***“E.P.Thompson: Last of the English Radicals?"***

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One of the most striking features of our turbulent political times is the dramatic decline in the fortunes of parties of the left, across Europe -- and of course here in the UK too. There has been a profound collapse of confidence in the appeal of social democratic politics in particular. And for some while now, a variety of different ideas and approaches have been cast as possible routes to salvation for the increasingly disorientated liberal left. One such idea is the notion that a radical tradition particular to England might be re-engaged by a Labour party that has lost its soul and remains averse to expressions of English national identity. This argument has been most recently advanced by figures like Jon Cruddas and Tristram Hunt, and, some years before them, by the likes of Michael Foot and Tony Benn.

The idea of regaining a local tradition of political dissent finds an interesting echo in various commentaries on Brexit which see this momentous decision as an act of disruption by the English working class which has periodically been inclined to rebellion against the political elite – a kind of latter-day version of the peasants’ revolt according to a range of different commentators. Here I set to one side the merits or otherwise of this interpretation of Brexit. But the image of an enduring lineage of English radicalism, on the one hand, and the notion of an ingrained English bolshiness towards established political authority, on the other, lead us back to Edward Thompson, author of the landmark work - *The Making of the English Working Class --* and one of the most well-known public intellectuals and radical campaigners of the second half of the twentieth century. ‘A thoroughly English dissident’ is how one of his obituarists[[1]](#footnote-1) summed him up. And one of the flurry of books that have appeared about him since his death in 1993, is a collection of essays, edited by Roger Fieldhouse and Richard Taylor which examine his relationship with English radicalism.[[2]](#footnote-2)

But while there has been a concerted effort to interpret Thompson in the context of this lineage, less consideration has been given to what he actually said about it, and how he conceived his relationship with England's radical tradition. These are the main themes of this article.

One particular sub-plot to which I draw attention when considering his reflections on English radicalism, is Thompson’s growing concern about the UK’s membership of the European Community, then just starting its long march into the heart of British political life. He died just before the issue gained the iconic status it came to acquire. Thompson, the stubborn English patriot and intuitive Eurosceptic looks like he might well have been a keen supporter of Brexit. But another Thompson -- the proponent of a people’s Europe of the heart and mind, and ardent critic of conservative forms of patriotism, might have voted differently.

*Thompson and the radical tradition*

Before I examine these themes in some of his key works, let me start by sketching some of the factors and contexts that informed his relationship with a radical English canon. Born in 1924, his father’s Methodism, high-minded liberal beliefs and anti-imperialism were formative influences. And so also were his mother’s American origins and missionary background. Dignitaries and visiting politicians from abroad were frequent visitors to his home, especially leading figures from the Indian anti-colonial movement of the 1920s and 1930s, who were close associates of his father -- a leading academic authority on Bengali culture. Edward’s talented elder brother, Frank Thompson, a charismatic classicist and poet, was perhaps his most important guiding spirit. Frank joined the Communist Party during its anti-fascist hey-day, and was killed at the age of twenty three, while working as a liaison between the Special Operations Executive and the Bulgarian partisans.[[3]](#footnote-3) Edward himself was commanding a tank unit in Italy when he received news of his brother’s death at the age of twenty one. He was indelibly marked by the imprint of his brother’s ideals and haunted by the political dream of a democratic Europe that would rid itself of fascism through the active resistance of its peoples.

His next great influence was the Communist Party of Great Britain, which he joined – against his parent’s wishes, inspired by Frank. There he became a junior but integral figure within the richly talented ‘Historians Group’ in the 1940s, working under the tutelage of such figures as Dona Torr, Rodney Hilton, Maurice Dobb and Christopher Hill. In this unique, collaborative environment, he was inducted into a libertarian and patriotic socialist ethos, an outlook which was increasingly at variance with the Marxist-Leninist orthodoxies of the party’s leadership. There he learned that a different history to the official version of monarchy and state existed in the bowels of the English historical past. The people had on different occasions been stirred to demand that ancient liberties and customary rights be respected by political rulers and powerful economic interests that were minded to ignore or overrule them. He recalled years later that one of the few books he carried with him around the battlefields of Italy was *The Handbook of Freedom*, a collection of English writings on liberty and democracy, stretching back through twelve centuries, that had been compiled by Jack Lindsay and Edgell Rickword.

The ethos of “the freeborn Englishman” – one of Thompson’s favourite motifs – runs through its pages. The notion that critical arguments about the present were, for the English, typically located in the remembered past became a formative theme in his work and thought. It shaped his highly distinctive biographical account of William Morris, in which he insisted that his fellow Marxists treat the romantic tradition as an integral, supportive resource. And it figured again in his extraordinary work *The Making of the English Working Class*, which he began writing during his tenure as an adult education tutor in the 1950s. This work, and later studies of the social history of the eighteenth century, revealed the interplay of these early influences. Thompson was a Marxist historian and thinker of a highly distinctive kind, blending a deep affinity for some of the leading figures of English poetry and literature with a Marxist sensibility that was much more firmly geared toward questions of agency, imagination and struggle than structures and economic categories.

These texts also showcase the highly literary character of Thompson's writings, which were distinctive for the rhetorical range and writerly flair they displayed, qualities that were increasingly rare among the academically based intelligentsia from the 1960s. His writings resound to a powerfully judgmental authorial voice and reveal an unusual gift for satire. This latter quality deserves particular emphasis, not least because the kinds of humour, hyperbole and irreverence within them have become much rarer in progressive thought and writing. Thompson can be located in a long line of satirists stretching from Jonathan Swift right through to Richard Ingram and *Private Eye*. These qualities were no accident. He was a poet and writer of fiction who was engaged for many years after 1945 teaching English literature as an adult education tutor, in the West Riding, and was steeped in its canonical works and authors.

A further key to Thompson's radicalism was his intuitive feel for the 'provinces' and the distaste for the court – to adopt the language of the eighteenth century for a moment. Living in the West Riding, with his wife and intellectual collaborator, historian Dorothy Thompson, after 1945, helped cement his sense of a rooted and self-assured labour movement culture in industrial cities and towns away from London. His historical writings are suffused with the belief that it is in such localities, beyond the reach of party elites, state patronage and the forces of law and order, that radicalism has often brewed.

In a revealing early essay on the origins of the Independent Labour Party in the North of England, he set to one side its London leaders and best known figures, upon whom historians tended to linger, and made a case for the role and contribution of Irish-born, Yorkshire agitator Tom Maguire.[[4]](#footnote-4) This intuitive identification with dissent and the margins framed his commitment to provide the alternative version of its national story, which he always tended to tell from the bottom up and the outside in. And his writings show a particular feel for the landscapes and physical environments that shaped working life, and the importance of the history of specific places to their inhabitants. This affinity with, and respect for, the textures and culture of working class life was a characteristic he shared with the writing of two other rising intellectual figures in the 1950s – Richard Hoggart, author of *The Uses of Literacy*, and cultural critic Raymond Williams, author of the immensely influential account of Britain’s radical heritage – *Culture and Society*. Their work was often connected by contemporaries, and seen as representing a turn back towards the concrete and experiential, in intellectual terms. But there were important differences between them too, and Thompson’s histories and political outlook were always distinctive, and increasingly difficult to reconcile, he felt, with the dominant trends of the intellectual left.

He displayed an independence of mind and stubbornness of temperament that made his involvement in collective political ventures rather fraught. This was first apparent in his growing scepticism about the CPGB and its close alignment with the political outlook of the USSR. This led to his break, along with thousands of other, from the Communist party in 1956, in protest at the invasion of Hungary by the Soviet Union. The party that had incubated his own commitment to the idea of a uniquely English democratic spirit was now, he concluded, pitted against it. His feelings are laid bare in this half-joking excerpt form a private letter he wrote, in May of that year, to Bert Ramelson, secretary of the Leeds branch of the Communist Party: ‘thank God, there is no chance of this E.C [*the Executive Committee of the CPGB*] ever having power in Britain: it would destroy in a month every liberty of thought, conscience and expression which it has taken the British people 300 odd years to win’. Thompson subsequently threw himself into editing a new journal of socialist discussion and thought – the *New Reasoner*, which he co-edited with historian and collaborator John Saville – and became a leading figure in the wider new left current which briefly promised a renaissance of alternative thinking on the left. For this venture he had the highest hopes. It represented a further expression, he opined, of the line of social and moral criticism which ran, ‘from the antinomianism of the radical civil war sects … through Blake and an underground tradition of revolutionary opposition during the Napoleonic Wars to William Morris and the “socialist revival” at the end of the nineteenth century’. Living up to such a billing was always going to be hard, and so it proved as this temporary alliance of students, intellectuals, and urban professionals collapsed after 1959, leaving only the journal *New Left Review* (*NLR*) still standing.

*Three polemics and an idiom[[5]](#footnote-5)*

Having sketched some of the sources of his affinity for an indigenous seam of radicalism, I want to turn now to consider how he characterised it during the middle years of his career. Specifically, I will look briefly at the three famous polemical essays he wrote – all public rejoinders to the ideas advanced by different Marxist theorists. These were, in turn: *The Peculiarities of the English,* from 1964,directed at the leading figures of the younger New Left generation: his *Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski,* published in 1973,which provided a public reprimand to this formerly Marxist, philosopher from Poland; and *The Poverty of Theory*, from 1979,which lampooned the avatar of Marxist structuralism, French philosopher Louis Althusser.

*Peculiarities* has long been one of his most acclaimed essays, offering a rejoinder to the theoretically derived account of British development advanced by New Left thinkers Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn. He insisted upon the importance and achievements of England’s labour movement and literary culture. His sharp riposte to them was, he claimed, the expression of a frustration he had fought to keep in check. But Thompson was, in fact, being somewhat disingenuous here, for the piece had been some while in the making.

An earlier, angrier version of it appeared in the form of a closely typed, occasionally splenetic, thirteen-page memorandum which he circulated to the *NLR* board, before he walked off it. I first came across this spiky memo buried away in John Saville’s papers in Hull library, while doing research on the new left in the 1980s. Entitled ‘Where are we now?’, it is now available in print.[[6]](#footnote-6) This piece is most striking for the sharpness of its criticisms of the ethical deficiencies of the ‘anti-imperialism’ of a new generation of left intellectuals. Against the growing disdain for the indigenous cultural and political tradition which he sensed was becoming an unquestioned orthodoxy, Thompson insisted that drawing upon English cultural resources and ideas was entirely compatible with the building of solidarity with those in struggle elsewhere. More than this it was necessary to be rooted in the domestic soil, in order to have the sense of balance and human connection required to make internationalism meaningful. Otherwise notions such as international solidarity or anti-imperialism were little more than empty phrases or theoretical slogans. He noted a spreading tendency on the new left to suspend basic principles when expressing solidarity with the deeds and standpoints of anti-colonial leaders or states, and an inclination to avoid moral judgement on the deeds of terrorist groups.

In the expanded, later version of the memo – *Peculiarities --* he offered a more developed, and somewhat politer, account of the value and richness of what he repeatedly termed ‘England’s idiom’ a term which is itself notable. This prhase described a way of arguing and a manner of ethical thinking, not a particular political dispensation. Though the contributions of a wide range of romantic poets and writers and radical figures like William Blake and William Cobbett, he detected a shared moralistic sense of opposition to the system and values of industrial capitalism, to institutions built upon deference and class hierarchy, and, more broadly, to the unaccountable exercise of power. Notions of community, belonging, creativity and culture were all central to the fluid and shifting language through which these figures expressed a richer version of the human personality than utilitarianism could ever supply. And here he cast himself both as an exponent of this exceptional idiom, on the one hand, and as a proponent of the idea that the insights and ethics of an English line of criticism formed an essential contribution to a much wider European discourse, on the other.

His reference to this English idiom is worth pondering, as are the terms he chose not to use for it. He studiously avoided talking of a ‘tradition’ of English radicalism, or using the now familiar term “Englishness” throughout his writings. Tradition, I suspect, carried politically conservative overtones which he knew would make his position even harder to promote. It also threatened to render this idiom too polite and scholastic in kind. This was, after all, the basis for one of his spiky objections to Williams’ presentation of the same lineage in his work Culture and Society. As he put it, in 1961: ‘Burke abused, Cobbett inveighed, Arnold was capable of malicious insinuation, Carlyle, Ruskin and D. H. Lawrence, in their middle years, listened to no one’. This was ultimately a communion of contrarians.

*Peculiarities* also revealed his growing interest in the question of the UK’s relationship with the European Community, then beginning to emerge as a salient political issue. Thompson – in full demotic mode -- conflated his opposition to the fashions of European Marxism with his deep, intuitive scepticism about the prospect of economic integration with parts of the Continent. “Euro-Marxism” was his new caustic phrase, enabling him to collapse trends in Marxist theorising with arguments in high politics. The alternative to both, he maintained, was a renewed engagement with the sensibilities and ideas of English social criticism. But the past and the national culture were, he sensed, foreign countries for a younger cohort of leftist, and the essay conveys his growing fear that a profound generational change was producing a major turn away from the bearings they afforded.

In the wake of his public dispute with the leading lights of the New Left, Thompson spent a number of years nursing a growing sense of grievance and political isolation. But the late 1960s were also the period when his intellectual reputation began to grow, and he retained a connection with left-wing intellectual culture through his years as Director for the Centre of Social History at Warwick University, a position he abandoned in protest at the University’s relations with its local business community in 1971.[[7]](#footnote-7)[[8]](#footnote-8)

Many of the same thoughts and resentments were rehearsed in his next major polemical statement – the *Open Letter* which appeared in *Socialist Register* in 1973. A well-known philosopher who had held posts at a number of Europe’s leading institutions, having left Poland in 1969, and a notable historian of philosophy and theology, Kolakowski was a slightly surprising subject for Thompsonian polemic. What had aroused his ire was a deep disappointment that a figure he had once admired had seemingly moved from one of the Cold War camps -- Stalinism -- to the other – Western liberalism, with apparently alacrity. This was the option which Thompson himself had fiercely resisted after 1956 and which he had urged others to withstand as he fought for a third, independent socialist way -- between the magnetic poles of Communist orthodoxy and a social democratic lineage to which he never fully reconciled himself.

In this work he resumed the mock-ironic rhetoric of *Peculiarities.* This time Thompson styled himself Lear’s fool about to take up the cudgels against one of the titans of European philosophy. But now the English idiom was depicted as a fading star, increasingly moving out of the range of contemporaries. This stance referenced a shift in the wider culture – as depictions of Britain as backward and failing in social and economic terms had come to pervade political discourse, and as these concerns were starting to infuse the debate about whether the UK should join the European Community. It was also in this period that the fateful (and in Thompson's eyes, wrongful) conflation of Englishness and Empire became so prevalent in intellectual circles.

So now the national idiom took on a more melancholic, and resentful air. The English were ‘jesters’ to the ‘priests’ guarding the theological and philosophical orthodoxies favoured in mainland Europe. In an extraordinarily sweeping (and it has to be said, ahistorical) argument, he defended this contrast on the basis that two great rival forces shaping modern European culture -- Communism and Catholicism – could be seen as different halves of one single universalist proclivity, against which were arraigned the plucky English. Reading these passages again now, it is hard not to see a precursor here of some of the overblown, anti-European rhetoric that has made its way into British political discourse of late. Declaring Protestantism to be the basis for the English mindset served to embellish the irreverent voice and righteous posture that he adopted throughout this work, as he presented himself as the undaunted rebel against absolutist giants emerging across the Channel.

But there is much more going in this text than a collapse into the outlook of the ‘little Englander’, an accusation levelled at him subsequently by Tony Judt. Thompson was trying here to reverse the polarity that flowed from the arguments mounted by Marxist theorists and liberal intellectuals – which descended from the heights of universalistic theory to the foothills of historical process and cultural tradition. A rich array of rhetorical figures and analogies were conjured up to aid his efforts. Thus, Thompson famously styled himself an old-fashioned, clumsy ‘bustard’, a bird doomed to stay on the ground while, all around him, others soared into the theoretical sky. Bustards, and some dubious jokes aside, the text also includes, once again, a more nuanced understanding of the national tradition, and his own relation to it. He likened himself to a ‘prisoner’ trapped within ‘a hostile national culture which is itself both smug and resistant to intellectuality and failing in self-confidence’.[[9]](#footnote-9) And he returned to the idea that the best of English thought represented a precursor for, and contributor to, a wider European discourse: ‘Take Marx and Vico and a few European novelists away, and my most intimate pantheon would be a provincial tea party: a gathering of the English and the Anglo-Irish’. [[10]](#footnote-10) The “Anglo-Irish” reference is interesting, and far from unique to this passage. It allowed Thompson to bring to the metaphorical party two of his great literary influences -- Swift and Yeats. The idiom in short was a bridge to, rather than an enclave away from, wider currents of European thought.

And yet, the isolationist rhetoric on display undoubtedly served to pull against this imagery, and had the effect here of rendering the vision of European commonality more distant, in imaginative terms, than in his previous writings. And now he reflected at greater length upon the European question that was to the fore in British politics.

This was now an issue on which he was ready and willing to pronounce publicly. In one of his rare forays outside the liberal-left press in these years, he wrote a revealing, op-ed for *The Simday Times* during the Referendum campaign of 1975.[[11]](#footnote-11) Dismissing talk of ‘going into Europe’ as a fad associated with the rapacious desire of middle class consumers to enrich their lifestyles, he reverted to some of the John Bull slapstick of these essays. In typically irreverent fashion he declared the European project to be ‘more like the nine middle-aged couples with failing marriages meeting in a darkened bedroom in a Brussels hotel for a Group Grope’. But, strikingly, the underlying basis of Thompson’s objection was democratic, nor nationalistic. ‘We are already in Europe’, he declared. And in the name of democratic principle and worries about the lack of accountability for all the peoples represented, he declared his objection. Indeed, in what looks now like a rather prescient aside, he noted that attempts at integration might one day engender a spasm of -- what he called – ‘angry and destructive bourgeois nationalism’.

It is interesting to ponder what exactly happened to the tradition of democratic-leftist objections to European integration which Thompson, and figures like Tony Benn, articulated the 1970s. It appears to have almost entirely disappeared when different parts of the Labour family shifted from sceptics to supporters in subsequent years. It may also have withered because the kinds of patriotic radicalism which these figured asserted were increasingly out of kilter with the outlook of the University-educated, metropolitan professionals who were increasingly to the fore in Labour circles, and the left more generally, from that period. And it may also be that the very idea of English exceptionalism was contaminated by its association with Enoch Powell, a connection remains a huge obstacle to its reclamation.

Thompson’s final essay in the trilogy considered here, offers some insight into why and when this shift of mentality came to pass on the left. This was his famous polemical rejoinder to the French Marxist Louis Althusser -- *The Poverty of Theory,* published as a book-length essay five years later in 1978. What appears to have triggered this, his most famous, contrarian statement was his concern at the rapidity with which this paradigm was becoming a fashionable orthodoxy in political circles, and a deepening hostility to Althusser’s anti-humanism, and sense that the mode of intellectual enquiry with which he associated it – Theory with, as he put it, a capital ‘T’ -- was making inroads across the humanities and social sciences in British universities.

This essay carried forward much of his earlier thinking, and re-employed some of the same comic motifs: ‘the bustard’, for example, made a notable return. But something was now missing from this work – an absence that has escaped the notice of its many interpreters. There is no mention of the English idiom. And, given that this essay drew Thompson back to some of the arguments and issues that had previous resulted in its employment, this is very striking.

His abandonment of this term is, I think, indicative of a collapse of confidence on his part in the appeal of the lineage of English social criticism among his audiences, and perhaps too a response to the result of the Referendum of 1975. He invited his audience to laugh at the ‘ludicrous spectacle of ‘an English empirical historian … attempting to offer epistemological correction to a rigorous Parisian philosopher’. And in a strikingly vivid metaphor, he likened structuralism to a pestilence that had spread across the Channel. And yet, despite this familiar fare, he chose not to summon the national idiom as the terrain upon which to muster his own position.

Instead, he transposed its themes into an extended discourse about the need for historical understanding – as opposed to deductive forms of theory. While English figures do crop up here, he relied most heavily upon the Italian jurist and historian, Giambattista Vico to buttress his position. Vico was applauded for his conception of history as ‘an open-ended and ultimately unpredictable set of processes, each of which possessed their own internal ‘logic’. This new focus was shaped both by his worry about the influence of the theoretical systematising associated with structuralism, but also by the growing prominence of positivist trends in the social sciences. He saw both of these currents as signalling a turn away from historical -- and literary -- forms of criticism and thought.

These passages provide a prescient attack upon the early inklings of the kinds of egalitarian theory and empiricism which came to characterise a later generation of Labour thinking. Thompson let rip against these trends, and, rather idiosyncratically, chose to treat the philosopher Karl Popper – theorist of the ‘open society’ -- as the liberal partner in crime to Althusser. What is also apparent here, is a broader lament at the weakening connections between cultural knowledge and criticism and the progressive mind, as other disciplines, notably economics, have come to the fore.

In this essay he drew the battle lines with his opponents a little differently. It was now humanist and democratic European thought against the growing influence of structuralist, macro-social and positivist theories, and he attempted – rather contentiously -- to align those in the latter camp with Stalinist and other anti-democratic political allegiances. He closed with an unambiguous declaration of his unwillingness to continue engaging with the left-wing intelligentsia. And in so doing he joined a long list of contrarian radicals who have torn up their left-wing membership cards in public. Christopher Hitchens comes to mind as a later contrarian who occupied a somewhat similarly awkward position on the left to the one in which Thompson now found himself.

The loss of faith shown by one of its greatest twentieth-century exponents in the resonance of an English radical tradition needs to be born in mind by those seeking to claim Thompson for progressive patriotism. In each of these essays, an unresolved strain is discernible -- between an exceptionalist understanding of the English as a unique and special people with a rich heritage of democratic struggle, on the one hand, and a commitment to the interwoven nature of English and European thinking and politics, on the other. Through his involvement in the European Nuclear Disarmament campaign, during the 1980s, Thompson provided a very practical demonstration of this second way of enacting English nationhood. But in broader intellectual terms, he rarely acknowledged the tension between these ideas -- and he certainly never resolved them.

*The liberty tree*

The fading confidence that post-imperial England had in its own radical tradition carried important political consequences, as well as intellectual ones, for Thompson. He identified its diminishing presence as the main reason for the disinterest of many socialists in what he viewed as the keynote issues of the 1970s – the growing authoritarianism and centralism of the state and the erosion of British democracy. Previous generations of radicals and the early labour movement in particular had show a strong commitment to the notion that a set of rights and liberties had been won by the English, and these figures were often wary of the centralised cast of government that had been a feature of English history since the Norman invasion. As he put it, ‘The Chartist, Radical Liberal, Irish nationalist and formative labour movements were distinguished by their sensitivity to libertarian issues, and their suspicion of the policy of statism**’.**

These concerns were aired in a bevy of essays and articles he wrote in the 1970s - mostly for *New Society* and *The Guardian* -- on questions of civil and intellectual liberty, reflecting his own increasing involvement in various libertarian campaigns including the ABC trial, press freedom, debates about surveillance and the reach of the intelligence services.[[12]](#footnote-12) A common theme in these writings is the creeping encroachment by the state upon traditional democratic practices, such as the jury system, and upon civil liberties more generally on the grounds of national security. And he was critical too of the illiberal causes which many leftists were inclined to indulge, notably support for the goals of Provisional IRA – an issue which has come back to haunt senior figures in today’s Labour party.

His repeated point of reference within these sharply written, often highly satirical, writings was his old friend -- the “freeborn Englishman”. They were undoubtedly important among those campaigning on these issues. But they did not resonate much beyond these circles, and appeared tangential, in some ways, to the divides and causes of this period. What exactly did the “free born Englishman” mean to a society entering a period of profound industrial conflict? And this was now a country that was markedly more diverse in ethnic and cultural terms than when Thompson had been born, and where issues of racial justice and gender equality – in particular – had become the sources of new dynamics of protest and opposition. In this context, the idea of reclaiming the democratic values of the fondly imagined English past was starting to look irrelevant or complacent, or both.

Aware as he was of new reasons for his own seeming irrelevance, Thompson was trenchant in his belief that the left would come to rue its neglect of the value of liberty and fashionable scepticism about the rule of law. The latter, he memorably argued at the end of his major historical work *Whigs and Hunters,* was an intrinsically important achievement for the poorest and most vulnerable in any society. And while he increasingly intuited how dated his own thinking now appeared in progressive circles, there are some highly prescient and forward-looking aspects to these writings. Most obviously they seem to speak directly to the current period when issues of surveillance and technology, and the regulation of free speech, have once more returned to the fore. In the context of this article, what is most notable is the intimacy of the relationship he assumed between support for democracy and civil liberties and a relationship with a distinctively English lineage of thought and criticism.

*Conclusions*

The idea of returning to Thompson as an exemplar of English radicalism, with which I began this article, is undoubtedly complicated by the realisation that he himself lost faith in its political resonance. Coming to understand some of the tensions in his own thinking in this area is salutary for anyone interested in the project of crafting a progressive English patriotism today.

There are various additional reasons for doubting the idea that his thinking represents some kind of pathway to which the lost left should now return. First, the political vision which he advanced for post-war Britain tended to lack the impact and depth of his historical writing. No distinctively Thompsonian way of thinking about politics resulted from his writings about post-war Britain. And that is in stark contrast to the later influence of New Left contemporaries of his, such as Ralph Miliband, Stuart Hall and Tom Nairn. At heart Thompson proposed a return to the vision and ethos of a popular front style movement which ranged across parties and suspended differences in the pursuit of some basic common goals. This outlook had its moments; and it sometimes has its strengths. It was exactly this kind of ethical politics that fired the heart of the peace movement in which he figured so prominently in the 1980s. But this way of thinking about politics remained fundamentally at odds with the nature and realities of a two-party system forged in the era of industrialisation. Thompson’s was a vision of opposition and protest. It was not obviously engaged with the ethos or strategic considerations associated with governance.

And, second, despite himself being dogged by the accusation that he was overly nostalgic and culturally conservative, it may well be that Thompson – like many other progressives – consistently under-estimated the depths of Tory patriotism and the ability of Conservatives to appropriate these sentiments for their own political ends. Important and inspiring as his vision of radical England was, he said little about how it should be rendered more meaningful and valuable than the more familiar tales of pomp and circumstance from which ideas of British nationhood have been forged. Its connections to a different political outlook need to be carefully crafted and strategically developed, not simply asserted.

And yet, re-engaging these writings is also to encounter striking insights into some of the dilemmas facing progressives in an age when questions of patriotism, nationhood and place are so prominent in politics; and also to be challenged by the different pattern he wove around these concerns in comparison to current forms of political thinking. Thompson’s abiding belief that progressive politics could only prosper when it had close connections with, and a deep empathy for, the texture and strains of ordinary life, and when it championed the radical patriotism of alternative England, is certainly striking to behold in the current moment. More specifically, the now ingrained habit of looking at English society as divided by a profound chasm between the parochial and nationalist ‘left behinds’, on the one hand, and the radical liberalism of metropolitans, on the other, is nicely undercut by his reminder that historically London-based radicals are nearly always in despair about the conservative and backward working classes, and usually miss what is really going on elsewhere. And it is challenged too by his conviction that the left prospers when it forges alliances across different social groups and geographical differences, a task that requires an understanding of the consciousness and traditions of a range of different groupings, not the imposition of pre-determined orthodoxies.

Some of our other, most familiar dichotomies also look a little less solid when considered through Thompsonian eyes. His sense of the deep interconnection between a distinctive English imagination, a commitment to a Europe of the peoples, and the practice of international solidarity, stands in marked contrast to the tendency now to see patriotism and international sympathy as opposites.

But the exceptionalist idiom which Thompson wanted to reclaim is a more problematic, and mixed, inheritance than he generally acknowledged. And in recent times it has been most powerfully harnessed by politicians from the political right, rather than liberals or leftists. Towards the end of his own life it was Mrs Thatcher who employed historically encoded ideas about British greatness so powerfully – as he ruefully noted. And now, another female Conservative leader commands the political scene in part because her opponents are unwilling or unable to contest her appropriation of English national sentiment. Until his progressive successors realise the importance of trying to build bridges between the two broad national discourses which Thompson identified, and of looking at politics from the bottom up and outside in, it seems likely that the Conservative command of England’s national consciousness will continue for some while yet.

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1. W.L.Webb, ‘A Thoroughly English Dissident’, The Guardian, 30 August 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. R.Fieldhouse and R.Taylor (eds) *E.P.Thompson and English Radicalism* (Manchester University Press, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A full account of his life and death are provided in P.Conradi, *A Very English Hero: the Making of Frank Thompson* (Bloomsbury, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. E.P.Thompson, ‘Homage to Tom Maguire’, in A.Briggs and J.Saville (eds) *Essays in Labour History* (Macmillan and St Martin’s Press, 1960). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A fuller discussion of these texts is available in M.Kenny, **‘A Traditional English (Not British) Country Gentleman of the Radical Left’: Understanding the Making and Unmaking of Edward Thompson's English Idiom’, *Contemporary British History,* 28, 4, 2014.**  [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. E.P.Thompson, ‘Where are we Now?’, in C.Wilmslow (ed.) *E.P.Thompson and the Making of the New Left.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. E.P.Thompson, ‘The Long Revolution Part 1’, *New Left Review, 1, 9 (1961), p?* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. E.P.Thompson, *Warwick University Limited: Industry, Management and the Universities* (Spokesman, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. E.P.Thompson, ‘An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski’*, Socialist Register,* 1973, pp. 1-100; accessed at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/thompson-ep/1973/kolakowski.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Thompson, ‘Open Letter’. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. E.P.Thompson, ‘Going into Europe’, *The Sunday Times,* 27 April1975. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. These are collected in Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight* (Merlin, 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)