

A Very Rooted Cosmopolitan: E.P. Thompson's Englishness and His Transnational Activism

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INTRODUCTION

E.P. Thompson was a Marxist, a radical as well as a peace campaigner, who was very active in the peace movement throughout his life, especially during its first wave in the 1950 and 1960s, and again during its second wave in the 1980s. This chapter discusses E.P. Thompson as a transnational peace activist whose Marxist ideology should have been well suited for such transnationalism. Yet, as we shall see, his rootedness in specific English traditions limited the extent of his transnational commitments. Thompson's emergence as an international leader of the peace movement stems from his internationalist upbringing and social background. As a peace activist, Thompson articulated a global consciousness

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of nuclear catastrophe. When analysing the “globality” of Thompson’s activism, it makes sense to keep in mind that he played different public roles: his public role as a political activist stood next to and intermingled with his roles as author/poet and scholar/historian.¹

In discussing Thompson’s global influences as activist, author, and scholar, we seek to trace the social networks that were fundamental to Thompson’s ideas and actions. How instrumental was Thompson in establishing, shaping, and maintaining (trans)national networks? How did these networks affect his “global” performance as an activist during the decades of the Cold War? Our hypothesis is that Thompson’s performance and way of thinking were strongly embedded within the national English context, although being at the same time truly global in its articulation of internationalist ideas. In other words, Thompson serves as a good example of how deep embeddedness in national traditions does not necessarily exclude strong doses of internationalism.

E.P. THOMPSON: NATIONAL TRADITIONS AND INTERNATIONALIST COMMITMENTS

Edward Palmer Thompson was born in Oxford in 1924. His parents were intellectuals and missionaries; they were Methodists and liberals. Thompson was highly educated. His father, the writer Edward John Thompson, spent several years in India where he sympathised with the nationalist cause. Edward John Thompson described himself as a “liberal conservative with a touch of socialism.” The Thompson’s home often had interesting visitors, including Gandhi and Nehru. Edward Palmer had followed his parents’ anti-imperialist conviction from an early age.²

Edward’s brother Frank had already been a member for some time before he joined the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in late 1941 at Cambridge. Mary Kaldor wrote that Edward “was strongly influenced by his brother [...], who envisaged a united democratic

¹For the international reception of Thompson’s writing, see the recent issues of the *International Review of Social History*, vol. 61, no. 1, 2016, and *Historical Reflections*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2015.

²On his father’s liberal cosmopolitanism, see Mary Lago, *‘India’s Prisoner’: A Biography of Edward John Thompson, 1886–1946*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001.

socialist Europe.”³ E.P. Thompson trained in history at university, where communism was relatively popular among the undergraduate students. He was aware of the Stalinist atrocities, yet he also saw communist internationalism as an anti-fascist force, a conviction that was fostered during his time as a soldier in North Africa and Italy. Frank was executed by the Bulgarian Gendarmerie in 1944 during a mission in Bulgaria. Given how close E.P. Thompson was to his brother, the latter's violent death at the hand of fascists strengthened Thompson's anti-fascism.⁴

After the war, Thompson finished his undergraduate degree, and co-founded the Communist Party Historians' Group, with Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, Raphael Samuel, Dona Torr, and others.⁵ He married Dorothy Towers, a fellow communist and historian. In 1948, he and his wife joined the international volunteers of the Yugoslav Youth Railway to help build a railway. It was meant as a symbolical and practical gesture in support of Tito's and the Yugoslav Communists' anti-fascism, their self-liberation of their country, and their Communist commitment. This form of practical internationalism was in line with his Communist convictions as well as his existence as a soldier in the British army.⁶

When they returned from Yugoslavia, Edward and Dorothy Thompson decided to move to Yorkshire. He began teaching for the Leeds Extra-Mural Department in hopes of getting closer to actual proletarians. According to Thompson, he “went into adult education because it seemed to me to be an area where I would learn something about industrial England, and teach people who would teach me.”⁷ According to Cal Winslow, “Thompson was one in a generation

³Mary Kaldor, ‘Obituary: E.P. Thompson,’ *Independent*, 30 August 1993, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-e-p-thompson-1464255.html> [Access Date 2 August 2016].

⁴Bryan D. Palmer: *E. P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions*, London: Verso, 1994, pp. 40–51.

⁵Harvey J. Kaye, *British Marxist Historians: An Introductory Analysis*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984; Bill Schwartz, “‘The People’ in History: The Communist Party Historians' Group, 1945–1956,” in Richard Johnson et al., eds., *Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982, pp. 44–95.

⁶E.P. Thompson, ed., *The Railway: An Adventure in Construction*, London: British Yugoslav Association, 1948.

⁷Interview with E. P. Thompson, in Henry Abelove et al., eds., *Visions of History: Interviews with E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Sheila Rowbotham, Linda Gordon, Natalie Zemon Davis, William Appleman Williams, Staughton Lynd, David Montgomery, Herbert*

of socialist educators—young people, nearly all veterans—who chose workers' education as an active alternative to elite education, just as the Thompsons chose to live in the provincial West Riding, purposively far from the Metropolis."⁸ Thompson made his professional and domestic choices from a class perspective—he distrusted the elite institutions training the elite class and he distrusted the metropolis that was dominated by those elites. Yorkshire stood for the working-class north of England and extra-mural education for an attempt to reach out to the working classes and help them attain an education. At the same time the middle-class Thompson had high hopes that he could actually learn about class from the people he would teach.⁹

These early choices already indicated that Thompson was a man who lived his everyday life according to his political beliefs. He saw himself as a political missionary—wishing to educate the working class, whilst at the same time rejecting the missionary-like arrogance of seeking to convert working-class attitudes (what he called “class indoctrination”¹⁰). Instead, he perceived teaching and learning as a mutual process. As were many other left-wing educators, Thompson was deeply influenced by what he had witnessed about army education during the Second World War. Left-wing veterans like himself remained practitioners of this idea of educating the working man whilst at the same time acknowledging the importance of his class position and practice.¹¹

Thompson and his wife also lived their political beliefs in their private lives. Thus, they soon began to organise political discussions in their house in Siddal, a working-class district in Halifax, where they lived, with

Gutman, Vincent Harding, John Womack, C. L. R. James, Moshe Lewin, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976, pp. 3–26, here p. 14.

⁸Scott Hamilton, ‘The Making of EP Thompson: Family, Anti-fascism and the 1930s,’ in Scott Hamilton, ed., *The Crisis of Theory: E.P. Thompson, the New Left and Postwar British Politics*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011, pp. 11–45.

⁹Roger Fieldhouse, ‘Thompson: the Adult Educator,’ in Roger Fieldhouse and Richard Taylor, eds., *E. P. Thompson and English Radicalism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014, pp. 25–47.

¹⁰Many examples can be found in John Rule and Robert Malcolmson, eds., *Protest and Survival: Essays for E.P. Thompson*, London: Merlin Press, 1993.

¹¹Cal Winslow, ‘Introduction: Edward Thompson and the Making of the New Left,’ in Cal Winslow, ed., *E.P. Thompson and the Making of the New Left: Essays and Polemics*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2014, pp. 9–34.

their children, until the 1960s. Living amongst the class he had chosen as his own, Thompson was active in the local Communist Party and was elected to the District Party Committee. He also chaired the Halifax Peace Committee, became secretary of the Yorkshire Federation of Peace Organization, and edited the *West Riding Peace Journal* as well as the *Yorkshire Voice of Peace*, which he had founded.¹² His strong commitment on behalf of the peace movement had started during the Korean War in the early 1950s. From these earliest times, he was keen to develop alliances across parties and beliefs, seeking to reestablish a united front of the Left in pursuit of peace. During the 1950s, he was already among the most important peace activists in Yorkshire. From 1958, Thompson became very actively involved in the CND, “sharing in the daily practice of fund raising and organizing marches, as well as in the writing of articles to help define the campaign’s wider goals and strategy.”¹³

The peace movement became a central institutional focus for Thompson’s transnational activism, because 1956 marked a decisive break in Thompson’s life and in the left-wing milieu in Western Europe more generally.¹⁴ Three important things occurred. First, on 25 February 1956, Khrushchev gave his so-called “secret” speech, which was intended to be leaked immediately, and was followed by the so-called Krushchev Thaw.¹⁵ The Stalinist heritage was now openly attacked from within the Soviet Union, and the speech caused debates in the West following its publication by Western newspapers in June 1956. Thompson took this moment as an occasion to contrast the English liberal tradition with the authoritarian tradition of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), as Wade Matthews recently pointed out.¹⁶

¹²Bryan D. Palmer, ‘Homage to Edward Thompson, Part I,’ *Labour/Le Travail*, vol. 32, 1993, pp. 11–71, esp. p. 45.

¹³Michael D. Bess, *Realism, Utopia and the Mushroom Cloud: Four Activist Intellectuals and their Strategies for Peace, 1945–1989: Louise Weiss (France), Leo Szillard (USA), E.P. Thompson (Britain) and Danilo Dolci (Italy)*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993, p. 107.

¹⁴The importance of 1956 is also emphasised in Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The Left and the Struggle for Democracy in Europe, 1850–2000*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

¹⁵For the full speech in English, see: <http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2007/apr/26/greatspeeches1> [Access Date 2 August 2016].

¹⁶Matthews, *The New Left, National Identity and the Break-up of Britain*, Chap. 3.

Second, shortly after Krushchev's speech, in June 1956, the Hungarian Secretary General, Mátyás Rákosi, who had described himself as "Stalin's best pupil," resigned, which started the Hungarian Revolution, and the establishment of a revolutionary government in Budapest which declared its exit from the Warsaw Pact. The invasion of Hungary by Soviet troops and the installation of a new pro-Soviet Communist government followed in November 1956.¹⁷

Third, parallel to the Soviet invasion of Hungary, the Suez Crisis unfolded in October 1956. The British and French governments were worried about the nationalisation of the Anglo-French canal by Egyptian President Nasser. The British and the French sent military contingents to Egypt to protect what they saw as their interests. This invasion of the imperialist West was associated by the Left as the mirror image of what was happening with the Soviet imperialism in Hungary. However, the Anglo-French action was not supported by the US, which forced the alliance to withdraw their troops. Hungary and Suez seemed to demonstrate, to many of those who would form the first New Left in Britain, that the two superpowers had total control of the global political system and both were using this power to prevent the emergence of democratic socialism. In line with this, Thompson also felt that the world's geopolitical domination by two super powers, the US and the Soviet Union, would impede the realisation of peace, democracy and a humanistic Marxism. As he argued in his article on socialist humanism, the Soviet Union had betrayed that tradition and therefore needed to be transformed, just as Western capitalism had to be overcome.¹⁸

As joint editors of the British CP journal *The Reasoner*, Thompson and John Saville voiced their dissent with the CPGB over Hungary, effectively accusing the party of abandoning international revolutionary solidarity. Hence they rejected the official Communist reading of the Hungarian revolution as counter-revolution, a position supported by, among others, a fellow member of the CPGB Historians' Group, Eric

¹⁷Paul Lendvai (transl. by Ann Major), *One Day that Shook the Communist World: The 1956 Hungarian Uprising and Its Legacy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, p. 35.

¹⁸E.P. Thompson, 'Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines,' *The New Reasoner*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1957, pp. 105–143.

Hobsbawm.¹⁹ Communist parties could not tolerate internal pluralism and dissent and hence it was only logical that the CPGB suspended Thompson and Saville, who then resigned their membership to pursue their version of humanist Marxism outside the party. About 7000 other British communists also left the party at that time. Thompson, Saville, and their allies began publishing the dissident journal *The New Reasoner*, which would merge into *The New Left Review* in 1959. This development was the origin of the First New Left in Britain.²⁰

The break of Thompson and others with international Communism occurred in response to intense differences about the meaning of internationalism. For official Communists, their transnational commitment resulted in a celebration of the ending of counter-revolutionary tendencies, but for Thompson and those who left the CPGB in 1956, transnational solidarity and activism were with those who opposed Soviet-style Communism in Eastern Europe. In spring 1957 Thompson affirmed his ongoing belief in Communism: “although I have resigned from the Communist Party—I remain a Communist.”²¹ Hungary then did not mean the Social Democratisation of large sections of the Communist Party but rather the formation of a new ‘third way’²² between official party communism and Social Democracy. This third position was intensely internationalist, whilst at the same time seeking for ways to express itself politically in Britain. Thompson’s close collaboration with his friend Lawrence Daly, who had also broken with Communism in 1956 over the setting up of the Fife Socialist League, demonstrates Thompson’s desire not to restrict the British New Left to

¹⁹Eric Hobsbawm, ‘Suppressing Facts,’ *Daily Worker*, 11 September 1956, in which he approved, ‘with a heavy heart’ the crushing of reform communism in Hungary, although he did also call on the Soviet Union to withdraw its troops as soon as possible.

²⁰Chun Lin, *The British New Left*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993; Michael Kenny, *The First New Left: British Intellectuals after Stalin*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995. On Saville, see David Howell, Diane Kirby, and Kevin Morgan, eds., *John Saville: Commitment and History*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2011.

²¹E.P. Thompson, ‘Socialism and the Intellectuals,’ *Universities and Left Review*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1957, pp. 31–36, available [online]: http://banmarchive.org.uk/collections/ulr/1_socialismint.pdf [Access Date 2 August 2016].

²²On third way traditions after 1945, see Jonathan Schneer, *Labour’s Conscience: The Labour Left 1945–1950*, Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988. Darren Lilleker, *Against the Cold War: The History and Political Traditions of Pro-Sovietism in the British Labour Party, 1945–1989*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2004.

an intellectual movement but to build political and institutional alliances with the working class.²³

For Thompson, and for others with similar feelings in continental Europe and the US,²⁴ one of the prime arenas for his internationalism remained the commitment to peace. In 1957, Eden's successor, British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, announced the strategy of developing thermonuclear weapons and admitted the British government had already tested these bombs in the Pacific. Thompson subsequently joined the newly founded Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND).²⁵ Peter Worsley, Dorothy Thompson, and Stuart Hall remember that "[w]ithin the new and rapidly-growing Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, what was now becoming known as the 'New Left' played a major part. John Rex's pamphlet 'NATO or Neutralism' linked the neutralism which had emerged in Europe as a response to the Cold War to the new mass movement."²⁶ The neutralists deeply doubted the Western strategy to secure peace through nuclear armament. To what extent protesting against the British support of this strategy was in itself a form of transnational activism as it concerned global security and countered images of the foreign enemy is, however, an interesting question: at that time the CND was primarily a British movement, even if it served as a model for the later Easter Marches of the peace movement in Western Europe.

Thompson's peace activism remained wedded to a revolutionary transformative perspective that can also be gauged from his work as a historian. In 1959 Thompson published his biography on the nineteenth-century writer William Morris, who he saw as a "Romantic in revolt, [who] became a realist and a revolutionary."²⁷ Thompson first immersed himself in Morris's writings when he prepared classes for his students.

²³On the brief flowering of the Fife Socialist League, see Christos Efstathiou, 'E.P. Thompson, the Early New Left and the Fife Socialist League,' *Labour History Review*, vol. 81, no. 1, 2016, pp. 25–48.

²⁴For an interesting comparison, see Bess: *Realism, Utopia, and the Mushroom Cloud*.

²⁵Holger Nehring, *Politics of Security: British and West German Protest Movements and the Early Cold War, 1945–1970*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

²⁶Richard Taylor, 'Thompson and the Peace Movement: from CND in the 1950 and 1960s to END in the 1980s,' in Roger Fieldhouse and Richard Taylor, eds., *E.P. Thompson and English Radicalism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014, Chap. 9.

²⁷E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: From Romantic to Revolutionary (Spectre Classics)*, Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2011, p. 2.

He found in Morris a good example to discuss English literature in an adult class, where many were members of the labour movement. "I was seized by Morris. I thought why is this man thought to be an old fuddy-duddy? He is right in with us still."²⁸ Thompson was interested in a particularly English intellectual and revolutionary tradition, and he saw in Morris "the first major English-speaking Marxist" and he saw Morris as a good example to resist the orthodox and Stalinist traditions in Marxism.²⁹

Gerard McCann has discovered in Thompson's political thought an "eclectic approach to theory [which] made appeals to the historical materialism of Marx, the utopianism of William Morris and [...] libertarian thought [...]."³⁰ Thompson, also according to Harvey Kaye, followed a Marxism deeply affected by the thought of William Morris and identified himself as a "democratic, libertarian communist."³¹ Thompson, by means of his biography of Morris, was tracing an English radical tradition that served as historical foundation for his present-day Marxism and Communism. By the end of the 1950s, Thompson's Marxism had become "less [...] a self-sufficient system, [and] more [...] a major creative influence within a wider socialist tradition."³² It was not so much "an obedient expression of the Communist Party line"³³ as it was an indication that Thompson was still trying to combine national traditions with internationalist commitment. In many ways, his socialist (inter)nationalism showed parallels to Morris's philosophy. The romantic socialist, Morris, believed it was necessary to revive the traditional arts in industrial society.³⁴ Ruth Kinna provided an excellent analysis of Morris's personal nationalism: he was a romantic, communitarian, and English nationalist who believed English society and politics had been corrupted by capitalism. The true English nation, which had stood for liberty, egalitarianism, and justice, he found only in medieval England.

²⁸Interview with E.P. Thompson, 1976, p. 13.

²⁹Ibid, p. 21.

³⁰Gerard McCann, *Theory and History: The Political Thought of E.P. Thompson (Avebury Series in Philosophy)*, Aldershot, Brookfield: Ashgate, 1997, p. 1.

³¹Harvey J. Kay, *The British Marxist Historians*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995.

³²Cited in Newman, p. 162.

³³Michael D. Bess and E.P. Thompson: 'The Historian as Activist,' *American Historical Review*, vol. 98, no. 1, 1993, pp. 18–38, here p. 21.

³⁴Goulden Hugh, *The Last Romantics*, London: Duckworth, 1949, Chap. 3.

And this national character, which he also saw in the constitution, he felt could be revived only under conditions of a radically federalist socialism. Surely, the early socialist also had strong internationalist convictions, although in Morris's romantic world-view Englishness as such was cosmopolitan. Capitalism, in his eyes, had produced a commercial patriotism and unnecessary competition between the nations.³⁵ As a member of the Eastern Question Association (est. 1877) and of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (est. 1878), he not only campaigned for the protection of English heritage but also, for example, for the restoration of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. This action might have had more to do with his anti-Turkish and anti-Islamic sentiments than with his cosmopolitanism, as Melanie Hall has commented.³⁶

Thompson's concern with English radical traditions was also extremely visible in his admiration for the radical William Cobbett, laid out in what was to become his magnum opus, *The Making of the English Working Class*, published in 1963.³⁷ Not only did workers have agency and not only did the 'superstructure' influence the 'structure' of Marx's dialectical and historical materialism, but the nascent working classes of England already practiced a marked transnationalism, especially in their reception and adoption of French revolutionary thought and action. As with Morris, the individual radical, the nascent working classes of England, as collective actor, were providing a national tradition for humanistic Communism, and this was an English tradition deeply imbued with internationalism.

His scholarly work can thus be said to be in line with his political activism. His career path reflected an ongoing concern for a different kind of academia from that which was mainstream in Britain. Accepting a Readership in Social History and the Directorship of the Centre for the Study of Social History at Warwick, which was founded in 1965, Thompson was hoping to influence the direction in which social history, and in particular the social history of the working classes, would be going

³⁵Ruth Kinna, 'William Morris and the Problem of Englishness,' *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2006, pp. 85–99.

³⁶Melanie Hall, 'Redeeming Holy Wisdom: Britain and St. Sophia,' in Melanie Hall, ed., *Towards World Heritage*, London: Routledge, 2011, p. 50.

³⁷E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, London: Penguin, 1963; see also Dorothy F. Thompson, ed., *The Essential E.P. Thompson*, New York: The New Press, 2001, pp. 104–105.

in Britain.³⁸ In 1967 he published his influential article on the commodification of time and the industrialisation of social life in *Past and Present*, entitled “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism.”³⁹ This topic certainly was an important one for global history, and Thompson was aware of this dimension. He sees the modern time-culture as originating in Western Europe more generally, uses examples from colonial countries around the world to contrast modern to traditional society, and involves some French philosophy. Nevertheless, his narrative again focusses most strongly on England and on almost exclusively English sources. Further, in 1971 he published a similarly extensive article in the same journal on “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century.”⁴⁰ Here the subject matter was again national, but the argument was developed in close liaison with his friend, the US labour historian Herbert Gutman, who was inspired by Thompson’s work. Gutman represented in the United States the new, cultural labour history that Thompson represented in the United Kingdom.⁴¹

If, in his scholarly work, Thompson was seeking to establish an internationalist national tradition for humanistic Communism, in his political work he continued to be critical of ‘parliamentary socialism’⁴² and

³⁸Tony Mason and Jim Obelkevich, ‘Labour history at the Centre for the Study of Social History, Warwick,’ *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, vol. 48, 1984, pp. 22–23; Emma Griffin wrote: ‘His tenure at the newly created University of Warwick was brief: he resigned just six years after taking up the post, disgusted at the commercial turn it was taking,’ see ‘E.P. Thompson: The Unconventional Historian,’ *The Guardian*, 6 March 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/mar/06/ep-thompson-unconventional-historian> [Access Date 12 August 2016].

³⁹E.P. Thompson, ‘Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,’ *Past and Present*, vol. 38, no. 1, 1967, pp. 56–97.

⁴⁰E.P. Thompson, ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,’ *Past and Present*, vol. 50, no. 1, 1971, pp. 76–136.

⁴¹Ira Berlin, ‘Introduction: Herbert G. Gutman and the American Working Class,’ in Ira Berlin, ed., Herbert Gutman, *Power and Culture: Essays and the American Working Class*, New York: The New Press, 1987, pp. 3–69, here pp. 20–25.

⁴²Thus the title of Ralph Miliband’s formidable critique of reformist socialism in Britain which Thompson no doubt shared with his close personal friend Miliband. See Ralph Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism: a Study in the Politics of Labour*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1961; on Miliband see also Michael Newman, ‘Ralph Miliband and the Labour Party: from Parliamentary Socialism to “Bennism,”’ in John Callaghan, Steven Fielding, and Steve Ludlam, eds., *Interpreting the Labour Party. Approaches to Labour Politics and History*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003, pp. 57–70.

what he perceived as the slavish obedience of the Labour Party to US foreign policy interests. In a prominent New Left May Day Manifesto in 1967, together with other spokespersons of the British New Left, Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams, Thompson sought to challenge the Labour government of Harold Wilson, in particular their support for the US in the Cold War.⁴³ In the mid-1970s Thompson would begin to liaise with the socialist academic and politician Ken Coates, heading the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation (BRPF) in Nottingham. Together they discussed a new peace initiative against what they perceived as dangerous escalation of the Cold War through the NATO decision, in December 1979, to station new US missiles in Western Europe in an attempt to force the Soviet Union to reduce their weapons arsenal in Eastern Europe.⁴⁴

The so-called twin-track strategy of NATO led to a major revival of the peace movement in Britain and other parts of Western Europe and the Western world.⁴⁵ Thompson and Coates now founded European Nuclear Disarmament (END), quickly nicknamed ‘PhD CND,’ for it united academics and intellectuals in pursuit of a new strategy for building peace. END sought to overcome the superpower dualism by building an alliance of democratic socialists from both sides of the Iron Curtain, committed to building a democratic socialist Europe from below that would overcome the Cold War binaries and could result in the peaceful cooperation of nation states in Europe.⁴⁶ The foundational appeal of END, penned by Thompson and Coates, outlined their vision for a future peaceful and nonaligned democratic socialist Europe.⁴⁷ Thompson became one of the most influential spokespersons for END

⁴³New Left May Day Manifesto 1967, available [online]: <http://digital.library.pitt.edu/u/ulsmanuscripts/pdf/31735061540344.pdf> [Access Date 6 February 2017].

⁴⁴Stefan Berger and Norman Laporte, ‘Between Scylla and Charybdis: END and Its Attempt to Overcome the Bipolar World Order in the 1980s,’ *Labour History*, vol. 111, 2016, pp. 11–25.

⁴⁵Lawrence S. Wittner, *The Struggle against the Bomb, vol. 3: Toward Nuclear Abolition: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1971 to the Present (Stanford Nuclear Age Series 3)*, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003.

⁴⁶Patrick D.M. Burke, ‘European Nuclear Disarmament: A Study in Transnational Social Movement Strategy,’ PhD dissertation, University of Westminster, 2004.

⁴⁷The Bertrand Russell Foundation, ‘European Nuclear Disarmament: An Appeal for Action,’ *Security Dialogue*, vol. 11, 1980, p. 108.

in the 1980s, with public debates on television, writing for major British newspapers, especially *The Guardian*, and speaking at mass rallies and festivals. His article *Protest and Survive* from 1980 sold 50,000 copies in less than a year and subsequently another 36,000 in the form of a Penguin special.⁴⁸ END's campaign was outspokenly and directly transnational in that it was appealing to activists in both Western and Eastern Europe to unite, from below, a Europe different from that imagined and represented by the statesmen of both Western and Eastern Europe. The END conventions held throughout Europe in the 1980s were an impressive testimony to this form of transnationalism, although it did run into difficulties in ambiguous dealings with the socialism that actually existed behind the Iron Curtain.

In his scholarly work during the 1970 and 1980s, Thompson continued to be concerned primarily with an English national tradition, albeit one that had transnational implications. In 1975 Thompson published *Whigs and Hunters*, criticising the strengthening of property laws of the ruling class in eighteenth-century England that violated English legal tradition.⁴⁹ Thompson's concern with legal traditions mirrored an interest of the young Marx who perceived the law as a potentially liberalising institution.⁵⁰ His interest in the rule of law and the law as protection from arbitrary decision making by politically authoritarian regimes was revived during the Thatcher governments after 1979, which he despised. He expressed his views on liberty in 1980 in his book *Writing By Candlelight*.⁵¹

Thompson also intervened powerfully in the theoretical debates underpinning history writing in the 1970s, notably with his 1978 *The Poverty of Theory*. It was a direct reaction to Perry Anderson's and Tom Nairn's rallying call to British historians to engage with the Marxist

⁴⁸Palmer: *E.P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions*, pp. 126–142.

⁴⁹E.P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: the Origins of the Black Act*, London: Penguin, 1975.

⁵⁰Daniel H. Cole, "An Unqualified Human Good:" E.P. Thompson and the Rule of Law,' *Journal of Law and Society*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2001, pp. 177–203; see <https://thel-egalexchange.wordpress.com/2012/06/03/the-rule-of-law-is-an-unqualified-human-good-e-p-thompson/> [Access Date 6 February 2017].

⁵¹E.P. Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight*, London: Merlin, 1980; on the close relationship between liberty and Thompson's peace activism, see also McCann, *Theory and History: The Political Thought of E.P. Thompson*, 1997, pp. 145–176.

structuralism of Louis Althusser. Although the reception of French structuralist Marxism by Anderson and Nairn is often seen as a sign of these authors' cosmopolitanism and internationalism, Thompson's rejection is equally often perceived as evidence for his little-England provincialism.⁵² There is, however, also an entirely different way of interpreting Thompson's stance. It was not that he rejected Althusser because he was foreign or French, but because his variant of Marxism was not compatible with Thompson's own: Thompson's emphasis on culture, the law, and all structurally belonging to the 'superstructure' of Marxist theory were disregarded by Althusser.⁵³ Although Thompson did admit that "No Marxist *cannot* be a structuralist, in a certain sense,"⁵⁴ an over-determined structuralism would ultimately lead to a complete disregard of the crucial agency of the people. Hence, Thompson did not ignore Althusser but found him wanting, this in itself not a sign of little-Englandism but one of transnationalism that can also reject, for good reason, things from beyond the nation-state. What we thus suggest here is thinking of Thompson's particular interest in English history and identity as distinct from his general political philosophy and methodology of history, which actually accorded well with his internationalist convictions and transnational activism.

THOMPSON'S INTERNATIONALISM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSNATIONAL ACTIVISM

In what follows we examine more closely how, in Thompson's humanistic Marxism and his peace activism, a concern for the national intermingles with a strong internationalism and commitment to transnational activism. Thus, we focus on some of his historical and political writings. Thompson perceived the two blocs during the Cold War as "two monstrous antagonistic structures."⁵⁵ These blocs not only impeded the realisation of his ideal type of Marxist world, but they also threatened to

⁵²Such a critique of Thompson can be found, for example, in Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, London: Verso, 1980.

⁵³'Interview with E.P. Thompson,' pp. 16–17.

⁵⁴E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, London: The Merlin Press, 1978, pp. 17–18.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 265.

destroy all human civilisation. According to Thompson's logic, nuclear deterrence was not only existentially dangerous but also harmed the success of 'socialist humanism' in supporting both undesirables: Western Capitalism and Soviet Communism. Instead, he wanted to bring about a new democratic socialism from underneath. It is intriguing how this political project coincided with his historical project to foster 'history from below,' that is, a form of historical writing that takes seriously the concerns of the everyday, of the losers of historical progress and of experience and culture.⁵⁶ In the editorial of the first issue of *The New Reasoner*, John Saville and E.P. Thompson wrote that:

[i]n the political field, we take our stand with those workers and intellectuals in the Soviet Union and E[astern] Europe for that return to Communist principle and that extension of liberties which has been dubbed 'de-Stalinisation'; in Britain with those socialists on the left wing of the Labour Party, or unattached to any party, who are fighting under very different conditions, for a similar re-birth of principle within the movement.⁵⁷

In other words, they were pleading for the unity from below of an independent left that would have freed itself from the shackles of party communism and social democracy. His consistent argument in favour of 'positive neutrality'⁵⁸ between the blocs that was the basis of his peace activism was also based on assumptions of equidistance between the two blocs to be brought about by a people's alliance from beneath.

Thompson's article "Socialist Humanism," published in *The New Reasoner* in 1957, not only attacked Soviet authoritarianism but was also critical of Marx's and Engels' insufficient recognition of individual ideas and actions, and their false belief in a determining materialist structure that Stalinism had further enhanced. It was Thompson's mission to emphasise the 'true' elements in Marx's and Engels' philosophy, which

⁵⁶Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Post-War Britain: History, the New Left and the Origins of Cultural Studies (Post-Contemporary Interventions)*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997.

⁵⁷Joh Saville and E.P. Thompson, 'Editorial,' *The New Reasoner*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1957.

⁵⁸Mary Kaldor, 'Obituary: E. P. Thompson,' *The Independent*, 29 Aug. 1993, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-e-p-thompson-1464255.html> [Access Date 6 February 2017].

was, above all, their humanism. The experience of Stalinism had taught Marxism a lesson.⁵⁹

Stalinism in the Soviet Union, which, according to Thompson, persisted also after the death of the dictator, was not only indicted on account of its anti-humanist interpretation of Marxism but also because of its participation in and promotion of the nuclear arms race between the two superpowers. However, Thompson firmly believed that the two superpowers were giving themselves legitimisation through the alleged threat posed by the mutual other. Hence the Soviet Union could justify its anti-democratic stance with reference to the threat posed by the US and NATO, and the US and NATO could justify their virulent anti-Communism and opposition to peace with the allegedly aggressive intentions of the Soviet Union to spread world communism. Only if the Western peace movement broke that circle and forced the Western governments to demobilise its arsenal of weapons, while at the same time supporting the dissident peace movement in Eastern Europe (which, according to Thompson, had the same aim vis-à-vis their respective governments), could the world move beyond the binary divide threatening to bring the world to the brink of universal annihilation:

The Hydrogen Bomb, the soundly-based fear of aggression from American imperialism (which every day announces new advanced bases for atomic missiles) strengthens the bureaucratic and military caste, gives them their *raison d'être*, gives colour to Stalinist ideology, and at the same time weakens and confuses the fight against Stalinist ideology both in the Soviet Union and outside. The dismantling of Stalinism will not be assisted simply by swelling the chorus of anti-Stalinist abuse. We must understand – and explain – the true character of Stalinism, the new face of Soviet Society immanent within it. We must do what we can to dismantle the Hydrogen Bomb.⁶⁰

Thompson's idea of political activism was therefore very much in agreement with his personal Marxist philosophy of history. History could be driven from beneath by the ordinary people once they had become

⁵⁹Thompson, *Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines*, pp.105–143. See also <https://www.marxists.org/archive/thompson-ep/1957/sochum.htm> [Access Date 6 February 2017].

⁶⁰Thompson, 'Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines,' p. 138.

conscious of their agency. He believed: “Historical consciousness ought to assist one to understand the possibilities of transformation and the possibility within people.”⁶¹ His attention to ordinary people and their agency, in both politics and history, also meant an awareness of specific local, regional, and national context in which such agency was found in expression. As the people’s agency on behalf of democratic socialism and peace was transnational and internationalist in perspective, the actual struggle would have to be carried out in more restricted scenarios. Hence, in Thompson’s thinking the spatial scales of the transnational and various sub-transnational levels coincided.

Thompson’s transnationalism from below had been encouraged by the events in 1956. The Hungarian revolution had shown that Communism might yet return to its actual principles, and work together with a democratic socialist left in the West to achieve what was still the unfulfilled Leninist dream of 1917: world revolution.⁶² The agency of the people in this dream would be vital: “central to Socialism, and which—above all—must unite intellectuals and the working class in a common cause—that man is capable not only of changing his conditions, but also of transforming himself; that there is a real sense in which it is true that men can master their own history.”⁶³

In this alliance of the people, intellectuals had a special role. Warning of anti-intellectualism within the socialist movement,⁶⁴ he argued that historians could give the working class a greater sense of their agency in the past, which would also serve as a resource for their contemporary struggles. What was indeed needed, he argued, was a new “sense of history” that would acknowledge this fact.⁶⁵ He saw himself very much as an intellectual in this mould, able to provide this sense of history, and he was very successful in this mission, especially with his 1963 book, *The Making of the English Working Class*.

⁶¹ ‘Interview with E.P. Thompson,’ p. 16.

⁶² Thompson, ‘Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines,’ pp. 105–107.

⁶³ Thompson, ‘Socialism and the Intellectuals,’ p. 36.

⁶⁴ E.P. Thompson, ‘Commitment in Politics,’ *Universities & Left Review*, vol. 1, no. 6, 1959, pp. 50–55, see also: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/thompson-ep/1959/commitment.htm> [Access Date 6 February 2017].

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

[It] was more than a history. It was, [Thompson] insisted, a political work as well, 'a polemic' and a call to arms. It was the result, in part, of a decade of work in the peace movement, then nearly another decade in the New Left. The Making was aimed not at the academy but principally at 'his students, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), the Left Clubs,' and those young workers, indifferent to the trade unions of the Labour Party, radicalized yet watching from the fringes of these movements.⁶⁶

Thompson's new kind of social history from below sought to illuminate forgotten histories of the disadvantaged and thus to "challenge the official records" and provide "new ways of understanding the actualities of eighteenth and nineteenth century life."⁶⁷ Thompson aimed at bringing out the revolutionary agency of the working class.⁶⁸ By writing the history of the working class, he aimed at strengthening their identity. That it was an English working class had more to do with the specifics of time and place than an avowed commitment to a national cause.⁶⁹

However, Thompson's belief in agency had its limits. In December 1981 he argued: "History never happens as the actors plan or expect. It is the record of *unintended* consequences. Revolutions are made, manifestos are issued, battles are won: but the outcome, twenty or thirty years on, is always something that no-one willed and no-one expected."⁷⁰ This statement is also extremely relevant for Thompson's understanding of the Cold War. Following Boris Pasternak's expression in *Dr. Zhivago*, Thompson thought the Cold War should be seen as "consequences of consequences." To him it was an "abnormal political condition" for which no one had wished. There seems to be an interesting tension between human agency and human intentionality in Thompson's thinking.⁷¹ This tension also had repercussions for the directionality of Thompson's historical and political thinking. History seemed to teach him that it was impossible to foresee where political actions would lead. Such basic openness of the future also had to account for the possibility

⁶⁶Winslow, 'Introduction: Edward Thompson and the Making of the New Left,' p. 11.

⁶⁷Ibid, p. 17.

⁶⁸McCann, *Theory and History: The Political Thought of E.P. Thompson*, p. 2.

⁶⁹Matthews, *The New Left, National Identity and the Break-up of Britain*, p. 64; Fieldhouse and Taylor, eds., *E.P. Thompson and English Radicalism*, p. 2.

⁷⁰E.P. Thompson, *Beyond the Cold War*, London: Pantheon, 1982, p. 10.

⁷¹Ibid.

that it would all go terribly wrong. This realisation might explain the pessimism and apocalyptic tone in some of Thompson's writings, for example, in his science fiction novel, *The Sykaos Papers* from 1988,⁷² and in his rallying pamphlet *Exterminism and Cold War* from 1982.⁷³ As he also remarked in conversation with the Caribbean writer and activist C.L.R. James in 1982, it was not at all unlikely that all this will go through the roof.⁷⁴ Ultimately his transnational activism was not so much motivated by the certainties of historical teleologies, more common to orthodox shades of Marxism-Leninism, than by the moral stances of Methodism, in which individuals had to follow their conscience in trying to do what was right, in spite of chances of success and regardless of possible consequences. It is thus perhaps more a Protestant spirit rather than scientific Marxism that drove Thompson in his transnational peace activism.

The latter attitude preceded his departure from the Communist party, but it is true that transnational peace activism became, for Thompson, a new institutional home for this version of a humanist Marxism through which he attempted to pursue his agenda for democratic socialism. In 1960, he argued "that in the 1950s there has been a polarisation of human consciousness which has corresponded to the polarisation of world power. The world orthodoxies have been constructed in mutual antagonism." He believed that this antagonism between "the pure 'Stalinist'" and "the pure 'Natopolitan'" had been responsible for the dominant "ideology of apathy," that is, the culture of the cold war, that held sway over the globe⁷⁵ and impeded the socialist revolution. The CND was for Thompson not only an indication that the right consciousness can make changes but was also necessary to overcome the cold war culture internationally. The CND, however, as Bess put it, "riven by

⁷²E.P. Thompson, *The Sykaos Papers*, London: Pantheon, 1988; on the topic of the Apocalypse in connection with anti-nuclear protests, see also Philipp Gassert, 'Popularität der Apokalypse: Zur Nuklearangst seit 1945,' *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, vol. 61, no. 46/47, 2011, pp. 48–54, available [online]: <http://www.bpb.de/apuz/59696/popularitaet-der-apokalypse-zur-nuklearangst-seit-1945?p=all>, [Access Date 6 February 2017].

⁷³E.P. Thompson, *Exterminism and Cold War*, London: Pantheon, 1982.

⁷⁴See <http://territorialmasquerades.net/in-conversation-e-p-thompson-and-c-l-r-james/> [Access Date 14 September 2014].

⁷⁵E.P. Thompson, 'Outside the Whale' [1960], reprinted in E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, London: The Merlin Press, 1978, p. 145.

internal dissension over the tactics of protest gradually began to lose its élan” in the early 1960s.⁷⁶

More than two decades later, in 1982, Thompson recognised the “success of the European peace movement” as “[t]he political cost of forcing Britain, Belgium, West Germany and Italy to accept Cruise and Pershing missiles upon their territories is so high that the counsels of NATO are now divided.”⁷⁷ Millions were protesting in Western Europe at that time, and Bess saw “Thompson’s principal contribution to this burgeoning movement ... in his effort to politicize what had tended to be a primarily technical controversy...” Bess described Thompson’s role in the END as follows:

He wrote dozens of articles for European and American newspapers, continually mailed off letters to the editor, and appeared often on British television, either in interviews or in news reports. He travelled to the major British cities, giving speeches and holding meetings (an average of ten public appearances per month between 1980 and 1982), and he went abroad on speaking tours from California to Hungary, Iceland to Greece, visiting some fourteen countries in all.⁷⁸

Once again we can observe how national engagement and transnational activism went hand in hand for Thompson. The first major END document, which was strongly influenced by Thompson, was the so-called END Appeal in April 1980. It began with the following words: “We are entering the most dangerous decade in human history. A third world war is not merely possible, but increasingly likely.”⁷⁹ It went on:

An increasing proportion of the world resources is expended on weapons, even though mutual extermination is already amply guaranteed. This economic burden, in both East and West, contributes to a growing social and political strain, setting in motion a vicious circle in which the arms race

⁷⁶Bess: *Realism, Utopia, and the Mushroom Cloud*, p. 114.

⁷⁷E.P. Thompson, “‘The Wet Gate.’ An Introduction to the North Atlantic,” in Olafur Gromsson and Angus McCormack, eds., *END Special Report: The Nuclear North Atlantic*, London: Merlin Press, 1982, pp. 6–10, here p. 8.

⁷⁸Bess and Thompson: “The Historian as Activist,” pp. 18–38.

⁷⁹Reprinted as part of Ken Coates, ‘European Nuclear Disarmament,’ originally published in *Spokesman*, Vol. 38, 1980, available [online]: <http://www.spokesmanbooks.com/Spokesman/PDF/100Coates.pdf> [Access Date 2 August 2016].

feeds upon the instability of the world economy and vice versa: a deathly dialectic.

In Thompson's view, and according to the Appeal: generations "have become habituated to the threat. Concern has given way to apathy." Thompson's voice was recognisably present in this piece, which was calling for international cooperation from below, for nuclear disarmament in Europe.

In his pamphlet, *Protest and Survive*, from 1980, Thompson reacted against a letter by the military historian Michael Howard, published in *The Times* on 30 January 1980. Howard's letter had argued that Britain might suffer "a series of pre-emptive strikes by Soviet missile" while "the use of our own nuclear weapon...would become quite literally 'incredible'" so that the UK government should maintain a "serious civil defence policy."⁸⁰ Thompson then argued that a nuclear war would be much more disastrous than Howard had suggested. Thompson discussed a number of strategic scenarios, what he called the "logic of deterrence" and what he called "the logic of this deep structure [of the Cold War]." Finally, Thompson discussed the use of language in Britain that legitimised war. Towards the end of this pamphlet, Thompson explained his determinism that a nuclear war *will* happen: "I argue from a general and sustained historical process, an accumulative logic, a kind made familiar to me in the study of history. The episodes lead in this direction or that, but the general logic of process is always towards nuclear war." The only way out he could see was: "We must protest if we are to survive." "We must generate an alternative logic, an opposition at every level of society." Subsequently, Thompson outlined the movement representing an alternative logic across Western Europe and called for direct actions: "We must close down those airfields and bases which already serve aircraft submarine on nuclear missions. And we must contest every stage of the attempt to import United States cruise missiles onto our soil." And he further wrote: "...there must be great public manifestations and direct contestations—peacefully and responsibly conducted—of several kinds." Thompson mentioned a range of fields where citizens could become

⁸⁰Michael E. Howard, 'Reviving Civil Defence,' *The Times*, 30 January 1980, printed in E.P. Thompson, *Protest and Survive*, second (revised) edition, London, 1980, p. 2., available [online]: <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113758> [Access Date 18 June 2014].

active in campaigning against nuclear weapons. His opposition to the nuclear arms race in this pamphlet does call for revolutionary actions. Being European meant to him being opposed to both “the imperialist West” as well as “the old stoney Stalinist reflexes of the East.”⁸¹ There is a fascinating tension here in his belief that the lesson of history was that nuclear war would come, if there was no sustained opposition to the ongoing arms race, and his belief, stated here, that the historical process is always open towards the future. The latter he also needed to sustain the transnational activism for which he was calling and in which he himself was so engaged.

Thompson argued that his comrades should overcome the assumption that there was a rational logic behind the emergence of the Cold War, which is imperialism. And that the socialist states had only joined the arms race for defensive purposes. The international class struggle that aimed at ending capitalism would not overcome the logic of mutual destruction of the Cold War. Hence, the search for peace was more urgent for Thompson than the class struggle.⁸²

As in *Protest and Survive*, Thompson thus claimed in ‘Notes on Exterminism’ that the nuclear system had its own logic and should be analysed as such. Marxist analyses of class and imperialism would not be sufficient to understand “The Logic of Nuclear Weapons Systems.”⁸³ All this confirmed that Thompson had come a long way from understanding the world in terms of ‘basis—superstructure’. It did not necessarily mean a weakening of class perspectives or a lessening of his anti-imperialism, but it mirrored a belief that the political sphere could be quite independent from other spheres and could demand a concentration of efforts in one particular field that had become so vital for the survival of mankind.

Thompson’s overriding concern for peace activism accompanied a ready acceptance that economic factors contributed to the dangers of “exterminism.” Referring to work by the New Left economic historian Emma Rothschild, he accepted the argument that the military industries in the US after the Second World War were just as important as

⁸¹Thompson, *Protest and Survive*.

⁸²Martin Shaw, ‘From Total War to Democratic Peace: Exterminism and Historical Pacifism,’ in Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland, eds., *E.P. Thompson. Critical Perspectives*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990, pp. 233–251.

⁸³E.P. Thompson, ‘Notes on Exterminism, the Last Stage of Civilisation,’ *New Left Review*, vol. 1, no. 121, 1980, p. 7.

the textile industries during the industrial revolution in Britain. He saw the arms sector as dominating the economy not only in the US, but also in the Soviet Union.⁸⁴ This economic structure, combined with a political culture of fear and irrationality, would be the foundation for “exterminism” and “Cold War-ism” that would predetermine the “historical destination.” Again demonstrating his ready reception of internationalist voices, he referred to Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s critique of the “negative utopians” and confirmed Enzensberger’s “analysis of the gathering determinism of exterminist processing.”⁸⁵

Differing from many in the British labour movement, who enjoyed good contacts with Communists behind the Iron Curtain,⁸⁶ Thompson was excited about the emergence of dissent in Eastern Europe. On 23 December 1981, when he became aware of the Solidarnosc movement in Poland, Thompson demanded: “We must strive to loosen Europe from the military hegemony of both super-powers, and to press forward measures of demilitarization in every part of our continent. Peace and freedom must now, more than ever, be seen as one cause. There is no other way.”⁸⁷ Otherwise, he argued, “the oversurplus” of nuclear weaponry and the “balance” and “anxiety” that held sway over Europe and would soon destroy the “civilised conditions for life.”⁸⁸

CONCLUSION

When Thompson passed away in 1993, the Cold War was over and civilisation was not extinct. However, the end of the Cold War had not come about as the result of an alliance of democratic socialists from Western and Eastern Europe. Instead, the Communist regimes had imploded under the weight of economic failure, the failed attempt to reform Communism in the Soviet Union under Gorbachev, and internal dissent

⁸⁴Ibid., pp. 17–21.

⁸⁵Ibid., pp. 27–29.

⁸⁶Stefan Berger and Norman LaPorte, ‘Great Britain: Between Avoiding Cold War and Supporting Free Trade Unionism,’ in Idesbald Goddeeris, ed., *Solidarity with Solidarity: Western European Trade Unions and the Polish Crisis, 1980–1982 (The Harvard Cold War Studies Book Series)*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010, pp. 129–158.

⁸⁷E.P. Thompson, ‘Author’s Note,’ in E.P. Thompson: *Beyond the Cold War*, London: Pantheon, 1982, p. 1.

⁸⁸Ibid.

in Eastern European Communist regimes. Capitalism seemed triumphant, as was suggested by one of the most influential, albeit also controversial, analyses of the post-Communist world by Francis Fukuyama.⁸⁹ The transnational activism of E.P. Thompson in pursuit of peace and a humanist socialism had not been successful. The 1990s witnessed the rise of nationalisms in both Eastern and Western Europe, the failure of the European Union to prevent war and genocide in the former Yugoslavia, and a second Cold War between Russia and the West. The arsenal of nuclear Armageddon has been significantly reduced, but the superpowers possess more than enough weapons to destroy the world many times over. Further, there is a worrying trend that the nonproliferation of atomic weapons technology is not working. All the issues that motivated Thompson's transnational activism are still in existence, including the problems of social inequality under capitalism that are as stark as ever in global perspective and have also reached the Western heartlands since the financial and economic crises began in 2007–2008.

Thompson's transnational activism was, as we have seen, rooted in his early commitment to Communism and anti-fascism. His strongly internationalist outlook was always mixed with a belief that such internationalism needed to be 'earthed' and rooted in local, regional, and national traditions. Hence, there was no contradiction in Thompson's mind between building a radical English historical tradition as basis for contemporary political identities and his commitment to internationalist values and transnational activism. He was looking to the likes of William Cobbett, William Morris, William Blake, Tom Maguire, and the members of the London Corresponding Society as representatives of a democratic socialist tradition culminating in the British New Left and its close alliance with the peace movement. The outlook of these English radicals had never been provincial and isolationist, and Thompson's vision of the contemporary New Left was neither. He followed developments in other countries, notably the US and the major continental European countries, with great interest, communicated with many non-English intellectuals on history and the pressing political questions of the day, and responded to French structuralism as well as the emergence of Solidarnosc in Poland.

Finally, he observed the peace movements in many countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain with intense interest, even if not always with wholesale support.

⁸⁹Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Free Press, 1992.

His lifelong commitment to socialist humanism might appear Quixotic at times, but we should remember that we like the hero of Cervantes' famous novel so much precisely because his noble heroism has all the right moral convictions on his side. Thompson's historical predilections and political commitments are also rooted in a moral universe, of which his Marxism was an integral part.⁹⁰ And who on the Left could deny that we are still looking, in the post-Cold War world of today, for a politics that might replace the destructive energies of a global capitalism? Thompson's rooted transnational activism seems neither irrelevant nor outdated today.

⁹⁰On morality and Marxism, see the observations in Stefan Berger and Alexandray Przyrembel, 'Moral, Kapitalismus und soziale Bewegungen: Kulturhistorische Annäherungen an einen alten "Gegenstand,"' *Historische Anthropologie*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2016, pp. 88–107.