CHAPTER 7

'…Two Monstrous Antagonistic Structures': E. P. Thompson's Marxist Historical Philosophy and Peace Activism During the Cold War

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Introduction

E. P. Thompson was a Marxist, a radical as well as a pacifist, who had been very active, first in the Communist Party of Great Britain, and subsequently in the New Left and in the peace movement.[1] He was one of

[1] B. D. Palmer (1994) *E.P. Thompson. Objections and Oppositions* (London: Verso); H. J. Kaye and K. McClelland (eds.) (1990) *E. P. Thompson. Critical Perspectives* (Oxford: Temple University Press); and S. Hamilton (2011) *The Crisis of Theory. E. P. Thompson, the New Left and Post-war British Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

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the founding fathers of European Nuclear Disarmament (END) and widely acknowledged as intellectual leader of the British peace movement, both at home and abroad. In this article, we focus primarily on how his Marxism influenced his commitment to peace. Many of his historical and political writings, including his novels, were extremely popular among peace activists so that one can assume a wide readership and hence considerable influence of Thompson in the peace movement. We shall ask how his Marxism informed his peace activism and what connections he drew between a Marxist social analysis and the demands to overcome the bipolar world order of the Cold War that, in his eyes, prevented progressive political developments and threatened humanity with extinction.

Thompson was present at the very birth of the British peace movement. As founding editor of the *New Reasoner* (together with his wife Dorothy and John Saville)—in 1956—Thompson was soon an iconic figure among the British New Left.[2] The New Left grew in support in the aftermath of de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union, the clampdown on Hungarian reform in 1956 and the Suez crisis of the same year.[3] The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) developed only one year later, in 1957, in response to the plans of the British government to test a hydrogen bomb, and the New Left was vociferous in its support for CND.[4] When, more than two decades later, NATO's 'twin-track strategy' led to the re-emergence of a mass peace movement in the West, Thompson was again one of its major figureheads, championing what he called 'détente from below' against what he perceived as irresponsible sabre-rattling of the political leaders on both sides of the Iron Curtain.[5]

Thompson perceived the two blocs during the Cold War as 'two monstrous antagonistic structures',[6] which were mutually constitutive, impeded the realization of his ideal concept of a Marxist world

[2]W. Matthews (2013) *The New Left, National Identity, and the Break-Up of Britain* (Leiden: Brill), p. 2.

[3]G. Eley (2002) *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Modern Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

[4]P. Byrne (1988) *The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament* (London: Croom Helm Ltd.); L. S. Wittner (2009) *Confronting the Bomb: A Short History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement* (Stanford: Stanford University Press).

[5]S. Berger and N. LaPorte (2010) *Friendly Enemies: Britian and the GDR, 1949–1990* (Oxford: Berghahn Books), pp. 265–66.

[6]E. P. Thompson (1978) *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London: Monthly Review Press), p. 265.

and would ultimately threaten to destroy civilization. Along with large sections of the New Left Thompson looked for 'third ways' between Western capitalism and Soviet Communism.[7] The Cold War framework, within which nuclear deterrence worked, was for Thompson a major break on the development of such a 'third way', often referred to by Thompson as 'socialist humanism'. Hence, his peace activism was never just a cause in itself, but always a necessary tool for realizing the socialist humanist society of the future.

Thompson's peace activism has been explored by a number of authors, particularly by the American historians Michael Bess,[8] and Bryan Palmer,[9] but to some extent also by people from other disciplines, such as the sociologist Martin Shaw[10] and the educational scientist Dick Taylor,[11] and others.[12] On the basis of these works and Thompson's own writings, we shall, first of all, outline the political and intellectual biography of our subject between the poles of political activism, scholarship and peace activism, before we will discuss the Marxist understanding of history in Thompson's writings. On this basis, we shall, finally, analyse Thompson's position between the two blocs and his role in the peace movement.

Biographical Notes on Marxism, Historical Scholarship and Peace Activism

Edward Palmer Thompson was born in Oxford in 1924. His parents were liberal intellectuals and Methodist missionaries. His father, the writer Edward John Thompson, spent several years in India where he

[7] On the development of third way conceptions in Britain, see J. Schneer (1988) *Labour's Conscience. The Labour Left 1945–1950* (Boston: Unwin Hyman).

[8] M. Bess (1993) *Realism, Utopia, and the Mushroom Cloud. Four Activist Intellectuals and Their Strategies for Peace, 1945–1989, Louise Weiss (France), Leo Szilard (United States), E. P. Thompson (England), Danilo Dolci (Italy)* (Chicago: Phoenix Fiction).

[9] B. D. Palmer (1994) *E.P. Thompson*, chapter 5.

[10] M. Shaw (1990) 'From Total War to Democratic Peace: Exterminism and Historical Pacifism' in K. McClelland (eds.) *E. P. Thompson. Critical Perspectives* (Oxford: Temple University Press), pp. 233–51.

[11] R. Taylor (2013) 'Thompson and the Peace Movement: From CND in the 1950s and 1960s to END in the 1980s' in R. Fieldhouse and R. Taylor (eds.) *E. P. Thompson and English Radicalism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp. 181–201.

[12] E.g. G. McCann (1997) *Theory and History. The Political Thought of E.P. Thompson* (Aldershot: Ashgate), chapter 5.

sympathized with the nationalist cause. He described himself as a 'liberal conservative with a touch of socialism'.[13] The Thompson household often had interesting visitors, including Gandhi and Nehru. It is thus not surprising that E. P. Thompson followed an anti-imperialist conviction from an early age.

Edward's brother Frank had already been a communist party member for some time before E. P. Thompson joined the Communist Party of Great Britain in late 1941 at Cambridge. Mary Kaldor wrote that E. P. Thompson 'was strongly influenced by his brother Frank Thompson, who envisaged a united democratic socialist Europe'.[14] Edward Thompson trained in history at university, where communism was relatively popular among the undergraduate students.[15] 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.[16] In the army, Thompson encountered many left-wing views and army experience confirmed the ideological choice he had made in Cambridge. Frank was executed by the Bulgarian Gendarmerie in 1944 during a mission in Bulgaria.[17] E. P. Thompson was strongly affected by this tragic loss of a deeply admired older brother.

After the war, he finished his undergraduate degree and co-founded the Communist Party Historians Group, together with Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, Raphael Samuel and others. He married Dorothy Towers, a fellow communist and fellow historian.[18] In 1948, he and

[13] H. Ansari (2010) 'Musings of Sir Mohammad Iqbal on the Place of Muslims in Late Colonial India: Letters to Edward John Thompson, 1933–1934', Transcript of a podcast: http://media.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/engfac/indian_traces/ansari.pdf?CAMEFROM=podcastsGET, date accessed 17 January 2018, p. 1.

[14] M. Kaldor (1993) 'Obituary: E. P. Thompson', *The Independent*, 30 August 1993, see online: http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-e-p-thompson-1464255.html, date accessed 17 January 2018.

[15] W. Matthews (2013) *The New Left*, p. 62.

[16] C. Winslow (2014) 'Introduction. Edward Thompson and the Making of the New Left' in: idem (ed.) *E.P. Thompson and the Making of the New Left: Essays and Polemics* (New York: Monthly Review), p. 16.

[17] M. D. Bess (1993) 'The Historian as an Activist', *American Historical Review*, 98, 1, 19–38, at p. 20.

[18] S. Rowbothman (2011) 'Sheila Thompson Obituary', *The Guardian*, 6 February 2011, see online: http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/feb/06/dorothy-thompson-obituary, date accessed 18 January 2018.

Dorothy Towers joined the international volunteers of the Yugoslav Youth Railway to help build a rail track. On their return, they decided to move to Yorkshire. He began teaching for the Leeds Extra-Mural Department. 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'.[19] Cal Winslow argued that 'Thompson was one in a generation 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 and proletarian West Riding, purposively far from the Metropolis'.[20] Thompson was thus not only a man of ideas, but also a man of actions; someone who lived his everyday life according to his political ideology. On the one hand, he saw himself as a political missionary who wished to educate the working class. On the other hand, he was keen to learn from his working-class students.[21] Thompson and his wife began to organize political discussions in their house in Siddal, a working-class district in Halifax. They both moved there as members of the Communist Party. E. P. Thompson was elected to the District Party Committee. Next to his work in adult education, he 'would also chair the Halifax Peace Committee; he was secretary of the Yorkshire Federation of Peace Organizations; and he was editor of the *West Riding Peace Journal*'.[22] Thompson had become a peace activist for the first time during the Korean War in the early 1950s. Subsequently, he was instrumental in developing the peace movement in Yorkshire, often involving a wide range of left-wing activists. Thompson founded a journal, the *Yorkshire Voice of Peace*, and engaged in local peace campaigns throughout the 1950s.[23]

1956 marked an important break in Thompson's life. In response to de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union, Thompson contrasted the English liberal tradition with the authoritarian tradition of the Communist Party

[19] H. Abelove (1983) 'E. P. Thompson' in idem. (ed.) *Visions of History Interview* (London: MARHO), p. 13.

[20] C. Winslow (2014) 'Introduction', p. 16.

[21] Ibid, pp. 18–19.

[22] Ibid., p. 15.

[23] R. Taylor (2013) 'Thompson', pp. 182–83.

of Great Britain.[24] Abhorred by the Soviet invasion of Hungary, he, along with 7000 other party members, gave up all hope of reforming the CPGB from within and left the party. He had become politically homeless at precisely the same moment as the Suez crisis confirmed to him his anti-imperialist convictions. As editors of *The Reasoner*, Thompson and John Saville issued their dissent with the CPGB on Hungary and accused the British Communist Party of failing to demonstrate its international solidarity with the revolutionaries. The party responded by suspending both as editors, which triggered the decisions to leave the party.[25] Thompson, Saville and others then began publishing the dissident journal *The New Reasoner*, which would merge into *The New Left Review*, the intellectual flagship of the New Left.[26] Many among the early New Left in Great Britain were associated with the Labour Party, but Thompson remained extremely critical of this traditional political force which he regarded as one that had actually never pursued any real socialism.[27] In spring 1957, Thompson explained: 'although I have resigned from the Communist Party I remain a Communist'.[28]

When, in the same year, 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, the politically now homeless Thompson immediately joined the new-found CND.[29] Peter Worsley, Dorothy Thompson and Stuart Hall remember that '[w]ithin the new and rapidly-growing CND, 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

[24] W. Matthews (2013) *The New Left*, p. 66.

[25] E. P. Thompson (2008) 'Foreword' in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press).

[26] M. D. Bess (1993) 'The Historian', p. 22.

[27] See M. Newman (2013) 'Thompson and the Early New Left' in R. Fieldhouse and R. Taylor (eds.) *E. P. Thompson and English Radicalism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp. 162–63.

[28] E. P. Thompson (1957a) 'Socialism and the Intellectuals', *Universities & Left Review*, 1, 1, 31–36, see online: http://banmarchive.org.uk/collections/ulr/index_frame.htm, date accessed 18 January 2018.

[29] M. Kaldor (1993) 'Obituary'.

new mass movement'.[30] CND was not a communist organization, but its loose structure welcomed dissident communists who were critical of the Soviet Union.[31] A strong affinity between the New Left and the CND developed at that time.

Thompson's historical research in the 1950s seems like a running commentary on his political development. As he was growing increasingly critical of Soviet Communism, he explored home-grown, English radicalism as an alternative political inspiration. In 1959, Thompson would publish his biography on the nineteenth-century writer *William Morris* (1959), who he saw as a 'Romantic in revolt, [who] became a realist and a revolutionary'.[32] Thompson felt inspired by Morris, and Morris pointed him in the direction of exploring English radicalism further, even if Michael Bess was right in pointing out that his interpretation of Morris is still very much in line with orthodox Marxist–Leninist interpretative frameworks.[33]

The same cannot be said for his magnum opus that he was to publish four years later, while still living in Siddal. *The Making of the English Working Class* which was published in 1963 demonstrated his growing belief in the historical agency of workers and the historical relevance of their experiences. Thompson's book has often been described as a foundational stone of the 'history from below' tradition in historical writing. Thompson turned the traditional Marxist 'basis-superstructure' model upside down in emphasizing the agency of ordinary people and their culture. The book was in many ways a further exploration of the English radical tradition. And it drew heavily on the information Thompson had gathered 'during [his] previous ten years as a tutor in extramural classes in the West Riding'.[34] His contemporary class experiences, his political development and his historical research seemed to forge a productive

[30] P. Worsley, assisted by D. Thompson and S.Hall (2006) *The New Reasoner*, see online: http://www.amielandmelburn.org.uk/collections/nr/index_frame.htm, date accessed 18 January 2018.

[31] R. Taylor (2013) 'Thompson', p. 184.

[32] E. P. Thompson Morris (1955) *William Morris. Romantic to Revolutionary* (London: Lawrence & Wishart), p. 16.

[33] M. D. Bess (1993) 'The Historian', p. 21.

[34] C. Winslow (2014) 'Introduction', p. 20.

symbiosis in what was to become his most celebrated and certainly most famous historical work.[35]

From the mid-1960s, Thompson spent more time on his profession than on activism. Instead of accepting an offer from the University of Leeds, Thompson chooses a job as a Reader in Social History and Director of the Centre for the Study of Social History at the University of Warwick, which was founded in 1965. In 1967, he published his influential article on the commodification of time and the industrialization of social life in *Past & Present*, entitled *Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism*.[36] In 1971, he published a similarly extensive article in the same journal on *The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century*, which was based on a paper he had given at Buffalo in the USA in 1966, where he visited his friend, the labour historian Herbert Gutman. Both became landmark publications in labour history, influencing generations of labour historians. Already in 1952 Thompson had co-founded *Past & Present*, which was to become one of the internationally most prestigious social history journals in decades to come.[37]

Even though he worked primarily as an academic during this period, his political activism still surfaced from time to time. He was one of the editors of the prominent *May Day Manifesto* in 1967, with which spokespersons of the British New Left sought to challenge the Labour government of Harold Wilson.[38] Wilson served as Prime Minister from 1964 to 1970 and again from 1974 to 1976. Thompson was a strong critic of Wilson whom he accused of authoritarian tendencies and the oppression of civil liberties. He saw the need to uphold the rule of law and a distinctly English liberal tradition. Again his historical work paralleled his political concerns. In 1975, Thompson published *Whigs and Hunters* criticizing the strengthening of property laws of the ruling class in eighteenth-century England. The late eighteenth century, just like the 1970s, witnessed a challenge to cherished legal traditions. Daniel Cole has argued that Thompson's belief in the rule of law was similar to Marx's

[35] Ibid.

[36] E. P. Thompson (1967) 'Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism', *Past & Present*, 38, 1, 56–97.

[37] C. Hill, R. Hilton, and E. Hobsbawm (1983) 'Past and Present. Origins and Early Years', *Past & Present*, 100, 1, 3–14.

[38] K. Laybourn (2006) *Marxism in Britain: Dissent, Decline and Re-emergence, 1945–c.2000* (Oxon: Routledge), pp. 76–77.

early writings, in which law was seen potentially as a liberal-democratic force. Thompson sought to revive a particular radical liberal or libertarian tradition and infuse it with unorthodox Marxist meaning.[39] His concerns grew exponentially, when Margaret Thatcher came to rule the country in May 1979. Thompson expressed his views on the threat she posed to liberty in 1980 in his book *Writing by Candlelight*.

His concern with domestic politics in Britain did not snuff out his peace activism. Already in the mid-1970s, Thompson was discussing with Ken Coates, from the Nottingham-based Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, a new initiative to counter what both perceived as dangerous escalation of the arms race in the Cold War, in the context of increased tensions between both superpowers.[40] When the twin-track strategy was implemented by NATO in December 1979, their worst fears seemed to be confirmed, and Thompson returned to peace activism with a vengeance. 'The upsurge of a West European peace movement in 1980 was his moment', Mary Kaldor recalled in her obituary on Thompson. Dorothy and Edward Thompson now focused almost entirely on their political activism in END. He engaged with debates on TV, wrote in major British newspapers, like the *Guardian* and a number of more left-wing papers, and spoke at mass festivals like Glastonbury. Together with Ken Coates, he had developed the idea for END and the END Appeal, entitled *A Nuclear Free Europe* was based on their discussions from the mid-1970s, even if Thompson was the lead author of this appeal.[41] With END Thompson returned to a form of European internationalism. His campaign was genuinely pan-European, in the sense that it reached from Poland to Portugal, and conventions were held at many places in Europe. As we described above, Thompson had moved from Soviet communist internationalism to English radicalism only to return to a form of European internationalism in the search for peace in a Europe that would leave the bipolar world order behind. The agency of English radicals, thus Thompson's hope, was to inspire European peace activists to build a bloc-free neutral Europe which would also be an

[39]D. H. Cole (2001) 'An Unqualified Human Good: E.P. Thompson and the Rule of Law', *Journal of Law and Society*, 28, 2, 177–203, at pp. 201–2.

[40]R. Taylor (2013) 'Thompson', p. 188.

[41]The text of the END Appeal is included in E. P. Thompson and D. Smith (eds.) (1980) *Protest and Survive* (London: Penguin), pp. 223–26.

opportunity for building the kind of socialist humanism that was still the political ideal of Thompson. His famous 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.[42] It was translated into many European languages. Similarly, his *Notes on Exterminism and the Last Stage of Civilization* would have a huge influence not just in Britain but in peace movements across Europe and North America.[43]

Thompson's Marxist Understanding of History

Thompson's Marxist understanding of history emphasized both *agency* and *consciousness*. He firmly believed in and sought to trace in history the agency of ordinary working people who acted out of a sense of moral righteousness. Their social and political consciousness had less to do with abstract ideology and more with notions of justice that had their roots in history and memory. States and rulers had in the past ignored such consciousness and such agency at their peril, and, in Thompson's view, they were still doing so in the present. In the West, Labourism and later neoliberal Conservatism were out of touch or forthrightly hostile to the interests, desires and values of working people, and in the Communist East, the class of Communist officials had betrayed the revolution. In the editorial of the first issue of *The New Reasoner*, in which also *Socialist Humanism* was published, John Saville and 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.[44]

Mary Kaldor remembered that '[a]s biographer of William Morris and chronicler of the English working classes, [Thompson] was part of the

[42] R. Taylor (2013) 'Thompson', p. 189.

[43] E. P. Thompson (1980) 'Notes on Exterminism, the Last Stage of Civilization', *New Left Review*, 182, 1, Exterminism and Cold War, London 1982, pp. 3–31.

[44] J. Saville and E. P. Thompson (1957) 'Editorial', *The New Reasoner*, 1.

English radical tradition. He became a consistent and trenchant critic of Stalinism after leaving the Communist Party in 1956 and espoused the idea of positive neutrality'.[45] His article *Socialist Humanism* published in the same first issue of The New Reasoner from 1957, attacked not only Soviet authoritarianism but was also critical Marx's and Engels' insufficient recognition of individual ideas and actions, and their false belief in a determining economic base that relegated culture to the sphere of superstructure. The humanism of the early Marx and Engels had to be saved against the dead weight of structuralist determinism in their later works.[46]

Critical of any economic determinism in history, Thompson explained the success of Stalinism in the Soviet Union in terms of a justified fear of American superiority in the arms race:

> 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'etre, 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.[47]

Peace activism in other words was working towards the realization of socialist humanism, both in the Communist and in the capitalist parts of the globe. Through his historical work and his political activism, Thompson affirmed his belief that history was driven from below. His eclectic mixture of Marxist materialism, Morris' utopianism and a strong English libertarian strand[48] united to forge a democratic and libertarian communism[49] that saw in peace activism the best means of realizing

[45] M. Kaldor (1993) 'Obituary'.

[46] E. P. Thompson (1957c) 'Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines', *The New Reasoner*, 1, 105–43.

[47] E. P. Thompson (1957) 'Socialist Humanism', p. 138.

[48] G. McCann (1997) *Theory and History*, p. 1.

[49] H. J. Kaye (1994) *The British Marxist Historians* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

socialist humanism. In order for this to work, ordinary people had to become conscious of their agency. As Thomson argued: 'Historical consciousness ought to assist one to understand the possibilities of transformation and the possibility within people'.[50] The world revolution was still possible, if only communism were to return to its humanist origins.[51] Intellectuals like himself and workers had to unite behind the common cause, socialism. The economic conditions were secondary to the will to change: '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'.[52]

Thompson undoubtedly considered the role of intellectuals important in the socialist movement. In 1959, he warned of anti-intellectualism: 'to romanticise the working class and its organisations is not only futile, it is also a flat betrayal of socialist responsibility'.[53] However, he attached greater agency to the working class and its conscious struggles in British history, and he called for 'a sense of history' that would acknowledge this fact.[54] Intellectuals, like himself, were in the position to provide for this sense of history, and arguably his magnum opus, *The Making of the English Working Class* meant to do precisely this. Winslow interprets this work as seminal for the New Left:

> [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.[55]

[50] H. Abelove (1983) 'E. P. Thompson', p. 16.

[51] See E. P. Thompson (1957b) 'Socialist Humanism. An Epistle to the Philistines', *The New Reasoner*, 1, 105–7.

[52] E. P. Thompson (1957a) 'Socialism and the Intellectuals', *Universities & Left Review*, 1, 1, 31–36, at p. 36.

[53] E. P. Thompson (1959) 'Commitment in Politics', *Universities & Left Review*, 6, 50–55.

[54] Ibid.

[55] C. Winslow (2014) 'Introduction', p. 11.

As a historian, Thompson advocated a new kind of social history.[56] After discovering unseen records in the archives he sought to illuminate forgotten histories of the disadvantaged, as Cal Winslow describes it, and thus to 'challenge the official records' and provide 'new ways of understanding the actualities of eighteenth and nineteenth century life'.[57] Thompson offered a counter-narrative on British history, and he sought to bring out the revolutionary agency of the working class.[58] At the same time, he aimed to highlight class identities in the past with a view to providing historical depth to contemporary class struggles.[59]

Thompson's Marxism became less ideological and more open-minded and flexible. By the end of the 1950s, he argued that Marxism was 'less … a self-sufficient system, [and] more … a major creative influence within a wider socialist tradition'.[60] He was hostile to Marxist structuralism represented by the French philosopher Louis Althusser, as most strongly expressed in his *Poverty of Theory*, that was also an attack on Althusser's British disciples, notably Perry Anderson.[61] Instead of a structuralist concern with power and structures, Thompson preferred the study of 'culture and the inwardness of experience'.[62] He did admit that 'No Marxist can*not* be a structuralist, in a certain sense'.[63] But his whole understanding of history was premised on his belief in experience as basis for human agency. Such experience was rooted in culture. Agency, for Thompson, was not necessarily intentional. As he argued in December 1981: 'History never happens as the actors plan or expect. It is the record of *unintended* consequences. Revolutions are made, manifestos

[56] For an explicit commitment to the history from below approach see E. P. Thompson (1960) 'Homage to Tom Maguire' in A. Briggs and J. Saville (eds.) *Essays in Labour History. In Memory of G. D. H. Cole 25 September 1889–14 January 1959* (London: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 276–316.

[57] C. Winslow (2014) 'Introduction', p. 17.

[58] G. McCann (1997) *Theory and History*, p. 2.

[59] Matthews, *New Left*, p. 64; R. Fieldhouse, T. Koditschek, and R. Taylor (2013) 'E. P. Thompson: A Short Introduction' in R. Fieldhouse and R. Taylor (eds.) *E. P. Thompson and English Radicalism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp. 1–24, here p. 2.

[60] Cited in M. Newman (2013) 'Thompson', p. 162.

[61] Perry Anderson responded to Thompson defending Marxist structuralism from a cosmopolitan point of view. See, in particular his Arguments within English Nationalism.

[62] H. Abelove (1983) 'E. P. Thompson', pp. 16–17.

[63] Ibid.

are issued, battles are won: but the outcome, twenty or thirty years on, is always something that no-one willed and no-one expected'.[64]

Thompson transferred such views on history to his own contemporary Cold War world. According to him, the Cold War represented an 'abnormal political condition' that nobody had wished for. They were the unintended outcomes of intended actions. And they produced an 'odd and dangerous condition' that seemed frozen in time, precisely because of the existence of mutual deterrence by means of weaponry that, by coincidence, was invented at this historical moment.[65] What followed from such views on historical contingency, agency and culture in the historical process?

Thompson's Role in the Anti-Nuclear Movement and His Position Between the Two Blocs

As we have argued above, the CND turned into a mass movement in Britain between 1956 and 1963. It was intertwined with an undogmatic Marxist New Left milieu that was dispersed across a number of social movements.[66] Thompson believed that the peace movement would become an important part of a New Left Marxist movement, offering critical Marxists a new home. Both the New Left and the peace movement were opposed to nuclear weapons and to British membership in NATO.[67] Both believed in direct action to achieve their political goals.[68] The revolutionary zeitgeist of undogmatic Marxists, fed up with orthodox party communism, could now be channelled into peace activism. It gave them something concrete to do and a new institutional home. Thompson, like many others, cherished the opportunity of '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'.[69]

[64] E. P. Thompson (1982b) *Beyond the Cold War* (London: Pantheon), p. 10.

[65] Ibid, p. 10.

[66] P. Byrne (1997) *Social Movements in Britain (Theory and Practice in British Politics)* (London: Routledge).

[67] W. Matthews (2013) *The New Left*, p. 7.

[68] Ibid, p. 10.

[69] M. Bess (1993) *Realism*, p. 107.

Thompson was convinced that the CND was the right instrument to overcome the polarized Cold War culture. In his view, the orthodoxies of capitalism and communism had been constructed in mutual antagonism leaving no space for the agency of ordinary people who neither wanted that antagonism nor the reigning orthodoxies. But the ideological enmity between 'the pure Stalinist' and 'the pure Natopolitan' had been responsible for the dominant 'ideology of apathy', characterizing the culture of the cold war, that held sway over the globe[70] and impeded any advances in the socialist humanism he espoused. For Thompson, CND was about showing the masses a way out of apathy and an alternative to the dominant Cold War culture. When CND 'riven by internal dissension over the tactics of protest gradually began to lose its élan' in the early sixties, it was another major political disappointment for Thompson.[71]

Yet his hopes were revived two decades later, when Thompson again recognized the 'success of the European peace movement' in overcoming the dominant Cold War culture.[72] In the early 1980s, millions were protesting in Western Europe, and Thompson saw new opportunities for politicizing the people not only for a struggle against the deployment of missiles but also for a new post-Cold War culture that was to provide a more fertile ground on which his variant of socialist humanism could be built. He took up his campaigning days again with renewed vigour:

> 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 counties in all.[73]

[70] E. P. Thompson (1960) 'Outside the Whale' in idem. (ed.) *Out of Apathy* (London: Stevens and Sons), p. 145.

[71] M. Bess (1993) *Realism*, p. 114.

[72] E. P. Thompson (1982b) 'Introduction: The Wet Gate' in O. Grimmson and A. McCormack (eds.) *END Special Report: The Nuclear North Atlantic* (Glasgow: Heatherbank Press), pp. 6–10, here p. 8.

[73] M. D. Bess (1993) 'The Historian'.

Similarly, Thompson's comrade, Mary Kaldor, who had also been very influential in this movement, remembered his activism on behalf of END that he had helped to bring about:

> Thompson stomped the country, making speeches to packed halls and giving interviews to radio and television. He wrote articles and pamphlets and endless letters. He organized END's specialist working groups on Eastern Europe which became the source of information about the new peace and human-rights groups in the East and West. In short, he engaged himself in everything from the administrative minutiae of choosing the design for badges, or the structures of particular committees, to the high politics of the ideological struggle not only with the political leaders and military planners of the West but also with the peace committees and 'disarmament' specialists of the Warsaw Pact…[74]

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'.[75] Further below, 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 feeds upon the instability of the world economy and vice versa: a deathly dialectic.[76]

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 recognizably present in this piece, which was calling for international cooperation from below, for nuclear disarmament in Europe and for overcoming the division of the world into two hostile blocks, neither of which promised to move towards socialist humanism.

[74] M. Kaldor (1993) 'Obituary'.

[75] E. P. Thompson et al. (2011) 'Appeal for European Nuclear Disarmament' in F. Holroyd (ed.) *Thinking About Nuclear Weapons. Analyses and Prescriptions* (London: Routledge), p. 368 [Reprinted version].

[76] Ibid.

Nuclear disarmament, however, did not only promise a better world; it also was an absolute necessity for survival. Thompson disagreed vehemently with those, like the military historian Michael Howard, who argued that another round in the nuclear armaments race was necessary to keep the credibility of the deterrence strategy of the West. In response to Howard's letter to *The Times* of 30 January 1980, Thompson fired off his pamphlet, *Protest and Survive*.[77] Here, Thompson argued that a nuclear war was likely to 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 action: '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. …there must be great public manifestations and direct contestations – peacefully and responsibly conducted – of several kinds'. Thompson envisioned a European movement that was opposed to both 'the imperialist West' as well as 'the old stoney Stalinist reflexes of the East'.

A third landmark publication, also published in 1980, was Thompson's article in the *New Left Review* entitled *Notes on Exterminism, the Last Stage of Civilization*. Here, he again combined his unorthodox Marxism with his peace campaigning: 'Comrades, we need a cogent theoretical class analysis of the present war crisis'. Criticizing the 'the immobilism of the Marxist Left' with regard to the persisting Cold War, he presented his own reading of the Cold War as leading to lethargy and preventing a breakthrough to the building of socialist humanism from below.

> A swift caricature of whatever theory underlies this immobilism would run like this. It is in stance a priori: the increasingly-expert literature on weaponry, militarism, and in peace research remains unread. It is informed by a subliminal teleology: history must move through its pre-programmed

[77] M. Howard (1980) 'Reviving Civil Defence', Letter to *The Times* (30 January 1980), printed in E. P. Thompson and D. Smith (eds.) (1980) *Protest and Survive*.

> stages, do what men will, and we may refuse, with religiose [sic] optimism, Marx's grimmer option: 'the mutual ruin of the contending classes.[78]

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. He attacked a widespread assumption on the left that the international class struggle and declining capitalist economies would solve the problem of the Cold War stand-off automatically.

Instead, he suggested to 'read the immediate past as the irrational outcome of a collision of wills, and we would expect the immediate future to enlarge that irrationality'. As in *Protest and Survive*, he saw the catastrophe located in the power struggle within the 'USSR-China-US' triangle. The struggle of the peace movement, he contended, was not just about weapons:

> The Bomb is, after all, something more than an inert Thing. First, it is, in its destructive yield and programmed trajectory, a thing of menace. Second, it is a component in a weapons-*system*: and producing, manning and supporting that system is a correspondent social system-a distinct organization of labour, research and operation, with distinctive hierarchies of command, riles of secrecy, prior access to resources and skills and high levels of policing and discipline: a distinctive organization of production, which, while militarist in character, employs and is supported by great numbers of civilians (civil servants, scientists, academics) who are subordinated to its discipline and rules.[79]

Like in *Protest and Survive*, Thomson thus claimed that the nuclear system had its own logic and should be analysed as such. A Marxist critique of imperialism or capitalism would not be sufficient to understand 'The Logic of Nuclear Weapons Systems'.[80]

Referring to Emma Rothschild, he accepted the argument that the military industries in the USA after the Second World War were just as important as the textile industries during the industrial revolution in

[78] E. P. Thompson (1980) 'Notes', p. 5.

[79] Ibid., pp. 5–6.

[80] Ibid., p. 7.

Britain. But instead of a decline of this industry, he saw a revival. He saw the arms sector as dominating the economy not only in the USA, but also in the Soviet Union.[81] This economic structure, combined with a political culture of fear and irrationality, would be the foundation for 'exterminism' and 'Cold War-ism' which might well become humanity's destiny, if the people did not mobilize against it.[82]

Thompson took much encouragement from the developments in Poland. He interpreted the success of the Solidarność movement as further evidence that ordinary people were willing and able to resist the logic of those in power on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Consequently, he demanded: 'We must strive to loosen Europe from the military hegemony of both superpowers, 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'.[83] Thompson continued to argue against 'the over surplus' of nuclear weaponry and any balance-of-power arguments as well as combatting the lethargy-producing 'anxiety' that held sway over Europe and would soon destroy the 'civilised conditions for life'.[84] The new resistance against this Cold War logic could take heart from the historic example of antifascism, which had given Europe a common identity before, just like peace activism could provide the basis for a common European identity in the contemporary world.[85] This would challenge the Europe 'of two hostile Europes' that were led by corrupt power elites in both the USA and the Soviet Union.[86] Not all members of END shared Thompson's vision of socialist humanism or a third way between the Soviet communist and the American capitalist visions of world order, and there were many internal debates in END about all of these issues, which we cannot go into in a short article.[87]

[81] Ibid., pp. 17–21.

[82] Ibid., pp. 29–31.

[83] E. P. Thompson (1982a) 'Author's Note' in idem (ed.) *Beyond the Cold War* (London: Pantheon).

[84] Ibid, p. 1.

[85] Ibid, p. 4.

[86] Ibid, p. 6.

[87] For more on these intellectual squabbles, see R. Taylor (2013) 'Thompson', pp. 194–95.

Conclusion

Thompson was not an optimist, as he told the Caribbean writer and activist C. L. R. James in 1982. While movements like Solidarność were raising hopes for a change in the geopolitical structure, Thompson still believed it was not unlikely that the world will end in Armageddon.[88] Yet he always was enough of a Marxist to retain the belief in a future that would be better than the present and that it was worth fighting for. We have concentrated on Thompson in this article to show that through individual key activists, like him, Marxism played an influential role in the peace movement. In line with many 'academic' Marxists of his generation in Britain, his political beliefs first led him into the Communist Party. His wartime experiences only cemented his commitment to Marxism and Communism. Yet the CPGB and really existing socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were a huge disappointment to him, and hence, it was only logical that Thompson, like thousands of other British Communists, left the party over the clampdown in Hungary in 1956. Afterwards he was politically homeless, as he continued to reject the reformism of the Labour Party and confirmed his commitment to a form of Marxism that was increasingly unorthodox. As we have argued above, his turn to the peace movement and to peace activism can be seen as an attempt to build an alternative political home for himself. For Thompson, the peace movement represented a mass movement from below that had the potential of saving the world from nuclear destruction and of overcoming the Cold War binaries in East and West. If Europe could be united against the powerful interests of those who were in government in the Communist East and the capitalist West, then, this might also be an opportunity to realise the socialist humanist project to which Thompson remained committed from the 1940s to his death in 1993.

As we have also argued above, his historical writings and his political writings were closely interrelated. The past often served as guidance for the present in view of an imagined future that arose out of his Marxist world view. Thompson's preference for English radicalism, be it William Morris or the members of the London Corresponding Society,

[88] Territorial Masquerade (2012) 'In Conversation: E. P. Thompson and C. L. R. James', http://territorialmasquerades.net/in-conversation-e-p-thompson-and-c-l-r-james/, date accessed 14 September 2014.

can be seen as a conscious move away from Soviet internationalism. It also was a step into the everyday world of ordinary workers, their consciousness and their experiences, which, Thompson argued, formed the basis of their struggles for a better future. This struggle was an ongoing one in history, and the peace movement was the social movement in his own present that promised to carry on the fight in the most meaningful way. The moral economy, underpinning Thompson's project of socialist humanism was best represented by a movement from below that challenged the corrupted elites in power in both West and East. Appalled by the global inequalities and exploitative structures produced by the capitalist West, he upheld a belief in the rule of law and in liberty that he found in English history, but not in Communist Eastern Europe, and that he felt increasingly under threat in his native Britain. Thompson was a champion of the agency of ordinary people, both in the past and in the present. Such agency, he argued, stood above any economic determinism that he did not tire to criticize in orthodox Marxism. It was the basis on which the lethargy vis-à-vis an allegedly unchanging and unchangeable Cold War world could be overcome. Thompson's charismatic personality and his powerful historical and political writings reached a very wide audience, in the peace movement and beyond. Through Thompson, many peace activists encountered a form of unorthodox Marxism that was intellectually convincing, morally appealing and helpful in contemporary political struggles.

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