

What's Left of E.P. Thompson? Reflections on an Anti-Progressive¹

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Cal Winslow, ed., *E.P. Thompson and the Making of the New Left: Essays and Polemics* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2014). 288pp. \$23.00 Paperback.

Christos Efstathiou, *E.P. Thompson: A Twentieth-Century Romantic* (London: Merlin Press, 2015). 284pp. \$41.00 Hardcover.

Is E.P. Thompson (1924–1993) still a relevant resource for the left? The two books under review—one a collection of his occasional pieces and the other an intellectual biography—would like to leave the reader with a positive impression. To be sure, British sociology is still strongly influenced by the tradition of “cultural studies” to which Thompson was a distinguished early contributor, and there have been periodic efforts to keep his memory alive, typically as someone who was sensitive to the moral dimension of political economy.² Here he is often coupled with Karl Polanyi, the *émigré* Austrian lawyer turned economic historian. Polanyi’s 1944 masterwork *The Great Transformation* is now regarded as a founding text in economic anthropology. It remains a contemporary reference point for those who prefer to see their socialism grounded in a communitarian rather than a technocratic ethos.³

What unites Polanyi and Thompson, a literary scholar by training, is an intuition that there was a window of opportunity in the eighteenth century for an escape from feudalism that did not involve an embrace of capitalism.⁴ Indeed, not only is most of Thompson’s historical scholarship—from *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) to *Customs in Common* (1991)—about this period, but it is also the source of his examples for the sort of grassroots “socialist humanism” that he favoured. But whereas Polanyi—notwithstanding his emphasis on the redistribution of surplus (agricultural) wealth—remained largely immune to Marx’s charms, Thompson explicitly adopted the ideas and rhetorical trappings of Marxism. Yet the fact that so much of his work is devoted to distancing himself from the more “orthodox,” “materialist,” “structuralist” versions of Marxism prominent in the twentieth century—notably in *The Poverty of Theory* (1978)—could lead the ungenerous reader to conclude that Thompson never quite figured out something that Polanyi realized relatively early in his career, namely, that while he was a kind of socialist, he was not really a Marxist—or even a progressive.

Polanyi was a somewhat errant offspring of the Austrian school of economics who nevertheless shared their understanding of Marxism as a “communised” version of Saint-Simon’s socially engineered capitalism. To the Austrians, Marx simply transferred the reins of the scientifically planned economy from the “captains of industry” and their expert advisers to the proletarian foot soldiers, but the fundamentally autocratic sensibility remained intact.⁵ Here it is worth noting that the Austrians understood Marx as very much the originator of what came to be known as “Marxism”. In other words, they placed less emphasis on Marx’s own intellectual biography—e.g. his “Hegelian” roots in the phenomenology of the master-slave relation—than on the political formations that Marx promoted once he moved to Paris and then London, which were extended by his followers in various “International” conferences. Thus, the Austrians see a clear red thread running from Marx to the Soviet Union. This is in contrast to Thompson’s understanding of Marx, which perhaps became the norm in the English-speaking world in the 1960s, whereby “authentic Marxism” was judged by its conformity to the spirit of Marx’s early work, prior to his serious involvement in organizing the political movement that came to bear his name. From this opposing standpoint, the Soviet Union is increasingly seen as betraying Marx’s original principles.

Based on Polanyi’s reading, Marx would seem to be a strange bedfellow for someone like Thompson, who agreed with Polanyi that a symbiotic relationship to nature was a key feature of anything that might be called “socialist humanism.” After all, Marx had adapted Saint-Simon’s account of the transition from military to commercial societies under organized capitalism into an account of human progress from the mutual exploitation of humans (shared by military and commercial societies, or feudalism and capitalism, in Marx’s view) to humanity’s collective exploitation of nature (true socialism). Marx appeared to share a belief held not only by Saint-Simon and his followers but also by classical political economists—namely, that the true enemy of humanity is not some part of the human population (say, a repressive or a backward class) but nature itself, whose inherent scarcity places limits on the full development of human potential.

As a result, human ingenuity needs to be organized to overcome scarcity. This is what Saint-Simon meant by “industry,” and the phrase “Industrial Revolution” was coined to capture this idea as a generalised mentality, which of course Marx shared. For Saint-Simon, nature’s scarcity, and its hostility to the realization of human ends, is the modern mark of our Biblically fallen state, the result of our divine expulsion from the superabundance of the Garden of Eden. In Marx’s more explicitly secular philosophical anthropology, “primitive communism” corresponds to Eden. But for both Saint-Simon and Marx, this original pe-

riod is not one in which humans lived modestly in harmony with nature, say, in the sense that was promoted in recent years under the rubric of “social ecology” by the anarchist Murray Bookchin, a position with which both Polanyi and Thompson could have some considerable sympathy.⁶ Rather, in our pre-lapsarian state, nature was directly responsive to humanity’s godlike will, starting with Adam’s naming of the creatures.

Again, for both Saint-Simon and Marx, “industry” was the road to redemption, as it tapped into our godlike ability to make more out of less through the application of intelligent labour, and thereby come to approximate that Edenic state of nature’s automatic responsiveness to Adam’s command. Where Saint-Simon and Marx parted company was that the former believed that industry required a hierarchical organization of human labour, a rationalization of capitalism’s dominant tendency, which had been codified by the classical political economists. In contrast, Marx believed that capitalism’s retention of the repressive character of hierarchy from feudalism was itself part of the problem, especially if one believes that *all* humans have this godlike capacity for “industry.” But for both, nature is presumed to be the ultimate foe that turns my enemy’s enemy into my friend, effectively resolving class conflict into collective progress.

In short, what Polanyi early understood and what Thompson perhaps never quite appreciated was that Marx was more “post-capitalist” than “anti-capitalist” in his orientation to political economy. In other words, like Saint-Simon, Marx saw capitalism as not only part of history’s forward momentum but also the platform for launching the next stage of human progress. Where they differed was over the features of capitalism that had to be retained and abandoned in the move to socialism. From Marx’s standpoint, Saint-Simon’s vision retained too much of the emerging capitalism of his day—and so remained too indebted to past social formations—to be a reliable guide to the future. In this context, it was telling that Saint-Simon’s fondness for hierarchy was matched by a fondness for Christianity, especially as this combination was continued by his student, Auguste Comte. Indeed, this struggle between Marxists and those who after Comte came to be known as “positivists” over how to transcend capitalism has arguably anchored the left’s soul-searching about what it means to be “progressive” since the mid-nineteenth century.

For his part, Polanyi realized in a way that Thompson never did that his own vision of “socialist humanism” was distinctly pre-capitalist in orientation, referring to a world in which the differences between Saint-Simon and Marx never would have mattered. In this pre-capitalist utopia, the state would never have consolidated society on so many levels, especially by integrating individuals by means of functional differentiation, instead of allowing for their own relatively sponta-

neous modes of self-organization. Such a resolutely anti-statist stance helps to explain why Polanyi refrained from intervening in contemporary political debates, contenting himself with searching for cross-cultural precedents for economies with a strong mutualist and redistributionist ethic. In contrast, the less self-aware Thompson found himself rather quixotically at odds with both the Marxists and the positivists of his day—the latter represented by Anthony Crosland, the intellectual leader of the Gaitskellite wing of the UK Labour Party whose technocratic-cum-meritocratic vision of the welfare state fuelled by a “mixed economy” dominated post-war mainstream British political discourse. I shall conclude by saying more about this less talked about side of Thompson’s ideological polemics.

One reason to believe that Thompson is of little use to the modern left is that he was not so clearly a “progressive” thinker in the sense that both Saint-Simon and Marx were. Close attention to Thompson’s public writing and speaking reveals someone who, like C. Wright Mills (with whom he corresponded and whose obituary he wrote) and Noam Chomsky, saw big government and big business in cahoots to thwart the freedom of the individual. In a remarkable unscripted talk for the UK Channel 4 late-night television programme *Opinions*, Thompson proposed that these superordinate entities have conspired to turn intellectuals into media mouthpieces, marginalizing anyone who would ask fundamental questions about the course of domestic or foreign policy (the talk was given in 1982, the year of the Falklands War). By way of contrast, Thompson pointed to the pamphleteers, poets, and dissenters who, in his telling, occupied centre stage in eighteenth century public life. As for what can be done today, Thompson concluded that there needs to be a platform for citizens worldwide to voice conscientious objection to the policies pursued by their respective nation-states. On first hearing, this sounds like a role for the United Nations, were it not that the UN accepts the legitimacy of nation-states in a way that Thompson obviously did not.⁷

As this episode illustrates, Thompson identified public intellectual life with the politics of protest, through which he then forged a link between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. And while protest has certainly been a component of progressive politics, there is nothing inherently progressive about protesting. Protest in the first instance is simply an expression of resistance to the status quo or dominant tendency, it is confrontational but falls short of being progressive. Progress also requires a direction of travel away from the source of confrontation that effectively overcomes it, so that one does not need to encounter it again—or at least not in the same virulent guise. This was what Marx learned from Hegel’s *Aufheben*, the synthetic moment of the dialectic. More generally, we might say that progress had to be invented or learned in human history,

given that most world cultures account for temporal change in cyclical terms. In other words, the foe against whom we protest never truly disappears. However, progressives believe that the foe can be defeated once and for all. This explains the campaigns to “eliminate” or “eradicate” disease, famine, poverty, illiteracy, etc. that have been done in the name of progressives on both the positivist and the Marxist side of the left for the past 150 years. It also explains the enormous disappointment and, increasingly, cynicism and backlash when these efforts fail to meet their targets.

It is against this backdrop that we should consider Christos Efstathiou’s sympathetic attempt—published by a small London press that provided a base for Thompson himself and other “new left” luminaries—to explain Thompson’s curious political trajectory. Efstathiou boils it down to Thompson’s support for the “Popular Front,” the name used for a coalition of working and middle class people who opposed Fascism in various European countries in the 1930s. However, the coalition was not “progressive” in the sense of offering a collective project that would be made possible once Fascism was vanquished. Indeed, as might be expected of a cross-class alliance, it did not really possess a positive ideology. It was a case of “my enemy’s enemy is my friend,” but without taking advantage of the opportunity to forge a deeper unity of purpose. To be sure, much of this lack of progressive telos can be explained by the Popular Front’s belief that Fascism was an ever-present threat, no matter the resistance. But in the case of Thompson, there is also a more fundamental belief, a social ontology that he shared with his eighteenth-century heroes which is not so different from Polanyi’s: namely, that when people are freed from repressive regimes they can self-organize to promote their collective interests. They do not need to be led in a particular direction by those who know better. They simply need to be allowed to know for themselves and then act accordingly.

However, modern ideological politics, both of the “left” and the “right,” are about setting a direction of collective travel in time.⁸ In this respect, it is a bit surprising that given his reputation as a historian who attended to the contextual details of his subjects, Thompson never seemed to take seriously that the modern left/right ideological polarity is a product of the aftermath of the French Revolution, the period immediately *following* the one to which he devoted most of his research. The left/right polarity formed over the extent to which past (political, economic, cultural, etc.) practice should be carried over into the future. As we saw with Saint Simon and Marx, the left wanted to replace large chunks of past practice with more “progressive” alternatives. It is not at all clear that the eighteenth-century protesters on which Thompson modelled his own practice were temporally oriented in quite this way. Thompson’s awkwardness with regard to

the “progressive” character of leftist politics has been inherited by his second generation “new left” followers who now largely populate the academy in programmes that promote “cultural studies” and “identity politics.”

Here it is instructive to recall how Thompson ends his masterwork, *The Making of the English Working Class*, in a chapter entitled “Class Consciousness.” Had it been written by a “progressive” Marxist, it would have been focused on how working class people organized to overcome class difference. Thompson, however, focuses on how working class people forced their “betters” to acknowledge their existence without necessarily reducing any of the inequalities between them. As Thompson argues, it was more about the politics of recognition than the politics of equality which were being promoted across the Channel in France. This perspective is confirmed by Thompson’s interesting but relatively neglected *Whigs and Hunters* (1975), which uses the Black Act of 1723 as an entry point to discuss the emergence of the “rule of law” in Britain. It focuses on legislation which for the following century made poaching a capital crime. While the long struggle for the Black Act’s repeal did not remove the underlying economic differences between the landowners and the poachers, it marked a newfound respect for human life. This was reflected in the mutual accountability of the owners and the poachers under the eyes of the law, such that the former came to be restricted in how they could mete out justice to the latter. The overall picture that emerges is one in which basic inequality at the material level in never really redressed. Instead there is a stabilization of the social order through the legitimization of different ways of being in the world. Thus, the lives of workers slowly come to be seen to possess a kind of intrinsic dignity that went beyond whatever services the workers provided for their masters and employers.

The birth pangs of cultural studies and identity politics are easy to spot in the type of narrative trajectory illustrated in *Whigs and Hunters*, including Thompson’s allergic reaction to historical materialism in its more economic forms. However, from a “progressive” standpoint, Thompson’s narrative looks relatively nostalgic, unambitious, and perhaps even conservative in orientation. After all, neither Saint-Simon nor Marx thought that the main problem with the workers was their poverty or their lack of recognition. Rather, it was the lack of organization which is required to bring about effective change in an entire society. Yet, as Cal Winslow makes clear in the introduction to Thompson’s occasional pieces, Thompson was loath to turn such a critical eye on the working class. Winslow traces this attitude to a 1950 paper, “Against University Standards,” in which Thompson objected to the invocation of John Henry Newman in the mission statement of the adult education programme in which he taught. He specifically complained about Newman’s emphasis on education’s role in inculcating an

attitude of tolerance, which Thompson read as an invitation for students to park their lived experience outside the classroom. On the contrary, Thompson insisted, education should amplify students' powers of self-expression, not to mitigate or otherwise "reform" them. This especially applied to the education of workers, who already faced so many challenges to their self-worth by the meritocratic culture of post-war Britain.⁹

This is a convenient point to turn to what is perhaps the strongest indication of the anti-progressive character of Thompson's socialist humanism—namely, his regularly voiced contempt for the "socialist revisionism" of the UK Labour Party, or "Gaitskellism," as Thompson sometimes called it, after Hugh Gaitskell, Chancellor of the Exchequer in the early years of the welfare state and Labour Party leader until his untimely death in 1963.¹⁰ However, Thompson's most explicit target was one of Gaitskell's protégés, Anthony Crosland, arguably the Labour Party's leading post-war intellectual, who died in 1977 as Foreign Secretary under James Callaghan, the last Labour prime minister until Tony Blair.¹¹ To understand why Thompson often expressed greater antipathy to the revisionists than to the Stalinists, we need to keep in mind that just like his contemporary Tony Benn and Benn's acolyte, current Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, Thompson believed that throughout its history the party had too easily sold out its "socialist" principles for short-term electoral advantage. In contrast, they all believed that the Soviet Union—even at its most repressive domestically and menacing internationally—was simply responding to the ratcheting up of Cold War rhetoric by the United States.¹²

However, Thompson, Benn and Corbyn may be guilty of projecting a nostalgic view of the Labour Party as having been a grassroots people's movement, which it never was. On the contrary, with the exception of Michael Foot's ill-fated party leadership in early 1980s and Corbyn's more successful leadership today, the Labour Party has always been in the hands of people who were clearly following in the footsteps of the party's founders in the Fabian movement, an offshoot of the Liberal Party that was dedicated to unleashing society's productive forces by long-term systematic reform of the mechanisms of government—and the dispositions of the governed. What leftists often derided in Blair's so-called "New Labour" years as "aspirationalism" had been always central to the Labour Party's ideological mission.¹³

Nevertheless, these leftists can claim Thompson as a progenitor, who nearly four decades earlier had targeted Crosland as promoting a "myth of prosperity," "Americanisation," and "philistinism."¹⁴ What Thompson found most galling in Crosland's revisionism was the very drive for "upward social mobility," which would have members of the working class abandon their roots and strive

to become part of the middle class. In Crosland's revised socialism, people are never good enough as they are, and so they need the state to create the conditions for bettering themselves. This invariably results in people producing and consuming more. The task of government is to enable all this to happen as efficiently as possible, which entails human capital investments to smarten up the population as well as strategic decisions about which welfare functions are best done directly by the state, as opposed to state-regulated markets.

Curiously, for someone who believed in the native wit of the working class and was generally averse to top-down social explanations, Thompson was firmly convinced that Crosland-style state-based engineering of human aspirations instilled a false consciousness in the general public. The lure of a consumer society effectively inhibited them from questioning as loudly as they should the need for ever greater productivity. For his part, Crosland would probably find Thompson's attitude rather patronizing of the public, who once presented with options for "better living," might well decide to relinquish their old class and cultural affiliations and adopt new ones. In the end, we see here a fundamental conflict that the left has faced vis-à-vis its attitude towards freedom. Thompson ultimately believed that people should have the freedom to be who they are, a rather classical conception of freedom, which harks to the days of natural law and natural rights. In contrast, the more modern Crosland held that people should have the freedom to be who they want to be, which may be something other than who they are, which in turn alludes to a world of contract and exchange. Thompson's difficulties in fully reconciling himself to various doctrines of progressive politics, including Marxism, stems from the pre-modern political sensibility that he retained from his eighteenth-century heroes. These difficulties, though not as explicitly expressed as in Thompson's work, have been largely inherited by the vexed leftism of contemporary cultural studies and identity politics. It perhaps also explains why the two books under review, while clearly sympathetic to Thompson, treat him as a closed chapter in the history of leftist thought.

NOTES

¹ This piece is dedicated to my Warwick colleague Charles Turner, who introduced me to Thompson's *Whigs and Hunters*, at which point the penny dropped.

² Among the latest is Nick Stevenson, "E.P. Thompson and Cultural Sociology: Questions of Poetics, Capitalism and the Commons," *Cultural Sociology* 11 (2017): 11–27.

³ E.g. Tim Rogan, *The Moral Economists: R.H. Tawney, Karl Polanyi, E.P. Thompson and the Critique of Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018). Although there is no clear evidence that Polanyi influenced Thompson, many of Thompson's more incisive observations about classical political economy have a Polanyesque feel. For example, Thompson notes that Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus naturalized agricultural shortfalls, as if resources could not be redistributed to mitigate their effects on the poor, as in "primitive communist" societies. For good measure, he draws on Amartya Sen's thesis that famines result when rent-seeking elites take the same cut of the product during a moderate shortfall in production, resulting in an exceptional shortfall. See E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London: Merlin Press, 1991), 284–7.

⁴ In both cases, it is a "long eighteenth century," since both Polanyi and Thompson's main works roam into the first third of the nineteenth century. In Thompson's case, this means that he sees the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution, not as the start of the modern ideological struggle over the role of an increasingly powerful state but as a continuation of the popular movements of the previous century, which culminated in the passage of the Great Reform Bill of 1832, whereby for the first time Parliamentary constituencies were allotted by population size.

⁵ This is a major thesis of Friedrich Hayek, *The Counter-Revolution of Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1952).

⁶ Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Palo Alto: Cheshire Books, 1982).

⁷ E.P. Thompson, "Opinion 1982," YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DGhWxFj3SZo>.

⁸ Steve Fuller and Veronika Lipinska, *The Proactionary Imperative* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), chap. 1.

⁹ E.P. Thompson, Cal Winslow, eds., *E.P. Thompson and the Making of the New Left* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2014), 18–19.

¹⁰ Thompson's visceral dislike of Gaitskellism may relate to Gaitskell's undergraduate thesis at Oxford, written under the supervision of G.D.H. Cole, which made

the very un-Thompson-like argument that the UK Chartist movement—which eventually secured voting rights for working class men in the Great Reform Bill of 1867—required middle class leadership for its success.

¹¹ Crosland's revisionist magnum opus is *The Future of Socialism* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1956).

¹² Thompson explicitly argues this point in a 1984 Oxford Union debate against Reagan's Defence Secretary Caspar Weinberger. The motion on the table was that the US and USSR are moral equivalents, which Thompson affirmed. See Harbor-Side Films, "Great Confrontations at the Oxford Union: Caspar Weinberger vs. E.P. Thompson," YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMdTJJa3kVo>.

¹³ Chris Renwick, *Bread for All: The Origins of the Welfare State* (London: Allen Lane, 2017).

¹⁴ *E.P. Thompson and the Making of the New Left*, 28–29, 85–87.