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The Crisis of Theory: E. P. Thompson, The New Left, and Postwar British Politics

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Author:
Scott Hamilton
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Penelope Corfield

The first thing that stands out from this study is how passionate and volcanic was E. P. Thompson?s intellectual life as a historian, Marxist thinker, and informed campaigner. He was devoted to reason. Indeed, one of the left-wing journals with which he was involved was entitled *The New Reasoner*. Thompson also loved to immerse himself in the slow and steady assessment of original source materials from history, anthropology, and literature. Yet his intellect was volcanic, often smouldering, always fiery, and from time to time truly igniting. As a result (to mix metaphors), he became the storm petrel of Britain?s intellectual left for over 40 years, from the 1940s to the early1990s.

Sooner or later, almost everyone within the left-wing intelligentsia received either a private or a public admonition for his or her failure to interpret justly and, consequently, to act justly in the cause. Nothing personal. But Edward Thompson often needed opposition to an erring fellow-thinker in order to galvanise himself to write. It was like grit in the oyster. As a result of these outbursts, he did often secrete pearls, in the form of theoretical and historical output of great salience and immense long-term influence. He also produced, however, some colossal misjudgements, lots of bruised feelings, many complaining memoranda, sundry harmed working relationships on the intellectual left, and eventually, by the mid-1970s, a degree of political and intellectual isolation on his own part.

Personally, Edward Thompson was a charming and charismatic figure, with a yelping, infectious laugh. His explosions came from the sheer intensity of his commitment and his strong sense of drama, even melodrama. For example, in his book entitled *Whigs and Hunters* (1975) on an egregious example of 18th-century class-biased legislation, he wrote, at Dorothy Thompson?s suggestion, a substantial concluding section discussing the rule of law generically.(1) Edward Thompson argued that, despite some bad laws, it was valuable and civilised for a society, no matter how socially unequal, to share a common legal system with pre-determined principles of operation. So far, so good. In arriving at that point, Thompson was rejecting a jingoistic celebration of English constitutionalism on the one hand and a reductive Marxist critique of the law on the other. For him, however, such a middle position was highly fraught. He felt that he was clambering from a narrow ground onto ?an even narrower theoretical ledge?.(2) His phrasing implied that he was alone and in danger of falling at any moment. Well, actually no. He often faced bruising adversaries. No doubt about that. But on this occasion his stress that a just society needs to pay attention to importance of civics, as well as economics, was eminently sensible. In this case, his particular historical example was disputed by some fellow historians. Yet there was very little controversy over his measured praise for the rule of law and ?due process? ? a stance which remains as topical and valid today as ever.

Nonetheless, it is true that Thompson by the mid-1970s felt himself to be increasingly isolated. He had in part made himself so. After resigning from Warwick University at the age of 48, he thenceforth operated as a freelance, intermitted by some lecture stints overseas. Of course, the Thompsons continued to see their impressively global range of friends. Their august country house at Wick Episcopi was ever welcoming, if often draughty. However, Thompson?s daily working environment was solitary. Furthermore, by the later 1970s, he was even more deeply depressed by the disarray of Marxism than he had previously been. He felt keenly all intellectual challenges from past and present comrades on the left. In fact, he was far more disturbed by their criticisms than he was buoyed by the public admiration and even adulation that he gained after the publication of his classic *Making of the English Working Class* (1963 and still in print). Hence he felt not only isolated but also angry.

All those seeking an introduction to this turbulent figure need look no further than Scott Hamilton?s *Crisis of Theory*. The account is even-handed, detailed, and sober. Generally, Thompson is praised but, at times, criticised or chided. Hamilton also takes pains to locate the kaleidoscopic disputes, which now seem rather abstruse, within a broader political/intellectual context. It is true that there are some confidence-shaking errors, scattered through the book. For example, Thompson is sent as a student to Oxford (p. 36), when actually he went to Cambridge. At other points, various historians are misnamed ? and their books attributed to the wrong authors. And a hybrid Labour politician named Richard Crossland appears in the narrative (p. 63), leaving it unclear as to whether he was Richard Crossman or Anthony Crosland.

In general, however, Hamilton?s account takes his readers carefully through a chronological account of E. P. Thompson?s intellectual trajectory as a Marxist thinker. The ten chapters start with Thompson?s family background among the left-leaning Oxford intelligentsia, followed by his close relationship with his older brother Frank Thompson, who died fighting the Nazis in Bulgaria in 1944. Coverage then focuses upon E. P. Thompson?s theoretical writings after his break from the Communist Party in 1956, which was triggered not only by the Soviet invasion of Hungary but also by the failure of his (and others?) attempt to democratise the British Communist Party. Then followed, after a brief period of euphoria, new rows between the ?old? New Left (including the ?empiricist? Thompson) and the ?new? New Left (notably the theoretician Perry

Anderson). The arguments culminated in 1963 with Thompson?s bitter departure from the *New Left Review*. This bleak moment for him already followed the splits of 1956 ? and presaged yet further disillusionments, and yet further breaks with former comrades that were still to come.

After that, chapters assess the attempt to establish a rival *Socialist Register*; (briefly) Edward Thompson?s contribution to the anti-Labour government *Mayday Manifesto* project in 1968; and (also briefly) Thompson?s involvement in the student activism at Warwick University and his resignation from the University, after publishing the tirade *Warwick University Ltd* (1971).

Next the analysis turns to Thompson?s interventions in Marxist theory, as he rebuked Kolakowski (controversially) and excoriated Althusser (splendidly, if long-windedly). The various responses to Thompson?s theoretical positions from fellow Marxists are also examined. Then there is brief but telling information (pp. 159?61) about Thompson?s uncomfortable academic visit to India in December 1976 / January 1977. He was welcomed by the government, particularly for his Indianophile father?s old friendship with Nehru. E. P. Thompson, however, recoiled from the Indian communists who were defending Indira Gandhi?s autocratic rule under the Emergency (1975?7). In particular, he was aghast when a scholar, who criticised him pertinently at an academic seminar, was arrested shortly afterwards.

Hamilton?s narrative comes to a peak with his extended discussion of the *History Workshop* Conference at Oxford in December 1979. The Thompson volcano exploded with maximum force. He denounced the ?enclosed ghetto of the academic left? and fellow speakers at the Conference for good measure. The result alienated many. Thompson seemed too much of a touchy prima donna, who was unwilling to engage with other arguments. This event compounded his relative intellectual isolation.

Later chapters then round up Thompson?s theoretical writings in the 1980s; discuss his poetry, written chiefly in his youth, and its relationship to his politics; and briefly review Thompson?s unsuccessful and ?conflicted? novel *The Sykaos Papers* (1988). This story ends with the option of saving planet Earth ? or not. Thompson left the outcome uncertain, poised on the brink.

Assessing all these twists and turns of fortune, Hamilton justly highlights Thompson?s repeated alternations between elation and pessimism. After leaving the Communist Party, he was hopeful, writing that ?I commenced to reason in my thirty-third year ? in 1956? (p. 53). He sought to found a new left-wing progressive moment, to reform or replace what he saw as the ?moribund? Labour Party. Yet Thompson quickly feared that his vision of humanist Marxism was being marginalised within a New Left which was looking to abstract continental theory for inspiration. Or later, in August 1976, when Thompson was returning home after a visiting professorship in the USA, he predicted to his ally, the historian John Saville, that: ?British society is poised for a transition to socialism? (p. 157). It did not happen. The resurgent right rather than the left was gaining popular support. At the 1979 *History Workshop* Conference, the erupting Thompson spoke of a coming political catastrophe and warned darkly that many of the audience ?would soon be serving long jail terms? (p. 178).

Hamilton deftly defines this Thompsonian duality as ?an uneasy mixture of catastrophism [and] hyper-optimism? (p. 159). Thompson retained a steady belief in ?the agency of the intellectual and activist left? (ibid). Nonetheless, he was often distanced from street-campaigners, such as the student radicals in the later 1960s, who admired him but, from his point of view, did not heed his message.

These cycles of intense hope and despair must have made Thompson hard to live with, at least in the downturns, which were often prolonged. Hamilton?s study is far from a personal biography. But his evidence suggests how much Thompson must have gained from his wife and life-partner?s magnificent inner calm. Even Dorothy Thompson, however, did not find it all easy.

One countervailing theme, that could have been noted more strongly, was Thompson?s long-running friendships with his fellow historians on the political left. John Saville, for example, was one of the few people at the *History Workshop* Conference in 1979 who supported Thompson. Another steady ally was the

Marxist historian Christopher Hill, who appears but once in Hamilton?s index. At some stage in 1956, when both Hill and Thompson quit the British Communist Party, they did disagree over the timing of their resignations. Hill got a sternly critical letter from Thompson ? a letter which, it is hoped, has survived among the Hill MSS archive at Balliol College. Their comradeship, however, survived. Later Hill said magnanimously that, while he thought the invective too severe, Thompson was right on the substantive issue. Subsequently, as historians, they always cited each other with approval. Their academic concord was surprising to an extent, since their arguments were incompatible on some key points, such as the timing of the famous but elusive transition from feudalism to capitalism. Nonetheless, they steered clear of collision on historical matters. Both men valued their alliance-at-a-reasonable-distance, which helped to armour them against their many attackers.

A further Thompsonian characteristic that emerges clearly was his continual struggle to write to deadlines. Luxurious and luxuriant in his prose, he lacked a capacity to self-edit. Furthermore, he sharply resented attempts by outsiders to cut or even to amend his texts. (I made that mistake once). He worked very much to his own rhythms. Indeed, Hamilton might have made more of the unintended humour that emerges from his account, as Thompson furnished a regular stream of promises, excuses, further promises, and non-appearing typescripts ? or, alternatively, offered to some baffled editor something quite different from what was originally promised. Incidentally, how Thompson would have loathed the pressures of writing regularly for University Research Assessments. And what contempt he would have expressed, in his erudite vocabulary, for the anti-intellectualism of the process and its poverty of terminology. To standardise the richly variegated output of scholars into ?units of assessment?, each counting the same, would have outraged him. And the solemn production of a mathematicalised verdict, based on an aggregation of non-comparable data, would have prompted his scandalised satire.

Overall, Hamilton?s study is not intended as a full intellectual biography. There is relatively little detail about Thompson?s historical writings, which prompted as many debates among historians as did his Marxist theoretical interventions among the Marxist left. Nor is Hamilton concerned with Thompson, the peace campaigner of the 1980s; or Thompson, the friend of European dissidents against totalitarian Marxist regimes. Perhaps a full edition of his ever-vivid letters would be a first step towards a comprehensive intellectual biography of this polymathic loner, who survived unrepentantly outside the academy in an era of increasing intellectual specialisation.

Yet readers of Hamilton?s careful exposition will learn much about Thompson?s falling out of love with, firstly the organised Communist Party, and then, slowly and agonisingly, with Marxism as a system of ideas. At the very end of his life, Thompson expressed his dilemma clearly. When confronted by dogmatic anti-Marxists, he defended his life?s cause, eloquently. Yet when arguing with convinced-by-the-book Marxists, he opposed them, angrily.

Out of such critical ambivalence came a rich and idiosyncratic body of historical and theoretical writings. For Thompson himself, their production was prompted by a mixture of agony and ecstasy. In his later years, he was often tired and ill. But, to quote from his favourite poet William Blake, E. P. Thompson never ceased from mental fight ? nor did his sword sleep in his hand.

Notes

1. E. P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* (London, 1975), pp. 258?69.Back to (1)
2. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters*, p. 260.Back to (2)

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