed, with as many as twelve sessions running concurrently.

*Marxism 93* was advertised as a week of political discussion and debate. Alex Callinicos gave a Marxist interpretation of the Holocaust, an introduction to historical materialism and criticised the policy of UN interventions. Tony Cliff and Paul Foot put the Party's politics to the people and guest appearances were made by left luminaries such as Christopher Hill, Tony Benn and Robin Blackburn. Due to the nature of the event, which was not intended to be an academic conference, but a political rally, the level of discussion did not really do justice to the issues. The SWP has a line on almost everything from Islamic fundamentalism to Robin Hood, a line which is closely towed, with the disquieting consequence that consensus tends to function as the precondition and not the telos of any debate.

The exoteric approach to political education was evident from the lapidary nature of the questions posed and the answers supplied. Last year's notorious entries, 'Foucault/Derrida: enemies of Marxism?' (answer: yes) had given way this year to the tame, but equally unambiguous, 'Postmodernism/cultural materialism; alternatives to Marxism?' (answer: no). There were some surprises however. The answer to the teasing question, 'Opera – bourgeois entertainment or radical culture?' was radical culture. Bored with Neighbours, according to Anthony Arblaster, revolutionaries everywhere were now flocking to *Così fan tutte*. This unexpected valorisation of opera, as an oasis of near extinct revolutionary aesthetic practice, seemed perverse in the light of the wholesale refusal to analyse mass culture. Gareth Jenkins seemed happier to have insulted Adorno than to have read him. Had he done so he could have pointed out that so-called 'high' culture is no more exempt from commodity fetishism than 'low' culture. Besides which the question of the revolutionary potential of art cannot be reduced to the question of which areas of culture do or should or did appeal to the workers.

Another surprise, given that the talks were not designed to appeal to academics or sophisticates, was the readiness to invoke Heisenberg's uncertainty principle or chaos theory in considering the alleged determinism of Marx's theory of history. The presupposition behind this seemed to be that philosophical theory is bourgeois and elitist whilst scientific theory is inherently democratic and intelligible. However, one contribution to the ensuing discussion bucked the trend by quoting Lenin, quoting Engels, quoting Hegel that, 'freedom is the recognition of necessity', a

speculative insight which felt out of place in a discussion where the self-evidence of theoretical physics was preferred to the difficulties of the dialectic.

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*Modernism: Poetics, Politics, Practice* at King's College, Cambridge was very much an academic affair. It had the cosy atmosphere of a symposium, because the forty-two contributors, mainly from the field of English Literature, made up a considerable part of the audience. The prohibitive price of the tickets prevented many students from participating. Last-minute visitors were turned away at the door, on the grounds that the conference had been sold out in advance, although there were plenty of seats available inside. Perhaps the corporate clients of the sponsors had failed to turn up again.

Proceedings began with Gillian Rose performing 'The Comedy of Hegel and the *Trauerspiel* of Modern Philosophy', arguing that Absolute Spirit must be read as the venture of recognition rather than the perfectibility of pneuma. Simon Jarvis spoke in the same session on reciprocity and soteriology, melding Marcel Mauss with an Adornian materialist understanding of literature. Jacqueline Rose adumbrated certain analogies between Woolf's idea of nationless women, and the problem of Zionism in Dorothy Richardson. In the evening Suzanne Raitt and Laura Marcus co-hosted a chat about 'Modernism and the New Biography'. On Sunday, Helga Geyer-Ryan deconstructed justice from Homer to Kafka in half an hour. As if this were not enough she also insinuated the demise of Marxism as an intellectual discourse (and the collapse of Eastern Europe to boot) from Derrida's critique of Walter Benjamin. This extraordinarily ambitious paper followed Drew Milne's sober, but high-speed, essay on revolutionary art and the philosophy of history. Milne drew on Marx's critique of neo-classicism in *The 18th Brumaire* and Benjamin's reflections on history to evaluate Ian Hamilton Finlay's provocative use of classical motifs.

Despite some very interesting contributions '*Modernism: Poetics, Politics, Practice*' suffered from too many speakers and not enough discussion. The situation was not eased by the arbitrary juxtaposition of the papers, which precluded dialogue between the speakers, a dialogue which might have justified there being so many speakers in the first place. For instance, Diana Collecott on 'H.D., Hellenism, and Sapphic Modernism' was programmed to speak with Andrew Michael Roberts on 'Men and Traffic: Economies of Masculine Desire in Konrad's "Karain" and the Nissan Primer Advert, "Car Wash"'. Any continuities, and there were continuities, were fortuitous. It is one thing to diagnose a fragmentation of discourses, and quite another to create one. In this respect *Marxism 93* was a better organised event, with fewer speakers, longer papers and more time for questions afterwards.

Gordon Finlayson