

‘HISTORY AND HOPE’:

E.P. THOMPSON AND THE MAKING OF THE ENGLISH WORKING CLASS

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E.P. THOMPSON AND THE MAKING OF THE ENGLISH WORKING CLASS**

**By**

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## ABSTRACT

The Making of the English Working Class is widely regarded as a seminal contribution to the development of post-war English historiography. Whether historians agree with Thompson's views or not, they cannot study the period 1780-1832 without paying some attention to the arguments expressed in that text. The Making also claimed the attention of socialists and sociologists since it dealt explicitly with the concept of social class. Indeed, Thompson's arguments on this question challenged, as he intended, many of the ideas then current on class and the attendant notion of revolution. Although I refer briefly to the literature dealing with the impact of The Making in the introduction, this dissertation has little to say on that subject. Instead, it inquires into the concerns that prompted the publication of the text.

There has been no adequate study of the relationship between The Making and the political and intellectual context in which Thompson wrote. This is a serious omission, because the status of the text cannot be established without understanding Thompson's intentions. This dissertation hopes to go some way to filling in the gaps in the literature on Thompson's work by considering this aspect of it.

A central proposition in The Making is Thompson's defence of the claim that men have the capacity to act as agents in the making of their own history. This notion, he argued, was denied by the ideologies which gave the Cold War its specificity. Marxists, in the Leninist tradition, reduced human thought to terms defined by abstract economic laws over which men had no control. Bourgeois thought similarly constrained human motives, but within a framework defined by an acquisitive and competitive conception of man's nature. In both cases human nature was assumed to be fixed and the character of this could be seen to be reflected in the existing organization of social relationships.

According to Thompson, bourgeois and Marxist alike had reified a particular present and derived an eternal human nature from these abstractions. Thompson rejected this ideological conception of human nature and, following the early Marx, argued that men define their own nature through their actions. Thompson also traced this theme to the emphasis which the English Romantic critique of industrial capitalism placed on creative labour. The definition of creative labour, especially in the work of William Blake and William Morris, can be shown to have played an important role in shaping Thompson's own understanding of socialism.

Thompson, in fact, drew heavily from Romanticism and integrated themes from this tradition with his own experiences in the labour movement to articulate an original conception of socialist activity. The connection between his study of William Morris - one of his earliest and most important statements on Romanticism - and his later political and historical work, up to and including The Making, has all too often been ignored. This study focuses on this relationship in the belief that it will help one to understand some of the reasons lying behind publication of The Making.

The first two chapters deal with Thompson's interpretation of the importance of English Romanticism for contemporary socialist practice. They are followed by a fairly detailed discussion, in chapters 3 and 4, of Thompson's critique of the Marxist orthodoxy that was dominant in the 1950s. Chapter 5 considers Thompson's explanation both of the sources of political apathy in post-war Britain and the factors which he believed portended socialist alternatives to the present. Chapters 6 and 7 pursue a theme introduced in chapter 2: the political significance of Thompson's history. I conclude with a general discussion of the significance which Thompson attributed to the role of creative literature, and especially to poetry, to the task of creating a socialist consciousness.

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The one person who should have read this dissertation, because it owes the most to her, was my godmother and aunt, Trudy McGarry: it is to her memory that this study is affectionately dedicated.



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## Introduction

Edward Palmer Thompson is a poet, revolutionary socialist, historian; literary, social and philosophical critic, and novelist.<sup>1</sup> He does not pursue these interests as separate activities. Rather, they are unified by a concern to articulate alternative values to those informing existing social relationships. The values which Thompson has defended, and used as a yardstick by which to evaluate contemporary institutions and practices, are those of mutuality and cooperation, the capacity for men to make meaningful and purposive choices; an ability to exercise conscious control over their world. His work evinces a profound respect for human potential; a potential which he has repeatedly shown to be denied and frustrated in capitalist and Eastern European societies. He has located these values in history, in creative literature and in his own experiences as a practising socialist, writer and teacher.

Thompson's oeuvre has long challenged the 'common sense' of capitalist and Marxist societies. Both types of societies, he has argued, place unacceptable restrictions on human activity. They typically derive legitimation from ideological sanctions. This dissertation follows Thompson's understanding of the term ideology as

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<sup>1</sup>This study is not a biography. There are good biographical sketches in the following: Henry Abelove, review of The Poverty of Theory, by E.P. Thompson, In History and Theory 21, 1982, 134-35; Harvey J. Kaye, The British Marxist Historians: An Introductory Analysis (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), 169-71; Bryan D. Palmer, The Making of E.P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism and History (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1981), 31-43; Ellen Kay Trimberger, "E.P. Thompson: Understanding the Process of History," in Theda Skocpol, ed., Vision and Method in Historical Sociology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 212-18. I have omitted a biographical discussion because I do not feel that I can add any significant facts to the existing literature. But one can note that many of Thompson's published articles contain a number of veiled autobiographical references. This material is productive of certain 'original' interpretations. Rather than cite these individually, I have referred to them at the appropriate points in the text that follows.

...a form of false consciousness, deriving from a partial, partisan, view of reality; and at a certain stage, establishing a system of false or partially false concepts with a mode of thought which - in the Marxist sense - is idealist. (emphasis in the original)<sup>2</sup>

More strongly, an ideology can be characterized as a set of beliefs which derive from and are designed to sanction certain material interests rather than others. Human nature and all valuations of human worth are expressed in terms of these beliefs. An ideology is particularly efficacious when this 'partial view of reality' is assimilated as the common-sense of the day, serving to define man's place in the world, and in relation to others, in terms which benefit some rather than others. For Thompson, an ideology perceives the world in abstract terms because it refuses to take seriously the opinions of those who experience reality differently. These abstractions are used to guide action rather than the ideas being tested against empirical reality.<sup>3</sup>

Thompson has defended a view of man's nature which cannot be contained within abstract formulations. Men, Thompson has argued, make their own nature.<sup>4</sup> Where bourgeois and Stalinist alike claimed that human nature was fixed, Thompson insisted that human nature could not be constrained within immutable categories of thought which took no account of changes in the world.<sup>5</sup> As long as people think in these terms, it will be possible neither to conceive of alternatives

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<sup>2</sup>E.P. Thompson, "Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines," New Reasoner, no.1, Summer 1957, 107.

<sup>3</sup>Note the comments on ideology in E.P. Thompson, "An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski," in E.P. Thompson, The Poverty of Theory and other Essays (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), 375-78.

<sup>4</sup>I use the words 'man' or 'men' throughout this dissertation for convenience. I intend no gender discrimination by their use.

<sup>5</sup>Thompson's classic statement of this can be found in his long polemic against Althusser (and, to a lesser extent, Karl Popper): E.P. Thompson, "The Poverty of Theory or an Orrery of Errors," in E.P. Thompson, The Poverty of Theory, 1-210. Although this dissertation does not examine the substantive arguments in that text, many of the themes developed there are to be found in Thompson's earlier writings. This is hardly surprising since this essay sits between the covers of a text which includes two articles ("Outside the Whale," [1960], and "The Peculiarities of the English," [1965]) from the period that I am primarily concerned. And the polemic in "The Poverty of Theory"

to the present - alternatives which are, to a certain degree, immanent in the 'non-ideological' present<sup>6</sup> - nor to act to bring these alternatives to fruition. In arguing thus, Thompson was, in part, following the 'early' Marx:

What Marx proposed (and I am thinking of the theses on Feuerbach) was that all human conflicts are observable only within specific social contexts. And the bare forked creature, naked biological man, is not a context which we can ever observe, because the very notion of man (as opposed to his anthropoid ancestor) is coincident with culture; man only is insofar as he is able to organize some parts of his experience and transmit it in specifically human ways. Thus to propose the investigation of "man" apart from his culture (or his lived history) is to propose an unreal abstraction, the investigation of non-man.<sup>7</sup>

Elsewhere, Thompson wrote that

[h]uman nature cannot be abstracted from its context in particular men; "the abstract individual...belongs in reality to a particular form of society." Only within this context can human nature be changed - men may only make their own nature through action in changing circumstances.<sup>8</sup>

Thompson has also drawn deeply from the English Romantic critique of industrial capitalism. The influence of English Romanticism on the development of Thompson's thought is

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was, perhaps, directed less at Althusser *per se* (as too many of Thompson's critics imagined; and imagined despite Thompson's own comments - "The Poverty of Theory," 3), then at a mode of thought that Thompson believed Althusser's ideas were symptomatic. That is to say, Thompson found in Althusser lineaments of that idealism which he felt characterized the Cold War ideologies in the 1950s and 1960s, and which, in part, he diagnosed in his essays "Outside the Whale," and "The Peculiarities of the English." Indeed, I would argue that "The Poverty of Theory" can only be understood in the light of Thompson's early work; and I would argue this point against the only sustained critique of *The Poverty of Theory*, because it completely ignored these writings: Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism* (London: NLB/Verso, 1980).

<sup>6</sup>That is to say, the present as viewed from the perspective of non-dominant material interests; or, in plain English, working people.

<sup>7</sup>Thompson, "An Open Letter," 369.

<sup>8</sup>E.P. Thompson, "Outside the Whale," in E.P. Thompson, ed., *Out of Apathy* (London: New Left Books, 1960), 183.



perhaps the least commented upon aspect of his work.<sup>9</sup> This dissertation argues that it is a tradition

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<sup>9</sup>Anderson, Arguments within English Marxism, 157-75, considers certain aspects of Thompson's work on Romanticism. Anderson, however, seemed to be more concerned with refuting Thompson's central claim in his biography of Morris: E.P. Thompson, William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary (London: Merlin, 1955; second revised edition, with a postscript: New York: Pantheon Books, 1976). According to Thompson, Morris derived an understanding of the underlying dynamics of capitalist society from his training within Romanticism. This understanding complemented ideas that were being derived within the Marxist tradition. However, Morris' work must be considered independently of the latter and evaluated on its own terms. Chapter 2 explores Thompson's (changing) interpretation of Morris' work and the relevance he attributed to it for contemporary political argument and practice. The point I want to make here is that Anderson found Thompson's arguments unacceptable; Morris' contribution was seen to be inferior to Historical Materialism. Anderson, however, limited his discussion to certain points in Thompson's 'postscript' to the second edition. He made no attempt to assess Thompson's interpretation of Morris either in relation to Thompson's understanding of Romanticism in general, nor of how this understanding has shaped Thompson's historical and political work.

Henry Abelove, review of The Poverty of Theory, by E.P. Thompson, In History and Theory, 21, 1982, 132-42, also discussed certain aspects of Thompson's views on Romanticism, and did so in such a way as to attempt to relate these views to the broader corpus of Thompson's work. Abelove noted that Thompson originally wanted to be a poet (Thompson is actually a poet) and that the word poet, in old English, meant 'maker' (a point noted by Thompson himself in William Morris [1955], 781). Abelove argued that these facts help one better appreciate The Making:

"When Thompson titles his major book The Making of the English Working Class, he draws attention to that paralleling of art and popular struggle which is in effect the plot of all his work as a historian. For the word "making" is ambiguous. Maker is the Old English term for poet, and making means poetry writing as well as building and achieving. The Making of the English Working Class names what Thompson has done as a writer and what the English working people have in struggle achieved for themselves. In that title the parallels converge." (139)

I agree with part of this, but would ask of the premises which inform these 'parallels'. Thompson focused on working class struggles to emphasize the distinctive character of the value system giving meaning to their actions. Poetry, for Thompson, as I argue in the conclusion to this dissertation, holds out the possibility of articulating alternative values to those currently dominant in society. In conjunction with the material experience of working people, poetry can, Thompson believed, play a key role in structuring a socialist consciousness. In Thompson's work, these two elements (Poetry/intellectual practice and material experience) cohere around his understanding of the materialist conception of history - see the discussion in chapter 1, section I.

I would not agree with another of Abelove's suggestions as to the importance of poetry in Thompson's work:

"...he means to try to dignify the struggle of working people by continuously, if implicitly, comparing it and juxtaposing it to art, which is something he can rely on readers to value already." (138)

which bears crucially upon his understanding of socialism. The character of Romanticism's influence can be seen in the parallels between the emphasis which it placed upon creative labour and the importance Thompson attached to the notion of human agency; or the idea that men have the capacity to make themselves, and their own nature, in acting upon their circumstances. This relationship is discussed in chapter 1.

Thompson's most articulate and impassioned defence of his claim that men have the capacity to be agents in the making of their own history is to be found in the text that secured his reputation, The Making of the English Working Class.<sup>10</sup> This text, however, has typically been assessed without due consideration to the political and intellectual context in which it was written.<sup>11</sup> The Making has generally been examined from the perspective of its contribution to the development of social history,<sup>12</sup> historical sociology,<sup>13</sup> or to the Marxist understanding of the term

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But what Thompson intended by the significance of Romanticism was not that which many of his readers might have intended. I discuss this point in chapter 1, section II.

<sup>10</sup>E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963; reprinted with a postscript, London: Pelican Books, 1968; reprinted with a new preface, London: Pelican Books, 1980), (unless otherwise stated, subsequent references are to the 1968 edition). The Making was not, however, Thompson's first (or, in certain respects, his most important) book. But William Morris (1955) was more or less universally ignored, both academically and politically. Some of the reasons for this are suggested in the introductory discussion to chapter 2. Moreover, the second edition, while favourably reviewed, has still received no extended treatment.

<sup>11</sup>Palmer, The Making of E.P.Thompson is, to a certain extent, a notable exception.

<sup>12</sup>Although the following do not deal exclusively with The Making they do help one understand part of the historiographical context that the text appeared in; some of the traditions it drew upon and some of those it sought to contend: Paul Corner, "Marxism and the British Historiographical Tradition," in Z.G. Baranski and J.R. Shortt, eds., Developing Contemporary Marxism (London: Macmillan, 1985), 89-111; Alan Dawley, "E.P. Thompson and the Peculiarities of the Americans," Radical History Review, no.19 Winter 1978-79, 33-59; Geoff Eley, "Rethinking the Political: Social History and Political Culture in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Britain," Archiv fur Sozial Geschichte, 21, 1981, 427-57; Richard Johnson, "Culture and the Historians," in J. Clarke, C. Critcher, and R. Johnson, eds., Working Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory (New York: St Martin's Press, 1979), 41-71; Gareth Stedman Jones, "History: The Poverty of Empiricism," in Robin Blackburn, ed., Ideology in Social Science: Readings in Critical Social Theory (London: Fontanna, 1972), 96-115; Gareth Stedman Jones, "From Historical Sociology to Theoretical History," in R.S. Neale, eds., History and Class: Essential Readings in Theory and Interpretation (Oxford:

social class.<sup>14</sup> It has been variously praised for enhancing our understanding of the past and criticized for masquerading ideology in the guise of history.<sup>15</sup> Some commentators have referred to the way in which Thompson's political commitments are reflected in The Making but they have not examined the nature of the relationship.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, certain observers have attempted to make a distinction between Thompson the 'naïve' political activist and Thompson the 'inspired' historian:

...there is an astonishing contrast in Thompson as a socialist intellectual, between the brilliance and richness of his imagination as a historian and the poverty and abstraction of his intelligence as a political analyst. The divorce between his intimacy and concord with the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and his distance and lack of touch with the second half

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Basil Blackwell, 1983), 74-85; Christopher Kent, "Presence and Absence: History, Theory and the Working Class," Victorian Studies, 29, 3, (Spring 1986), 437-62; Raphael Samuel, "The British Marxist Historians, part 1," New Left Review, no.120 March-April 1980, 23-96; Bill Schwarz, " 'The People' in History: The Communist Party Historians' Group, 1946-56," in Richard Johnson, et al., eds., Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 44-95; Bernard Semmel, "Two Views of Social History: E.P. Thompson and Gertrude Himmelfarb," Partisan Review, 52(2), 1985, 133-43.

<sup>13</sup>Suzanne Desan, "Crowds, Community and Ritual in the Work of E.P. Thompson and Natalie Davis," in Lynn Hunt, ed., The New Cultural History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 47-71; Ellen Kay Trimberger, "E.P. Thompson: Understanding the Process of History," in Theda Skocpol, ed., Vision and Method in Historical Sociology, 211-43.

<sup>14</sup>Anderson, Arguments Within English Marxism, passim; Anthony Giddens, "Out of the Orrery: E.P. Thompson on Consciousness and History," in Anthony Giddens, Social Theory and Modern Sociology (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 205-24; Bob Holton, "History and Sociology in the Work of E.P. Thompson," Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology, 17(1), (March 1981), 46-54; Gregor McLennan, "E.P. Thompson and the Discipline of Historical Context," in Richard Johnson, et.al., eds., Making Histories, 96-130; R.J. Morris, Class and Class Consciousness in the Industrial Revolution (London: Macmillan, 1979); Alan Warde, "E.P. Thompson and 'Poor' Theory," British Journal of Sociology, 33(2), June 1982, 224-37; Hayden White, Tropics of Discourse (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 15-19; Ellen Meiksins Wood, "The Politics of Theory and the Concept of Class," Studies in Political Economy, 9, (Fall 1982), 45-75.

<sup>15</sup>Both the enthusiasms and the objections to The Making are covered in F.K. Donnelly, "Ideology and Early English Working-Class History: Edward Thompson and His Critics," Social History, 3, 1976, 219-38. Thompson himself addressed a number of criticisms to the first edition in the postscript to the 1968 edition.

<sup>16</sup>Palmer, The Making of E.P. Thompson, passim.

of the 20th century, is baffling. It is a divorce that is evidently anchored deep in the sensibility...<sup>17</sup>

This view revealed a profound misunderstanding of the relationship between Thompson's political and historical work. If Thompson the political analyst was naive, then Thompson the historian should also be seen as naive. Thompson's interpretation of the historical possibilities inhering in the present was, this dissertation maintains, analogous in form to his interpretation of the process of class formation in the early nineteenth century. Thompson the historian and Thompson the political analyst are not two Thompsons. They are both embodied in the same man. What can be said of Anderson's argument is that it tended to abstract The Making from its generative context and thereby minimized its political relevance. And this appears to have been Anderson's intention.<sup>18</sup>

This dissertation hypothesizes that The Making was a deliberate political intervention in a context that Thompson believed contained the potential for effecting a revolutionary

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<sup>17</sup>Perry Anderson, "Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism," New Left Review, no.35 January-February 1966, 33-34. Anderson then proceeded to catalogue evidence of Thompson's alleged simplistic political understanding. Although Anderson's indictment elicited no reply, Thompson did eventually publicly reject this aspect of Anderson's argument, as well as other arguments that were marshalled in this article as a rejoinder to "Peculiarities" (which was itself a sustained critique of an earlier piece by Anderson: Perry Anderson, "Origins of the Present Crisis," New Left Review, no.23 January-February 1964, 26-53.). Thompson's opinion of "Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism," was expressed in The Poverty of Theory, 403-4. To a certain extent, moreover, one might make a convincing case out to show that not only did "The Poverty of Theory," represent Thompson's reply to Anderson, but his historical essays in the years after 1965 were, in part, concerned to refute Anderson's interpretation of the past three centuries of British history that were outlined in "Origins".

<sup>18</sup>This dissertation does not discuss the debate between Thompson on the one side and Anderson and Tom Nairn on the other in the mid 1960s. Many of the issues involved in that debate, issues which re-surfaced in the debate surrounding The Poverty of Theory, are discussed in the following: Ian Birchall, "The Autonomy of Theory: A Short History of 'New Left Review'," International Socialism, 2(10), 1982, 51-91; B.A. Bryant, "The New Left in Britain, 1956-1968: The Dialectic of Rationality and Participation," (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1981); Keith Nield and John Seed, "Theoretical Poverty or the Poverty of Theory" Economy and Society, 8(4), 1979; Donald Sassoon, "The Silences of 'New Left Review'," Politics and Power, 3, 1980, 221-54; Tom Wengraff, "An Essay on the Early 'New Left Review'," (M.A. diss., University of Birmingham, 1979).

transformation of British society. The arguments developed here are inferential. I have relied exclusively on published material as well as some general observations drawn from two short conversations with Thompson. I was not granted permission to view correspondence which might have supported some of my conclusions. Nevertheless, a reading of The Making in conjunction with a number of adjacent texts does tend to support this hypothesis. The following paragraphs outline the main arguments of this study.<sup>19</sup> I begin with a general discussion of Thompson's understanding of the term social class. This concept is central to Thompson's historical and political work and one cannot appreciate the revolutionary characteristics of his socialism unless it is considered.

# I

Thompson characterized class as a relationship between people possessing similar material interests, who learn to perceive these interests as standing in an antagonistic relationship to those possessing different interests:

...class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born - or enter - involuntarily. Class consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas and institutional forms. If the experience appears as determined, class consciousness does not. We can see a logic in the responses of similar occupational groups undergoing similar experiences, but we cannot predict any law. Consciousness of class arises in the same

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<sup>19</sup>I prefer to adopt this approach rather than summarizing the various literature surrounding Thompson's work. This is for two reasons. First, there has been no adequate study on the themes - especially Thompson's insistence upon the historical and contemporary relevance of Romanticism and Utopianism - that this dissertation discusses. I find it difficult to talk about nothing. Second, I think it is more sensible to indicate the points at which I agree or dissent with certain arguments at the appropriate points in the text, and I will do so by use of footnotes.

way in different times and places, but never in just the same way.  
(emphasis in the original)<sup>20</sup>

Thompson defined his understanding of class in opposition to the ideologies which were dominant at the time of writing:

...the book [was] structured by a double-sided critique: on the one hand of the positivist orthodoxies then dominant in the more conservative academic schools of history...on the other hand, of a certain 'Marxist' orthodoxy (then waning in influence in this country) which supposed that the working class was the more-or-less spontaneous generation of new productive forces and relations.<sup>21</sup>

For Thompson, the problem with both persuasions was their refusal to consider anything other than objective determinations in the formation of class. The first defined class in terms of a multiplicity of occupational categories: there were classes rather than class. The second saw class as a structure which was given mechanically by the mode of production. In both cases, no consideration was given to the role of subjective factors in the process of class formation: how did people actually experience their material or objective conditions and in what ways did this experience shape their actions. Indeed, neither considered class as a process at all; rather, classes were just assumed to exist. Thompson's conception of class as a relationship between different interests demands an historical approach to the problem. Human relationships are not static, but are in a state of constant flux. As people respond to changes, they re-evaluate the character of the interests which the relationship(s) they find themselves in express:

I do not see class as a 'structure', nor even as a 'category', but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships ...the notion of class entails the notion of historical relationship. Like any other relationship, it is a fluency which evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and attempt to anatomize its structure. The finest meshed sociological net cannot give us a pure specimen of class, any more than it can give us one

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<sup>20</sup>Thompson, The Making, 9-10.

<sup>21</sup>Thompson, The Making (1980), 14.

of deference or love. The relationship must always be embodied in real people and in a real context. Moreover, we cannot have two distinct classes, each with an independent being, and then bring them into a relationship with each other. We cannot have love without lovers, nor deference without squires and labourers. (my emphasis)<sup>22</sup>

People experience class in the same way that they experience any other human relationship. One cannot predict in advance the outcome of these relationships; the outcome is something which will only reveal itself in time. Class cannot, therefore, be defined in terms of static categories; it is a phenomenon which must be apprehended historically:

Sociologists who have stopped the time-machine, and with a good deal of conceptual huffing and puffing, have gone down to the engine-room to look, tell us that nowhere at all have they been able to locate and classify a class. They can only find a multitude of people with different occupations, incomes, status-hierarchies, and the rest. Of course they are right, since class is not this or that part of the machine, but the way the machine works once it is set in motion - not this interest and that interest, but the friction of interests - the movement itself, the heat, the thundering noise. Class is a social and cultural formation (often finding institutional expression) which cannot be defined abstractly, or in isolation, but only in terms of the relationship with other classes; and, ultimately, the definition can only be made in the medium of time - that is action and reaction, change and conflict. When we speak of a class we are thinking of a very loosely defined body of people who share the same categories of interests, social experiences, traditions and value-system, who have a disposition to behave as a class, to define themselves in their actions and in their consciousness in relation to other groups of people in class ways. But class itself is not a thing, it is a happening.(emphasis in the original)<sup>23</sup>

Thompson's insistence on class formation as a historical process<sup>24</sup> was inspired by political reasons. These stem partly from the fact that the text was written at a time when the mystifications of the Cold War were being challenged by the appearance of popular, utopian,

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<sup>22</sup>Thompson, The Making, 9.

<sup>23</sup>Thompson, "Peculiarities," 295.

<sup>24</sup>Historical in the sense that he understands the materialist conception of history. See Thompson's discussion of this concept in: Thompson, "Peculiarities," 289; Thompson, "An Open Letter," 354-57; Thompson, "The Poverty of Theory," passim.

initiatives.<sup>25</sup> In one way or another, the ideologues of the Cold War had fostered, in the post-war world, a profound sense of political quietism or apathy. Thompson equated apathy with a feeling of impotence in the face of impersonal bureaucratic structures (trade unions, political parties, the agencies of the welfare state and of unbridled capitalist and 'socialist' power), and rigid, abstract, politico-intellectual orthodoxies.<sup>26</sup> He explained the shift from apathy to activism in the following way:

...beneath the polarization of power and ideology in the Cold War, a new, rebellious human nature was being formed...These abstract ideologies contended for people's minds; but people, educated by circumstances, changed by a logic which challenged these abstractions...It was the cock-crow of the Hungarian rising which - by denying the horror of 1984 - lifted the spell of impotence. It was the threat of nuclear annihilation which made the quietists rebel. At Aldermaston the clouds began at last to release their store of compassion.<sup>27</sup>

In one sense, The Making can be seen as both a response to and a manifesto for these initiatives.<sup>28</sup> At a minimum, it illustrated an alternative understanding of class and revolution to that of their Cold War associations. This understanding, moreover, was one that he demonstrated to be rooted in indigenous revolutionary traditions. In an article written at a time when The Making was in mid-composition, Thompson argued that it was

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<sup>25</sup>I am referring to the emergence of the New Left and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. These phenomena are discussed briefly in section II below, and at greater length in chapters 5 and 6.

<sup>26</sup>E.P. Thompson, "The New Left," The New Reasoner, 9, (Summer 1959), 4-5.

<sup>27</sup>Thompson, "Outside the Whale," 187, 189.

<sup>28</sup>This, I appreciate, is a bold and somewhat speculative claim, but I will attempt to prove it during the course of this study. In this context, though, one should note that The Making was written at precisely the same time that Thompson was heavily engaged in building up the New Left and in CND: Thompson, The Making (1980), 14. The themes that saturate that text also resonate throughout his political writings at the time. This observation, moreover, appears sufficient in itself to refute Anderson's attempt to separate Thompson's historical and political work.



...foolish...to underestimate the long and tenacious revolutionary tradition of the British commoner.

It is a dogged, good-humoured, responsible, tradition: yet a revolutionary tradition all the same. From the Leveller corporals ridden down by Cromwell's men at Burford to the weavers massed behind their banners at Peterloo, the struggle for democratic and for social rights has always been intertwined. From the Chartist camp meeting to the dockers' picket line it has expressed itself most naturally in the language of moral revolt. Its weaknesses, its carelessness of theory, we know too well; its strengths, its resilience and steady humanity, we too easily forget. It is a tradition which could leaven the socialist world. (my emphasis)<sup>29</sup>

Class, as a structure, was typically associated with the Soviet Union's interpretation of Marxism. In fact, most people viewed Marxism and the Soviet union as inseparable. This was a view that was actively encouraged by the British Communist Party (BCP), and one which Thompson had, as I show in chapters 3 and 4, vigorously resisted in the years after 1956. This perception was also fostered by Western intellectuals who had been attracted to Marxism during the 1930s but who, for various reasons, had become disillusioned with their earlier commitments. Chapter 5 discusses Thompson's criticisms of this intellectual tendency.

When Marxists talked about class they emphasized (i) its formation in material being and (ii) the inevitability of violent and insurrectionary revolutionary change. In consequence, an association was established between class and a particular form of revolution. In Thompson's view, this conception of revolution was fallacious because it was based upon a false understanding of class and one which bourgeois thinkers could "[fault] without difficulty".<sup>30</sup> It was a conception, moreover, that entailed harmful consequences for the labour movement. If revolutionary social change was seen to be synonymous with the Soviet Union's history, then those insisting upon the necessity of revolutionizing social relationships were not likely to be taken seriously. Bourgeois ideologues could,

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<sup>29</sup>Thompson, "Revolution," In Thompson, ed., Out of Apathy, 308.

<sup>30</sup>Thompson, The Making, 10.

therefore, justify existing social relationships by way of such negative comparisons: the present was better than any imaginable future. But, if one cannot predict the form that class will take, one cannot assume that the type of revolution that can be expected in Britain will follow the Soviet model. The type of revolution that one might anticipate in contemporary Britain would depend upon the way in which people interpreted their class interests. This interpretation would necessarily draw upon indigenous political and cultural traditions: traditions which, in contrast to the Soviet Union, included a strong democratic impulse. Intellectual and moral argument were central characteristics of this tradition.<sup>31</sup> In Britain, it was quite possible to conceive of an 'open' and peaceful transition to socialism.

Nevertheless, the perceived relationship between class and a particular interpretation of Marxism was sufficient to disable serious thinking on the question of a revolutionary transformation of Britain. Thompson's critique of Marxism in the years after 1956 should be seen as an attempt to challenge existing views on the idea of revolution. The Making should be seen as playing a key role in this strategy.

The obstacles deriving from the contemporary perception of Marxism were reinforced by the positivist tendencies in bourgeois thought. One need hardly inquire into the way in which people thought about their material experiences if classes could be defined objectively as occupational categories. If, however, class was perceived as a relationship then one might want to know whether people thought that the relationships which they found themselves in were fair or

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<sup>31</sup>This is a theme that is ever-present in Thompson's work. It can be traced through his writings on Morris, his critique of the BCP in 1956-57 and of social democratic/Fabian interpretations of socialism in the late 1950s and 1960s. It is to be found in his indictment of the interpretation of British history offered by Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn in 1964-68; an interpretation which in many ways formed the intellectual moorings for New Left Review in the years after 1963. And it figures prominently in Thompson's criticisms of the government's attempts to erode civil liberties and subvert the jury system in the 1970s and 1980s. Two of Thompson's earliest statements on this question are: E.P. Thompson, The Fight for a Free Press (London: British Communist Party Pamphlet, 1952); E.P. Thompson, "Winter Wheat in Omsk," World News, vol.3, 1956, 408-9.

not: to what extent did they serve their interests? If existing relationships did not serve their interests then, as in any other relationship, there would be little point in remaining in them. Rather, it would make sense to establish relationships which did advance their interests.

Thompson was not, however, justifying the need for social change in economic or material terms alone. After all, this was the principal type of justification for the claims advanced by the BCP. Moreover, the social democratic wing of the labour movement, represented by the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) and the trade unions, resorted to an economistic conception of socialism to justify non-change.<sup>32</sup> The Fabian tradition had long envisioned socialism as a means to resolve grievances stemming from income differentials. As the general material well-being of society had risen the need to seek improvements was seen by representatives of this tradition to have declined proportionately.

For Thompson, by contrast, the idea of class as a human relationship directed attention not only to economic questions, but demanded one consider those of power and morality. The question was not whether material interests per se were satisfied, but whether or not social relationships served the needs and interests of actual people. The Marxist believed questions of power and morality to be irrelevant in the sense that they were given by the mode of production. A socialist society could not be created until the centres of economic and political power had been captured. All attempts which fell short of this goal were interpreted as bourgeois 'con-tricks'. The social democrat, by contrast, could find nothing fundamentally wrong with the existing order of society. This belief followed from his claim that the principal objective of the socialist lay in repairing economic inequalities. Since these inequalities had been addressed within the framework of capitalist society it was, to the social democrat, self-evident that any further reforms could be

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<sup>32</sup>See chapter 5, sections II and III.

similarly addressed. The realm of values and power were necessarily seen to be distinct since these considerations only make sense when one conceives of class as a relationship.

## II

In a sense, the ideologies that Thompson defined his position in opposition to either criticized or justified existing social arrangements, and defined their respective political strategies, in terms of some idealization of human nature. This was a conception that typically derived from and was designed to sanction the interests of certain intellectual and political elites. For Thompson, however, social relationships and institutions had to be assessed in terms of their impact upon actual people.

...the worth of a human being - his capacity for loyalty, his qualities as a lover or parent, his creativity, his behaviour in the presence of death - is coincident in no way with his placing within a particular set of intellectual criteria. And it is the scandalous assumption that it is so - the product in this country of "public-school" elitism, seconded by decades of educational selectivity, within a system which rewards, not only in money and status but also in "worth" those who pass the intellectual tests - that is a vitiating error not only of intellectual life very generally but also of some socialist and "Marxist" groups which...are inspecting the workers and peasants as "vehicles", and...propose themselves as the rationality which must direct an inert, pragmatic working-class movement and select for it its goals.<sup>33</sup>

Thompson, then, rejected the 'Marxist' conception of socialism because it denied experiences which did not square with theoretical arguments. Moreover, its claim that class consciousness was automatically given by the material context opened the way to a "party, sect, or theorist, who [would] disclose class consciousness, not as it is, but as it ought to be."<sup>34</sup> It was not

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<sup>33</sup>Thompson, "An Open Letter," 385-86.

<sup>34</sup>Thompson, The Making, 10.

possible to envision change until one was told that the revolutionary moment had arrived. Change would not be sought because it was the right thing to do but because it was historically necessary. Thompson rejected the arguments of social democrats because they worked to suppress lines of class difference and antagonism. In both cases, the views of real people were denied and, in the process, the possibility of human agency was lost.

A critique of the assumptions shaping the Cold War ideologies necessarily implied a defence of creative agency. Stated alternatively, one cannot understand Thompson's conception of agency, as it is expressed throughout his work, unless one considers the context in which this theme was developed.

When Thompson wrote of class and class consciousness, then, he was referring to the way in which people perceive their material interests as these are disclosed to them through the development of the relationships in which they find themselves. Objective definitions of class are flawed in their refusal to entertain the views of those who experience reality differently to those producing the definitions. Western culture, he suggested is dominated by a profound sense of intellectual arrogance: only the views of an educated stratum appear worthy of consideration. Individuals, however, do not experience reality in the same way and there is no inherent reason why the views of some should be given precedence over the views of others. Working people were quite capable of thinking for themselves:

...it is a sad premise from which socialist theory should start (all men and women, except for [the enlightened minority of intellectuals] are originally stupid) and one which is bound to lead on to pessimistic or authoritarian conclusions.<sup>35</sup>

Although Thompson wrote this in 1978, and with different antagonists in mind to those structuring his arguments during the late 1950s and early 1960s, the sentiments embodied in

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<sup>35</sup>Thompson, "The Poverty of Theory," 8.

these lines, and in those quoted above, reflect deeply held convictions. One can suggest a number of sources for these convictions in Thompson's own experiences,<sup>36</sup> but in this context I want to single out one of especial significance. With the exception of a six-year stint, Thompson has remained on the margins of the academic establishment.<sup>37</sup> Between 1947 and 1964 he taught adult classes in the Labour Movement as an extension lecturer at the University of Leeds. The formative nature of this experience is suggested in the following remarks:

I have learned a great deal from working people in the past, and I hope to continue to do so. I have learned, from particular working people, about values of solidarity, of mutuality, of scepticism before received ideological "truths", which I would have found it difficult to discover in other ways, from the given intellectual culture. For the values of *égalité* are not ones which can be thought up, they must be learned through living them.(my emphasis)<sup>38</sup>

'Living' these 'values' meant practising them in all aspects of one's work. One can see this ideal at work in Thompson's criticisms of the elitist and bureaucratic structures of the British Communist Party, and the Parliamentary Labour Party and trade unions, in his defence of Morris' conception of socialism and in many other aspects of his work. Indeed, his own understanding of socialism, and of the proper role for socialist intellectuals in the task of cultivating a socialist consciousness, reveals many parallels to the way in which he conceived his practice as a teacher:

All education which is worth the name involves a relationship of mutuality, a dialectic: and no worthwhile educationalist conceives of his material as a class of inert recipients of instruction. But, in liberal adult education, no tutor is likely to last out a session - and no class is likely to stay the course with him - if he is under the misapprehension that the role of the class is passive. What is different about the adult student is the experience which he brings to the relationship. This experience modifies, sometimes subtly and sometimes more radically, the entire

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<sup>36</sup>These are discussed at greater length in the conclusion to chapter 4.

<sup>37</sup>He played an active role in helping to establish, and was a Reader in (1964-1970), the Centre for the Study of Social History at the University of Warwick. This was a move that was not entirely devoid of polemical intent.

<sup>38</sup>Thompson, "An Open Letter," 383.

educational process: it influences teaching methods, the selection and maturation of tutors, the syllabus: it may even disclose weak places or vacancies in received academic disciplines and lead on to the elaboration of new areas of study.<sup>39</sup>

It would not take a great deal of imagination to change the words a little here and we would have something like: the task of the socialist intellectual is to assist working people become aware of the way in which capitalism frustrates their potential. He guides, but he does not preach: those who conceive of socialism as a self-enclosed body of knowledge which is imparted from on high will soon find themselves without an audience. The socialist intellectual not only teaches but he learns. His theories, unless they are modified in the light of experience (changing circumstances) will quickly become redundant and have little meaning for those to whom they are addressed. It is hardly surprising that many of Thompson's criticisms of contemporary and historical intellectual practice are informed by Marx's injunction that the educator must also be educated.<sup>40</sup> Thompson did not believe that this idea could be learned in a formal university setting:

The globe spins, but as they cross the campus to the next committee they don't notice any movement. The conventions of their ideologies hem them in but they have lived inside these so long that they don't know it. The world of politics chunters on from one unprecedented danger to the next,

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<sup>39</sup>E.P. Thompson, Education and Experience: Fifth Mansbridge Memorial Lecture (Leeds: Leeds University Press, 1968), 1.

<sup>40</sup>"The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that the circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to educate the educator himself." Karl Marx, (third) Theses on Feuerbach.

but the salary still gets paid into the bank, and promotion (if one keeps one's nose clean) may be round the corner.<sup>41</sup>

Although I have mentioned the fact that The Making was written in the years 1959-62, this book did not emerge out of a biographical vacuum. In fact, much of the research for it was laid down over the course of the previous decade.<sup>42</sup> Many of the emphases of argument in that text were originally fashioned in the course of tutorial discussions; and, crucially, in the materials that were immediately accessible. In the literature surrounding The Making, the preface to that book has been examined to the point of 'overkill'. One of Thompson's remarks, however, has gone unnoticed:

The book was written in Yorkshire, and is coloured at times by West Riding sources...I have also learned a great deal from members of my tutorial classes, with whom I have discussed many of the themes treated here.<sup>43</sup>

In one very important sense, the authenticity which Thompson accords the experiences of the agents who appear in The Making stems from his own experiences with working people in industrial Britain. In the classroom, Thompson listened to and respected the views of his students. He did not impose his views upon them, but was as willing to learn as he was to teach. One of his central concerns in The Making was to give a hearing to the views of those who experienced, and

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<sup>41</sup>E.P. Thompson, "Remembering C. Wright Mills," in E.P. Thompson, The Heavy Dancers (London: Merlin Press, 1985), 270. One need not assent to this point as a universal truism; and it is doubtful that Thompson would, for in certain instances it is quite ungenerous. Many of those whom he regarded as 'compatriots' have long plied their trade in an academic environment. One thinks of Christopher Hill (Oxford), Eric Hobsbawm (Birbeck) and John Saville (Hull). However, there are aspects of it which found confirmation in Thompson's subsequent experience (the original version of this 'Remembrance' appeared in Peace News, 1963). The discussion in E.P. Thompson, ed., Warwick University Ltd.: Industry, Management and the Universities (London: Penguin Books, 1970) is, in this respect, quite instructive.

<sup>42</sup>Thompson, The Making (1980), 14.

<sup>43</sup>Thompson, The Making, 14. It seems to me that the book was more than just a little 'coloured' by these sources. It would be a good deal more accurate to say that Thompson's understanding of class, agency, the role of the socialist intellectual and the rest owe an enormous debt to this experience because it helped him to interpret these sources in such a distinctively original manner.



did not benefit from, the Industrial Revolution. This was more than many 'academic' accounts of the period were willing to entertain. In the post-war world industrialism was typically interpreted through presentist preoccupations; or, more precisely, from the perspective of the dominant ideologies. Against these accounts Thompson asserted that

[t]he making of the working class...was not the spontaneous generation of the factory system. Nor should we think of an external force - the 'industrial revolution'- working upon some nondescript undifferentiated raw material of humanity, and turning it out at the other end as a 'fresh race of human beings'.<sup>44</sup>

The social and economic changes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century affected real people, who experienced these changes in real ways, and who had equally real voices that had been drowned out by contemporary and subsequent developments. But this does not mean that their views had or have no validity; to assume this is to fall into an ideological and idealist mode of thinking. It was in resisting this type of thinking that Thompson's stated rationale for writing The Making should be read:

...to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' handloom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity. Their crafts and traditions may have been dying. Their hostility to the new industrialism may have been backward-looking. Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies. Their insurrectionary conspiracies may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not. Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experiences...(my emphasis)<sup>45</sup>

If the aspirations of those whom history has forgotten were 'valid in terms of their own experience', then this was no less true of the aspirations of those whom history was in the process of forgetting. As Thompson discovered in his classes, working people did have something to say. This may not have been what the dominant ideologies would have wanted them to say. But, then,

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<sup>44</sup>Thompson, The Making, 213.

<sup>45</sup>Thompson, The Making, 13.

these were the views of actual people who experienced the reality of capitalist Britain in a way that an abstract conception of them did not. The views of working people in the present were not those of Thompson's historical agents. But they did share one thing in common: certain values and ideals which could not be accommodated within the framework of capitalist society, whether in one of its early or later formations.

We may say, then, that Thompson was not merely contesting a particular view of the past for academic reasons. He can be said to have employed the past to assist political argument and practice in the present. The next section explores more thoroughly the manner in which Thompson utilized the past to justify a conception of socialism that integrated objective and subjective determinations in the process of class formation. One, that is, which defended a view of men as agents in the making of their own history.

### III

I have already mentioned that Thompson's work is indebted to English Romanticism. Although Thompson does not discuss the work of the Romantics in The Making their presence is apparent in that text. This fact has been noted by a number of commentators. For example, Harvey Kaye, in his study of the British Marxist historians, writes that:

Thompson's historical studies are often framed by references to historically contemporary poets and poetry. The best example is in The Making which opens and closes with references to Blake. Here Thompson argues that much was lost when the double resistance to capitalism of the Romantic poets and the Radical Craftsmen failed to become a single effort.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Kaye, The British Marxist Historians, 171

Thompson argued elsewhere that the early Romantic poets - Wordsworth, Coleridge and Blake - were both critical of the conventions of their time and prepared to treat the interests of ordinary people on their own terms.<sup>47</sup> For a variety of reasons, Wordsworth and Coleridge abandoned their early political commitments. Blake, however, did not abandon his. Moreover, Blake was a craftsman and shared many of the concerns of those suffering from the effects of an encroaching capitalist ethic in the industrializing north. Thompson suggested that Blake had developed a fairly clear understanding of the mechanisms driving the emerging capitalist society.

The emphasis in The Making is upon the attempts made by Radical Craftsmen to resist the "annunciation" of the acquisitive ethic.<sup>48</sup> Working people, Thompson argued, were capable of thinking about the changes affecting their lives and of establishing organizational forms to resist the threat posed by the market. The polemical function of Thompson's argument is obvious. He was simultaneously denying the contemporary view of man as an economic being and demonstrating the ability of working people to act upon their own initiative in order to defend their material interests. Indeed, they had to act on their own because they lacked the assistance of intellectual and political elites. This view of political activity is one that could be readily contrasted with the conception of political activity advanced by the BCP and the PLP in the 1950s. Both the BCP and PLP claimed to represent the interests of working people, but it is apparent that Thompson believed their claims to be specious.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>For Wordsworth and Coleridge see E.P. Thompson, "Disenchantment or Default? A Lay Sermon," in Connor Cruise O'Brien and William D. Vanitch, eds., Power and Consciousness (London: London University Press, 1969), 149-81. For Blake see E.P. Thompson, "'London'," in Michael Phillips, ed. Interpreting Blake (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 5-31.

<sup>48</sup>"I have suggested that one way of reading the working-class movement during the Industrial Revolution is as a movement of resistance to the annunciation of economic man." Thompson, "Peculiarities," 294.

<sup>49</sup>See especially E.P. Thompson, "The New Left," New Reasoner, no.9, Summer 1959, 1-17.

Although Thompson presented the subjects of The Making as historical agents he also suggested that working people did not have a clearly developed sense of the forces threatening their livelihoods. Rather, they tended to defend their interests and justified their actions in terms of an older moral economy. They resisted social change because the direction of change was seen to be morally wrong. Working people did not begin to acquire a clear insight into the workings of the market economy until the end of the 1820s; and even then, this understanding only found expression in the work of a few working class intellectuals and political activists. These insights were forged in the context of working people's experience of struggle over the previous decades. They gradually came to realize that the type of interests they claimed could not be realized within the context of a society whose basic values were given by competition and greed.

If one reads Thompson's views on the Romantic poets in conjunction with his discussion of working class struggles there is a sense in which he appeared to be claiming that the course of English history might have been different if intellectuals and working people had been able to effect a juncture.<sup>50</sup> At first glance, this type of argument seems to be irrelevant. After all, the past cannot be repeated and historians should hardly be concerned with 'what if?' questions. It is a truism that the past cannot be altered; it is not true that men can do nothing to alter their present. In the 1950s bourgeois and Marxist thought denied the possibility of alternative or utopian social visions. For Marxists, any thinking which did not conform to theoretical prescriptions could be dismissed as indicative of bourgeois ideas. Conversely, utopian ideas were suspicious to bourgeois thinkers because of their association with authoritarian social systems:

...the utopian impulse is...not necessarily politically progressive as some of its supporters wish to claim; it can clearly issue forth in malignant forms. National socialism is perhaps the clearest example of this with its

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<sup>50</sup>An interpretation which is suggested by reading Thompson's various critiques of intellectuals in his political writings in conjunction with: (i) his comments in his study on Blake's 'London';(ii) those in The Making, 915, 711 and (iii) his explanation of the failure of socialism to gain an effective foothold in late nineteenth century England that is outlined in William Morris (1955).

appalling vision of a thousand year Aryan Reich...Liberals are quite right in seeing Auschwitz as the poisoned fruit of utopianism. They spoil their case by arguing that Auschwitz is the inevitable consequence of utopianism.

The latter view was also fuelled by the historical experience of Stalinism. The gap between rhetoric and reality in the Soviet Union was seen as evidence of the... fanaticism ...of utopias. The accompanying dystopian literature...with its portrayal of intolerant, elitist, uniform and stagnant societies, was in turn harnessed to this attack. The idea that the way out of dystopia lies not in the rejection of utopianism but in its refinement was not entertained. (my emphasis)<sup>51</sup>

"It became plausible to argue that socialism...was an inspiring and creative force only so long as it remained in the imagination."<sup>52</sup> As a practical political philosophy, intent upon changing the world, its apparent terminus was totalitarianism.<sup>53</sup> The cumulative effect of such developments was to reinforce the ideological status quo:

We have had enough glimpses, in this century, of human "possibility", and not all of them show man's nature as 'rich'. We are more preoccupied with the need to control certain propensities of human nature than to release a questionable potentia.<sup>54</sup>

The mind, deprived of faith, [sank] back exhausted upon the well-sprung sophisms of the past...Custom, Law, the Church, the State, the Family - all came flooding back. All were indices of the supreme good - stability.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>Vincent Geoghegan, Utopianism and Marxism, (London: Methuen, 1987), 4.

<sup>52</sup>Kirshan Kumar, Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times (London: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 382.

<sup>53</sup>Good examples of the alleged relationship between utopian ideas and authoritarian political regimes can be found in: Crane Brinton, "Utopianism and Democracy," in F.E. Manuel, ed., Utopias and Utopian Thought (Boston, MA: Houghton and Mifflin, 1966), 50-68; Jacob L. Talmon, Utopianism and Politics (London: Conservative Party Pamphlet, 1957).

<sup>54</sup>Thompson, "An Open Letter," 363-64.

<sup>55</sup>Thompson, "Outside the Whale," 371, 373.

Any alternative vision became suspect. This interpretation of the utopian impulse - the ('faith' in the) desirability of an 'ought' to the current 'is' - was applied to the past as well as to the present. The past was mediated through the assumptions of the present: Cold War ideologues were "simply using history as a mirror and glimpsing within it projections of [themselves]".<sup>56</sup> Herbert Butterfield might have read Whig historiography its last rites in 1931,<sup>57</sup> but in Thompson's view an economic mutation of it was still very much alive in the post-war world.

In rejecting the ideological assumptions of the Cold War warriors, Thompson was able to view the past differently; dialectically rather than teleologically. For Thompson, the past could be employed to demonstrate the possibility of change in the present. Utopianism had not always been associated with a particular interpretation of Marxism.

The dominant ideologies of the post-war world entailed the conclusion that men were to be seen as victims of forces beyond their control. In drawing upon the historical record, Thompson hoped to show to the present that this has not always been true. There are historical examples showing that men have attempted to assert alternative visions to the common sense of their time. And, as Thompson's discussion of Morris and Blake shows, some men have revealed a fairly clear understanding of the dynamics of capitalism without having read Marx.

How do these points bear upon my claim that The Making should be interpreted as a polemical intervention? This can be explained in the following manner. Thompson identified a number of parallels between the intellectual and political context of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century England and that of the late 1930s to the 1950s.<sup>58</sup> In both periods intellectuals

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<sup>56</sup>Thompson, "An Open Letter," 349.

<sup>57</sup>Herbert Butterfield, The Whig Interpretation of History (London: Methuen, 1931).

<sup>58</sup>Thompson, "Outside the Whale," *passim*; E.P. Thompson, "Comment: On Common Values? An Argument," Stand, 20(2), 1979, 48-54.

became disenchanted with the revolutionary ideals which had attracted their early attention. But rather than denying specific, contextually dependent, revolutionary impulses, they tended to abstract these impulses from their generative moment and, in the process, slipped from a particular to a general denial of each and every form of revolutionary initiative. In the early period, such initiatives were too closely identified with the course of the French Revolution and intellectuals felt betrayed as the ideals of equality, liberty and fraternity degenerated into Bonapartism. In the second period, disillusion stemmed from particular experiences of Soviet Marxism. In denying the possibility of change, intellectuals in both periods were indirectly supporting the ideologues of the status quo.

There was one intellectual current in the late 1950s which actively sought to challenge the status quo. This was represented by the journal Universities and Left Review (ULR). Thompson's relation to this tendency of the New Left<sup>59</sup> is discussed in chapters 5 and 6. In general terms, the relationship was an ambiguous one. On the one hand, Thompson saw much that was valuable in their critique of modern Britain. On the other hand, he upbraided them for viewing the potential contribution of working people to the creation of a socialist society in a patronising manner.<sup>60</sup> The working class was not seen to be an agent of revolutionary transformation by the ULR tendency because it was assumed to be too heavily influenced by bourgeois ideas. In consequence, ULR maintained, working people were not able to articulate a distinctive

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<sup>59</sup>The central difference between the Old Left (Leninist-Trotskyist-Stalinist and Social Democratic-Fabian-Welfare Statism) and the New Left can be located in their attitude towards cultural and ideological questions. Whereas the former insisted upon grounding socio-politic analyses in economic considerations, the latter - and here Thompson and those ex-communists who he was closely associated with in the journal New Reasoner dissented from ULR - tended to minimize the relevance of such factors. Thompson's understanding of the relationship between cultural and non-cultural questions is a complex issue and one subjected to much criticism both by Anderson in the mid-1960s and in the aftermath of The Poverty of Theory's publication. It is of the utmost importance for understanding the structure of The Making and it will be given due consideration at a later point in this study.

<sup>60</sup>E.P. Thompson, "Commitment in Politics," Universities and Left Review, no.6 Spring 1959, 50-55.

consciousness that would challenge the hegemonic or 'dominative' bourgeois world view. One of Thompson's concerns in The Making was to illustrate that the agencies of cultural domination have been equally oppressive in the past - he referred specifically to Methodism - but this has not prevented working people from resisting these influences and of advancing to a revolutionary consciousness as antagonistic interests were revealed through the process of struggle. One has no reason to assume, therefore, that similar processes were not possible in the present.

ULR intellectuals believed that they could identify the characteristics of socialism and that working people should follow their lead. ULR did not appear to be interested in the grievances and interests which working people might have. In effect, ULR ignored the material context that gave interests, including their own, their class character. In Thompson's view, working people were not likely to respond to moral exhortation. Indeed, this point had been demonstrated historically in Thompson's first major study, William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary.

There is a sense in which The Making can be said to have been directed at the first New Left and, at one level, it is in this that one can understand the text's political rationale. Although one cannot alter the past, Thompson can be seen to be drawing lessons from it. The 1790s offered one possibility for men to exercise control over the historical process, and the late 1950s appeared to offer another one. This opportunity, in Thompson's opinion, was given by the emergence of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). CND shattered the political torpor of the 1950s and placed moral questions on a political agenda hitherto pre-occupied with considerations of expediency and parliamentary intrigue. Thompson interpreted the extra-parliamentary political tactics of CND as offering the potential for focusing attention on the values supportive of capitalist society. The production of a nuclear arsenal was seen by Thompson to be symptomatic of capitalist values. Thompson therefore believed that this issue would focus attention on the character of contemporary class struggle. In struggling to resist the bomb, people would



come to realize that the interests which these struggles manifested could not be advanced in the context of a society which manufactured nuclear weapons. The struggle for disarmament would impress upon people the necessity for a revolutionary transformation of society. This type of reasoning was analogous to that employed in The Making: people discover their interests, and articulate a specific consciousness, through the process of struggle. That is to say, the type of interests which people claim cannot and will not be advanced within a society whose dominant ethic supports antagonistic interests. A similar type of reasoning, as chapter 2 demonstrates, also informed Thompson's interpretation of Morris' path to socialism

If the opportunities which the 1950s offered were to be seized, people had to believe that it was both possible and practicable to change society. This belief, Thompson maintained, could be fostered by intellectuals. However, intellectuals had first to think in a different way about the concepts of class and revolution. ULR intellectuals, for example, did have a fairly clear understanding of capitalism. If they could have developed this understanding further, by recognizing the distinctive character of working class interests, they might have realized that the type of society which they wanted could not be brought about without the active participation of the working class. Once they had realized this fact, it was incumbent upon intellectuals not to dictate the way to socialism, but to help working people become aware of their interests and of the character of the forces arraigned against them. In so doing, intellectuals could play a key role in fostering a belief in the desirability of change.

For Thompson, then, the socialist intellectual had a responsibility to demonstrate how capitalist social relations frustrated human potential. The sources of this frustration occurred not merely at the point of production, but were built into the very fabric of all social relations. It is not possible to have competition and relations of domination and subordination at work and not have the values upon which these are based elsewhere in society. Socialists, therefore, had to change

the way in which people were habitually taught to think in capitalist society. Once people's values were changed they would recognise that the types of interests which these new values gave rise to could not be realized within the framework of existing society.

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The title of this dissertation, 'History and Hope', is borrowed from an essay by the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski.<sup>61</sup> It reflects the principal concern of this study, which is to demonstrate the way in which Thompson has brought historical arguments to bear upon contemporary political practice. Although one can do little to alter the past one can draw inspiration from previous struggles. These struggles reveal the attempts which people have made to promote their aspirations. These attempts may not have been successful, but they at least show to people in the present that it is possible to make the effort to struggle for the type of society which they want to live in. The past, that is, can be said to hold out a source of hope for the present. This theme appears to have been Thompson's unspoken intention in writing The Making.

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<sup>61</sup>Leszek Kolakowski, "Responsibility and History," in his Towards a Marxist Humanism: Essays on the Left Today (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 87-157, and especially 143-57.

## Chapter 1

### A Romantic Heritage

Edward Thompson has used the phrase "communist utopian" to characterize William Morris' socialism.<sup>1</sup> By it, he intended to indicate the extent to which Morris integrated themes from the English Romantic and Marxist critiques of industrial capitalism. In the process, Thompson argued, Morris transformed both traditions and fashioned an original conception of socialism. Morris' heuristic incorporated a moral critique of bourgeois society with an insistence upon the necessity of political action as the only means by which criticisms of existing social relations could be channeled into effective strategies for social change.

Romanticism, Thompson maintained, had long criticized the materialist ethic championed by capitalist society for its reduction of all human values to economic categories. Against the claims advanced by bourgeois ideologues, that man was inherently acquisitive, the Romantic tradition defended values which could not be assigned an exchange value. In particular, this tradition insisted that men do not always act for economic reasons. Men were held to express their humanity through imaginative and creative labour. This view of labour was contrasted with capitalist modes of production. Rather than labour expressing ideals which men had themselves chosen, labour was geared to needs defined by a market economy. In the words of the early Marx, capitalist society denied to man the right to express his 'species being'. Instead, this society fostered an artificial or ideological view of man's nature.

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<sup>1</sup>Thompson, William Morris (1977), 792.

For the Romantics and, it has been argued, the Marx of The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, capitalism was seen to be wrong because it was morally wrong.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the justification for changing capitalist society was to be found in moral arguments: replacing this society with one grounded in human values. That is, values which find expression in human relationships and not in some abstract characterization of them. Following Matthew Arnold, the Romantics can be said to have asserted values which opposed a 'philistine' conception of man: "[the philistines] have developed one side of their humanity at the expense of all others and have become incomplete and mutilated men in consequence."<sup>3</sup>

According to Thompson, Morris was brought to socialism via Romanticism and he stressed the central role that moral considerations played in shaping Morris' political outlook.<sup>4</sup> Yet, Thompson observed, Morris was nurtured in a tradition of social criticism that was essentially negative. That is, while Romanticism could criticize capitalist society for frustrating human potential it was not able to envision any mechanism by which the values it sustained might be transformed into practice. It was one thing to criticize, but something quite different to affirm these values as aspirations worth struggling for.

If Morris could find nothing in his Romantic training that would allow him to conceive of the possibility of translating ideals into practice he was to find a potential agent in Marxism's emphasis upon the need for working class political action. However, Morris disagreed with the type of justification for socialism that the later Marx advanced. For the Marx of Das Kapital, the

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<sup>2</sup>M. Doskow, "The Humanized Universe of Blake and Marx," in R. J. Berholf and A.S. Levitt, eds., William Blake and the Moderns (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), 225-40

<sup>3</sup>Matthew Arnold, quoted in Thompson, William Morris (1955), 176.

<sup>4</sup>E.P. Thompson, The Communism of William Morris (London: The William Morris Society, 1965), 9, 17-19. Thompson's views were originally presented as a lecture in the Hall of the Art Workers' Guild in London on 4 May, 1959.

principal text which English socialists in the 1880s drew upon,<sup>5</sup> socialism was justified solely in terms of historical necessity. Given the economic laws driving the historical process that Das Kapital claimed to have uncovered, socialism was seen by many early converts to Marxism to be inevitable. But Morris was not willing to accept these ideas uncritically. His own experiences taught him that theories would not move people to support ideals unless they actually said something which appealed to their immediate concerns. In Morris' view, Marxism's weakness lay in its inability to relate its theories to the actual grievances which working people expressed. This weakness was brought home to him by the failure of London socialists to make much of an impact on the rising tide of working class discontent in the late 1880s.

Socialists, Morris came to believe, would only appeal to working people if they presented their case in a manner that made socialism appear as if it offered a more desirable alternative to the present. In effect, socialists had to make their case against capitalism on moral grounds. This did not mean that socialists should preach to the working class. Rather, they should demonstrate, by referring to the actual conditions that working people found themselves in, the manner in which social arrangements were not in their interest. Socialists had to refer to the way in which working people experienced capitalism and not impose views derived from the experiences of intellectuals. If capitalism was to be replaced, working people had to desire the change themselves. If the justification for socialism was not couched in these terms, socialist ideals would never command the support necessary to transform them into reality. But, as Morris was to discover, many Marxists felt that they knew better than working people themselves what interests they should

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<sup>5</sup>The early converts to Marxism would have used the French edition of Capital, since an English edition was not published until the late 1880s. On this point one can usefully refer to Stuart MacIntyre, A Proletarian Science: Marxism in Britain 1917-1933 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 91-92, passim. A general overview of the development of early Marxist ideas can be found in Kirk Willis, "The Introduction and Critical Reception of Marxist Thought in Britain, 1850-1900," The Historical Journal, 20 (2), 1977, 417-59.

be asserting. Marxists, in other words, relied too heavily upon theories without inquiring into the experiences of working people. Marxists interpreted the world from their experiences and refused to take seriously the views of working people. Morris found this intellectual elitism objectionable and, in the light of political developments, strategically disastrous. Moreover, Morris could find in this attitude very little to distinguish it from the bourgeois world view. Both viewed reality from a limited and partial perspective and both sought to define working class interests in terms of this perspective.

According to Thompson, Morris' contribution to the history of socialism must be regarded as a very significant one. Yet, it is a contribution which has been consistently undervalued by those within the Marxist tradition. In large measure, the failure to appreciate Morris' stature can be traced to some of Marx's own comments as to the value of Romanticism. In The Grundrisse, for example, Marx "faulted the Romantic critique of society for unwittingly remaining within the confines of bourgeois life."<sup>6</sup> Engels also viewed Romanticism in a negative light and his views were especially influential in shaping the direction that Marxism was to take from the late nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup>

Thompson's interpretation of the character of Morris' socialism will be discussed at length in chapter 2. I have commenced this chapter with a brief overview of this interpretation in order to indicate the importance which Thompson himself attached to Romanticism and Marxism. This chapter is principally concerned with examining Thompson's interpretation of Romanticism. In order to understand the reasons why he believed that socialists have much to learn from Romanticism I begin by outlining Thompson's understanding of the Marxist method. This method,

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<sup>6</sup>Michael Fischer, "Marxism and English Romanticism: The Persistence of the Romantic Movement," Romanticism Past and Present, 6, (1), 1982, 27.

<sup>7</sup>Engels' influence in shaping the direction of Marxism after Marx's death is discussed briefly in chapter 3 below.

Thompson's argument suggests, shares much in common with the techniques adopted by the early Romantic poets - Blake, Coleridge, and Wordsworth -and very little with the way in which Marxism was generally understood in the 1950s.<sup>8</sup>

## 1

Thompson defined the Marxist method or the materialist conception of history in the following way:

The dialectical intercourse between social being and social consciousness...is at the heart of the historical process within the Marxist tradition. If this is displaced then we evacuate that tradition altogether.<sup>9</sup>

Social being refers to the material conditions of life into which people are born and/or enter involuntarily, while social consciousness indicates the way in which people think about material reality and organize their social relationships.<sup>10</sup> Orthodox Marxists expressed the relationship between the two elements in terms of a base-superstructure model: the base or

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<sup>8</sup>In this dissertation Marxism refers to those ideas and practices associated with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and its affiliates. The terms 'Orthodox Marxism' and 'scientific socialism' are used inter-changeably to refer to this phenomenon. Although there were a number of continental thinkers in the 'Western Marxist' tradition who had developed arguments which parallel certain themes in Thompson's critique of orthodox Marxism - Lukacs' attempt to reconcile the problem of freedom and determination, and Gramsci's development of the notion of hegemony come to mind - Thompson's thinking does not appear to have been appreciably influenced by this tradition. If there were any contemporary European influences then they came from Eastern European influences; specifically Kolakowski and more generally from his experiences in Eastern Europe during the 1940s. But even then, such influences should be seen as confirming rather than determining a line of thought that drew heavily upon indigenous sources. This is hardly surprising, since Thompson's ideas were originally shaped in the context of the Cold War and a significant aspect of the polemic that defined this context was a concern to deny the exclusive association between revolutionary theory and practice and the history of the Soviet Union.

<sup>9</sup>Thompson, "Peculiarities," 289.

<sup>10</sup>Thompson, The Making, 10.

infrastructure embraced the material conditions of production and the superstructure defined the character of those ideas, in their institutionalized form (law, morality, aesthetics, religion, politics, etc.), which were typically associated with a particular mode of production. For Thompson, the problem with characterizing the relationship in these terms was the tendency to make ideas depend, in a reductionist sense, upon material reality. The dependent relationship between social being and social consciousness was suggested by the claim that the dominant ideas in any society reflected the material interests of those who own the means of production. This claim did not mean that non-owners were incapable of thinking, but it did mean that their ideas, unless they explicitly challenge the ideas supportive of dominant material interests, will reflect those interests rather than their own interests. As long as working people continued to believe that social arrangements were fair and did promote their interests then their ideas and attitudes were little other than an expression of a 'false consciousness'. For orthodox Marxists, a true or revolutionary class consciousness necessarily manifested itself at the point of material production and at times when the inherent contradictions between capital and labour became apparent; that is, during recessions and/or periods of technological change. A true consciousness was revolutionary because in acting upon it working people would assert interests which fundamentally challenge the basis of capitalist society.

All presentations of the base-superstructure model had a teleological component built into them. This derived from the claim that social life was seen to be governed by laws which were directing society to an inevitable and predetermined end; the demise of capitalism. In some accounts, there was a suggestion that a true consciousness would develop spontaneously; that is, when the appropriate socio-economic dislocation materialized the working class would automatically recognize its collective interests and act upon them. This idea, however, tended to be displaced in the early twentieth century by Lenin's arguments justifying the necessity of a vanguard of the proletariat. Lenin's arguments were based upon his growing awareness that, rather than advancing



to a revolutionary consciousness, the working class tended to get side-tracked into economism or the development of a trade union consciousness. This new consciousness vitiated the development of a class consciousness by setting up a multiplicity of sectional and divisive interests. Working people appeared to be more interested in extracting concessions from the existing system than seeking its revolutionary transformation. The conclusion that Lenin drew from these observations was that the working class would never develop a revolutionary consciousness unless it was effectively implanted in them. In other words, working people could not achieve socialism through their own agency; rather, they had to be shown what their interests were by a revolutionary elite who claimed exclusive knowledge of the laws regulating social life.

For Thompson, this interpretation of the relationship between social being and social consciousness was based upon a form of 'mechanical idealism'. It was mechanical because it posited an axiomatic relationship between thought and action on the one hand and material context on the other. It was idealist because it was based upon abstract reasoning. Moreover, these abstractions derived from an elite and they were imposed upon reality. When Thompson described the relationship between social being and social consciousness as a dialectical one he was, in an important sense, recognising that working people had the capacity to interpret their own material reality, and to act to secure goals that were defined by themselves and in terms of their understanding of their material experience. Working people were capable of purposive action and did not always require the assistance of an elite. The reasons which they give for acting in a particular way may not be those sanctioned by a theory, but this does not mean that these reasons can be dismissed as a product of a false consciousness.

Although the preceding paragraphs gloss over a number of substantive theoretical issues, they do indicate some of the key lines of difference between Thompson's view of socialism and socialist activity, and those advanced by orthodox Marxists. For the latter, consciousness is

determined exclusively at the point of production: changes in the material base necessarily prompt new ideas. This claim can be stated more strongly: it is not possible to envisage the formation of alternative values within capitalist society. Socialist values can only be created after the capitalist mode of production has been displaced. All political strategies which are not geared to the overthrow of capitalism, and the political and legal institutions which sustain this mode of production must, therefore, be interpreted as attempts to shore-up bourgeois interests. The strategies of orthodox Marxist were, consequently, limited to the acquisition of political and economic power.

Thompson identified several related problems with this type of 'reasoning'. First, it claimed that men were victims of forces beyond their control rather than agents in the making of their own history. As a result, there was a tendency to postpone discussion of the possible character of a socialist society until after the revolution. This type of discussion implied the possibility of imagining alternatives to the present. However, such speculations could not be permitted since consciousness was given by being and the latter defined thought within strict limits. Therefore, all ideas which did not conform to the prescriptions of material being could be interpreted as counter-revolutionary. Moreover, the arguments defended by orthodox Marxism provided no guarantees that the society which such a 'mindless' revolution might inaugurate would be any better than capitalist society. Indeed, there was historical evidence to prove that it would not be.

Thompson believed that 'Marxists' were discrediting socialism in the eyes of the labour movement by defining the tasks of socialists in such absolute terms. Against their claim that socialist values could not be fostered within capitalist society Thompson maintained that they had to be. Socialism had to point in some direction and it made sense that men should define the type of society that they wanted rather than conceiving of themselves as victims of abstract laws.

Following Morris, Thompson argued that socialists would only present a convincing case if they could demonstrate the way in which the socialist alternative was more desirable than

capitalist society. That is, socialists had to indicate the ways in which capitalist social relations and institutions thwarted human development. For Thompson, this meant criticizing the values which capitalism promoted and contrasting these with the types of values which a socialist society might advance. This task was likely to be more effective if socialist values could be shown to work in practice.

According to Thompson, then, Marxism had followed a course which had very little in common with his understanding of the materialist conception of history. Orthodox Marxists refused to take seriously the idea of reciprocity between social being and social consciousness that the term 'dialectical intercourse' directs attention to. In other words, ideas are not only determined, but they can have a determining role in shaping action. One might conclude, therefore, that Thompson believed that those in the Leninist tradition had 'evacuated' the Marxist tradition 'altogether'.

## II

If Thompson believed that orthodox Marxism had little in common with the materialist conception of history one can suggest that he viewed certain elements of English Romanticism as having an affinity with this conception. This can be seen in the Romantic defence of creative labour against the type of labour fostered by capitalism.

Creative labour occurs where a craftsman exercises control over the labour process. He produces because he wants to and not because he has to. In the process, he brings his physical and intellectual faculties to bear upon a task which he has himself defined. What he produces will be subject to the constraints imposed upon him by the material and intellectual resources at his disposal: the knowledge, skill and the limits of his imagination are all relevant, as are the physical

objects that the craftsman has to work with and work on.<sup>11</sup> But, in conceiving of a project and in acting to realize it, the craftsman will express something of his own being in the object which he has created. He will have humanized the object in the sense that he knows it as his own, and in the process will have acquired new skills, knowledge and material resources which define future possibilities for labour. In essence, men express their humanity through their creative endeavours.<sup>12</sup>

In a sense, Thompson's understanding of socialism was based upon principles which are analogous to those outlined in the preceding paragraph. Thompson regarded socialism as an achievement of creative agency. Men must define for themselves the type of society which they want and act to bring their ideas to fruition. But Thompson did not claim that any society at all was possible. Human agency was seen to be subject to certain constraints. Nevertheless, he did believe that it was possible to imagine alternatives to the present.

The role of the imagination, we have observed, was a central characteristic of the Romantic tradition.<sup>13</sup> At the height of the Cold War, however, Romanticism was held in low esteem. Romanticism, Thompson wrote in the mid 1950s,<sup>14</sup> was typically defined in opposition to Realism. While the latter was seen as an attempt to present reality in a literal sense, the former was characterized as a

...specialized form of literature...in which an imaginary world with its own laws is created, only distantly related to the world of living experience...however...the word 'romantic' has unfortunate associations

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<sup>11</sup>Thompson, "The Poverty of Theory," 17-18

<sup>12</sup>Doskow, "Humanized Universe," 239, 227.

<sup>13</sup>It should be understood that this dissertation does not concern itself with Romanticism as such. I am only interested in the way in which Thompson has interpreted aspects of this phenomenon, and the manner in which his interpretation has shaped certain of his political and historical arguments.

<sup>14</sup>Thompson, William Morris (1955), 26.

today, suggesting...high-flown idealisms at odds with reality, or excessive dramatization of the passions and the sentiments.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, the Romantic artist could have nothing meaningful to say about the concerns of the world because he was engaged in imaginative speculations. One should emphasize that Thompson found this interpretation of Romanticism to be 'unfortunate' and, therefore, it was not the way in which he viewed the role of the creative artist. In fact, this statement should be read as polemic against the Cold War ideologies. We have seen the way in which orthodox Marxism denied the validity of imaginative thinking: Romanticism was interpreted as an expression of bourgeois thinking. Literature and other art forms were valid only to the extent that they reinforced a particular view of reality. But the social and political 'utility' of Romanticism was also denied by much contemporary English political thought.

English thinking, Thompson argued, has long been characterized by an empirical idiom which functions as an ideological justification for capitalist interests.<sup>16</sup> Empiricism defines, as valid knowledge, that which is amenable to empirical observation and can be explained rationally. Speculative thought cannot be verified by rational controls. Empiricism, therefore, concerns itself with what is and not with what ought to be.<sup>17</sup> The origins of this type of thinking, and its relationship to the development of capitalism, are not immediately relevant here. However, this type

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Thompson, "Peculiarities," 273.

<sup>17</sup>David Hume, one of the most influential thinkers of the eighteenth century Scottish Enlightenment, is often referred to as an 'authority' in justifying the distinction between 'is' and 'ought'. But there is an interesting argument suggesting that Hume did not intend what his interpreters believed he intended. That is to say, Hume did not make a case for the denial of ethical considerations in empirical studies. This theme is developed by Alasdair MacIntyre, "Hume on 'is' and 'ought'," in Alasdair MacIntyre, *Against the Self-Images of the Age* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 109-24. Thompson, acknowledges the "importance" of this - and several of MacIntyre's other essays - for the historian: see E.P. Thompson, "An Open Letter To Leszek Kolakowski," in Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, 401.



of thinking was reinforced in minds of contemporaries as a result of their recent experiences with utopian ideas in practice. In the 1950s, utopianism was inseparable from the Soviet Union's conception of socialism. This was an image of socialism, moreover, that was reinforced by many ex-communist Western intellectuals. This image, Thompson argued, helped to deny the validity of all forms of utopian thinking and, therefore, reinforced the status quo since the present was seen to be better than any imagined alternative.

According to Thompson, both ideologies had misrepresented the character of utopian thought. Orthodox Marxists were wrong in their claim that all forms of Romantic thinking should be characterized as self-indulgent bourgeois criticism and could, therefore, have no role to play in the task of creating a socialist society.<sup>18</sup> Western arguments were wrong in asserting that utopian thinking necessarily implied an association with the Soviet Union and that, as a result, intellectuals should keep their speculations to themselves and not attempt to seek a radical change of society. Both positions mis-understood the historical character of Romanticism because, Thompson suggested, they were more interested in reading the past through the dominant assumptions of the present than in examining it on its own terms. This type of 'reading' had the effect of ignoring historical variations and of presenting Romanticism as a uniform phenomenon. It may, Thompson argued, have been true that the later manifestations of Romanticism were little other than an expression of the poets own subjectivities. But this was a subsequent development, and the political significance of the movement as a whole cannot be read off from its last stages, or in terms of the presuppositions of the present. When the movement is apprehended historically, rather than through the concerns of the present, the early phases of Romanticism appear in a different light:

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<sup>18</sup>See Thompson's discussion in William Morris (1955), 767ff.

"The first great impulse of the movement was neither vague nor 'idealized', but specific and revolutionary"<sup>19</sup>

When Thompson characterized Romanticism as a movement that was inspired by revolutionary goals he meant that the early Romantic poets affirmed values that were radically incompatible with those informing an ascendant market economy. The values of the Romantic poets, expressed primarily in the contrast they drew between creative and non-creative labour, could not be realized within the context of a capitalist society. This recognition was, perhaps, forced upon Blake more strongly than the other poets, but Wordsworth and Coleridge also challenged many of the dominant cultural assumptions of their time. In particular, their work in the 1790s suggests a deliberate attempt to break free from the, then dominant, paternalistic framework of thought.

Until the 1790s the educated classes had taken a passing interest in the pastimes of the poor, but they had not taken these pastimes seriously. With Wordsworth, Thompson identified one of the first attempts to treat the experiences of the poor on their own terms, rather than idealizing the interests of the poor in terms of those of the governing classes. In The Prelude, Thompson argued, Wordsworth advanced the idea of the equality of worth of the ordinary man and he recognized the fact that social conventions imposed an artificial conception of man:

"society has parted man from man neglectful of the universal heart"...This vision into the universal heart...takes us altogether outside the paternalistic framework.<sup>20</sup>

Rather than locating sources of human valuation in social conventions Wordsworth insisted that "[the] equality of worth of the common man...lay in moral and spiritual attributes, developed through experiences of labour, suffering and through primary human relations."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Thompson, William Morris (1955), 28.

<sup>20</sup>Thompson, Education and Experience, 8.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.



Evaluating the way in which social relations did or did not recognize the equality of human worth became the touchstone of the Romantic critique. This criterion lay at the heart of Morris' conception of socialism and it also guided Thompson's work.

Wordsworth, of course, eventually became the reactionary poet laureate of Queen Victoria. Thompson explained Wordsworth's metamorphosis as symptomatic of a wider tendency. Intellectuals were initially attracted to the ideals advanced by the French Revolution and the general belief that it was possible to construct society from rational principles. These ideals were also asserted by Jacobinism but with one crucial difference: the Jacobins pressed their demands in the name of political equality. It was in asserting "the Rights of Man" rather than the rights of particular men that Jacobinism could be said to share many of the cultural assumptions of the society upon which it made its claims. The Jacobins did not demand real rights for real men because, in couching their arguments in terms of the language of the educated - that is, in terms of an appeal to reason - their perception of the uneducated poor was no different to those who viewed the poor within a paternalistic framework. The Romantic poets, however, attempted to transcend Jacobinism's limited horizons and pass beyond the idea of abstract rights for abstract men to "something more local, but also more humanly engaged."<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the Romantic poets did invest a great deal of faith in the power of reason at the outset of the 1790s. But the course of events during the 1790s - the execution of Louis XVI, the terror and the onset of continental war - led them to the conclusion that this faith might have been displaced. As a result, intellectuals became disenchanted with political involvement and gradually withdrew their commitment. In other words, there was a growing belief that it was not possible to affirm ideals without these becoming corrupted. If, therefore, intellectuals wished to preserve their ideals it made sense not to attempt

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<sup>22</sup>Thompson, "Disenchantment," 152.



to affirm these through political struggle. To a certain extent these developments were understandable:

How far is it possible for men to hold onto aspirations long after there appears to be no hope of inserting them into 'the real world which is the world of all of us.' If the social context makes all insertion seem impossible - if all objective referents for these hopes are cruelly obliterated - if the attempt to live out the ideals appears to produce their opposite -if fraternity produces fratricide, equality produces empire, liberty produces liberticide - then aspirations can only become a transposed interior faith.<sup>23</sup>

The key term here is 'hopes'. Men need to believe that their ideals have some chance of realization if they are to continue to affirm their commitment to them. Sustaining hope implies the existence of some agent - 'objective referents' - which will facilitate the realization of aspirations in the world. For Thompson, the principal obstacle facing Wordsworth and Coleridge was the extent to which they were isolated, by a barrage of anti-Jacobin propaganda, from the embryonic working class movement in the industrializing north. This movement embodied the potential which might have brought their aspirations to fruition because it defended a concept of human valuation close to that asserted by these poets. Both the radical craftsmen and the Romantic poets attempted to defend creative labour against an ever encroaching system based on the division of labour.

According to Thompson, then, the Romantic poets withdrew from political activity because they could see no mechanism that would allow them to insert their ideals into the world. They placed too much faith in the slogans of the French Revolution and too little in the potential agency of working people. Middle class aspirations for liberty and equality were fine. But the middle class "could never realize this vision...because their very existence depended upon the establishment of a new tyranny over the exploited working class."<sup>24</sup> When working people did begin to press their claims "the Rights of Man" revealed itself to be a very shallow and class-based doctrine.

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 174.

<sup>24</sup>Thompson, William Morris (1955), 34.

Wordsworth and Coleridge, Thompson argued, were never fully able to comprehend the social forces that were acting to thwart the realization of their ideals. Although their poetry does reveal an attempt to reconcile the contradictions between their early ideals and the manner in which these ideals realized themselves in practice, both eventually gave up the effort and reverted to older patterns of thinking. Not only do the old paternalistic clichés re-appear, but their work actively denied aspirations which they once affirmed. In doing so, they were contributing to an interpretation of Romanticism as an art form that has little to say about social life. In other words, they were actively assisting the triumph of capitalist interests and empiricist thinking and, therefore, indirectly contributing to the view that men can do nothing to alter the world. But if Wordsworth and Coleridge were not able to understand the dynamics of their society, the same, in Thompson's view, could not be said of Blake.

### III

If I devised my own pantheon I would without hesitation place within it the christian Antinomian, William Blake, and I would place him beside Marx.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the obvious importance of Blake's ideas to Thompson's own work, very little of what Edward Thompson has had to say about William Blake has been published.<sup>26</sup> If we are to grasp the significance that Thompson attributed to Blake then it is necessary to engage in some 'imaginative' reconstruction. The discussion in this section, though, is not an exercise in speculation.

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<sup>25</sup>Thompson, "An Open Letter," 316.

<sup>26</sup>At the time of writing, Thompson has published only one piece of work on Blake: E.P. Thompson, " 'London'," in Michael Phillips, ed., Interpreting Blake (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 5-31. Thompson did, however, promise an extended study of Blake's work in this article: see n.14, 14.



Rather, I have drawn upon a number of sources in order to elucidate several themes in Blake's work so as to demonstrate probable lines of influence on Thompson's own work. These themes include: Blake's critique of rationalism; his Antinomian beliefs and the importance which he attributed to creative labour. This discussion is then brought to bear upon an analysis of Thompson's only commentary on Blake's work to date.

Although Blake did not use the term alienation his work has been interpreted as being centrally concerned with (i) the ways in which capitalism divided man both from himself and from his fellow men, and (ii) proposing remedies to heal these divisions. A.L. Morton, for example, observed that "this theme of the division of man and his struggle to reintegrate himself lies at the heart of his symbolism."<sup>27</sup>

Blake criticized commercialism for two related reasons. First, as a craftsman he felt that capitalist society was too concerned with producing goods for profit and that the demands of the market left little room for the exercise of creative labour. Creative labour required the exercise of the imagination and Blake believed that the characteristic patterns of thought associated with capitalist society, its emphasis on rationalism and the scientific method, minimized the role of the imagination in the labour process. Second, to an Antinomian, the tendencies inherent in this type of thinking, to abstraction and quantification, were tantamount to blasphemy since they suppressed a crucial aspect of man's being: his spirit. Man's spirit was not amenable to the procedures and protocols of empirical observation. According to Blake, the denial of spirit, and, hence, the exercise of man's imaginative faculties, was the denial of man's very humanity.

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<sup>27</sup>A.L. Morton, The Everlasting Gospel: A Study in the Sources of William Blake, (New York: Haskell House, 1958), 13.

Blake's defence of the imagination did not entail a rejection of reason. Rather, he was reacting to those who were advancing the claim that all valid knowledge was derived from the methods employed by scientists and philosophers. In Milton, for example, he wrote of the need:

To cleanse the Fate of my spirit by self-examination,  
To Bathe in the waters of Life, to wash off the Not/human,  
I come in self-annihilation and the grandeur of/Inspiration,  
To cast off Rational Demonstration by Faith in /the Saviour,  
To cast off the rotten rags of Memory by Inspiration,  
To cast off Bacon, Locke and Newton from Albion's /covering  
To take off his filthy garments and clothe him with/Imagination.<sup>28</sup>

For Blake, these thinkers were guilty of imposing a pattern of thought that was essentially ideological. In other words, their methods were not, as they claimed, objective, but interpreted reality from a particular perspective. Moreover, this way of thinking was seen by Blake to characterize capitalist relations. In denying the unobservable spirit any role to play in the creation of knowledge, the rationalists were effectively denying the validity of the views of those who did not see the world through their lenses:

I see everything I paint in this world, but everybody does not see alike.  
To the eyes of the miser a guinea is more beautiful than the sun, and a  
bag worn with the use of money has more beautiful proportions than a  
vine filled with grapes. The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in  
the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way. As a man  
is, so he sees. As the eye is formed, such are its powers.<sup>29</sup>

For the capitalist, the 'Green thing' stood in the way of enclosure and profit, but for a cottager the tree was not an inert and discrete object but a living organism which had a variety of associations unintelligible to the 'improving' farmer intent on expanding rental revenues. The tree had different meanings and they were expressive not only of a different perspective but of different values. The class-based nature of the argument that is implied here can be found elsewhere in

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<sup>28</sup>William Blake, Milton, quoted in Stewart Crehan, Blake in Context (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan Ltd., 1984), 67-8.

<sup>29</sup>William Blake, quoted in *Ibid.*, 41.



Blake's writings. Thus, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell has been characterized as a metaphor for the type of social relations fostered by the twin evils of capitalism and rationalism.<sup>30</sup> For Blake, hell had a real social content:

As I was walking among the fires of hell, delighted with the enjoyments of genius, which to the Angels look like torment and insanity, I collected some of their proverbs; thinking that as the sayings used in a nation mark its character, so the proverbs of Hell show the nature of the infernal wisdom better than any description of a building or garment.<sup>31</sup>

There are two contrasting and antagonistic world views here. This is suggested by the very terms 'heaven' and 'hell': that of the educated sensibility/mind or 'the angel' who looks down on the world of the uneducated or poor or the inhabitants of hell. Indeed, the very terms not only carry different connotations (heaven: good, just, right; hell: bad, unjust, wrong) but they direct attention to divisions within and between men. The term 'angel' has an ethereal quality about it, divorced from material reality, while hell has earthly associations: a division symbolizing that between intellectual and manual labour that was increasingly coming to characterize the market economy. The angel's refuse to understand the meanings and values ('proverbs') which inform the actions of the poor and, instead, explain them in terms which are intelligible to them ('any description') but meaningless to the poor. Differences are eradicated and sameness established by criteria deriving from the angels. In other words, the poor are idealized: the relationship between the angels and the poor is characterized by an attitude of condescension on the part of the former to the latter. All valuations of human worth find expression in socially imposed criteria.

In probing beneath the surface of empirical reality, then, Blake was able to identify the norms and values which, to a culture increasingly educated in the principles of instrumental reason,

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<sup>30</sup>Crehan, passim.

<sup>31</sup>William Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, quoted in *Ibid.*, 145.

were seen to be mystical and irrational. Blake clearly identified his sympathies with the latter, because he finds in Hell the expressions of 'genius' which 'delighted' him.<sup>32</sup>

If Blake parodied the way in which the idea of heaven and hell was traditionally understood to indicate the ways in which social relations were working to divide men, he also parodied, in The Book of Urizen, the biblical conception of creation and the fall to suggest that a remedy for this state of affairs lay in man's own hands. Urizen is Blake's symbol for the unproductive labours of the deracinated intellect which

...creates by division and measurement and is frequently identified with Newton and Locke, who share with him the symbolism of wheels and of mathematically ordered stars. The starry wheels of Newton become the mill wheels of Satan.<sup>33</sup>

The last sentence indicates Blake's belief that capitalist social relations derived philosophical justification from rationalism. Blake did not so much indict industrialism as he did a particular way of thinking that was peculiar to capitalist society. His metaphor 'dark satanic mills' emphasizes the connection he perceived to exist between capitalist practice and rationalist thought. This phrase normally conjures up a picture of Lancashire textile mills, but for Blake it more appropriately refers to "...places where any mechanical or repetitive work takes place: schools, universities, building sites or real mills of any kind."<sup>34</sup> Blake, after all, spent nearly his entire working life in London and had no direct experience of the industrializing north. But he had a clear understanding of the vicissitudes visited by capitalism because they were impinging directly upon his own trade as a craftsman (engraver). In effect, Blake was attempting to diagnose capitalism's mentality and examine the destructive consequences flowing from this mentality:

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<sup>32</sup>One might note here that Thompson titled chapter 3 of The Making "Satan's Strongholds," and in it he examined those 'sub-political attitudes' that Blake called 'the proverbs of hell'.

<sup>33</sup>Morton, Everlasting Gospel, 23

<sup>34</sup>Crehan, Blake, 174.



Then left the sons of Urizen the plow and harrow, the loom  
 The hammer and the chisel and the rule and the compasses...  
 And all the arts of life, they chang'd into the arts of death.  
 The hourglass contemn'd because its simple workmanship  
 Was as the workmanship of the plowman and the water wheel  
 That raises water into cisterns, broken and burn's in fire  
 Because its workmanship was like the workmanship of shepherds  
 And in their stead intricate wheels invented, wheel without wheel,  
 To perplex youth in their outgoings and to bind to labours  
 Of day and night the myriads of Eternity, that they might file  
 And polish brass and iron hour after hour, laborious workmanship,  
 Kept ignorant of the use that they might spend the days of wisdom  
 In sorrowful drudgery to obtain a scanty pittance of bread,  
 In ignorance to view a small portion and think that All,  
 And call it demonstration, blind to all the simple ruler of life.<sup>35</sup>

Since Blake believed that men express their humanity through creative labour he felt that those who acceded to Urizen's demands were surrendering their humanity. They were in a fallen state. The source of the fall did not lie in a mystical event. It was a condition which men had imposed upon themselves. Consequently, salvation lay not in some transcendental state but in the exercise of man's own creative abilities in the present. In asserting this, Blake denied the argument, advanced by many religious denominations and by the Established Church, that man could do nothing to change the world because it had been created by an external being. Men could only obtain salvation if they submitted themselves to God's demands, communicated through the moral law and religious institutions. Blake repudiated this argument in its entirety:

It is against this all-enveloping 'Thou Shalt Not!' which permeated all religious persuasions in varying degrees in these years, that we can appreciate at its full height the stature of William Blake. It was in 1818 that he emerged from his densely allegorical prophetic books into a last phase of gnomic clarity in The Everlasting Gospel. Here he reasserted the values, the almost-Antinomian affirmation of the joy of sexuality, and the affirmation of innocence, which were present in his earlier songs. Almost every line may be seen as declaration of 'mental war' against Methodism and Evangelicism. Their 'vision of Christ' was his vision's 'greatest enemy'. Above all, Blake drew his bow at the teaching of humility and submission. It was this nay-saying humility which 'does the sun and moon blot out',

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<sup>35</sup>William Blake, The Four Zoas, quoted in Thompson, The Making, 488

'Distorts the heavens from Pole to Pole'/Rooting over with thorns and stems/ the buried soul and all its gems.<sup>36</sup>

Blake resisted the increasing pressures against human agency, encapsulated in the phrase 'Thou shalt not', and asserted instead the claim that 'Thou can' and, perhaps more strongly, 'Thou must' if men were to stop the drift into inhumanity. In doing so, he drew upon an Antinomian heritage.<sup>37</sup>

The key feature of the Antinomian tradition was its belief in the Everlasting Gospel. In essence, this was a revolutionary doctrine. It was based on the belief that God or the Holy Spirit was in all men and would realize Himself, through their activities in the temporal world at the beginning of the New Millennium. Millennial hopes, Thompson argued, typically flourished at times of extreme social dislocation, such as the 1640s or 1790s, when the belief that the new age was about to begin was encouraged by the apparent breakdown of existent social and political hierarchies.<sup>38</sup> The revolutionary aspect of this doctrine lay in its conception of spirit-in-man for this implied an egalitarianism which repudiated the moral law, derived from and sustained by a class-based religious hierarchy, and substituted it for a conception of society based on brotherhood. In the 1640s many believed that the new age's arrival was imminent and it is in this sense that one can see the Civil War as something other than a mere political struggle. Indeed, to view the Civil War primarily as a political struggle is to judge the 1640s anachronistically for it entails the application of criteria derived from a contemporary and secularized understanding of politics which had very little meaning for seventeenth-century Englishmen: they were less interested in reforming

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<sup>36</sup>Thompson, The Making, 411.

<sup>37</sup>Jack Lindsay, William Blake: His Life and Work (London: Constable, 1978), 48.

<sup>38</sup>Thompson, The Making, 52-5, 127-30.



political institutions and more concerned with a radical transformation of society. Political institutions were seen to be expressive of religious beliefs:

The English revolution was fought out in religious as well as political terms. Political comment was often clothed in religious form. The doctrine of free grace, the universal forgiveness of sins and the belief in an inner light accompanied the demands for freedom, equality and democracy that spread among the plebian ranks of the New Model Army, which had fought for its kind of society not the reformed social hierarchy of the Grandees. (emphasis in the original)<sup>39</sup>

The New Age that many hoped for was not, however, that which was realized. New sects were persecuted and their more democratically advanced political forms were gradually crushed. After the Restoration in 1660

...they were driven underground, preserving their faith in little, obscure conventicles, treasuring subversive pamphlets in old cupboards, holding the ideas of the revolution, as it were, in suspension, until towards the end of the eighteenth century, the world seemed ready for them again. Like Los, they "Kept the Divine Vision in time of trouble."<sup>40</sup>

They were able to keep "the Divine Vision" because the old enemies "The Beast and the Whore rule[d] without control"; that is, the State and the Established Church.<sup>41</sup> Indeed,

Without the Anglican Church, religious radicalism would have lacked the fuel on which to fire its memories of past struggles, its dreams of the future...The central fact about the Church of England in the eighteenth century was its complete identification with the state and the ruling class,

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<sup>39</sup>Crehan, Blake, 282. Crehan seems here to be summarizing, although he doesn't refer to it, a line of argument developed by Thompson: "The English Revolution was fought out in religious terms, not because the participants were confused as to their real interests, but because religion mattered. The wars were, in good measure, about religious authority. A man's right of property in his own conscience and religious allegiances had become just as real, and momentarily more real, than economic property rights." Thompson, "Peculiarities," 268.

<sup>40</sup>Morton, Everlasting Gospel, 36. Note the parallels between Morton and the line of argument in Thompson, The Making, 28-58.

<sup>41</sup>Thompson prefaces The Making with this quotation.

whose "natural religion" was a reaction against the religious fanaticism of the Civil War.<sup>42</sup>

The central difference between Antinomian and Erastian conceptions of religion can be expressed in the following manner. Since the Holy Spirit was in the hearts of all men, it was morally incumbent upon men to reject the compulsions and negatives of Erastianism. Antinomianism, that is, contained within it the potential for changing the social order. The opposite view was entailed in the idea of original sin because this fostered a subservient mentality - men had to subordinate themselves to God if they were to obtain grace and salvation. In essence, Erastianism "claimed an other-worldly sanction for its pretensions, bribing with 'allegorical' promises of reward or punishment in some future life."<sup>43</sup> It projected extra-temporal visions which served to deny man's own agency by claiming that the sufferings of the present would be compensated in the next life providing he was obedient in this one.<sup>44</sup> Blake, we have observed, rejected this conception of religion:

Then Los grew furious, raging: "Why stand we here/trembling around  
calling on God for help, and not ourselves, in whom God dwells,  
stretching a hand to save the falling man?"<sup>45</sup>

Blake's emphasis is upon man as the source of his own salvation. But whether he acted or not, Thompson claimed, depended upon the context and the extent to which it was conducive

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<sup>42</sup>Crehan, Blake, 282, 283.

<sup>43</sup>Morton, Everlasting Gospel, 31.

<sup>44</sup>An argument which, in Thompson's opinion, was taken a good deal further by Methodism. See the discussion in chapter 7, section II. In the context of this discussion about the way in which eighteenth-century religion functioned to deny man's agency, one should note the comparisons between Morton's comments upon Erastianism and the analogies that Kolakowski drew between secular and religious eschatologies: Leszek Kolakowski, "The Priest and the Jester," in Leszek Kolakowski, Towards a Marxist Humanism: Essays on the Left Today (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 9-37. Kolakowski's discussion is particularly helpful in understanding some of the arguments that Thompson developed in 1956.

<sup>45</sup>William Blake, Jerusalem; quoted in Morton, Everlasting Gospel, 44.

to the fostering of millennial hopes.<sup>46</sup> If the context was conducive then it was likely that revolutionary consequences would follow. If it was not, however, there would have been a tendency for men to seek an inner consolation in Spirit rather than allowing it to be corrupted by temporal influences.<sup>47</sup>

The belief that the new age was at hand was widely held in the 1790s.<sup>48</sup> In fact, with Blake:

...there came to a head the millenary apocalyptic traditions of christianity which over the centuries had tended to revive at moments of extreme crisis and which the church in its established forms had always found it difficult or impossible to control or contain. In these traditions...the demands for a total change in society were powerfully expressed...The experience of terror, ordeal, loss and isolation was linked with the spiritual release of re-birth, of re-generation, of emergence on a new level of living. In normal times the pattern could be limited to the individual existence, which was thus given a new sense of value and significance enabling it to carry on in a society which failed to be rejuvenated. But in times of crisis there was a return to the mass element, to the demand that society itself be re-born and purified of its injustices and divisions.<sup>49</sup>

Blake shared with many of his contemporaries a belief that the French Revolution had unleashed cathartic energies. In contrast to most, however, he came to hope not merely for a political reform but saw in these energies the potential for bringing about social regeneration. But Blake was not able to perceive any vehicle that would implement his ideals in the world. To a certain degree, Blake's problem was that experienced by the other poets: in being geographically isolated from the struggles of working people he was not able to see that their struggles were in defence of ideals that he himself defended. Specifically, the radical artisans and Blake wanted to

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<sup>46</sup>Thompson, The Making, 37.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 32ff.

<sup>48</sup>Thompson, " 'London'," 13.

<sup>49</sup>Lindsay, William Blake, xiii.

preserve their way of life as independent craftsmen: they wanted to retain the control which they exercised over the production process rather than been reduced to appendages of a market economy.

But there was also an important difference between Blake's critique and that of the other Romantic critics. Blake was isolated 'linguistically' from even the most democratically advanced reformers of the day, whereas Wordsworth and Coleridge were acquainted with some of them. They spoke in different language to Blake and the difference can be traced to the increasingly secular character of the older dissenting religions during the eighteenth century:

...the extreme originality of his definitions appears precisely in his huge struggle to secularize millenarian religion without losing what was vital and inspiring to it; that element which had kept alive in men, through years of hopeless division, a belief in an ultimate brotherhood and equality and which had given that belief a great unity force at crucial moments of change.

Blake uses the religious idiom because there was no other idiom that could affirm human unity with the fulness and dignity that he required. All the 'progressive' idioms of the day were keyed to bourgeois needs, even when stretched to the limits, as in Paine's plebian democracy or Godwin's abstract anarchism. Blake wanted to go beyond all such positions and to banish division and dis-integration from every sphere of social and individual experience.<sup>50</sup>

But he was drawing upon a tradition which many radicals in London and other urban centres had forgotten.<sup>51</sup> The religious beliefs of an increasing number of urban craftsmen during the eighteenth century had become more rational and genteel in proportion to their increasing prosperity. In the process, they were leaving behind them the enthusiasm and spontaneity which characterized the religion of the poor. As their religion became more rational, many of the older dissenting sects re-defined their relationship to the wider society. In the seventeenth century religion

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid., xiv.

<sup>51</sup>Thompson, The Making, Chapter 2, passim; Thompson, "Peculiarities," 268 ff.

was seen as an agency of social regeneration. By the late eighteenth century it was an important source for those who appealed for political reform in terms of rational arguments.

While Blake might sympathize with the political demands of Jacobinism in the early days of revolutionary enthusiasm, his attitude, as expressed in his poetry, began to shift during the course of the 1790s. An early poem, 'The French Revolution', identified the church, the monarchy and the law as the principal enemies. But, as Thompson's analysis of the poem 'London' demonstrated, Blake increasingly came to believe that the traditional objects of radical enmity were not the source of social problems. As a result, solutions other than political reform had to be considered.

#### IV

The argument will be advanced by quoting 'London' in its entirety:

I wander thro' each charter'd street,  
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow.  
And mark in every face I meet,  
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,  
In every infan'ts' cry of fear,  
In every voice, in every ban,  
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.

How the chimney-sweeper's cry  
Every blackning church appals,  
And the hapless soldier's sigh  
Runs in blood down palace walls.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear  
How the youthful Harlot's curse,  
Blasts the newborn infant's tear  
And blights with plagues the marriage hearse.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>William Blake, 'London'; quoted in Thompson, "'London'," 5-6.

The word 'charter,' Thompson suggested, would have carried associations in Blake's mind with cheating. If one reads the poem literally, then the context that it was written in might lead one to conclude that the ideals embodied in the poem were consonant with those being advanced by the Jacobins. This is not the way in which Thompson read 'London'. He argued that to do so is to misconstrue Blake's intentions. It is true that the Jacobins inveighed against cheating; but the type of cheating which they had in mind was political corruption.

Paine's enemies were monarchical, religious and hereditary institutions, all of which claimed sanction in the law. Specifically, Paine objected to the fact that the law was employed to defend vested interests. In opposition to Burke's argument that a charter represented a grant of freedom, Paine maintained that a "charter implied not a freedom but a monopoly."<sup>53</sup> Paine argued that he was:

...contending for the rights of the living, and against their being willed away, and controuled and contracted for by the manuscript authority of the dead.(emphasis in the original)<sup>54</sup>

For Paine, a monopoly meant that some had rights while others were denied them. But when Paine talked about rights he had in mind political rights. For example, Paine criticized the Test and Corporations Acts because they denied political citizenship to dissenters. This legislation was the product of the politico-religious conflicts of the seventeenth century and for many members of the older dissenting sects it made no sense in late eighteenth century England. Indeed, the political system in general was not seen to have kept pace with socio-economic change during the eighteenth century. Thompson argued that the constitutional settlement of 1688-89 had enshrined the sanctity of private property.<sup>55</sup> However, this arrangement benefitted certain forms of property

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<sup>53</sup>Thompson, "'London'," 9.

<sup>54</sup>Thomas Paine, quoted in Ibid.,

<sup>55</sup>Thompson, "Peculiarities," 258, 252.

and in particular landed wealth. As a result, many who had prospered during the eighteenth century came to feel a sense of grievance at their exclusion from the polity. It was these groups that Paine's arguments appealed to:

Paine's writings were in no special sense aimed at working people, as distinct from farmers, tradesmen and professional men. His was a doctrine suited to agitation among 'members unlimited'; but he did not challenge the property rights of the rich nor the doctrines of Laissez Faire. His own affiliations were most obviously with the men of the unrepresented manufacturing and trading classes...In terms of political democracy he wished to level all inherited distinctions and privileges; but he gave no countenance to economic levelling. In political society every man must have equal rights as a citizen; in economic society he must naturally remain employer and employed.<sup>56</sup>

Paine's arguments appealed to the sensibilities of those who had enriched themselves by absorbing the principles of instrumental calculation. He couched his arguments in terms of rational demonstration and revealed an

...unbounded faith in representative institutions: in the power of reason: in (Paine's words) "a mass of sense lying in a dormant state" among the common people, and in the belief that "man, were he not corrupted by governments, is naturally the friend of man and that human nature is not of itself vicious." And all this expressed in an intransigent, brash, even cocksure tone, with the self-educated man's distrust of traditions and institutes of learning...and a tendency to avoid complex theoretical problems with a dash of empiricism and an appeal to Common Sense.<sup>57</sup>

There was, then, nothing in Paine's writings that threatened the socio-economic hierarchies. He inveighed only against the political ones. The most successful parts of The Rights of Man were those chapters in the second part dealing with the 'social question'. There, Paine advanced arguments for a more equitable system of taxation; one, that is, that was not designed to sustain a system of absenteeism, patronage, nepotism, graft and jobbery but related tax to productive enterprise:

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<sup>56</sup>Thompson, The Making, 104.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.



It was this part...which effected a bridge between the older traditions of the Whig Commonwealthsman and the radicalism of Sheffield Cutlers, Norwich weavers and London artisans. Reform was related by these proposals, to their daily experience.<sup>58</sup>

Paine's arguments resonated in the minds of those sensitized to the traditions of 'the freeborn Englishman'.<sup>59</sup> They reinforced those notions of the 'just price' that Thompson encapsulated in the phrase 'the moral economy',<sup>60</sup> and in the 'rhetoric of constitutionalism' that dominated eighteenth-century political thinking.<sup>61</sup> In conceiving of their principal foes as 'God, King and Law',<sup>62</sup> the Jacobins failed to understand the realities of political and economic power. Instead of seeing political institutions as the symptom of social problems they saw them as the problem. This conception of political activity had an important short-term and a long-term consequence.

In 1789, the memory of the American Revolution and the immediate experience of the French Revolution might have led men to draw the conclusion that reason could order political society from first principles, rather than the existing order justifying its existence by deferring to the authority of the past. By 1794 some of the 'reasonable' men of five years earlier were in active

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 102.

<sup>59</sup>Thompson, The Making, 84-110.

<sup>60</sup>Thompson used this phrase to indicate the extent to which the actions of people during the eighteenth century were guided by criteria other than modern economic factors: "Until the late eighteenth century the common people of...England adhered to a deeply felt 'moral economy' in which the very notion of an 'economic price' for corn (that is, a dissociation between economic values on the one hand and social and moral obligations on the other) was an outrage to their culture..." Thompson, "Peculiarities," 292. The notion is discussed in a formal way only briefly in The Making: Thompson, The Making, 64-68. However, Thompson elaborated on his arguments in: E.P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," Past and Present, no.50, 1971, 76-136.

<sup>61</sup>Thompson, The Making, 85-88.

<sup>62</sup>I borrow this phrase from one of Thompson's articles: E.P. Thompson, "God and King and Law," New Reasoner, no.3, Winter 1957-58, 69-86.



complicity with 'Old Corruption's' attempts to suppress plebian claims. Thompson explained this re-orientation in the following way. In 1789 the cause of political reform had been advanced by well-to-do members of dissenting sects. They were interested in promoting their material interests. As the revolutionary initiative percolated down the social hierarchy other groups saw in the idea of reform a means by which they might promote their interests. But the interests of the latter were not those of the former. In fact, as different groups clamoured for reform it became apparent that their respective interests stood in an antagonistic relationship to one another. In other words, had plebian interests been accommodated they would have threatened those of the 'middle class'. Paine might have justified the need for reform in terms of the 'rights of man'. But these rights, as he expressed them in theory, were vacuous. When they were given material expression, however, they entailed consequences which neither he, nor those to whom he initially appealed, could have anticipated. The reason for this stemmed from the manner in which Paine made his case. This was defended, as we observed, in terms of the principles of reason. This language made sense to an educated audience, but it made no sense to the uneducated poor. In effect, Paine's argument was an abstract one. It presented a partial view of reality as reality. When his ideas were received by the poor they were interpreted in a different manner and the response of the propertied revealed the abstract qualities of the 'rights of man'. These were the rights of bourgeois man only.

The long-term effects of Jacobinism can be seen in the way in which its interpretation of social problems structured the development of the labourist tradition in Britain. That is, the tradition which eventually shaped the modern Labour Party. This tradition has deep roots in the rational theology of the dissenting and prosperous dissenting urban artisans of the eighteenth century. These groups were particularly receptive to Paine's arguments and they were to mould them into a secular ideology. This ideology provided the mentalité from whence the defence of working class interests were to be advanced:

Secularism is the ideological thread which binds London labour history together, from the London Jacobins and Place, through the anti-religious Owenites and cooperators, the anti-religious journalists and booksellers, through the free-thinking Radicals who followed Holyoake and flocked to Bradlaugh's Hall of Science, to the Social Democratic Federation and the London Fabians with their unconcealed taste for chapel rhetoric.<sup>63</sup>

Although most of the theorists of the working class have come from this tradition, this was not the only tradition. One was also developing in the industrializing north. Working people in northern England saw the world in a different light. Moreover, they had not assimilated the mores of educated culture. They expressed themselves, not in terms supplied by rationalism, but in those to be found in the enthusiasm and spontaneity of chapel rhetoric. When they talked of reform it was closer to the sense understood by the seventeenth-century religious dissident: reform was a means to an end and not the end itself. For the Jacobin, and those in the tradition of the free-thinking Paineite, reform was a means by which one's material interests might be advanced within the existing organisation of society. For the one, reform meant social regeneration; for the other it meant institutional reform. In modern terms, the contrast was between revolution and reformism.

Blake, Thompson argued, rejected the Paineite position because it was founded upon an abstract view of reality. For Blake, the source of man's corruption did not lie in corrupt political institutions. Thus, where Blake writes 'mind forg'd manacles' an earlier draft of the poem shows that he had intended to write 'german forg'd manacles'. "The reference was of course to the Hanoverian Monarchy, and perhaps to the expectation that Hanoverian troops would be used against British reformers."<sup>64</sup> This revision, Thompson continued, is suggestive of Blake's growing realization that the compulsions acting upon and constraining men are not only of a different order

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<sup>63</sup>Eric J. Hobsbawm, Primitive Rebels, 128, quoted in Thompson, The Making, 58.

<sup>64</sup>Thompson, "London," 14-15.

to that suggested in the Jacobin argument, but have a much stronger determinate influence on men's attitudes and actions. The phrase 'german forg'd manacles' had weaker associations than 'mind forg'd manacles' because it implied that the constraints which were imposed upon man were done so by other men. Since Paine assumed that men were endowed with the capacity of reason he could argue that the constraints could be removed by an appeal to rational argument and demonstration. The line which appeared in the published version of the poem carried with it stronger associations because it intended to emphasize the fact that the constraints upon men were those which they, 'the mind', had imposed upon themselves. This change was indicative of Blake's growing realization that the issues between freedom and tyranny were not as clear cut as they were once thought to be.

If the Jacobins were advancing their claims in the name of rationalist principles then Blake advanced his from premises defined by Antinomian beliefs. This interpretation, Thompson argued, is suggested by the fact that not only does Blake use the word 'mark' on three separate occasions in the poem, but this term replaces the phrase 'And See' that he had originally intended to employ:

... 'mark' undoubtedly came through to the reader with a much stronger biblical resonance. The immediate allusion called to mind will most probably have been 'the mark of the beast' as in Revelation XIII, 16-17: "And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hands or on their foreheads... And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name."<sup>65</sup>

Behind Blake's use of the term 'mark' lingers an allusion to buying and selling. Since he said that it is on all men then he intended by its use to indicate the extent to which no one can escape the taint of commercialism. Blake was, after all, drawing upon a tradition of radical dissent which had for decades

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid , 11-12.

...sermonized and pamphleteered against the Beast (Anti-Christ) who had his servitors 'which worshipped at his image'...social radicalism equated these with usurers, with the rich, with those successful in buying and selling.<sup>66</sup>

Blake, as we have seen, wrote in a context of millennial revival; that is, at a time when an increasing number of people were coming to believe that the destruction of Babylon was pending and the poor would "turn to their own account the imprecations against kings, false prophets and the rich."<sup>67</sup> Moreover, Blake was writing at a time when the visible impact of commerce must have been upper-most in his mind. It is in this sense that Thompson suggested that the term 'charter'd' must be understood:

One might think of the chartered companies which, increasingly drained of function, were bastions of privilege within the government of the City. Or again, of the monopolistic privileges of the East India Company, whose ships were so prominent in the commerce of the Thames, which applied in 1793 for twenty years' renewal of its charter, and which was under bitter attack in the reformers' press.<sup>68</sup>

The material which Blake drew upon to construct the poem was all around him and in one sense the poem can be read as a description of his perceptions. At this level the poem can be said to be

...organized around the street-cries of London. In the first verse we are placed with Blake...and we 'see' with his eyes. But in the second, third and fourth verses we are hearing, and the passage from sight to sound has an effect of reducing the sense of distance or of the alienation of the observer from the object of the first verse, and of immersing us within the human condition through which he walks. We see one thing at a time as distinct moments of perception, although, by the end of the first verse, these perceptions become cumulative and repetitive...we hear many things simultaneously. (emphasis in the original)<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 7.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 18-19.

We 'see' and 'hear' what Blake sees and hears; we are presented with an image which is not the view of an outsider but that of one who lives and suffers that which is described. This understanding is indicated by the fact that the 'mark' which Blake talks about is one that afflicts all men, including Blake himself. This is the mark of the beast. Given the meanings assigned to this by radical dissent, Blake was signalling the extent to which all men were trapped within the web of commercial relations. In adopting this approach, Blake's

...treatment of the City departs from a strong literary convention...the convention was, in some part, a country man's convention, in some part a class convention - generally both. From which ever aspect, plebian London was seen from the outside as a spectacle.<sup>70</sup>

In this convention the views of the poor were mediated through attitudes of condescension. Reality was presented in terms of the interests of the observer and thus appeared to be a series of episodic and discrete moments. "Blake's 'London'", however,

...is not seen from without as spectacle. It is seen, or suffered, from within by a Londoner. And what is unusual about this image of the-human-condition-as-hell is that it offers the City as a unitary experience and not as a theatre of discrete episodes.<sup>71</sup>

'London' was a description of the human condition as hell because the mark of the beast is on all men. Yet the poem was not, Thompson insisted, a description of the human condition:

...'the human condition', unless further qualified or disclosed, is nothing but a kind of metaphysical full-stop...But 'the human condition' is what poets make poetry out of, and not what they end up with. The poem is about a particular human condition. (emphasis in the original)<sup>72</sup>

Were Blake simply describing the human condition then it would be difficult to explain why the poem carried not only a tone of indignation, but also one of compassion for those who suffered the

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 20.

mark of the Anti-christ. Neither would be present if Blake believed that the world, as he described it, was an expression of an inherent human nature.<sup>73</sup> The millennial context which structured the manner in which the poem entered the public realm does not allow one to draw this conclusion. And both indignation and compassion are clearly expressed in 'London':

The tone of compassion falls on those who are in hell, the sufferers; but the tone of indignation falls upon the institutions of repression - the mind forg'd manacles, blackning church, palace, marriage hearse.<sup>74</sup>

In this, Blake expressed an affinity with and defined a distance from Jacobinism:

...while 'London' is a poem which a 'Jacobinal' Londoner could respond to and accept, it is scarcely one which he could write. The average Painite or supporter of the London Corresponding Society would have been unlikely to have written 'mind forg'd' (since the manacles would have been seen as wholly exterior, imposed by priestcraft and kingcraft); and the voice of indignation would probably have drowned the voice of compassion, since most Painites would have found it difficult to accept Blake's vision of man as being simultaneously oppressed (although by very much the same forces as those described by Paine) and in a self-victimized or Fallen State. One might seem to contradict the other. And behind this would lie...ulterior differences of emphasis both as to the 'cause' of this human condition and also as to its 'remedy.'

For if Blake found congenial the Painite denunciations of the repressive institutions of state and church, it did not follow that man's redemption from this state could be effected by a political re-organization of these institutions alone. (my emphasis)<sup>75</sup>

The Jacobins, having succumbed to a 'spirit' of rationalism, saw only surface appearances and were not able to comprehend the fact that these embodied attitudes and values which they were themselves effectively endorsing. By endorsing them they were duplicating that sense of condescension towards the poor that had characterized the older paternalistic framework

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<sup>73</sup>It is worth comparing Thompson's argument here with his criticisms of W.H. Auden: see chapter 5, section 1 below.

<sup>74</sup>Thompson, "London," 22.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 24.

of social relations. A Jacobin might indict the monarchy, the church and the law as institutions of repression but he would have little to say on behalf of the poor because their views did not matter to him. But Blake, in empathizing with the poor, signalled a different historical possibility; he recognized that the needs of the poor were not the same as those of the 'bourgeoisie'. Neither the problems afflicting man nor the solutions appropriate to them could be specified with any clarity while men continued to limit their horizons to empirical observation since the objects of perception were an expression of much deeper ailments. The source of these ailments and their remedy rested, in Blake's mind, with the actions (and inactions) of men.

There remains, finally, one important aspect of Thompson's interpretation of 'London' to discuss. It was suggested at the end of section 2 that Wordsworth and Coleridge were never fully to appreciate the dynamics of their society. This failure was attributed to the fact that they had invested too much faith in the early potential of the French Revolution. I have also observed that the Jacobins placed their trust in the power of reason to advance their political claims. For Blake, the attraction of reason had disabling consequences, because a mind untutored in anything other than sense perception and reason will only be able to conceive of that which has been defined for it by these 'organs'.<sup>76</sup> This pattern of thinking prevented one from imagining alternative social arrangements. Blake rejected this idiom and his rejection was expressed in the manner in which he interpreted London. Until 'London', the city was typically presented in a Realist or formalistic mode. Blake, however,

...saw the city imaginatively. He perceived in its familiar landmarks, its streets, buildings, people and palaces not empirical facts, but symbols: a symbolic reality behind a surface appearance. What he saw in London,

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<sup>76</sup>William Blake, There is so Natural Religion, in The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. David N. Erdman: 2, (Berkley: University of California Press, 1982).

he interpreted imaginatively. Tyburn, for example ...became symbolic of the cruelty of the moral law masking as religion.<sup>77</sup>

One cannot, Thompson's article maintained, understand Blake's 'London' unless one addressed the 'utopian' qualities that structured its very meaning. There is, he wrote,

...an ulterior symbolic organization behind the literal organization...And the symbolic organization is within the clearly conceived and developing logic of market relations. Blake does not only list the symptoms; within the developing imagery which unites the poem he also discloses their causes. From the first introduction of 'charter'd' he never loses hold of the image of buying and selling although these words themselves are never used. 'Charter'd' both grants from on high and licenses and it limits and excludes. If we recall Paine it is a 'selling and buying of freedom.' What are bought and sold in 'London' are not only goods and services, but human values, affections and vitalities. From freedom we move (with 'mark') to a race marked by buying and selling, the worshippers of the beast and his images. Then we move through the values in ascendent scale: goods are bought and sold (street-cries), childhood (the chimney-sweep), human life (the soldier), and, in the final verse, youth, beauty and love, the source of life is bought and sold in the figure of the diseased harlot who, herself, is only the other side of the 'marriage hearse'. In a series of literal, unified images of great power, Blake compresses an indictment of the acquisitive ethic, endorsed by the institutions of state, which divides man from man, brings him into mental and moral bondage, destroys the sources of joy, and brings, as its consequence, blindness and death. (my emphasis)<sup>78</sup>

According to Thompson, then, Blake's indictment was not directed at the characteristic institutions of capitalist society but at the value system which gave these institutions their specificity. As a result, it was futile to seek change by reforming or capturing political and economic institutions. Indeed, Blake was eventually to conclude that he was

...really sorry to see my countrymen trouble themselves about politics...princes appear to me to be fools; houses of commons and houses

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<sup>77</sup>Crehan, Blake, 76.

<sup>78</sup>Thompson, "London," 21-22.



of lords to me to be fools; they seem to be something else besides human life.<sup>79</sup>

In other words, there was little point in changing social institutions unless men changed the way in which they viewed one another. Effective social change presupposed a radical transformation of society's values. When Thompson wrote about revolutionizing social relationships he meant it in this sense.

It is one thing to talk about alternative values, but something quite different to put these into practice. I have suggested, however, that the values which the Romantic poets in general, and Blake in particular, asserted were similar to those defended by working people. The reason for the affinity lies in the fact that these values were seen to be expressed in and through creative labour. This type of labour, Thompson argued in The Making, characterized many occupations in the late eighteenth century. Although it was increasingly threatened by capitalist methods of production, working people did attempt to resist this onslaught. In effect, the conflicts which Thompson elucidated in The Making can be characterized as a struggle between two value systems and two ways of life. The precise nature of the threat, Thompson suggested, was not clearly recognized by working people until at least the late 1820s. Rather than conceiving of their antagonists in class terms working people continued to think in categories which, by the end of the eighteenth century, were becoming increasingly anachronistic. As a result they were not able to articulate effective strategies to challenge capitalist interests. There is more than just a hint in The Making and in Thompson's adjacent writings that, had working people been better equipped intellectually, the course of English history might have been different.

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<sup>79</sup>William Blake, quoted in E.P. Thompson, "The New Left," New Reasoner, no.9, Summer 1959, 1. This quotation prefaces an article in which Thompson outlined his aspirations for the New Left, and is immediately followed by the claim that "we share his dilemma today."

In concluding his study of the making of the English working class Thompson wrote that working people

...fought, not the machine, but the exploitive and oppressive relationships intrinsic to industrial capitalism. In these same years, the great Romantic criticism of Utilitarianism was running its parallel but altogether separate course. After William Blake, no mind was at home in both cultures, nor had the genius to interpret the two traditions to each other. It was a muddled Mr Owen who offered to disclose 'the new moral world', while Wordsworth and Coleridge had withdrawn behind their own ramparts of disenchantment. Hence these years at times appear to display, not a revolutionary challenge, but a resistance movement, in which both the Romantics and the Radical craftsmen opposed the annunciation of Acquisitive Man. In the failure of the two traditions to come to a point of junction, something was lost. How much we cannot be sure, for we are among the losers.<sup>80</sup>

Had the junction been effected, the challenge might have been, consistently, a revolutionary one. It was not until the 1880s that William Morris signalled the possibility that the two traditions might be joined. However, as I argue in the next chapter, Morris effected only a partial junction.

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<sup>80</sup>Thompson, The Making, 915.

## Chapter 2

### Romanticism and Socialism: Morris

E.P. Thompson's biography, William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary was originally published in 1955 and a second edition issued in 1977. The first edition appeared in the context of the Cold War and was directed specifically at a non-academic audience in the labour Movement. It was written in an "embattled mood" and Thompson admits that he "allowed some hectoring political moralisms, as well as a few Stalinist pieties to intrude upon the text."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the book was researched, written and published while he was still a member of the CPGB.<sup>2</sup> That is why "a somewhat reverent notion of Marxism as a received orthodoxy" prevented him from articulating an argument:

which, at a submerged level, structured [it] when it was first written...I was reaching towards a conclusion which, in the end, I turned away from out of piety towards politics-as-text and timidity before the term utopian.<sup>3</sup>

The conclusion that Thompson was "reaching towards" was a defence of utopianism as a valid form of political discourse in its own right and one which did not have to be screened according to the prescriptions of Marxist texts.<sup>4</sup> In other words, he was claiming that Marxism did

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<sup>1</sup>Thompson, William Morris (1976), 769.

<sup>2</sup>See also E.P. Thompson, "The Murder of William Morris," Arena, 2(7), 1951, 9-28; E.P. Thompson, "William Morris and the Moral Issues Today," Arena, 2(8), 1951, 25-28.

<sup>3</sup>Thompson, William Morris (1976), 769, 791-92.

<sup>4</sup>Thompson was alluding to a text which claimed that Morris' contribution to socialism had to be assessed in relation to standard Marxist authorities in the Leninist tradition: Paul Meier, La Pensee Utopique de William Morris. The reference is in Thompson, William Morris (1976), 780-84.

not have a monopoly on what counted as adequate knowledge: other sources could be drawn upon to serve as a guide to political action. This type of argument, however, was not an acceptable conclusion for an active member of the BCP to draw in the mid-1950s, for the Party saw in ideas not sanctioned by canonical authority evidence of residual bourgeois thought. This was an attitude that Thompson was to encounter repeatedly in 1956 and it was one which eventually led to his resignation from the party.<sup>5</sup>

Utopianism or speculative thought about the future was, in particular, frowned upon by the orthodox Marxist tradition:

...the critique of utopian socialism in The Communist Manifesto and, even more, in Engels' Socialism, Utopian and Scientific gave rise in the subsequent Marxist tradition to a doctrinal antimony: science (good), utopianism (bad). At any point after 1850 scientific socialism had no more need for utopias (and doctrinal authority for suspecting them). Speculation as to the society of the future was repressed, and displaced by attention to strategy. Beyond the 'revolution' little more could be known than certain skeletal theoretical propositions, such as the "two stages" foreseen in the critique of the Gotha Programme.<sup>6</sup>

Marx and Engels associated utopian socialism with the work of Saint Simon, Fourier and Robert Owen. These early socialists presented utopianism in an abstract format. They conceived of an ideal society which was contrasted with the present. But they seemed to assume that this utopia would somehow appear miraculously. For the early Marxists, this vision tended to divert attention from the sources of exploitation in the present. According to Thompson, Morris' utopianism was of a different genre. Although Morris did speculate as to the possible character of the future, he maintained that the type of future that men could anticipate would depend upon their own efforts and choices. Moreover, such choices would depend upon the context that men found themselves in and the material and intellectual resources available to them. For Morris, social

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<sup>5</sup>See the discussion in chapter 4 below.

<sup>6</sup>Thompson, William Morris (1976), 787-88.

change was desirable because the present was so undesirable, and the rationale behind his speculations about the future lay in the fact that such reflections demonstrated alternative ways of living. In showing men these possibilities, Morris was attempting to demonstrate the way in which existing social relations did not promote their best interests.

According to Thompson, the basic difference between scientific socialism and Morris' utopian socialism was this: the former insisted that one's material interests could be determined by reference to abstract historical laws, while the latter sought to locate them in the context of human relations. Orthodox Marxism abstracted human beings from their material context and imputed interests to them. In this scenario, socialism was seen to be historically necessary. Thompson's critique of this interpretation of socialism will be discussed in the next two chapters. This chapter examines Thompson's claim that Morris drew upon the Romantic heritage, that was outlined in chapter 1, in order to fashion a moral justification for socialism.

## I

William Morris was born in 1834 and came to intellectual maturity in an artistic context very much defined by the legacies of Byron, Shelley and especially Keats.<sup>7</sup> Morris' early revolt against capitalist society was inspired by his hatred of commercialism's effects on art and the demeaning light that this society held the creative artist. His first response to capitalism was typical of the Romantic artist of the day; rather than challenging his society he used art as a means by which he might find a refuge from it.

Morris' early work represents a deliberate attempt to distance himself from the present and to return to a past where beauty, uncorrupted by commercialism, might be found. Yet this very

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<sup>7</sup>Thompson, William Morris (1955), 30-48.

retreat was to play a crucial role in "liberating" his mind "from the categories of bourgeois thought",<sup>8</sup> that he had been born into. Morris discovered in the past the idea of society as a community of real human beings and one that was organized according to radically different values to those of his own. History was eventually to provide him with a yardstick to evaluate the present and to demonstrate, per contra the claims of bourgeois ideologues, that the present was more an expression of particular material interests than that of an unchanging human nature. For Morris, history came to perform a polemical role: his politics were to be defined in terms of his understanding of the historical process. Precisely the same can be said of the relationship between history and politics in Thompson's work.

Although Morris did not become involved in socialist politics until the 1880s there were, Thompson argued, a number of important early influences in guiding him to socialism. Perhaps the most significant one was the way in which Morris came to understand the concept of labour as something which depended upon the manner in which social relationships were organized. Thompson emphasized the role played by Carlyle and Ruskin in shaping Morris' thought on this question. Carlyle, for example, indicted commercialism for corrupting everything it came into contact with. Against those who defended the profit motive with an appeal to rational arguments he made an

...appeal to the heart, "to obligations sacred as man's life itself". But when these obligations came to be described they often took on the colour of feudal obligations and relations; relations which, however severe and binding, at least appeared as human relations, relations between men, and not between men and an impersonal labour market.

It is in Carlyle's disgust at the reduction by capitalism of all human values to cash values that his greatness lies: it is this which exercised most influence over Morris. (emphasis in the original)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid, 59.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 61.

Carlyle's social criticism was premised on the belief that human worth could not be reduced to economic categories. However, his insistence on work as a source of valuation did not make a distinction between different types of work and could, therefore, be just as easily assimilated to the capitalist work ethic. With Ruskin, however, Thompson found a resonance of Wordsworth's notion that value could only be derived through primary human relationships and, in particular, through creative labour based upon cooperative effort. Although Ruskin was not the first nineteenth-century critic to stress the moral function of work, he was the first to accord creative labour this significance. In so doing, Ruskin focused attention upon the different principles informing creative and capitalist labour:

Every man, Ruskin asserted, has creative powers slumbering within him...Like Carlyle he believed that through labour man achieved his own humanity; but with Ruskin there was this difference - the labour must be creative labour, summoning up the intellectual and moral - and not only the physical and mechanical - powers of the labourer. This led him to a direct contrast between medieval and nineteenth-century society.<sup>10</sup>

Ruskin's observation, Thompson claimed, was a revolutionary one because it recognized two radically different ways of organizing production: production for need and production for greed. The significance of this observation, however, was to be lost on Morris for nearly thirty years. Morris might have valued creative labour, but he saw no mechanism by which his ideals might be given substantive expression.

In the 1850s Morris revolted against his society because it seemed to offer nothing other than shoddy goods and he made no effort to understand the rationale - the profit motive - for this. The values which the artist nourished appeared to have no place in the world. The very fact that men could believe that there was no possibility of change, Thompson argued, induced them to withdraw from the concerns of everyday life:

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 65.

The aspirations of the great romantic poets denied by the advances of industrial capitalism and the triumph of a philistine middle-class, were being driven into a dream world of imagination...The romantic movement was escaping to a world of "romance", in compensation for the poverty of life, where beauty, the energies of youth, love and heroism, were conjured up in ancient heroic or medieval chivalric settings, or by frequent allusions to the past, or by hypnotic sensuous incantation. But always in this dream world these values are evoked with a savour of nostalgia, of loss, of the unattainable.<sup>11</sup>

Morris was to learn the value of creative labour, and the manner in which it was founded upon different values to those driving capitalism, through his own experiences as a craftsman. Of critical importance here was 'The Firm', which Morris established in the early 1850s in a conscious attempt to produce quality goods. In establishing The Firm, Morris was heavily influenced by

...John Ruskin who directed attention to the poisoning of the very sources of art and of creative labour in industrial capitalism, and who advocated the community of artists which The Firm at first sought to embody, working equally with their minds and with their hands.<sup>12</sup>

If Morris had intended to demonstrate, through the products of The Firm, that it was possible for men to express themselves creatively in bourgeois society, he was to become disappointed. His products soon came to acquire the status of bourgeois respectability. The very fact, moreover, that people were willing to buy cheap imitations of his designs showed to him the gross superficiality of this culture: it was interested in style and indifferent to the creative energies embodied in the process of production.

The Firm was eventually to open Morris' eyes to the workings of the market economy. His immediate response, however, was one of intense despair. Indeed, the poetry of his middle years

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 123.



reflects a complete abandonment of any possibility of realizing alternative values within Victorian society. In this, Morris was registering a widespread characteristic of Romanticism by mid-century:

It is the total absence of hope which is new - hope not for a future life, but for human fulfilment on earth. Moreover, this absence of hope fell within the context of a society whose basic ethic was that of naked individualism, where every pressure tended to isolate man from his neighbour, to inflate the subjective ego, and to deny the objective values of men acting together in society, striving for goals both wider and more permanent than those of the individual's satisfaction.<sup>13</sup>

Thompson identified The Earthly Paradise as the principal example of "...the poetry of despair."<sup>14</sup> The poem established Morris in the Victorian public's mind as a romantic dreamer. Thus, when he came to invest his energies in political causes he was perceived to be an impracticable idealist. To a certain extent, Morris' work deserved this interpretation because the poem treated beauty as merely the expression of the poet's subjective experiences, and these were seen to have no connection with everyday life. In another respect, though, the poem did represent a critique of Victorian society because it sought to sustain values denied and frustrated by that society.

The Earthly Paradise expressed Morris' nadir of despondency. After writing it he was to begin the long climb back up the cliffs of hope. If he could find nothing in a materialistic civilization worth worrying about he was to find something in his encounter with the Icelandic sagas. In the stories of the struggles of poverty-stricken people on a remote and barren twelfth-century island he was to find human qualities of

[e]ndurance and courage in the face of a hostile material and social environment...courage not in the presence of hope and success, but in the face of failure and defeat and hostile fate; the courage which was part defiance, part an assertion of the dignity and independence of man - this

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 157.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 161.

quality so opposed to the self-indulgent melancholy of romanticism in decline.<sup>15</sup>

But he also discovered something else of prime importance: nothing will ever change by thought alone. Man only manifests himself through his deeds. In recognizing this fact, Morris was coming to realize that if he wanted to change the world then he had to act. In terms of the life and struggles of the twelfth-century Norsmen, modern society appeared to be wholly deficient. Icelandic society, to Morris, seemed to be one:

...whose aims had something of the noble and heroic about them. They could not be applied within a society whose dominant ethic was self-interest. So it was that there ran through Morris' response to the sagas and to Iceland a continual sense of the contrast between the ideals of the northern past and those of his own society.<sup>16</sup>

This contrast was to provide Morris with a standard by which to evaluate and to criticize his own society. The discovery of hope and courage, and the realization that men express themselves through their actions was important in preparing Morris for political action. Morris, in other words, found grounds for hope in the present from his interpretation of the historical record. If men had demonstrated in the past that they could exert their will over a hostile environment there was no reason to believe that they could not do the same in the present. The only difference between the past and the present was the absence of a belief that it was possible to make changes in the present.

But the will to change was not, by itself, sufficient. The question that posed itself to Morris was how was this new found sense of hope to find practical realization. What, in the world, would act as the agent to give substance to his ideals? In the early 1880s he was to discover the working class. Yet, as late as the 1870s he could not conceive of them as an agency of change for

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 217-20.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 222.

he remained too heavily influenced by Ruskin's writings which, while increasingly critical of middle class values, offered few constructive suggestions for the purposive role of working people. In a series of letters addressed to working men, Fors Clavigera (1871-75), Ruskin attributed the cause of the Paris Commune to a selfish and irresponsible bourgeoisie. He drew parallels between the policies followed by the French middle class with those being pursued in England and suggested the possibility of a similar sequence of events in England. Although Ruskin condemned bourgeois attitudes he was not able to identify with working people for he saw in the burning of the Louvre a potential which horrified him. Ruskin criticized capitalist society but offered no substitutes. He assumed that working people could and should be like him. He did not assume that they had distinctive interests. He did not do so because his critique ignored the material basis of social relationships. In depriving his critique of a material content he was not able to realize the radically incompatible character of working and middle class interests. Moreover, he ignored the probability that change would require political struggle because the bourgeoisie would not surrender their advantages by an appeal to rational argument.

Although Ruskin was critical of the commercial middle class, his criticisms shared certain of their assumptions in its belief that the working class did not and could not have its own distinctive interests. This was a characteristic that was to be found among a latter generation of social critics.<sup>17</sup> It was also a feature of Morris' thinking until the late 1870s. His ability to break free from the assumptions of the dominant ideology constitutes for Thompson one of the most significant intellectual developments of the nineteenth century. How did this happen? According to Thompson several factors converged to effect this 'ideological rupture' in the consensual fabric of late nineteenth century thought.

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<sup>17</sup>See the discussion in chapter 5, section 3, and chapter 6, section 2 below.

One of the most important influences acting on Morris was his involvement with 'The Anti-Scrape'. This was the name which Morris gave to the society for the preservation of Ancient Buildings. It had been established in 1878 in an attempt to resist the onslaught of financial speculators who, in Morris' mind, were destroying national monuments in the name of greed and profit. Morris' involvement with the Anti-Scrape brought him into direct conflict with the property sanctions governing Victorian Society. For Morris, the architectural revival of mid-nineteenth century England illustrated the imaginative bankruptcy of philistinism.<sup>18</sup> The revival was more interested in the styles than the substance of previous ages. The nineteenth-century architectural establishment appeared to believe that it was possible to duplicate an old building by referring to a text. But Morris was well aware, as a craftsman in his own right, that it was one thing to copy 'slavishly' a pattern and quite another to employ a text or an idea to aid creative initiative.<sup>19</sup> Creative work, as Morris discovered through his experiences in The Firm, expressed something of the aspirations of those who had originally brought the artifact into being. Merely to copy a style was to suppress, as irrelevant, the substance behind the surface appearances. As Blake might have put it, such procedures entailed the denial of man's spirit. In other words, no attempt was made to understand the intentions of the original craftsmen - their material context and experiences were ignored. The intentions of the latter were not those of the bourgeois speculator; rather, they were an expression of certain human capacities which the acquisitive ethic frustrated.

The significance of these biographical details lies in the fact that Morris' experiences were helping him to see history in a wholly different light from the way in which it was normally characterized. Such presentations read the past in terms of the interests of dominant groups in the present. Since the hegemonic ideology only valued material success other human values could be

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<sup>18</sup>Thompson, William Morris (1955), 271-80.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 131-34.

written out of the past. As a result, history assumed a teleological character with the present been interpreted as the latest stage of a self-evident process. What was missing from such historical accounts was any sense of the past as a process of conflict and contradiction; of the manner in which certain interests were imposed upon others.

In other words, the combination of Morris' experience as a craftsman and his involvement with the Anti-Scrape was beginning to teach him a different sense of history. This was one which recognized that human wants could not be reduced to a common denominator. Instead, the past - and by extension the present - had to be understood in terms of the way in which social relationships were expressive of different and incompatible interests. As Morris came to understand the fact that working people did possess distinctive material interests, Thompson argued, he was to advance a different order of critique of capitalist society from that of his contemporaries:

Morris was by no means alone in his time in analyzing the disease of capitalist society: from their different standpoints Carlyle, Ruskin, Matthew Arnold - even Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Stuart Mill - either revolted in disgust against the ethic of capitalism or questioned its immutable economic basis - yet all these men, the "raillers against 'progress'", were somehow held back from a final, positive and revolutionary understanding.<sup>20</sup>

This 'revolutionary understanding' referred to Morris' recognition that working people had distinctive interests. These interests were denied by and could never be realized within capitalist society. It was in this recognition, Thompson argued, that Morris distanced himself from his contemporaries. The latter tended to idealize the interests of working people in terms of their interests:

...all were too ready to appeal to the working class to lead the nation forth in battles for objectives which they themselves had at heart, which were derived from their own special discontent, but which had little relevance to the immediate grievances under which the working class itself was suffering. They were too inclined to see the workers as the rank and file of an Army of Light, struggling valiantly for a culture or for a new

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 281.

new morality under the generalship of themselves and a few enlightened leaders who had broken free from the Philistine middle class.<sup>21</sup>

Morris arrived at this understanding from his background in Romanticism and the way in which this experience had taught him to appreciate the significance of creative labour. This was labour in which men developed themselves and came to know the world as their own creation. Through creative labour, men express their own needs and aspirations. This type of labour was contrasted with the labour process in capitalism. Here, men worked for reasons other than those which they had chosen; needs were supplied by the market. In Morris' view, the profit motive had reduced men to a shadow of their true selves. Creative labour, Morris' experiences with *The Firm* had taught, was not possible in capitalist society. If men were to express themselves through their work, in the manner that Morris had learnt from Ruskin, the value system supporting capitalist social relations had to be replaced with a value system which facilitated cooperative and creative effort.

Morris had, therefore, reached similar conclusions to those being developed within the Marxist tradition. He had reached his understanding of capitalism, though, before he came into contact with Marxist ideas. His reasons for wanting to overthrow capitalist society were, therefore, different to those advanced by Marxists. The next section discusses these differences and the significance that Thompson attached to them.

## II

I suggested in the introduction to this chapter that while Thompson's first edition of the Morris biography paid lip service to the BCP's view of the world, there were nevertheless points

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 283-84.



at which a submerged critique of that party's orthodoxy did puncture the surface. One sign of Thompson's dissidence can be seen in the way in which he characterized the approach to socialism adopted by Morris and H.H. Hyndman. Certainly the position which Thompson defended from mid-1956 against the 'party line' was very close to the one which Morris defended against Hyndman.

Morris' path to socialism was long and arduous. It involved a considerable amount of intellectual effort in which ideas were constantly being tested against reality. Hyndman, however, like many early socialists, arrived at socialism by means of a rapid conversion and came to believe unquestioningly in those tenets specifying an inevitable, economically driven, demise to capitalism:

His reading of Capital, and his discussions with Marx had convinced him that a proletarian revolution was inevitable...he asserted for himself the role of the interpreter and chief apostle of a mechanical "Marxist" dogma. Real flexibility, real understanding of the way men make history for themselves, was never present in his writings. The working class he tended to regard as the raw material of the revolution, the motive force which he could harness for his political strategy, rather than as fellow-comrades actively and consciously participating in the struggle....he alienated...hundreds...by his dictatorial manner and sectarian indifference to the wider organizations of the trade union and labour movement.<sup>22</sup>

While Hyndman saw socialism as inevitable, Morris felt that it would only be realized if men desired it. Hyndman seemed to be more interested in defending a few theoretical propositions rather than inquiring into what working people actually wanted. Theory ought to guide practice and if found to be wanting should be modified. "Study", Morris said, "must come not only from books, but also from 'living people'."<sup>23</sup> This conviction was a deeply held one stemming from his early forays into the decorative arts where he had drawn upon the knowledge of old texts to help him with his designs and to formulate new ideas. This need to test theory and practice was forced even more strongly upon him by his involvement with the Liberal Party.

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<sup>22</sup>Thompson, William Morris (1955), 342-43.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 354.

What finally opened Morris' eyes to the impossibility of advance within the shadow of the Liberal Party was the policy of the government in Ireland and Egypt..."Radicalism...will never develop into anything more than radicalism...it is made for and by the Middle classes and will always be under the control of the rich capitalists; they will have no objection to its political development if they can stop it there; but as to real social changes, they will not allow them. The last of his illusions had perished under the criticism of practical experience.<sup>24</sup>

Actually, Thompson was anticipating his own argument a little because Morris did not, as Thompson himself showed, eschew all his illusions until he experienced 'Bloody Sunday' (November 13, 1887); that is, the physical repression, and its unqualified support by the 'Establishment', of a mass demonstration of the unemployed in Trafalgar Square. In the aftermath of this event Morris wrote:

I had thought that freedom of speech and the right of public meeting were facts in themselves, about which politicians were agreed. I did not know the meanness of the whole crew even then. I was not aware that freedom of speech and public meeting were nothing to them but stalking-horses to hide themselves behind...I soon found, however, that the Liberal Party was a complete ass, that what they excelled in doing was singing "Gloria Gladstone in excelsis" and talking of what they intended to do in Ireland.<sup>25</sup>

Whether Morris discovered the double standards informing liberalism in the early or late 1880s, the important point to note is that he refused to accept uncritically certain of their presuppositions, but insisted upon the necessity to test these in practice. Liberalism was found to be morally anathema, hypocritical and capable of fostering political expediency.

Morris was also to part company with Hyndman and the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) because of their hypocritical moral stance. Morris refused to accept the claim that their interpretation of reality was the only correct view. Indeed, his reasons for leaving the SDF were

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 305.

<sup>25</sup>William Morris, Commonweal, November 10th, 1888; quoted in Ibid., 578-79.

very close to those given by Thompson when he resigned from the BCP. Morris was not, he wrote, prepared to "secede for any mere matter of tactics...but if I find myself opposed on a matter of principle...I will secede if I am driven to it."<sup>26</sup> For Morris, it was a socialist principle that men should actually want socialism. Socialists would only gain support if they were seen to be presenting an argument that made sense to people and offered a more desirable alternative to the present. For Hyndman, by contrast, socialism was historically necessary and if the working class could not see that then it was suffering from a false consciousness and had to be educated in its revolutionary mission.

The desirability of socialism and socialism's inevitability imply different sets of attitudes to working people and their role in the creation of a socialist society. The first is prepared to take seriously the idea that people can think about their own material situation. The second assumes that given a particular position in the production process a given consciousness can be expected. These views of socialism also imply different strategies. The first maintains that working people have the capacity to act on their own volition. The second claims that workers must be instructed in the goals of socialism as these are given by historical laws, and interpreted by an elite.

Morris resigned from the SDF because he rejected the reductionist premises of Hyndman's inevitability thesis

Discontent is not enough...The discontented must know what they are aiming at...My belief is that the old order can only be overthrown by force; and for that reason it is all the more necessary that the revolution...should be, not an ignorant, but an intelligent revolution.<sup>27</sup>

An intelligent revolution assumes that the views of the rank and file are given serious consideration. Yet this view was something which both Hyndman's and the BCP's concept of the

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<sup>26</sup>William Morris, Letters, 203-4; quoted in *Ibid.*, 397.

<sup>27</sup>William Morris, quoted in *Ibid.*, 447.

elite precluded. Those who had privileged access to laws moving the historical process knew what was best for everyone else. For Morris, this type of argument was based upon abstract nonsense; a theory which said little about the role people could be expected to play in changing existing social relationships. A theory, moreover, was not a sufficient justification for socialism.

Thompson used the term 'the education of desire' to characterize Morris' approach to socialist strategy. Men would be moved to action by a yearning for something desired but denied in the present. But desire had to be articulated in relation to their actual lived experience. Such closeness to real life, though, eluded many early converts to Marxism, as well as many in the Leninist tradition. However, one should also note that it was an ideal which Thompson felt that Morris himself was never completely able to realize.

Morris, Thompson argued, shared a dilemma with many socialists at the national level in the 1880s: the conundrum of whether to adopt a policy which accepted an incremental approach to socialism or one which refused to accept reformism. The debate was couched in terms of palliation versus purism. Both Morris and Hyndman rejected palliation. Yet while Hyndman saw palliatives as standing in the way of the inevitable outcome of history, Morris felt that such a policy would lead socialists down the path of parliamentary intrigue and compromise. In practical terms, purism meant avoiding direct contact with the daily struggles of working people. It was legitimate, for example, to express support for the Eight-hour day campaign from the side-lines, but it would not do for a socialist to participate actively in these struggles.

Morris' own arguments against palliation were initially outlined in an article for Commonweal in July 1885, although they changed very little over the remaining years of his life:

...palliation tends...to the creation of a new Middle class to act as a buffer between the proletariat and their direct and obvious masters; the only hope of the bourgeois for retarding the advance of socialism lies in this device.

It is a new society that we are working to realize not a cleaning up of our present tyrannical muddle into an improved, smoothly-working form of

the same 'order' - a mass of dull and useless people organized into classes, amidst which the antagonism should be veiled and moderated so that they should act as checks on each other for the insurance of the stability of the system.

The real business of socialists is to impress on the workers that they are a class, whereas they ought to be a society: if we mix ourselves up with parliament we shall confuse and dull this fact in people's minds instead of making it clear and intensifying it. The work that lies ahead of us is to make socialists, to cover the country with a network of associations composed of men who feel their antagonism to the dominant classes and have no temptation to waste their time in the thousand follies of party politics.(my emphasis)<sup>28</sup>

'Making socialists' in and through 'a network of associations' was very much the role that Thompson had in mind for the New Left Clubs in the late-1950s and early-1960s. Thompson, however, insisted on the importance of the active involvement of socialists in industrial struggles rather than supporting these from the outside. While Morris was advancing the claim that propaganda can shape new values and a socialist consciousness, Thompson averred that this consciousness must arise through the process of struggle itself. Propaganda can certainly help, but it is only through their attempts to advance their interests that working people will realize the distinctive character of their interests. Morris had gone so far, but he was held back from complete identification with the working class because of his fear that, unless they utterly repudiated capitalism, their endeavours would be contaminated with reformism.

The overriding fear of compromise shared by London socialists in the 1880s probably explains why the London organizations failed to capitalize upon the momentum wrought by the emergence of New Unionism. If socialism succeeded at all in the 1880s it was in the provinces rather than at the national level. This growth was fostered by local activists who understood, and were prepared to respect, the needs and interests of working people. In fact, for those actively

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<sup>28</sup>William Morris, "Socialism and Politics," Commonweal (July Supplement), 1885; quoted in *Ibid.*, 449-50.

involved at the local level the failures of the central organizations entailed an important consequence:

One after another some of the most gifted socialist propagandists - H.M. Champion, John Burns, the Avelings, Tom Mann, J.L. Mahon, Tom Maguire and many others - were being forced by events to loosen their organizational ties with the Federation or the League in order to make contact with the working class in their own organizations. By contrast, the dogmatism of the SDF and the anarchist-tinged purism of the socialist league were increasingly forming a back-water aside from the direct currents of the Mass Movement.<sup>29</sup>

This characterization of centre-periphery tensions is prophetic of Thompson's own relationship with the BCP in 1956. In Thompson's opinion, had London socialists been more flexible and had they seriously entertained the actual concerns of working people then the course of English socialism might have been different.<sup>30</sup> There was certainly a potential audience for the type of socialist message advocated by Morris. Thus, Thompson cited evidence of an enthusiastic response to a speech given by Morris to striking Northumberland miners in March 1888. This speech was recorded in a local newspaper:

He did not call the life of the working man, as things went, a tolerable life at all. When they had gained all that was possible under the present system, they would still not have the life which human beings ought to have (cheers)...Their work was to work to live in order that they might live to work (Hear, hear and shame). That was not the life of men, that was the life of machines...Even supposing that he did not understand that there was a definite reason in economics, and that the whole system could not be changed, he should still stand there in sympathy with the men present...If the thing could not be altered at all, he for one would still be a rebel against it (cheers).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 503.

<sup>30</sup>Thompson made a similar point when commenting upon the aftermath of Peterloo: Thompson, The Making, 711.

<sup>31</sup>Newcastle Chronicle, April 12th, 1887; quoted in Ibid., 521- 22.

Capitalism was wrong, in Morris's view, because it was morally wrong and debased man's worth as man by evaluating worth against a non-human criterion. But Morris was vague when it came to specifying the mechanisms of change. He believed that the working class must organize itself for total victory. In placing this goal at the top of the socialist agenda, however, he failed to consider the problem of immediate strategies. Part of the reason for Morris' reluctance to consider the problems of immediate political strategies stemmed from his perceived fear of reformism. But Morris' fears could also be traced to his Romantic training.

### III

Thompson defined Morris' mature work as an original and creative contribution to socialist thought. It falls within the Marxist tradition to the extent that Morris developed insights which complement those which Marx made. Thus, Morris had perceived the dialectical and contradictory nature of the historical process before reading Marx. At the same time, though, Morris was to justify socialism in terms other than those employed in Marx's later works.

Morris reached his conclusions from within the Romantic tradition. His original rejection of capitalist society was grounded in aesthetic rather than economic considerations. This aesthetic supplied Morris with an ethical system which was radically different to the values promoted by capitalism. Morris' values informed all his activities. However, there was an important sense in which his artistic and political activities were distinctive spheres of endeavour. For example, with one or two notable exceptions (The Dream of John Ball and News from Nowhere), he did not bring his imaginative work to bear upon the construction of a socialist culture because he was never completely able to see the role that his utopian thinking might play in the fight to create socialist



values. The reason for Morris' inability to unite his socialist politics and his art to the task of creating socialist values stemmed, Thompson suggested, from the way in which Morris viewed art.

Morris entertained two contradictory views as to the value of art. On the one hand, he believed that art provided a means by which men could express themselves through the practice of creative labour. This type of activity was alien to capitalist society and it tended to induce in the Romantic artist a distancing effect from the affairs of the world. But Morris also conceived for art a definite social role in that it could communicate ideals and aspirations:

In this sense...Morris...regarded the arts...as a special form of the realization of the consciousness of life, evoking a heightening of this consciousness in the audience. It was implicit in his view that the arts had an ennobling influence, a potent moral influence, in relation to man's social progress.<sup>32</sup>

The problem with Morris' aesthetic was that, while it allowed him to perceive art as expressing the aspirations of people towards beauty, these terms were never given any referential meaning in the present. He tended to assume that, because of the all-pervasive corrupting influences of philistinism, nothing in the present could provide a source of inspiration for the artist who had, instead, to refer to pre-capitalist models. Of course, this allowed him to articulate those values which led him to criticize capitalist society, but there was nothing in this society - not even the struggles of working people - which might inspire the utopian socialist. Had Morris seen art in terms other than a means by which he might escape a peculiarly harsh reality, Thompson argued, then he might have been able to have accorded it a more affirmative role in his socialist activities.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 762.

<sup>33</sup>A role analogous, perhaps, to the one that Thompson discovered for art in Yugoslavia. See E.P. Thompson, "Omladinska Pruga," in Edward Thompson, ed., The Railway: An Adventure in Construction (London: The British-Yugoslav Association, 1948), 22-24. See also the discussion in the concluding paragraphs to chapter 4 below.

But the very fact that he did have a social conception of and for art, whatever its limitations, did entail a positive component because

...it fostered in him an acute response to those periods of history when the people participated most in the practice of arts. Moreover, it helped him to view the problem of the relation of the artist to his society from a social rather than from an individualist standpoint. (my emphasis)<sup>34</sup>

This social conception of the value of art was, Thompson suggested, crucial because it forced Morris to define artistic value within the context of social relations: in general, those predicated upon a profit motive had no value at all. This followed from his conception of the role of art: it was supposed to communicate noble and heroic values. In a society given over to self-interest it was not possible to find these values. Therefore, nothing in this society was worthy enough to command the artist's attention.

When Morris criticized capitalism, he did so because of the pervasive presence of values supportive of commercialism. It was these values which devalued the worth of creative labour:

...he did not indict industrialism as such for degrading the craftsman to a machine; but capitalism, the production of goods primarily for profit and not for use".(emphasis in the original)<sup>35</sup>

Capitalism frustrated and denied creative labour and in the process thwarted and stunted man's development.

It is important to specify the precise nature of the criticism of his society that Thompson identified in Morris' work. The problem lay not in industrialism but with industrial capitalism. There was nothing inherently wrong with factories and machine-produced goods. Rather, the problem lay in the manner to which technology was put to use: the values which informed production were the principal object of Morris' criticism. Morris was less interested in the surface

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<sup>34</sup>Thompson, William Morris (1955), 769.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 749.



appearance - factories - than in the underlying dynamic contained within the acquisitive ethic. It was this ethic which gave capitalist social relations their particular character. The difference that Thompson drew attention to can be illustrated as follows.

In contrast to the Fabian version of socialism being developed by Sidney Webb, for example, Morris argued that all attempts to alleviate social problems by tinkering with the tangible manifestations of capitalism would come to nought unless capitalism's dynamic was tackled. The Fabian conception of socialism, claimed Morris, was based upon a complete misunderstanding of history: capitalism was identified with the Industrial Revolution and if one tackled the problems obviously arising from that phenomenon one would be on track for socialism. But in Morris' opinion - an opinion which The Making is clearly concerned to authenticate - the mechanisms of capitalist exploitation contained in social relations grounded upon acquisitiveness, were well established before the late eighteenth century and provided the context within which Industrialism took root and flourished. This fundamental<sup>36</sup> basis of social relationships had remained intact:

Capitalism, not machinery, had reduced the working man to "an appendage of profit-grinding", reducing the mill hand, for example, to being "as much a part of the factory where he works as any cog-wheel or piece of shafting is." The horror for Morris was not the factory system itself, but in its subjection to profit grinding, in its working conditions and in its social organization.<sup>37</sup>

Thompson's argument at this point has crucial implications for the position which he was to develop in public from 1956. For an orthodox Marxist, a revolutionary or true consciousness was developed in the work place. The social democratic/Labour Party approach to socialism shared a similar emphasis in its belief that socialism could be arrived at through 'capturing the

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<sup>36</sup>In this context, one should note the comments in Thompson, "Peculiarities," 291-92.

<sup>37</sup>Thompson, William Morris (1955), 755.

commanding heights of the economy'. Both similarly emphasized the strategic function of Parliament as the locus of political power.

If, however, the existing organization of society was merely an expression of a pervasive ethic, then effective social change pre-supposed changing social values. The implication of the Morris-Thompson position is that class consciousness is not formed merely at the work place. As a result, the goals that socialists should set themselves must look beyond the acquisition of economic and political power.

It was Thompson's contention that an important role should be assigned to imaginative literature in this process of creating new values and new ways of thinking about social organization. This was because these activities were less likely to be constrained by presentist assumptions.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, such thinking had to be directly related to the actual conditions which men found themselves in. If socialists failed to make their ideas meaningful they would not attract support. If, however, they could present alternatives to present social arrangements, and did so in such a way as to show men the way in which capitalist actuality frustrated their potential, then they would likely move men to action. However, Morris was not able to make this connection because he could find nothing ennobling in Victorian society to inspire his art. Morris

...failed to understand the active role of the intellectual arts within the greater process...despite his own socialist poetry, and the importance he laid upon cultural activity in the socialist movement, Morris paid next to no attention in his lectures to the role of the arts in the fight to win socialism - their power to inspire and change people in the struggle.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>One is reminded of Blake's aphorism: "Man by his reasoning power can only compare and judge of what he has already perceived./ Man's desires are limited by his perceptions, none can desire what he has not perceived./ The desires and perceptions of man untaught by anything but organs of sense, must be limited to the objects of sense." William Blake, There is No Natural Religion, in David V.Erdman, ed., The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake (Berkley: University of California Press, 1982), 2.

<sup>39</sup>Thompson, William Morris (1955), 772.

Ultimately, Morris' problem was that he was trapped in the categories of thought which he had originally fashioned to aid his escape from bourgeois society. This limitation did not mean that Morris was not sympathetic to the needs of the workers. What it did mean was that he had had a surfeit of the experience of suffering in his everyday life and attempted to keep this away from his artistic and imaginative work. Morris, in short, was not able to bring his creative work to bear upon the concerns of the present because he feared that such contact would contaminate the values his aesthetic sustained. In any case, after he discovered socialism he came to believe that:

...his aspirations need no longer be nourished in a world of art but could be consummated by human action in the world around him...He no longer saw his art as the central battlefield; if he could strike a blow here for the cause, so much the better. The immediate task...was to change life itself.<sup>40</sup>

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It is somewhat surprising that Thompson's discussion of the relationship between Morris' views on socialism and the role of art escaped the attention of the Party censors because they defended a position opposed to that endorsed by communist orthodoxy. For example, Thompson's insistence on the role of imaginative literature in the creation of alternative values within existing society suggests an obvious dissatisfaction with the reductionist theories of the BCP. Perhaps these arguments slipped through unnoticed because they were accompanied by the appropriate clichés. Thus, in the 1955 edition, Thompson argued that Morris' approach to socialism could be characterized as scientific and that his primary concern was to elucidate "the essential discoveries of scientific socialism"<sup>41</sup>. These 'discoveries' Thompson enumerated as:

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 780.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 790.

(i) the labour theory of value;

(ii) an historical conception of the class struggle which he presented in such a way as if to suggest a dependence upon (i) and, therefore, an implication that consciousness was a dependent variable;

(iii) a rejection of the liberal/social-democratic view of the state as an impartial arbitrator - parliament was seen to perform a delusory role and that appealing to it as an exclusive means of conflict resolution detracted attention from the underlying nature and sources of class conflict.

In the second edition, one can note the following changes:

1. There was no discussion of the labour theory of value. Indeed, its presence in the first edition sat somewhat incongruously with Thompson's earlier discussion of Morris' indictment of the acquisitive ethic as providing capitalism with its underlying dynamism. This ethic may have an obvious relationship to the concept of the labour theory of value, but the two are not synonymous;

2. As a result of (1), Thompson's discussion of the historical character of the class struggle found in Morris' work appeared no longer to be cast in a reductionist idiom;

3. Thompson placed more emphasis upon the utopian aspects of Morris' thought and in so doing reinforced the necessity of conceiving for the imagination a determinate as opposed to a determined role;

4. The pressures exerted by party membership can also be seen at work when one notes that in the second edition Thompson did not feel that "Morris's greatest political error" lay in his repudiation of parliamentary action.<sup>42</sup> In 1955, Thompson might have felt a need to draw

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 792.

upon Lenin's authority to explain how Morris erred in this respect.<sup>43</sup> After 1956 he had no need to pay lip service to the ideas embodied in The British Road to Socialism.<sup>44</sup>

5. The final change of importance can be seen in the discussion of Morris' understanding of the nature of a revolutionary political party. In the first edition, Thompson wrote:

Always he stressed the subordination of 'individual whims' to those collective decisions of the party; and that the leadership of the party should not be made up of a government and an opposition but of those united in their theoretical outlook...The role of theoretical education within the party he always placed high...he thought always of a party of comrades of men and women changed in their outlook and in themselves, prepared for sacrifice, without any shade of false distinction or personal ambition among them, ready to criticize themselves gravely for their failures - in short, of men and women striving to create new values and new people even within the old society, enjoying both their struggles and their relations, conscious of their own comradeship, and therefore worthy of building the society of the future.

Were William Morris alive today, he would not look far to find the party of his choice.<sup>45</sup>

It was one thing, as Thompson was to discover in 1956, for a party to be united in its theoretical outlook. It was quite another when an insistence upon theoretical unity entailed the subordination of all critical thought, thereby silencing those who dared point out the contradictions between theory and practice. That the emphasis upon theoretical unity should have disappeared in the second edition should cause no surprise. But even in 1955 Thompson can scarcely have meant the same thing as the party seemed to mean by theoretical unity: that is, fidelity to scriptural authority. At a minimum, this authority had basically de-legitimized all forms of speculative thinking

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 793.

<sup>44</sup>Between 1928 and 1935 Stalinist parties in Western Europe dismissed all other political parties as variants upon fascism. From 1935 various groupings on the Left sought to oppose a 'National Front' to the ascendancy of Nazism. This policy implicitly endorsed parliamentary tactics which, in the case of the BCP, was made explicit with the publication of this document.

<sup>45</sup>Thompson, William Morris (1955), 795.



about the future. It was, however, in such utopian thought that Thompson identified Morris' principal contribution to the development of the socialist tradition in England. The next section discusses Thompson's interpretation of Morris' utopianism in terms of the significance Thompson believed it has for this tradition.

#### IV

I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that Thompson believed that Morris' notion of utopianism was quite different to that advanced by the utopian socialists of the early nineteenth century. The principal difference lay in the fact that Morris "had no intention whatsoever to make cut-and-dried prophecies but...to make hints and suggestion...the choices before men in a communist society [he saw] were numerous".<sup>46</sup> Morris' emphasis was upon the choices which men could make, given the limitations that might be imposed by the context that they found themselves in:

...no man can really think himself out of his own days; his palace of days to come can only be constructed from the aspirations forced upon him by his present surroundings, and from his dreams of his life of the past.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 796.

<sup>47</sup>William Morris and Belfort Bax, Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome, 17-18; quoted in Ibid.

This was quite a different emphasis to that espoused by 'scientific socialism'. The latter insisted upon the 'choices' that men had to make. Morris' study of history taught him that there was no necessary path for social development to follow. History was a contingent process because everything depended upon the way in which men interpreted their relationships. But Morris also discovered in the record of the past the many attempts that men had made to advance their own interests. They may not always have succeeded in realizing their aspirations, but the fact that they had made the attempt held out hope for the present. Despite the many obstacles which act against the expression of collective action in the present, the historical record showed Morris that men had managed to act in the presence of equally oppressive conditions. The past revealed to Morris the powers which slumbered within men in the present:

The men of those times are no longer puzzles to us, we can understand their aspirations and sympathize with their lives, while at the same time we have no wish (not to say hope) to put the clock back...For indeed it is characteristic of the times in which we live, that, whereas, in the beginning of the romantic reaction its supporters were for the most part...praisers of past times; at the present time those who take pleasure in studying the life of the past are more commonly found in the ranks of those who are pledged to the forward movement of modern life; while those who are vainly striving to stem the progress of the world are as careless of the past as they are fearful of the future.<sup>48</sup>

If the past revealed the enormous reserve of political capital to be drawn upon to aid the struggles in the present, the slumbering energies in the present had to be tapped and channeled towards specific goals. Thompson suggested that socialists have much to learn in this respect from Morris' classic statement of a socialist Utopia, News from Nowhere.

According to Thompson, News from Nowhere interwove themes drawn from Morris' Romantic sensibility and his political experiences as an active socialist. Morris' utopia does not offer

... a literal picture of communist life. Morris knew perfectly well that the quality of life portrayed in his communist society could no more rise above the level of his own experience (enriched by his study of the past)

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<sup>48</sup>William Morris; quoted in Ibid., 836.

than water can rise higher than the level of its source; and by freeing his imagination from the inhibitions which would have been imposed upon it by an attempt at literal verisimilitude, he allowed it to move freely.<sup>49</sup>

News from Nowhere, Thompson argued, aspired to draw a contrast between the present and a possible future. The future that Morris portrayed resulted from men acting upon their desires to change their present in the past. The contrast between the present and the future was designed to make men dissatisfied with their lot in the present: to show them that alternative and more desirable social relationships were possible; but only if they were prepared to do something themselves:

News from Nowhere must not be, and was never intended to be, read as a literal picture of communist society. One of its purposes is a criticism of capitalist society, the other a revelation of the powers slumbering within men and women and distorted or denied in class society.<sup>50</sup>

There is a sense in which News from Nowhere can be read as a history in reverse: indeed, as a successful variant upon the themes developed in The Making. The men in Morris' utopia have succeeded in imposing their will upon history in a way that Thompson's agents attempted unsuccessfully. Indeed, the relationship between Thompson's interpretation of News From Nowhere and the emphases in The Making is suggested in a paragraph omitted from the second edition:

To some readers News from Nowhere is too 'ideal' for their soured stomachs. Such neighbourliness, such sense of the common good, such comradely good will and interest, are beyond reach of 'human nature'. Morris...does not understand the darkness of the human heart. Let us look 150 years, not forward, but backwards to the young Samuel Bamford trudging the road between Montsorrel and Loughborough:

Towards evening, I met a company of women coming from the hayfield; they were disposed to be merry, and dancing and singing with their forks and rakes on their shoulders, they formed a ring around me...They next produced a keg and a basket, and the kind creatures made me sit down

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 803.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 806.

amongst them and partake of their brown bread and hard cheese, which I did heartily, and quenched my thirst with a good draught of their home brewed ale.

Do we sometimes forget how savage has been the impact of capitalist ethics upon the human heart in the past 100 years, and how, in all but the soundest centres of working class life man has been made a stranger to man by fear, suspicion, selfishness and indifference which colour his whole attitude to life? And is it possible that News from Nowhere is nearer to the truth of a fully communist life than we are capable of understanding.<sup>51</sup>

For Thompson and Morris, history performed a 'didactic' and an inspirational role. It was intended to demonstrate that there was no necessary or pre-ordained path to the future. Moreover, it held out the possibility that men have at least the potential to effect change.

Thompson summarized the quality informing Morris' life and work as "moral realism". By this, he meant that Morris evaluated social relationships in terms of the ways in which they contributed to the well-being of men as men and not in terms of some abstract conception of them. Indeed, moral considerations played a crucial role in bringing him to socialism:

Morris never sought to disguise the leading part which moral considerations played in the formation of his outlook, and in guiding his actions. He was brought to socialism by his conscious revolt against the mechanical materialism which reduced the story of mankind to an objectless record of struggle for survival of the 'fittest', and which, in his own time, and under whatever high-sounding phrases, put profit and not "free and full life as the touchstone of value".<sup>52</sup>

If one substitutes 'material progress' for profit then this indictment can be said to have been directed as much at Stalinism as it was at bourgeois democracy. Social relations and institutions must be evaluated by reference to real men in real situations and not in terms of philistine criteria, whether they be economic laws or the (economic) rights of man:

No amount of preaching, of enthusiasm, or of devotion even, will induce the workers, with whom the world's future lies, to accept and act upon

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 808.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 828.

mere abstract propositions of what they have a right to aspire to; necessity must push them on before they can ever conceive of the future of equality and natural good will...necessity only can make them conscious of this (class) struggle.<sup>53</sup>

Ideals had to make sense to working people in terms of their own experience before they would act: "necessity alone would impel spontaneous riots and class struggle, wasteful and uncertain of success".<sup>54</sup> Necessity had to be guided. For Thompson, the fundamental importance of Morris's conception of utopianism lay in its recognition of this fact: desire would itself supply alternative values which necessity frustrated and would move men to action to realize their aspirations.

The final part of the biography discussed the relationship between 'necessity and desire'. In the concluding section to his discussion Thompson reversed the order of the couplet to emphasize the importance which he believed should be attached to desire. This emphasis was exactly what orthodox Marxism's insistence on the determinate relationship between social being and social consciousness denied. In asserting a role for desire, Thompson rejected the principles informing the Party's theory and strategy. If men can chose to act upon ideas which are not supplied by material reality they can be said to be exercising volitional agency over the course of the historical process.

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This chapter commenced with a discussion of the political context that the first edition of Thompson's biography of Morris was written and published. Thompson's membership in the

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 837-38.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 838.

Communist Party certainly affected some of his arguments and he acknowledged these in the postscript to the second edition by referring to "hectoring Stalinist pieties." By this phrase he meant

...re-assurances to the faithful who still held that the laws of history guaranteed the end of capitalism. Thompson meant to stress the moral case that Morris makes for overthrowing capitalism. But he ended up protecting and possibly exaggerating Morris' determinism. Morris' confidence that capitalism has to end (for historical reasons) accordingly eclipsed his conviction that it ought to end - the conviction that made him a socialist in the first place. (my emphasis)<sup>55</sup>

Thompson, however, publicly retracted the determinist reading of Morris in 1959:

...I have tended at certain points to suggest that Morris' moral critique of society is dependent upon Marx's economic and historical analysis, that the morality is in some ways secondary, the analysis of power and productive relationships primary. That is not the way in which I look upon the question now. I see the two as inextricably bound together in the same context of social life. Economic relationships are at the same time moral relationships; relations of production are at the same time relations between people, of oppression or of cooperation: and there is a moral logic as well as an economic logic which derives from these relationships. The history of class struggle is at the same the history of human morality.<sup>56</sup>

Morris' importance lay in his insistence on locating human morality in the context of human relations. Morality, or what people ought and ought not to do, cannot be read off from abstract formulations about human nature because

[h]uman nature cannot be abstracted from its context in particular men: "the abstract individual... belongs, in reality, to a particular form of society." Only within this context can human nature be changed -men may only make their own nature through action...<sup>57</sup>

Thompson had stated this principle as early as 1951 in a critique of bourgeois democracy, and one which appeared in an article on Morris:

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<sup>55</sup>Michael Fischer, "The Literary Importance of E.P. Thompson's Marxism," ELH, 50, (Winter 1983), 813-14.

<sup>56</sup>Thompson, The Communism of William Morris, 17.

<sup>57</sup>Thompson, "Outside the Whale," 183.

Our morality is not based on abstract 'principles' of freedom, justice and love which remain unchanged in every circumstance, or, rather, can be used to justify any and every policy that is thought to be expedient. Our morality is based on one principle only - man his real suffering and happiness. No matter how often they say 'freedom' we say that the burning of Korean villages with jellied petrol bombs is a vile and inhuman practice. No matter if the BBC drones on about 'western democracy'...it still will not alter our sympathy for the trade unionist imprisoned and shot in Spain or Greece.<sup>58</sup>

In 1956 Thompson was to indict the Communist Party for similarly justifying crimes and oppression in the name of abstractions which said nothing about "man his real suffering and happiness."

Whether Thompson's criticisms were directed at the political left or the political right they owed, as he has himself acknowledged, an enormous debt to Morris:

Morris, by 1955, had claimed me...When, in 1956, my disagreement with orthodox Marxism became fully articulate, I fell back on modes of perception which I'd learned in those years of close company with Morris, and I found, perhaps, the will to go on arguing from the pressure of Morris behind me.<sup>59</sup>

The lessons that Thompson felt he had learned from Morris were ones which he believed had political value for the present:

...if [Morris'] achievement had been more widely recognized, perhaps fewer Marxists would have been found who could have supposed that the overthrow of capitalist class power and productive relationships could - by itself - lead onto the fruition of a Communist community; that if the forms of economic ownership were right, the rest would follow. They would have realized - as Morris proclaimed in all his work -that the construction of a Communist community would require a moral revolution as profound as the revolution in economic and social power.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Thompson, "William Morris and the Moral Issues Today," 28.

<sup>59</sup>Thompson, William Morris (1976), 810.

<sup>60</sup>Thompson, The Communism of William Morris, 18-19.



These lessons may have escaped the attention of the BCP, but they were to play a crucial role in shaping Thompson's theoretical and political critique of the Party in 1956. It is to this critique that this dissertation now turns its attention.

### Chapter 3

#### The Critique of Stalinism, 1956-57

Edward Thompson joined the British Communist Party (BCP) as an undergraduate at Cambridge in 1942, and resigned after its Executive Committee (EC) passed a resolution endorsing the Soviet invasion of Hungary in November 1956. For Thompson, the Party's decision was the final straw in a long-drawn out confrontation with the leadership which had begun in the aftermath of Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in February 1956. In fact, Khrushchev's speech had been responsible for setting in motion a train of events which culminated in the biggest crisis in the Party's history. Between the end of 1956 and early 1958 some 10,000 members had resigned, or one third of the British membership. Desertions on such a scale signalled the erosion of that 'moral hegemony' which, until 1956, the party had exercised over the communist left. Initially, however, the response to Khrushchev's speech was one of shock and confusion and not resignation. The Soviet leaders' speech prompted a sustained effort to reform the BCP. When this initiative failed and when the Party leadership demonstrated through its actions, that it would accept no criticisms of the Party's theory and practice, the resignations followed.

This chapter and the next will explain the way in which the crisis developed within the Party during 1956. Chapter 3 begins by outlining the context in which Khrushchev's indictment was received and the response to it of the BCP's leadership. The chapter then examines, through the medium of Thompson's writings, the shortcomings of the Khrushchev speech. This assessment considers Thompson's theoretical critique of Stalinism and the extent to which he believed that this

phenomenon did not represent a genuine expression of Marxism-Communism. Chapter 4 expands on these themes by noting the central role Thompson played in attempting to articulate and channel intra-party dissidence towards reform. Finally, the inevitability of Thompson's resignation from the Party is examined in the light of events in November 1956.

# I

When the delegates assembled at the Twentieth Congress in Moscow in February 1956 they did not anticipate the accusations which Khrushchev was about to level against Stalin. Until then there had been an unequivocal identity of communist theory and practice in the person of Stalin. Indeed, his memory was revered to such an extent that the eulogies appearing at the time of his death were little short of hagiography. Writing in The Daily Worker in March 1953 the General Secretary of the BCP, Harry Pollitt, had informed his readers that:

Stalin - who has written golden pages in world history, whose lustre time can never efface...never the dictator, never one to lay down the law, always eager and willing to listen, to understand another's point of view...no words, no monuments, no tributes can ever do justice to the revolution in people's minds and actions, in changing world history, in freeing millions from darkness, oppression, poverty and misery that have been brought about by the work of comrade Stalin...eternal glory to the memory of Joseph Stalin.<sup>1</sup>

For Rajini Palme Dutt, the Party's principal ideologue, Stalin was a "genius" and "the architect of the rising world of free humanity" whose memory would "live on forever":

In those last months of ceaseless and un-redoubted theoretical and practical activity before his death, Stalin marked out with sure hand and unshakeable confidence and optimism, the path to the future. May the teachings, the example and inspiration of Stalin guide us all in our efforts henceforth to recall what he proclaimed in that final speech to the 19th

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<sup>1</sup>Harry Pollitt, "Eternal Glory to Stalin," Daily Worker, 7 March 1953, 2.

Congress of the CPSU as the radiant future for the Peoples' Democracies.<sup>2</sup>

While James Klugmann, another Party luminary and official biographer of the Party's early history, claimed that Stalin was "the world's greatest working class leader". He added that his recently translated Collected Works provided a "magnificent gift and guide for those fighting in Britain in the cause of socialism...a contribution of the very first order to the classics of creative Marxism." Klugmann concluded that:

...those who hate and fear the working class and the people, those who hate peace, those who hate and fear the concept of international fraternity...feared and slandered him in his life and they feared and slandered him at his death.<sup>3</sup>

One can, perhaps, understand the views of leading Party Apparatchiki although it is harder to comprehend the reasoning of an intelligent scientist such as J.D. Bernal when he wrote that:

Stalin's achievement is something greater than the building up and defending of the Soviet Union, greater even than the hope for peace and progress he gave the whole world. It is that his thought and his example is now embodied in the lives and thoughts of hundreds of millions of men, women and children; it has become an indissoluble part of the great human tradition.<sup>4</sup>

In the light of such lavish praise it is difficult to escape the verdict that the intellectuals of the BCP had a naive conception of political reality. As one subsequent commentary noted:

Stalin appeared to them as a paragon of all the virtues, moral and intellectual, and history appeared to them as a direct process whereby Stalinist Communism, in its existing form, superseded all other forms of politics and culture. In the person of Stalin they saw an absolute combination of power, science and morality...Until 1953 their state of

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<sup>2</sup>R.P. Dutt, "Stalin and the Future," Labour Monthly, 35 (4), April 1953, 145, 157.

<sup>3</sup>James Klugmann, "Stalin's Legacy," Labour Monthly, 35 (4), April 1953, 164, 168.

<sup>4</sup>J.D. Bernal, "Stalin as Scientist," The Modern Quarterly, New Series, 8 (3), Summer 1953, 142

mind might be summed up as: 'Stalin is, therefore all will be well.' On his death, this was modified into: 'Stalin has been, therefore all will be well.'<sup>5</sup>

Between March 1953 and February 1956 very little happened to suggest that this modified Cartesian formulation would be altered. Indeed, there was no good reason to expect the dramatic shifts signalled by Khrushchev's speech, for the homage paid to Stalin was symptomatic of the general reverence in which the Soviet Union was held by the BCP. It was seen as a:

...promised land, the embodiment of socialism in action...the place where man had become a giant, both in mighty feats of construction...and in heroic acts of resistance.<sup>6</sup>

Many of those occupying strategic positions within the BCP in the 1950s had been politically active in 1917. They saw in Lenin's achievements what they believed to be the single most important breakthrough in the history of mankind. He had engineered the triumph of a socialist revolution which offered the promise, in a conflict-ridden world, of an end to all forms of oppression and struggle. The success of the Bolsheviks was far from certain in the early days of the revolution and had initially to be defended from the hostile response of imperialist powers and counter-revolutionary Czarist factions. To these early recruits were added those who reached political maturity in the inter-war years; that is, at a time when capitalist-social democracy appeared morally, politically, socially and culturally - let alone economically -bankrupt. For these young men and women communism was embraced as a genuine belief system, a whole way of life, a moral crusade,

waging a temporal warfare for the sake of a spiritual end...communism was the way, the truth and the life. Like earlier belief systems, it put forward a complete scheme of social salvation. In place of fear and doubt...it offered glowing certainty...In place of evil, a state of shining

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<sup>5</sup>BICO, The Cult of the Individual: The Controversy Within British Marxism 1956-1958 (Belfast: British and Irish Communist Organisation. 1975), 5.

<sup>6</sup>Raphael Samuel, "The Lost World of British Communism, Part 1" New Left Review, 154 (November/December 1985): 34.

grace - the end of war, the final and permanent solution to all the problems created by capitalism, limitless social and cultural advance. It was a cause to which people dedicated their lives.<sup>7</sup>

Capitalism contained within it the seeds of oppression and destruction; communism held out the promise of redemption, the possibility of starting anew:

For a whole generation of communist and radical intellectuals in the west, the Soviet Union fulfilled deep utopian longings. Here was a great experiment in social engineering, a new start - utopia had emerged from myth and was under construction. Time and again as David Caute has shown, the image of the Soviet Union as 'the future' shines through the eulogies of western fellow travellers.<sup>8</sup>

It did not escape the attention of western communists that it was the Soviet Union, and not their own governments, who had first heeded the call to resist fascism in Spain. For many, the commitment to communism was strengthened after the war as capitalism re-asserted itself and the Cold War began. During World War II the BCP had benefitted from the favourable light in which British propaganda had cast the USSR. With the cessation of hostilities, however, the Labour administration had oriented itself to the foreign policy imperatives of the USA. In the context of increased American aid to Europe, the Berlin airlift and the discussions leading up to the formation of NATO in 1949, it was to be expected that the BCP should have perceived itself to be a persecuted sect. The reality of this perception was underscored at a number of points. The fierce anti-communism of the foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin, as well as that of leading trade unionists such as Arthur Deakin, became a good deal more vociferous from the late 1940s. More generally, socialism was becoming identified in the popular imagination with purges and war. Such events, as they unfolded in Korea, were dutifully reported in the media. Meanwhile, intellectuals were running to the capitalist press with stories of betrayals and swindles.

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 36.

<sup>8</sup>Vincent Geoghegan, Utopianism and Marxism, 79.

Although, as Thompson himself has acknowledged, anti-communist feeling did not attain the same proportions as MaCarthyism, it could not be denied that such sentiments were deeply entrenched within many parts of British life.<sup>9</sup> These sentiments were actively fostered in the media, which delighted in publications such as I Believed<sup>10</sup> and The God That Failed.<sup>11</sup> It was in this context that the BCP found itself in the position of having to stress the importance of party unity:

The principle of unity...was indissolubly linked to that of authority. Members had an 'un-troubled' faith in the leadership. They regarded the Party's highest actions as the embodiment of the collective will. Party 'rulings' were accepted as a matter of course; Party decisions, irrespective of the means by which they had been arrived at. The Party left no conceptual space for any division of interest between the leadership and the rank-and-file ...The Party allowed no conceptual space, either, for dissent, not even in the form of a private judgement. To air differences in public was to put the Party's good name in question...Communists had 'doubts', a token of their own frailty rather than errors in the Party line. It was legitimate to confess 'confusion', inconceivable that the Party might be wrong.<sup>12</sup>

Membership in the Communist Party was based upon an article of faith, analogous to that implied by membership of a religious sect. As with a religious faith, that of the CP member functioned not only to maintain intact a rigidly authoritarian hierarchy, but blinded him to experiential realities which contradicted his beliefs. The Western media, for example, might report on stage-managed show trials, but such reports could be dismissed as propaganda attempts to discredit communism. It was safer to retreat into the security of one's beliefs rather than to

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<sup>9</sup>E.P. Thompson, "A Conversation with E.P. Thompson," interviewed by Mike Merrill (New York, March, 1976), in Henry Abelove, ed., Visions of History (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 11.

<sup>10</sup>Douglas Hyde, I Believed: the autobiography of a former British Communist (London: Heinemann, 1951)

<sup>11</sup>R.H.S. Crossman, The God that Failed (New York: Harper and Row, 1950).

<sup>12</sup>Raphael Samuel, "The Lost World of British Communism, Part 2", New Left Review 156 (March/April 1986): 65-66.



encounter the contaminating influences in the world.<sup>13</sup> When, however, the mentor of world communism questioned aspects of communist policy it was only to be expected that self-doubt should burst into a public forum. This is what happened in the aftermath of Khrushchev's speech.

## II

Khrushchev actually gave two important speeches at the Twentieth Congress. The first, denouncing 'the cult of the individual,' was addressed to an open session of congress on 14 February. This speech suggested that many of the problems experienced in the Soviet Union since the Party's Seventeenth Congress in 1934 could be attributed to the rise of the personality cult. The second speech was delivered on 24 February to a closed session of the party elite and hand-picked foreign delegates. Khrushchev, on this occasion, was far more explicit in condemning Stalin.

The secret speech has never been officially acknowledged by the Kremlin, although the US State Department managed to acquire a copy of the text early in June 1956 and substantial portions of it were subsequently published in The New York Times and London Observer. The Kremlin did not respond to this publication, but the Central Committee of the CPSU did pass a resolution, in response to requests from a number of CPs for clarification of Moscow's position in the light of the text's publication. The resolution was passed on 30 June and printed in Pravda on 2 July. Since it did not explicitly deny the contents of the alleged secret speech its authenticity has generally been accepted. This was certainly the assumption of dissidents within the BCP who were incensed at the manner in which Khrushchev's speech had entered the public realm, because it

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<sup>13</sup>One should note the analogous reasoning here to that found elsewhere in Thompson's work: his discussion of Morris' path to socialism, the decline of 'plebian Puritanism' from the late seventeenth century (see the discussion in section 2, chapter 7 below), and the withdrawal of the Romantic poets from political engagements emphasize the fact that the affirmation of political aspirations depends upon the nature of the 'sociological' context.

suggested a deliberate attempt to cover up crucial facts. It would probably not have mattered a great deal whether or not the secret speech had come to light (or, indeed, if it was a fabrication); Khrushchev's public speech was explosive enough in its own right.

Although Khrushchev directed a number of specific allegations against Stalin, the most important point of the critique was his failure to criticize either the Party itself or its theoretical foundations. It was significant that he chose as his point of departure 1934 and not, in particular, 1929. Until 1934 Stalin had fought the good fight against deviationists, notably Trotsky and Bukharin. After the fight for theoretical and political control of the CPSU had been won, Stalin tended to get side-tracked into an increasing concern with his own personality. However, if Khrushchev had gone back further than the Party's Seventeenth Congress he would have had to have justified collectivization and, with that, the theory and practice of Bolshevism. Khrushchev had no intention of doing this. Instead, the thrust of his critique turned on the single allegation that the shortcomings in Soviet democracy could be explained as a result of violations of the Leninist principles of collective leadership and democratic centralism. For Khrushchev, these principles were the foundation of 'socialist legality' and provided guarantees for a healthy and well-functioning socialist democracy:

It is of paramount importance to re-establish and strengthen in every way the Leninist principles of collective leadership...the central committee vigorously condemns the cult of the individual as alien to the spirit of Marxism-Leninism. To make a hero and miracle worker out of a particular leader belittles the role of the Party and tends to reduce its creative effort.<sup>14</sup>

Khrushchev's insistence on collective, rather than individual, effort as the only means by which to advance to full-fledged communism was echoed in a speech from the first deputy premier, Mikoyan, several days later:

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<sup>14</sup>Nikita Khrushchev, "Report of the Central Committee of the CPSU to the 20th Party Congress," Keesing's Contemporary Archives, 10-17 March 1956, 14748.

The principle of collective leadership is fundamental for a party of the Leninist type. Yet for nearly twenty years we have had in fact no collective leadership. The cult of the individual, which had already been condemned by Marx and by Lenin, had flourished and this could not fail to exert an extremely negative influence on the situation inside the Party and its activities.<sup>15</sup>

The explanation offered by Khrushchev to account for the 'violations of socialist legality', and the one unhesitantly adopted by the leadership of the BCP - at least in public - was based upon a carefully drawn distinction between Marxist-Leninist theory, which was in principle correct, and Stalin's personal abuses of his office:

The term 'de-Stalinization' (like the term Stalinism) was never officially used by the communist parties themselves, who spoke instead of 'correcting errors and distortions', 'overcoming the cult of the personality', and 'returning to Leninist norms of party life'. These euphemisms were meant to convey the impression that Stalinism had been a series of regrettable errors committed by an irresponsible Generalissimo, but had nothing to do with the system itself, and it sufficed to condemn his ways in order to restore the pre-eminent democratic character of the regime.<sup>16</sup>

After Stalin's death all these deviations were immediately cured, the Party once more reformed to proper democratic principles and that was the end of the matter.<sup>17</sup>

Khrushchev had indeed been quite explicit in drawing this distinction because he claimed that:

...had Leninist principles been observed...we certainly would not have had such brutal violations of revolutionary legality and many thousands of people would not have fallen victim to the methods of terror.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Anastas I.Mikoyan, *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>Leszek Kolakowski, Main Currents of Marxism, 3 vols., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), vol 3, 454.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>18</sup>Nikita Khrushchev, "Secret Speech," in A.Dallin, ed., The Anti-Stalin Campaign and International Communism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), 15.



These were 'mistakes' which could be attributed to one man's paranoia. Despite these errors, the Soviet Union had still managed to take tremendous strides in laying the foundations of a truly communist society:

In spite of all the evil which the personality cult brought to the Party and the people, it could not change and has not changed the nature of our social system. No personality cult could change the nature of the Socialist State, based on the public ownership of the means of production...

To imagine that an individual, even such a major one as Stalin, could change our social-political system is to enter into a profound contradiction with the facts, with Marxism, with truth and to sink into idealism. (my emphasis)<sup>19</sup>

The Soviet Union was and remained a socialist state because it was based upon the Marxist-Leninist premise that socialism entailed the collectivization and public ownership of the means of production. Since the Soviet Union had followed a policy of collectivization from the inauguration of the first five-year plan, 1929-34, then the Soviet Union was a socialist state and Stalin had not altered this fact. Hence, Khrushchev's point of departure.

As far as Khrushchev was concerned, his speech at the Twentieth Congress had settled the Soviet Union's accounts with its past. Now the regime could proceed with the task of constructing a fully-fledged communist society. As far as the leadership of the BCP was concerned, Khrushchev had dealt adequately with any lingering doubts about the past and the Congress had, in general, signalled

...a new stage in the creative development of Marxism-Leninism...a profound analysis of the present international situation, armed the Communist Party and all the Soviet people with a majestic plan for a further struggle in the building of communism and opened up new prospects for joint action by all the parties of the working class in warding off the threat of another war and for the interests of working people.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Nikita Khrushchev, "30th June Resolution," in *Ibid.*, 293, 294.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 277.

The whole experience of the Congress was felt to have been a cathartic one:

The courageous and relentless self-criticism in the matter of the personality cult was a new brilliant proof of the power and strength of our Party and the Soviet social system.<sup>21</sup>

The faith invested in the infallibility of Soviet pronouncements by the BCP remained unshaken. When they came to communicate the new line on Stalin the leading figures within the BCP presented exactly the same arguments that they had received. Thus, at the Party's Twenty-Fourth Congress in April, Harry Pollitt explained away the Stalin phenomenon by arguing that Stalin had ignored 'the principles of collective leadership.' After his death, Pollitt continued:

...the Leninist principle of collective leadership [had] been fully restored, Soviet democracy and the protection of the legal rights of every Soviet citizen put into operation, justice done to all those who suffered from the mistakes and abuses of Stalin's personal rule and measures have been taken to make it impossible for a similar situation to arise again...We consider that the fact that the errors and abuses have been fearlessly laid bare by the leaders of the CPSU, despite the shock that this has inevitably meant, is a proof of their great courage and communist honesty. The actions that they have taken to put things right, publicly and openly, gives the world a powerful demonstration of their political integrity, sense of justice, un-reserved intention of repairing injustices and determination to see that such grave violations of collective leadership and socialist legality cannot be repeated.<sup>22</sup>

In public, Pollitt might have been willing to trot out the appropriate clichés, but privately he and other members of the EC had reservations. Thus, following the publication of Khrushchev's secret speech the Political Committee of the BCP issued the following statement:

At a private session of the 24th National Congress of our party in April a resolution was passed and conveyed to the CPSU regretting that a public statement on Khrushchev's secret speech had not been made...[This] would have enabled the members of all Communist Parties and the friends of the Soviet Union to have understood fully the seriousness of

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 282.

<sup>22</sup>Harry Pollitt, "The 20th Congress of the CPSU: and the role of Stalin," *World News*, vol.3, 1956, 247; "The 20th Congress of the CPSU: and the role of Stalin, Part 2," Ibid., 279.



the issues and helped them to a better understanding of everything that is involved.<sup>23</sup>

This resolution was decided upon more or less at the same time that Pollitt was publicly praising the Soviet Union for its handling of the Stalin affair. Unbeknownst to him, moreover, was the fact that Khrushchev had prefaced his critique with an insistence upon the necessity of keeping the facts he was about to disclose private.<sup>24</sup> Would it have made a difference to Pollitt had he been aware of these considerations? Probably not. After all, membership in the BCP was premised on an article of faith and one didn't get to the Party's helm by doubting the veracity of the Soviet Union's claims. If the latter re-assessed its position then it made perfect sense for Pollitt to re-adjust his views accordingly. It made equal sense for others to follow suit. R.P. Dutt's assessment of the Twentieth Congress was instructive:

What are the essential themes of the 'Great Debate'? Not about Stalin. That there could be any spots on any sun would only startle an inveterate mithra-worshipper. Not about the now recognized abuses of the security organs in the period of heroic ordeal and achievement in the Soviet Union. To imagine that a great revolution can develop without a million cross currents, hardships, injustices and excesses would be a delusion fit only for ivory tower dwellers in fairy land who have still to learn that the thorny path of human advance moves forward, not only through unexampled heroism, but with accompanying baseness, with tears and blood. The Great Debate that has opened is about larger issues spotlighted by the Twentieth Congress...The future of mankind in the nuclear age...the future of the labour movement to meet the new conditions...the future of the transition to socialism, for the completion of national and social liberation throughout the world.<sup>25</sup>

In March 1953 Dutt had characterized Stalin as the "architect of the rising world of free humanity" whose teachings would exhort and guide all communists in the struggle to realize a

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<sup>23</sup>"Statement of the Political Committee of the British Communist Party," in Dallin, The Anti-Stalin Campaign, 174.

<sup>24</sup>Nikita Khrushchev, in Dallin, The Anti-Stalin Campaign, 87.

<sup>25</sup>Rajini Palme Dutt, "The Great Debate," Labour Monthly, 38(5), May 1956, 194.

more just and humane world. By 1956 he had been relegated to a "spot" on the "sun" of Soviet achievement. Such diametrically opposed assessments, one would have thought, would require an inkling of explanation. But Dutt offered none and instead glossed over the past as a series of mistakes. All that mattered now was the task of completing the socialist objective. In this argument, apparently, the means adopted are irrelevant provided they secure the prescribed end.

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The first signs that the Stalin question had not been dealt with adequately can be seen from letters that were published in The Daily Worker in late February and early March. Their tone was one of confusion, and one clearly in need of full discussion. The paper's editor, J.R. Campbell, however, was not prepared to permit a full-scale debate to be aired in the columns of the paper and an editorial on March 12th commented that:

Most questions connected with the cult of the individual have now been dealt with and letters are tending to be repetitive. We have now decided to close this particular discussion.<sup>26</sup>

Campbell's refusal to allow full consideration to be given over to the concerns which party members were beginning to voice was, in fact, symptomatic of the way in which the BCP leadership handled the issues as they unfolded over the course of the next few months. Once the Stalin question became a discussion of Stalinism, attention began to focus on the premises of Marxism-Leninism. This was the real bone of contention in 1956, and yet the possibility of discussing Party theory and practice was foreclosed by the very manner in which Khrushchev had framed the problem: it had originated in Stalin's violation of the principles of socialist legality. Only by re-asserting and defending the integrity of democratic centralism could the life blood of the

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<sup>26</sup>John R. Campbell, Daily Worker, 12 March 1956.



Party begin to flow again. But democratic centralism entailed rigid compliance with a clearly defined hierarchical distribution of authority. In short, there could be no quarrel with the Party leadership's account of reality, and those who chose to challenge these explanations could be branded as factionalists. Nonetheless, the absurdity of the official account of Stalin did not go unnoticed by the membership and was well-expressed publicly:

The debate on the role of Stalin seems to be being fought out on the basis of a 'reverse cult of the individual'. The Marxist method demands a scientific study of an objective situation. The trite formula 'it was all Stalin's fault - the mistakes have now been corrected -' fails to take into account the fact that the policies of Stalin must have been thought to have been correct or necessary by a powerful section of the leadership...no one man can for long defy or divert a whole nation.<sup>27</sup>

Exactly! The Communist Party appealed to Marxism to criticize the bourgeois world; when it came to assessing its own history it relapsed into a bourgeois idiom. The Marxist method required a sociological and historical account to explain the contextual factors which gave rise to and sustained Stalin and Stalinism. It also required an assessment of the status of Stalinism vis-a-vis Marxism. Marx, after all had been inspired to liberate men from oppression; Stalinism contrived to enslave them. How and why had this transformation occurred? Did Stalinism, authoritarianism and tyranny represent the logical termini of Marx's thought? For Thompson, this was the critical question and one requiring immediate attention because

...the future of British socialism may be very much affected by the understanding of and feelings towards the [Soviet Union] of British socialists, since it has always been their faith that socialism was not only economically practicable but was also intensely desirable; that is, the socialist society would revolutionize human relationships, replacing respect for property by respect for men, and replace the acquisitive society by the commonweal. It was assumed that all forms of human oppression were rooted, ultimately, in the economic oppression arising from the private ownership in the means of production; and that once these were socialized the ending of other oppressions would rapidly ensue...

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<sup>27</sup>Ken Geering, quoted in The Cult of the Individual, 13-14.

If, then, British socialists find features in the new society of the East repugnant, and find in them evidence that new forms of oppression...can perfectly well take root in a socialist society...some will cease to be socialists...others will lose confidence in the revolutionary perspectives of socialism, take a more limited and humdrum view of human potentialities, and hence cease to struggle for that transformation in men's values and outlook which socialists once thought to be possible...such reactions are likely to strengthen capitalist society...Moreover, it is evident that British socialists who see men who claim 'Marxism' as their guide, banner and 'science' perpetrating vile crimes against their own comrades and gigantic injustices against many thousands of their fellow men, will assume and have assumed, that the ideas of Marx and Engels are useless or even dangerous.<sup>28</sup>

The governing idea here is that British socialists have been moved by more than economic considerations. They have seen in the socialist ideal the possibility of creating an alternative social order founded upon co-operative principles. British socialists have been moved to action in the belief that the values which would sustain such a society would be more desirable than the conflict-ridden and competitive impulses which move capitalism and prevent the realization of all those wants that cannot be assigned an exchange value. Socialism, in other words, would facilitate the realization of human potentialities that are denied by capitalism.

In effect, Stalinism reduced all human behaviour to economic motivations. From its philistine premises followed all the abuses on which Thompson was to arraign it before the British socialist tradition. Yet the BCP continued to stress the connection between socialism and collectivization. The Soviet Union was a socialist society because, and only because, it had abolished private ownership in the means of production. This was the path that Britain had to follow:

The factories are decisive for any advance. It is in the factories that the daily clash of ideas takes place...that the working class feels, understands and can most effectively organize its powers...that the greatest possibilities

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<sup>28</sup>Thompson, "Socialist Humanism," 106.



for developing a mass movement [exist]...The factories are at the heart not only of the immediate struggles, but of the advance to socialism.<sup>29</sup>

In Thompson's opinion, the BCP's exaltation of material progress, and the Party's assumption that man is merely an economic being, was not likely to earn much favour with British working people because it was wholly alien to the traditions of British socialism. The British socialist tradition, Thompson argued in his first published critique of the BCP in June 1956, was characterized by an emphasis upon moral discourse and intellectual liberty.<sup>30</sup> This tradition had demonstrated time and again that economic goals were not primary and that what really mattered to it was the right of 'the freeborn Englishman' to speak without fear or intimidation.<sup>31</sup>

Although Stalin did claim to derive authority from the works of Marxism-Leninism - a claim that Khrushchev did not dispute - Stalinism's interpretation of Marxism, Thompson argued, was a distorted one. It was Thompson's contention that Stalinism drew upon certain ambiguities in Marx, ambiguities which Lenin transformed into mechanistic and idealistic fallacies. In the context of a very specific and historically contingent situation Stalin was able to mould these fallacies into a distinctive ideology. This ideology became deeply embedded in the bureaucratic culture and mentality presiding over the Soviet Union and, hence, over its satellites.<sup>32</sup>

I now turn to an examination of Thompson's interpretation of Stalinism. The theoretical discussion in the next section should throw into relief the nature of Thompson's

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<sup>29</sup>Harry Pollitt, "Extract from the Political Report of the 24th Congress," World News, vol.3 1956, 210.

<sup>30</sup>Thompson, "Winter Wheat in Omsk," 208.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid. This is the first time that Thompson uses this phrase in a polemical context. Its appearance in the context of a maturing critique of the BCP directs attention to the links between 1956 and The Making.

<sup>32</sup>Useful accounts of the origins of this process are to be found in MacIntyre, A Proletarian Science and Jonathan Rees, Proletarian Philosophers: Problems in Socialist Culture in Britain, 1900-1940 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

criticisms of the BCP, which are discussed in chapter 4. Thompson's central claim can be summarized thus: the death of Stalin altered nothing in the Soviet Union because the CPSU remained committed to those very ideas which sustained Stalin. Stalin cannot be held solely responsible for 'violations of socialist legality'; this must be attributed to Stalinism. It followed, that the restoration of Leninist principles would not guarantee that similar 'violations' would not occur in the future; on the contrary, such abuses could be expected.

### III

When Thompson wrote about ambiguities in Marx's thought he was referring to the problems associated with the word 'reflection'. Marx, Thompson asserted, had two quite distinct meanings in mind when he used this term. First, "he referred to the way in which sense impressions 'reflect' material reality which exists independently of human consciousness." And, second, he used the term "as an observation upon the way in which men's ideas and institutions have been determined by their 'social being' in their history."<sup>33</sup> The first is a general statement of the materialist standpoint; the second is a historical observation and is not entailed by the former since that is an abstraction, whereas the latter is context-dependent. In order to understand the ideas current in any society it is necessary to examine, empirically, actual social relationships and practices and not interpret these through the prism of abstract schema which are applied to and given explanatory precedence over the empirical, palpable, context:

Because a sense impression may be described (metaphorically) as a 'reflection' of material reality, it by no means follows that human culture is a passive mirror reflection of social reality.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Thompson, "Socialist Humanism," 133.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.



However, the classic statement of the relationship between 'social being' and 'social consciousness' in Marx's Preface to A Critique of Political Economy, does suggest a reductionist interpretation:

In the social production of their life men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation on which arises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and life processes in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.<sup>35</sup>

Although Marx appeared to qualify the nature of the relationship between social being and social consciousness by using the adjective 'correspond', orthodox Marxists typically interpreted his meaning in a reductionist sense: there is, and must be, a causal relationship between the ideas in a society and its typical productive forces (tools and skills) and the way in which these forces are arranged (relations of production). The only interests which are meaningful are those which are defined by relationships given at the point of material production. These interests can be specified with precision. Thus, working people who aspire to the acquisition of material satisfactions are not expressing their true interests since such aspirations can only be realized within a socio-economic order supporting private ownership in the means of production. Such aspirations are, therefore, expressive of a false consciousness. A true or revolutionary consciousness will only manifest itself when working class organizational forms and political strategies are oriented to the socialization of the means of production. Consciousness, to be true, must mirror social being.

According to Thompson, Lenin's Materialism and Empirio-Criticism contributed powerfully to the introduction of this and other materialist fallacies:

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<sup>35</sup>Karl Marx, Preface to A Critique of Political Economy, in David McLellan, Karl Marx: Selected Writings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 389.

Lenin's...concern with the first premise of materialism led him into...(1) the repeated lumping together of ideas, consciousness, thought and sensations as 'reflections' of material reality...(2) the repeated statement...that material reality is 'primary' and 'consciousness, thought, sensation' is 'secondary', 'derivative'...(3) Lenin slipped over from Marx's observation, 'social being determines social consciousness' to the quite different (but untrue) statement that 'social consciousness reflects social being' (4) From this, he slipped over to the grotesque conclusion that 'social being' is independent of the social consciousness of humanity...(5) From this it was a small step to envisaging consciousness as a clumsy process of adaption to independently-existing 'social being': "The necessity of nature is primary, and human will and mind secondary. The latter must necessarily and inevitably adapt itself to the former." <sup>36</sup>

Thompson may have been correct in his claim that Lenin forced Marx's ideas in a direction not intended by the latter, but this tendency was also apparent in Engels' notion of 'dialectical materialism' as a general and universally applicable principle governing the process of change in natural and social life. According to this idea, contradictions inhere in all phenomena and there is a natural tendency for contraries to resolve themselves in the production of radically different forms. For Engels and his successors, all change was by means of the resolution of contraries and this process was governed by laws existing independently of the will of men. Moreover, change was always in the direction of progress. Although men can apprehend the workings of these laws and can manipulate them in the direction of change, they cannot alter them. This qualification aside, it is true that Lenin made a good deal more explicit the dualism, implicit in Marx, between the primacy of matter and the derivative status of consciousness:

Materialism, in full agreement with the natural sciences, takes matter as primary and regards consciousness, thought and sensations as secondary, because in its well-defined form sensation is associated with the higher forms of matter (organic matter).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Thompson, "Socialist Humanism," 133-34.

<sup>37</sup>V.I. Lenin, Materialism and Empirio-Criticism, Selected Works, vol.X1, 112-13; quoted in Gordon Leff, The Tyranny of Concepts: a Critique of Marxism (London: The Merlin Press, 1969), 76.



If consciousness can be assimilated to matter, then the laws governing matter must govern consciousness. The best that men can hope to do is to understand these laws and fashion them to their own ends; ends which are, in any case, given to them by knowledge of the dialectic:

The highest task of humanity is to comprehend the objective logic of economic evolution...so that it may be possible to adapt to it one's social consciousness... in as definite, clear and critical a fashion as possible. (emphasis in the original)<sup>38</sup>

In social terms the reflection theory entailed the following consequences:

(i) a bourgeois mode of production implied a bourgeois social consciousness, while a socialist mode implied a socialist consciousness. More strongly, a socialist consciousness could not exist until after the instruments of production had been appropriated;

(ii) since capitalism is predicated upon exploitative social relationships it is inherently conflictual and ineluctably pressing forward to a resolution in socialism;

(iii) men could do nothing to alter this incessant tendency and anything undertaken to assist its realization should be evaluated positively as progressive; anything thwarting this development was identified as regressive;

(iv) hence, an awareness of the dialectic afforded the opportunity to manipulate socialism into being, and all actions taken with this goal in mind were expressive of a revolutionary consciousness. Conversely, all actions that were not directed to this end were identified as counter-revolutionary.

It was precisely this line of reasoning that Stalin drew upon to justify his claim that not only human knowledge, but man's very being, is constituted solely of material reality:

If nature, being the material world, is primary, and mind, thought, secondary, derivative; if the material world represents objective reality existing independently of the mind of men, while the mind is a reflection of this objective reality, it follows that the material life of society, its being, is also primary, and its spiritual life, secondary, derivative and that

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<sup>38</sup>V.I. Lenin; quoted in Thompson, "Socialist Humanism," 134.



the material life of society is an objective reality existing independently of the will of men, while the spiritual life is a reflection of this objective reality.<sup>39</sup>

This epistemological and ontological 'argument', it should be understood, proceeded from an untested conjecture: 'if' is a probabilistic statement which may or may not be true and we can only determine its veracity through empirical testing. But orthodox Marxism had no need of such verifying procedures, and instead assumed the truth of the argument from its logical coherence. Herein lay the justification both for exalting technological determinism and for embarking upon rapid collectivization in post-revolutionary Russia; the five-year plans can be regarded as an expression of the CPSU's attempts to bring the laws governing social evolution under their sway.

If men cannot alter the dialectic then in what sense can any meaning be ascribed to the notion of human freedom? The solution adopted by orthodox Marxism was first advanced by Engels. Drawing on Hegel, Engels asserted that "freedom is the appreciation of necessity" and "necessity is blind only insofar as it is not understood."<sup>40</sup> In other words, one is free to the extent that one understands those a priori laws governing reality. Thus:

...freedom does not consist in the dream of independence of natural laws, but in the knowledge of these laws, and in the possibility this gives to making them work towards definite ends.<sup>41</sup>

Thompson dismissed this conception of freedom as a nonsense and one which bore no connection to Marx's understanding of the term:

...Marx's common-sense view that man's freedom is enlarged by each enlargement of knowledge...is transformed into the mystique of man's freedom consisting in recognizing and serving "the objective logic of

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<sup>39</sup>Joseph Stalin; quoted in *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>40</sup>Engels, *Anti-Duhring*; quoted in Leff, *Tyranny of Concepts*, 197.

<sup>41</sup>Leff, *Ibid.*

economic evolution": his freedom becomes slavery to necessity. (emphasis in the original)<sup>42</sup>

In what sense can men be said to be free if their choices have been prescribed for them. Indeed, this conception of freedom was limited in one further crucial sense: while freedom may be the appreciation of necessity, only a few people were assumed to be capable of appreciating that necessity. The majority had to take it as a given that the minority had perceived necessity correctly. Limited access to the mysteries of the universe stemmed directly from Lenin's notion of the vanguard. While a tightly-knit and highly disciplined party structure may have been necessary in the conditions prevailing in Czarist Russia and the early years of the revolution, this concept of party continued to survive despite having long outlived its utility. Not only did it survive, but it drew upon Lenin's fallacies and presented these as a means by which to justify its continued existence. Since the bureaucracy claimed an exclusive right to interpret the dialectic, then all ideas which contradicted official policies were necessarily seen to be counter-revolutionary.

Thompson argued that several inter-related consequences flowed from the manner in which a number of false ideas developed in the context of early twentieth century Russia:

1. Anti-intellectualism. This characteristic was inherent in "the imposition of a system of authorized pre-conceptions upon reality rather than the derivation of ideas from the study of reality."<sup>43</sup> Although this characteristic can be traced to Lenin, it took root in and drew nourishment from a context where anti-intellectual attitudes were prevalent. Such attitudes are often found in working-class movements where intellectuals are identified with an exploiting class. In Czarist Russia, where the social space separating different classes was great, and the resulting tensions between them acute, these attitudes were understandably well-developed.

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<sup>42</sup>Thompson, "Socialist Humanism," 134.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid. 109.

The very fact that the early Bolsheviks had to maintain party unity led them to subordinate individual points of view. But the imperatives governing the Party's survival have been reproduced; the bureaucracy has made a virtue out of necessity, a virtue which continues to draw upon a fallacious conception of human motivation in its reduction of consciousness to being. It is hardly surprising that when a disjuncture appears between the theory (what men should be thinking and doing) and the practice (what they actually are thinking and doing) that the theory should be questioned since we are taking about real people and not some abstraction of them. In particular, human beings are not economic automatons:

...it is of the first importance that men do not only 'reflect' experience passively; they also think about that experience; and their thinking affects the way they act. The thinking is the creative part of man which, even in class society, makes him partly an agent of history, just as he is partly a victim of his environment.<sup>44</sup>

The Stalinist could not accept this argument because, for him, thinking was prescribed by material reality; by the dialectic. But the very idea of there being historical laws operating independently of man's will does not sit easily with Marx's claim in The Holy Family that:

History does nothing. It possesses no immense wealth, it wages no battles. It is man, real living man who does all that, who possesses and fights; history is not, as it were, a person apart, using man to achieve its ends; history is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his aims.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 113.

<sup>45</sup>Marx and Engels, The Holy Family; quoted in Jorge Larraín, A Reconstruction of Historical Materialism (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 26. One should compare this argument with Thompson's interpretation of history outlined in chapters 6 and 7 below. In particular, note the remarks in E.P. Thompson, "A Homage to Tom Maguire," in Asa Briggs and John Saville, eds., Essays in Labour History, Vol.1 (London: MacMillan, 1960), 314: "Nothing in history happens spontaneously, nothing worthwhile is achieved without the expense of intellect and spirit."



In asserting economic or class interests as the sole source of human motivation the Stalinist "...entirely mistakes man's nature as revealed in his unfolding history."<sup>46</sup> Thus, Thompson observed that:

Slump does not necessarily engender socialist militancy...it may equally provide the breeding ground for authoritarianism. Some of the periods of greatest advance in our movement have been in the context of economic recovery (1889 and the New Unionism) or have been the product of an enhanced political consciousness arising from non-economic causes (the anti-fascist wars and 1945).<sup>47</sup>

There were important theoretical and political issues at stake in the Stalinist's claim that man is constituted of material reality. In describing and explaining reality in terms of the dialectic and in ascribing to this the status of an absolute law with an autonomous and determinate being, orthodox Marxists surrendered themselves to a form of self-alienation: for where else do ideas derive if not from the minds of men. The necessary conclusion that must be drawn from a reflection theory of knowledge is that all concepts have an exact representation in reality. However:

Not all concepts, and in particular very few scientific concepts, are arrived at by means of a process of generalization...One has only to think of Marx's own concepts of value, surplus value, abstract labour...to realize that they do not reflect a material reality directly observable.<sup>48</sup>

And from whence does the idea of the dialectic derive; where in reality could one find this concept? The answer is that it did not have any direct representation in reality because it had been contrived by man's imagination. But men had not only contrived an abstraction, they had also

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<sup>46</sup>Thompson, "Socialist Humanism," 122.

<sup>47</sup>E.P. Thompson, "The New Left," The New Reasoner 9 (Summer 1959): 13.

<sup>48</sup>Larrain, Reconstruction, 68-69.

subordinated themselves to it.<sup>49</sup> It was exactly such idealism that Marx criticized in The German Ideology:

Hitherto men have constantly made up for themselves false conceptions about themselves, about what they are and about what they ought to be. They have arranged their relationships according to their ideas of God, of natural man etc. The phantoms of their brains have got out of their hands. They, the creators, have bowed down before their creations. Let us liberate them from the chimeras, the ideas, dogmas, imaginary beings under the yoke of which they are pining away. Let us revolt against the rule of thoughts.

The premisses from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premisses...real individuals...the first premise of all history is...the existence of living human individuals...the first fact to be established is the physical organization of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature...The writing of history must always set out from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the actions of men.<sup>50</sup>

If Marx inveighed against idealism, then Stalinism was the embodiment of it. Indeed, Thompson found much in Stalinism that reminded him of the religious dogma of the church in the late Middle Ages:

Holy church, as we know, was founded upon an apostolic succession, with supreme doctrinal authority vested in the pope and the college of cardinals. It excommunicated heretics, pronounced anaethma on those who sought to smuggle heresies into the church and sought to establish the truth or falsity of doctrines by referring to a self-consistent system of thought, founded upon authority and biblical texts rather than by constant reference to the facts.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>It is true, as Thompson argues at length in "The Poverty of Theory," that concepts do not always have a direct representation in the world. This argument, however, should be distinguished from the claim that concepts can be used to organize an understanding of the past. But the concepts cannot be seen to be immune from empirical criticism. In the case of the dialectic, for example, Thompson has contended that we can observe contradictions in empirical reality as well as employing the idea of contradiction as a theoretical category: see Thompson, "An Open Letter," 353-56.

<sup>50</sup>Karl Marx, The German Ideology; quoted in McLellan, Selected Writings, 159, 160.

<sup>51</sup>E.P. Thompson, "Reply to George Matthews," The Reasoner: A Journal of Discussion, no.1 July 1956, 12-13.



Although proclaimedly materialist (Stalinism) partook of some of the characteristics of religion. Its symbol is the Lenin mausoleum. Its supreme ideologist was Stalin himself. And it found institutional expression in the CPSU and in the practices of 'democratic centralism'. Its most systematic exposition is to be found, perhaps, in Stalin's Dialectical and Historical Materialism.<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, Stalinism and Christian theology shared an eschatological vision in believing that the world was governed by a pre-ordained plan which men could not alter. Men, or more precisely the leader and his immediate entourage, could only hope to master the mysteries of this plan. They could take measures which would facilitate the pre-ordained end, and they typically justified their actions in terms of this end. The telos - the day of judgement or socialism - would mete out retribution to the wicked and justice to the meek and good of heart. A closely associated idea was the notion of theodicy which was:

...a method of transforming facts into values...a method through which a fact becomes not what it appears to be empirically, but an element in a teleological order that bestows special significance on all its components.<sup>53</sup>

The end to which history was taken to be moving provided a source of valuation for the actions of the present. If this was Stalinism then Stalinism was not Marxism. For Marxism was concerned with developing and expanding man's critical faculties, and not with the denial of these in the name of preserving intact the credentials of dogmatic idealism.

2. Closely associated with anti-intellectualism was the contempt that the Stalinist exhibited to the needs and interests of real human beings; a contempt which manifested itself as 'moral nihilism':

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<sup>52</sup>Thompson, "Outside the Whale," 172.

<sup>53</sup>Leszek Kolakowski, "The Priest and the Jester," in Kolakowski, Towards a Marxist Humanism, 14.

Ideas hostile to...Stalinism were seen as the last desperate rallying cry of an old 'superstructure'; it is far easier to be inhumane if one takes a non-human model.<sup>54</sup>

A Stalinist evaluated actions in terms of their contribution to the advance of socialism. These actions were not seen to be right or wrong; they were either politically correct or politically false. Since the Party elite claimed proprietorial knowledge of the dialectic their policies were necessarily correct. Mistakes could, of course, be made - and this was largely the line taken by Khrushchev's denunciation - but these, apparently, could only be apprehended retrospectively, when new 'knowledge became available.' Hence, the BCP could easily rationalize its changing assessment of Stalin. Any means would do provided they were geared to the realization of 'socialism'. In other words, moral licentiousness derived its sanction, ultimately, from idealism. In effect, morality had been reduced to considerations of political expediency:

...all evil is evil to the system, all evil men are agents of the west, all sin is a bourgeois survival. With this evasion all moral problems could be reduced to the problems of power, all moral precepts derived from the imperatives of history and the necessities of the Soviet state. Communist orthodoxy was reduced to the single problem of the conquest of working class power and all morality was subservient to this realpolitik.<sup>55</sup>

The view that political expediency rather than moral considerations should guide the actions of communists was deeply embedded within the hierarchical mentality of the BCP:

For Marxists every political decision is good or bad according to whether or not it serves the interests of working people and the cause of socialism.<sup>56</sup>

If you disagree with your opponent's political line, it is easy enough to call it immoral. But what has this to do with Marxism and the

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<sup>54</sup>Thompson, "Socialist Humanism," 114.

<sup>55</sup>Thompson, "Outside the Whale," 182-83.

<sup>56</sup>George Matthews; quoted in Thompson, "Socialist Humanism," 116.



determining of a class position on events? The moral estimation flows from, and cannot be separated from the political estimation.<sup>57</sup>

But morality, for Thompson, could not be relativized to class position because man was not an abstraction. To characterize morality as the Stalinist did effectively exonerated men from all moral responsibility for their actions. Since the Stalinist defended his actions on the grounds that they were undertaken in accordance with forces beyond his control, he could not be held accountable for any of his actions. However,

[n]o one can be absolved of moral responsibility for supporting crime on the grounds that he was intellectually convinced of its inevitable victory. No one is relieved of moral obligation to oppose a system of government a doctrine or a social order that he regards as base or inhuman by pleading that he considers it historically necessary. We are against that form of relativism which assumes that the criteria for moral assessment, assessment of human behaviour, can be derived from knowledge of the Weltgeist.<sup>58</sup>

Moral responsibility had to be placed in the hands of individuals, for they, and not some abstraction, were alone capable of intentionality and could alone be held accountable for the consequences of their decisions: "Moral judgements cannot be derived from abstract precepts...but only from real men and women."<sup>59</sup>

3. The final characteristic that Thompson identified in Stalinism followed from the combined effects of the first two: its denial of creative human agency. Enough has already been said about this idea to indicate that for Thompson it refers specifically to the capacity to make choices and to act upon them. In denying that men can think other than in terms prescribed for them by the dialectic Stalinism foreclosed the possibility of making meaningful choices. If men could not make choices they could not be free because the concept of choice means choosing one course of

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<sup>57</sup>John Gollan; quoted in Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>Leszek Kolakowski, "Responsibility and History," in Kolakowski, Marxist Humanism, 113.

<sup>59</sup>Thompson, "Socialist Humanism," 125.

action rather than another. Such decisions pre-suppose the existence of some criteria of selection. These criteria, Thompson argued, could not be given by an abstract conception of man's nature. Rather, they must be located within the context of social relations that men find themselves in. It is what men think about these relationships that matters and not what they are told they should be thinking by political elites and their theories.

The crux of Stalinism lay in the obeisance it paid to the economic base. But what exactly, Thompson wondered, ought one to understand by the economic base? The Stalinist would have one believe that it is merely a set of productive forces to whose needs it is man's lot to minister. However:

Production, distribution and consumption are not only digging, carrying and eating, but also planning, organizing and enjoying. Imaginative and intellectual faculties are not confined to a 'superstructure' and erected upon a 'base' of things (including men-things); they are implicit in the creative act of labour which makes man man.<sup>60</sup>

One might add, as Marx did, that what distinguishes man is his imagination:

We pre-suppose labour in a form that stamps itself as exclusively human. A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this: that the architect raises his structure in his imagination before he erects it in reality.<sup>61</sup>

To raise a structure in the imagination implies a different set of intellectual processes to those entailed in the notion that men merely reflect reality. In the former man, is seen to be an active participant in the process of change; and not a passive recipient of forces beyond his control:

Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates and controls the material relations between himself and nature. He opposes himself to nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his own body, in order to

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 131.

<sup>61</sup>Karl Marx, Capital; quoted in Ibid., 130.

appropriate nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway. (my emphasis)<sup>62</sup>

Man discovers his wants through the process of labour. In order to satisfy basic wants he brings his energies to bear upon reality, and in satisfying them he changes nature and himself; he perceives new wants and the process is repeated. He is constantly defining new possibilities and transcending limitations. The definition and realization of wants is a constant effort of conscious will and practical activity, requiring the freedom to think and to act if he is to truly objectivize his being in the world. What men will choose cannot be determined in advance, but will depend upon men's experiences. These experiences define their expectations and wants. The Stalinist claimed to know in advance what men will and must choose, and if they do not so choose then their actions must be guided by a false consciousness. The Stalinist, therefore, offered a conception of human perfectibility and he was able to justify his attempts to mould man in the image of this conception by claiming that it was inevitable.

Thompson's interpretation of Marxism was quite otherwise; it offered a conception of human potential, a potential which man must realize for himself through his own creative labour. The one conception is founded upon an abstraction, the other upon real men in real contexts. At least for 'the early Marx', man's nature could not be known in advance precisely because "...the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations."<sup>63</sup> If human nature could be reduced to a few schemata then reality could indeed be interpreted through the application of a priori categories. But the criterion which distinguishes man from an automaton is his ability to think, to reason and to imagine.

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid.

<sup>63</sup>Karl Marx, Theses on Feuerbach, (6th Thesis); quoted in McLellan, Selected Writings, 157.

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I began this section by noting that Thompson traced many of the characteristic features of Stalinism to certain ambiguities in the thought of Marx. In particular, he examined the process, initiated by Lenin, which assimilated two quite distinct meanings to the term 'reflection' and ended at a point that Marx's oeuvre had begun by criticizing; that is, idealism. The Stalinist manipulated reality through the medium of abstractions and refused to entertain man's actual needs and wants as these had revealed themselves through the process of their lived experiences or history. The Stalinist idealized man; he offered static structures and said nothing about changing human relationships.

In an effort to explain the way in which men relate to one another in a given society and the ways in which their relations changed as their material needs changed, Marx employed the metaphor of 'social being' interacting with 'social consciousness'. In Stalin's hands, a heuristic acquired a determinate being in its own right. That is, categories of thought became confused with categories of reality.<sup>64</sup> Rather than a reciprocity being seen to exist between 'being' and 'consciousness' the latter was reduced to and made to depend upon the former, and in the process any notion of man as a thinking, creative being vanished. Dialectical materialism became mechanical idealism.

According to Thompson, Stalinism defied two of Marx's guiding precepts:

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<sup>64</sup>See the discussion in Steven B. Smith, Reading Althusser: An Essay on Structural Marxism, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 142-49.

(i) The necessity to reject all previous forms of materialism because in them "...reality...is conceived only in the form of the object of contemplation...not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively."<sup>65</sup>

(ii) The Stalinist, in depending upon abstractions, denied the possibility that men can change. Marx, however, did not suppose human nature to be invariant: "The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances...forgets that circumstances are changed by man and that it is essential to educate the educator himself."<sup>66</sup>

While it may be necessary to abstract certain features from reality in order to impose upon it some coherence it does not follow that one can then move on to generalize universal laws governing all nature, including the procedures which gave rise to these laws in the first instance! As Blake put it, 'to generalize is to be an idiot.' In Thompson's opinion, idiocy seemed to enter the Marxist tradition when Lenin took hold of the dialectic and, as one commentator has noted:

...increasingly defined and formulated it in its own terms...the effect was to create a new metaphysic, to worship the abstraction for the reality, to turn guiding principles into precepts and prohibitions, to transform a method into an absolute.<sup>67</sup>

This was not Marx's understanding of the dialectic, because he located it firmly within the context of actual social relationships:

In order to examine the connection between spiritual and material production it is above all necessary to grasp the latter itself not as a general category but in a definite historical form...If material production is not conceived in its specific historical form it is impossible to understand what is specific in the spiritual production corresponding to

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 157. (1st Thesis)

<sup>66</sup>Ibid. (3rd Thesis)

<sup>67</sup>Leff, Tyranny of Concepts, 26.

it and the reciprocal influence of one on the other. (emphasis in the original)<sup>68</sup>

This, perhaps, is a better statement of Marx's understanding of the relationship between 'social being' and 'social consciousness', for it emphasizes correspondence rather than determinism, reciprocity rather than causal reductionism. Indeed, it states exactly Thompson's understanding of dialectical materialism and the one which, as we have seen in chapter 1, he conceived the materialist interpretation of history to comprehend. By this criterion, Stalinism and Marxism shared very little in common.

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<sup>68</sup>Karl Marx, Theories of Surplus Value; quoted in Larrain, Reconstruction, 67.

## Chapter 4

### Humanizing Socialism

"Give me liberty to know, to utter and to argue freely according to conscience above all liberty," declared Milton. He compared the attempt to suppress ideas by means of censorship "to the exploit of that gallant man who thought to pound up the crows by shutting his park gate." The suppression of opinion, he said, leads not to unity, but to "a gross conforming stupidity, a stark and dead congealment of wood and hay and stubble, forced and frozen together."<sup>1</sup>

The previous chapter concluded with the general observation that it is one thing to have theory assist in the interpretation of reality, but it is quite another to allow theory to blind one to reality. Theory should be man's servant and not his master. As an aid to understanding reality, one necessarily has to make certain abstractions. The Marxist dialectic - itself an abstraction - would seem to require that ideas be tested against reality and if they are found to be wanting then the appropriate changes made: the educators, said Marx, must also be educated. Mechanical idealism, by contrast, used reason to generalize universal laws, to whose will reason was then required to submit itself. The consequences which flowed from such procedures - anti-intellectualism or irrationalism, moral nihilism and the dogmatic denial of creative human agency - acted, in Thompson's opinion, as an impediment to the diffusion of Marxist ideas within the wider labour

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<sup>1</sup>John Milton, quoted in E.P.Thompson, The Struggle for a Free Press (London: A People's Press Publication, 1952), 8. Thompson quoted these lines again in his first public criticism of the BCP - "Winter Wheat in Omsk" - and, yet again, in the second, revised edition of his book Whigs and Hunters, 311. The context, and the opponents had of course changed between 1956 and 1977, but it is worth noting the similarities as well.



movement. It was therefore necessary to dissect Stalinism and explicate the ways in which this phenomenon could not be regarded as an embodiment of Marxism.

Thompson's criticism of Stalinism emphasized that this phenomenon was not "Marxism with three mistakes."<sup>2</sup> Stalinism had to be seen as a distinctive and coherent ideology, whose origins could be traced to the manner in which a number of fallacious ideas took root in, and drew sustenance from, a particular historical context. It was an ideology because it projected, as universal and immutable truths, a false conception of man and human nature, and one that was designed to justify the reproduction of vested interests. Stalinism was a way of thinking about reality that had become rooted in the CPSU and its affiliates. To criticize Stalinism implied, necessarily, a critique of the bureaucracy. It is the course of Thompson's critique of the BCP that this chapter intends to explore.

## I

Although dissatisfaction with the way in which the Twentieth Congress had handled the Stalin question began to express itself as early as late February 1956 it wasn't until July that a formal mechanism, The Reasoner, was brought into being to serve as a conduit for general discussion. Until that point the bureaucracy and its journals simply refused to acknowledge the existence of a problem. Indeed, to the Party elite, there didn't seem to be a need for the type of discussion that an increasing number of members were demanding. The official line had been passed on, and the principle of democratic centralism foreclosed the need to justify this explanation. The Reasoner was a response to this dogmatic intransigence.

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<sup>2</sup>Thompson, "Socialist Humanism," 132.

The Reasoner was a duplicated journal, edited and published by Thompson and John Saville<sup>3</sup> which ran through three issues - July, September and November 1956. Its sub-title, 'A Journal of Discussion', accurately reflected its raison d'être and its principal objectives were summarized in the first editorial:

The Reasoner is a journal which is, in the main, written by and addressed to members of the Communist Party. It is a discussion journal. Our first aim is to provide a new forum for the far-reaching discussions at present going on within and close to the Communist Party - on questions of fundamental principle, aim and strategy. (emphasis in the original)<sup>4</sup>

In taking this initiative the editors directly challenged the organizing principle of the party, and the one which, more to the point, the Party leadership were currently vaunting as the basis of a healthy socialist democracy. The leadership's views did not, however, deter the publication of an article by Ken Alexander which questioned the appropriateness of democratic centralism in a political culture with a long tradition of democratic freedoms. The most important of these freedoms, Alexander argued, was the right that British people enjoyed to express their opinions.<sup>5</sup> These freedoms, Thompson himself reflected, were not the bourgeois sops to a disaffected proletariat that the Party held them to be, but had been won through the exercise of conscious agency in numerous struggles. That is, these freedoms had been fought for by working people to enable them to promote their own interests. These interests could not be regarded as the same as bourgeois interests because they stemmed from different positions within the production process.

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<sup>3</sup>John Saville was an economic historian at the University of Hull. There is a useful discussion and bibliography of his work in Ralph Miliband, "John Saville: A Presentation," in David E. Martin and David Rubenstein eds., Ideology and the Labour Movements: Essays Presented to John Saville (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 15-31, 258-63.

<sup>4</sup>E.P. Thompson and John Saville, "Why We Are Publishing," The Reasoner: A Journal of Discussion, no.1, July 1956, 1.

<sup>5</sup>Ken Alexander, "Democratic Centralism," The Reasoner: A Journal of Discussion 5 (July 1956): 6-11.

Without these freedoms the interests of working people could not have been advanced. The BCP, however, seemed to assume that anything which stopped short of the overthrow of capitalist society indicated the lack of a revolutionary consciousness and was a means by which the bourgeoisie preserved its privileged position. Therefore, the freedoms which the British working class thought they possessed were illusory. Thompson dismissed this argument as irrational because it derived from a theory which the Party elite refused to test against reality.

Given the importance that Thompson attached to the defence of intellectual freedom as the defining characteristic of the British socialist tradition, one can understand why he should have become more vocal in his criticism the more the BCP attempted to thwart the expression of opinion. The point to emphasize is, that for Thompson, it was intellectual freedom and not material progress that mattered to British socialists. Working people would not be bought off with the promise of higher material standards:

It is a libel on the British working class to suggest that they would exchange liberties for a higher standard of living. Those...who travel on delegations to the East only to gape enviously and to belittle our own traditions do no good to our cause. They bring back not the true seed of solidarity, but a strange seed which will never thrive in our culture.<sup>6</sup>

The BCP would only "win the minds of British people for socialism," if, and only if, they were prepared to take "fully into account the intelligence, the experience, the democratic traditions and the organizational maturity of the British working class," and not idealize or perceive them through the medium of abstractions.<sup>7</sup> The first step to take in convincing working people that the Communist Party did have the real interests of real people at heart was for the Party to come to terms with its own past:

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<sup>6</sup>Thompson, "Winter Wheat in Omsk," 409.

<sup>7</sup>E.P. Thompson and John Saville, "The Case For Socialism," The Reasoner: A Journal of Discussion, no.2, September 1956, 6.



The Communist Party cannot effectively pursue its aim of unity if communists are not willing to enter an honest and self-critical discussion of the serious criticisms of communist method and theory.<sup>8</sup>

This discussion entailed, crucially, an assessment of the Party's proper relationship to the CPSU. It was one thing to recognize the advances made by the revolution and the 'heroic sacrifices' made by Soviet people; it was quite another to continue to encourage the belief that the support which the BCP gave was given uncritically. As long as this view was sustained, communists were merely endorsing the widely held belief that any means justified the end. As Saville put it:

Political support of the USSR is the basic principle of working class internationalism and this we will always adhere to...the error we fell into was not in defending the USSR, despite its mistakes, but defending the mistakes themselves...we shall stand discredited before the labour movement unless we honestly and frankly state where we went wrong and that we will ensure, as far as we can, that similar errors will not be made in the future...our political honesty as a political party is at stake...Belief in our intentions and assurances will inevitably be judged...by our attitudes to these recent revelations.<sup>9</sup>

If communists were to convince working people that they were pursuing moral ends, their actions had to demonstrate that they were doing so by moral means:

...conscious struggle for moral principle in our political work is a vital part of our political relations with our people. The British people do not understand and will not trust a monolith without a moral tongue.<sup>10</sup>

The Party's response to The Reasoner's call for open and frank discussion was, however, predictable: they saw in these demands evidence of factionalism. Initially, the Party responded by reminding the editors of the appropriate channels to follow if they had any concerns about questions of policy - although not of fundamental theoretical principle. On 10 August they

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>9</sup>John Saville, "Problems of the Communist Party," World News, vol.3, 1956, 314.

<sup>10</sup>Thompson, "Winter Wheat in Omsk," 408.

were summoned to a disciplinary hearing before the Yorkshire District Committee (YDC). Saville was unable to attend this meeting and submitted the following statement:

The Reasoner was conceived entirely in terms of the general interest of the Party. It is not and we do not intend to allow it to become a journal of faction. I am as firmly convinced as ever of the need for a Communist Party in Britain....

we believed that - before we published - there was a crisis developing in the Party which was not been reflected in the Party press or in the statements and actions of the leadership...we were aware of the opinion that there was a marked reluctance, amounting to a definite opposition on the part of those in control of the official Party, to analyze fully and frankly the consequences of the revelations of the Twentieth Congress ...We believed [that] recent events have made it plain that without the right of free, open and un-fettered discussion communist parties will become the victims of the disease of orthodoxy...We believed [that] the widespread discontent...would harden into bitterness and frustration or anti-party attitudes...unless some evidence of a new spirit was forthcoming. We see no reason to stop publishing The Reasoner: to do so would be a defeat, not for us, but for the principle of full, frank discussion we are determined to defend.<sup>11</sup>

There was a further hearing of the YDC on 18 August, but no new ground was covered; the demands to stop publishing were met with the same resolve to continue. The failure of local disciplinary procedures finally brought King Street into the picture, and on 29 August Thompson and Saville were summoned to a meeting with the Party's General Secretary, John Gollan. The details of the meeting, and the EC's position on The Reasoner were subsequently published in World News. They were both held to be "guilty of a grave breach of Party rules, practices and discipline, and that whatever their motives, the results of their actions were doing grave damage to the Party."<sup>12</sup> The EC had decided to treat the issue as a constitutional one and in so doing evaded the wider political and theoretical issues which the journal's publication focused

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<sup>11</sup>John Saville, "The Twentieth Congress and the British Communist Party," in John Saville and Ralph Miliband, eds., The Socialist Register (London: The Merlin Press, 1976), 9.

<sup>12</sup>"Communist Party Executive Committee Statement on 'The Reasoner'," World News, vol.3, 1956, 601.



attention upon. In essence, they had violated the hierarchical authority of the Party. Since neither had been elected, the EC claimed (although mistakenly in Thompson's case), they were behaving irresponsibly and "if they claimed the right to publish their own political journal, they could not deny the right to others."<sup>13</sup> If allowed to continue unchecked, The Reasoner, would set a dangerous precedent, encouraging others to engage in equally divisive factionalist tactics:

Far from being democratic, this situation would be the negation of democracy for such journals would be completely beyond the control of the Party membership and would be produced by individuals not elected or responsible to the membership. The only way to protect the rights of all members, including those who disagree with the present Party policy, is for the Party press to be the responsibility of the elected committees of the Party.<sup>14</sup>

The rationale behind this argument was that the Party had to present a united front if it was to defend an electorally viable position. An argument couched in terms of political expediency, however, was hardly likely to appeal to 'the reasoners' since it was precisely such tactical considerations, and the resulting evasions, that had prompted their critique in the first place. Political unity was inadequate unless preceded by unity in thought:

Only a party of free men and women, accepting a discipline arising from true democratic discussion and decision, alert in mind and conscience, will develop the clarity, initiative and elan necessary to arouse the dormant energies of our people...neither the reason nor the conscience of man can be confined within the disciplines and procedures appropriate to the decisions of action; nor can great theoretical issues be solved by simple majority vote.<sup>15</sup>

This argument was not acceptable to the Party leadership and at the meeting of 29 August Gollan reminded Thompson and Saville that the Party had recently appointed a commission to inquire into any needed reforms of Party procedures, and that they should cease publication.

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Thompson and Saville, "Why We Are Publishing," 3.



Neither, however, were prepared to budge on an issue which they considered the future of the Party hinged. A few days later, at Gollan's request, Thompson wrote a reply to the EC on behalf of himself and Saville:

We consider it to be in the fundamental interest of the Party that the fullest and frankest discussion shall continue. Since you were unable to give us assurances or effective guarantees that it shall continue in other forms, we regard it as a question of communist principle to continue publishing The Reasoner and the second number is now in active preparation.<sup>16</sup>

These concerns were well-founded because the Party had no intention of changing its position. Thus, when the Commission on Inner-Party Democracy reported its findings in December 1956 the minority report was rejected because "its proposals would amount to the disintegration of the Communist Party as a unified political organization".<sup>17</sup> This response was to be expected because the minority noted that:

In our view, the conception of an 'iron discipline', bordering on military discipline, although essential for the CPSU in Lenin's time, and in similar circumstances elsewhere, is inappropriate to our Party or to present British conditions, and the rigid application of the principle of democratic centralism, upon which the majority of the commission insist, will not create unity or discipline in the party, but will cause resentment, dis-unity and indiscipline.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, the minority report saw in the Party's insistence upon democratic centralism a convenient technique to evade an honest confrontation with the Party's past. This was a policy that was not apt to endear the Party to working people:

Communism's greatest strength is, or should be, the truth. Without access to the truth communists cannot take the right decisions. Truth is a weapon in our hands, but truth cannot be dissected into those parts which are helpful to our cause, and to those parts which are harmful and must

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<sup>16</sup>E.P. Thompson; quoted in World News, vol.3, 1956, 602.

<sup>17</sup>The Report of the Commission on Inner-Party Democracy (London: The Communist Party, 1956), iv.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 47-48.

therefore be suppressed...discussion is not something that can be turned on and off by the Executive like a tap...Discussion is a normal continuous process. It is true that the Party must reach decisions, but even decisions will not close a controversy so long as a substantial part of the Party remains unconvinced. [The Party's attitude towards] The Reasoner reveals the fear of independent thinking by Party members...We cannot expect the Communist Party to win a mass membership, either of workers or of intellectuals, on the basis of a prescribed list of forbidden literature, with freedom of expression limited to an occasional contribution to the Party press...If members find themselves unable to express their views through official Party channels they will be driven, as they have, to find expression in the non-Party press.<sup>19</sup>

The minority should have expected the Party's reaction. Their arguments, after all, were precisely those of The Reasoners' and by December the 'Reasoner's' affiliation with the BCP was history.

We can pick up the threads of the narrative again by noting that the second number was, as promised, published. On 7 October the editors wrote to Gollan again explaining their actions:

While we appreciate your general assurances about the intention of the leadership to promote and extend discussion we are not at all satisfied that this can in fact take place adequately in the present forms. Nor are we satisfied that within the present very serious political context that the power as to what should and should not be discussed and the way in which discussion can or ought to be left in the sole control of the executive committee, without effective safeguards of one sort or another defining and protecting the rights of minorities in written discussion. The discussion on central questions - which can best be defined for the moment as 'Stalinism' and its influence on our own theory and practice - has scarcely begun in our Party, and it would be a very serious set-back for our movement if it was now curbed or guided in channels decided beforehand by considerations of expediency.<sup>20</sup>

Gollan's reply of 16 October observed that the editors had defied an executive decision and added that "the Executive Committee specifically instructs you not to bring out a third

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 51, 52, 53.

<sup>20</sup>E.P. Thompson; quoted in World News, vol.3, 1956, 681.



number."<sup>21</sup> But the third issue did appear with a long editorial statement outlining the editors' understanding of and position on the questions raised by the controversy. The basis of the Party's argument, it claimed, was false because the rules that publication allegedly violated did not exist. Rather, the EC's position turned on a contrived interpretation of Rule 27 which empowered the EC "to interpret the other rules as it sees fit; and it has found it possible to interpret several rules to mean what they do not say."<sup>22</sup> The statement went on to explain that The Reasoner was published in the first place:

...because there was a political crisis both within the Party and in the International Communist Movement and theory which has not been reflected in the statements and actions of the leadership.<sup>23</sup>

The Reasoner sought to give expression to the concerns raised by the Twentieth Congress and to fill the void created by the fact that "the leadership had failed to initiate discussion and to assist the membership in a period of shock and confusion."<sup>24</sup> The statement concluded thus:

Not only were the leadership unwilling to take part in the discussion, they were also unwilling to see the discussion take place at all. So far from welcoming the ferment among the members, the Executive Committee regretted it and were afraid of the consequences...

The Executive's response to our publication has revealed their true attitude to the rights of discussion. Had it been sincere in its professed desire to promote far-reaching discussion it could have welcomed The Reasoner...In fact, the leadership from the time of our first publication, has been guided by two aims only: to silence The Reasoner unconditionally and to regain unrestricted control over all the means of discussion.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>John Gollan; quoted in *Ibid.*, 612.

<sup>22</sup>E.P. Thompson, and John Saville, "Statement By The Editors," The Reasoner: A Journal of Discussion, no.3, November 1956, 37.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 41, 43.

By the time that the third issue was published the controversy which had given rise to The Reasoner had a much more specific focus: the Soviet invasion of Hungary.

## II

A few months after he was ousted from the premiership of Hungary, Imre Nagy wrote that:

The Party membership and the Hungarian people do not want a return to capitalism. They want a people's democratic system, in which the ideals of socialism become a reality, in which the ideas of the working class regain their true meaning, in which public life is based upon higher morals and ethics; they want a system that is actually ruled not by a degenerate Bonapartist authority and dictator, but by working people through legality and self-created law and order. They want a People's Democracy where working people are masters of the country and of their own fate, where human beings are respected, and where social and political life is conducted in the spirit of humanism.<sup>26</sup>

Nagy conceived of socialism as a process involving the creation of a new moral sense rather than abstract schemata prescribing an increasing number of production targets. While he was premier, between July 1953 and August 1955, he had attempted to promote this conception of socialism through 'The New Course':

We cannot become a socialist country until we ourselves have become new socialist beings who have been elevated to a higher plane of humanity, not only by our material welfare...but also by our superior moral point of view.<sup>27</sup>

The new moral sense had to permeate all social relations. Although the transformation of economic relationships was held to be a key part of this process of creating a new

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<sup>26</sup>Imre Nagy, On Communism: In Defense of the New Course (London: Thames and Hudson, 1956), 49.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 43.

socialist consciousness, this consciousness would not generate itself spontaneously, but it was something that had to be created. People had to take responsibility for their own actions. Neither consciousness nor conscience could be appropriated by an elite who could then justify whatever expediency they chose by appealing to historical necessity. For Nagy, the idea that socialism only entailed the collectivization of the means of production was dangerous because it tended to relativize morality to the economy. It was also a false idea because it read society in terms of a static theory. Marxism, Nagy argued, had to be open-ended and change to take account of changing circumstances:

The masters of Marxism-Leninism did not bind the hands of future generations with their theories. The talmudist and exegetists, those who regard Marxism and the various conclusions and theories of Marxism as a compendium of dogmas that are independent of the various changes taking place in social development think that if they can commit these theories and conclusions to memory and keep quoting and re-iterating them ad infinitum, they can apply these theories and conclusions for all time, to all countries, to every phase of life. However, those who can think only in this fashion see the letter of Marxism but not its substance, and they memorize the text of the conclusions and theories but do not understand its contents. <sup>28</sup>

This was the same type of argument being advanced in the pages of The Reasoner and very similar ones were being advanced elsewhere in Eastern Europe. I have drawn attention to Nagy's views partly to indicate the international context of the crisis in communism in 1956 and the extent to which it was converging upon an expression similar concerns. Moreover, Nagy's voice was silenced for reasons not dissimilar to those moving the EC of the BCP. Initially, the Kremlin orchestrated his demise from power; it subsequently scheduled his execution. But as Nagy mentions in his book on 'The New Course', he was merely articulating a more wide-spread and popular belief derived directly from nearly a decade of experience of the Soviet Unions's version of a socialist utopia. This was a view that was clearly expressed by Peter Fryer:

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 3-4.



...the people had been promised a better way of life and were prepared to co-operate to the full to achieve it. But life grew worse instead of better and [people] knew from personal experience that the propaganda...was so much hypocrisy.<sup>29</sup>

It was this gap between theory and abstraction on the one hand and reality on the other which lay behind the outbreak of demonstrations in a number of Hungarian cities from late October 1956. Although the proximate cause has been traced to the inspiration drawn from the Polish revolt in June, the demands expressed by Hungarian intellectuals and workers (for reform of the bureaucracy, for effective constraints to be placed on the secret police, the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungarian soil, the extension of freedoms and the diversion of productive resources from heavy industry to consumer durables) were pressed in a context defined by the experience of 'socialism' since 1945. The issue came to a head on 23 October when students defied a government ban on demonstrations and organized a massive protest against the regime in Budapest. The government reacted by instructing the AVH (secret police) to take the appropriate measures to disperse the demonstrators and they responded by shooting indiscriminately into the crowds. The AVH's action brought workers into the struggle and revolutionary committees were subsequently set up throughout the country. Rather than deploying Soviet troops to quell discontent, Khrushchev at this stage opted for a government in whom the demonstrators would likely express their trust. To this end Nagy got his old job back. But when Nagy proceeded to demand the withdrawal of Hungary from the Warsaw Pact, the removal of all Soviet troops from Hungary and promised free elections in which non-communists could stand and, if elected, enter a coalition government, the Kremlin deployed military personnel.

It is worth fleshing out this skeletal narrative by referring to the eye-witness accounts of Peter Fryer, for his experiences are illustrative of precisely those themes pre-occupying The

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<sup>29</sup>Peter Fryer, Hungarian Tragedy (London: Dennis Dobson, 1956), 18.

Reasoner. In essence, Fryer's experiences highlighted the extent to which the BCP leadership's view of the world was skewed by unshakeable presuppositions: all evidence from the empirical record contradicting these presuppositions could, in fact, be explained by them as evidence of counter-revolutionary activity.

Peter Fryer had been covering Hungarian affairs for The Daily Worker since the show trial of Laslo Rajk and several other leading figures of the Hungarian Communist Party in 1949. It was more than evident that, before the end of October 1956, his credentials as a loyal Communist Party member were beyond reproach, because the paper's editor, J.R. Campbell, informed the readership on 29 October that:

The Daily Worker is interested only in facts...To improve our news service from this vital centre we have sent Peter Fryer to Hungary. Daily Worker readers know Fryer's reputation as an experienced and skilled reporter. No one is better qualified for such an assignment.<sup>30</sup>

But what Campbell understood by the term 'facts' soon revealed itself to be somewhat removed from the normal meaning attributed to this term. Shortly after arriving in Hungary, Fryer visited the town of Magyarovar and was immediately confronted with the reality of life in the People's Democracies - the townsfolk were burying 80 of their dead from the previous day's run-in with the AVH. In response to numerous stories about years of repression he sent the following dispatch to London:

After eleven years, the incessant mistakes of the communist leaders, the brutality of the state security police, the widespread bureaucracy and mismanagement, the bungling, the arbitrary methods and lies have led to total collapse. This was no counter-revolution organized by fascists and reactionaries. It was the upsurge of the whole people, in which rank-and-file communists took part, against a police state dressed up as a socialist society - a police dictatorship backed by Soviet armed might.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>John R. Campbell; quoted in Peter Fryer, An Appeal Against Expulsion (London: P.Fryer, 1957), 1.

<sup>31</sup>Peter Fryer, Hungarian Tragedy, 23-24.

Campbell didn't think this would make appropriate reading matter and rather than publish it an editorial, covering the same days that Fryer's account referred to, explained that

[w]hat has happened in Hungary these past few days has not been a popular rising against a dictatorial government. It has been an organized and planned effort to overthrow, by un-democratic and violent means, a government which was in the process of carrying through important and constructive measures.<sup>32</sup>

In fact, none of Fryer's reportage appeared in the paper and he was to receive his marching orders from the Party before the year was out. But, as he noted, his only offence was:

...to put loyalty to the truth above loyalty to the leaders. In the eyes of the leaders of the Communist Party I committed a heinous and unforgivable crime when...I published the facts about the Hungarian revolution, its causes and suppression by a foreign army.<sup>33</sup>

While Fryer reported on his experience, the EC interpreted this experience through the medium of its preconceived ideas and theories:

My views were established in the course of the Hungarian revolution. The Executive Committee's views had the imprint of 'made in Moscow.' The editor of The Daily Worker formed his views about the second Soviet intervention literally in Moscow, for he was there when it took place. The rest of the Executive Committee made up their minds in Covent Garden...Their views were not the result of independent critical thought and weighing up of the evidence. They were the result of conviction which not even the reservations of the Twentieth Congress could shake: that whatever the Soviet Union does is right and must be supported at all costs.<sup>34</sup>

The response of the leadership to Fryer was precisely the same as that shown to The Reasoner: they obstinately defended a form of dogmatic philosophical idealism. Textual prescriptions, and especially those from the Kremlin's oracle, were unquestionably correct and

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>33</sup>Fryer, Appeal, 1.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 6-7.



reality had always to be assessed in terms of them. Fryer's rejection of this position paralleled Thompson's, Nagy's, Kolakowski's and many other's:

Engels advised us to cast aside all fantasies and fancies and preoccupations that are found when tested in practice to give an incorrect or insufficient reflection of reality. The basic requirement of a dialectical materialistic theory of knowledge...is not reflected by the present leadership of the Communist Party. If they were materialists they would elaborate their ideas and policies on the basis of a close, detailed, systematic many-sided, concrete study, investigation and analysis of phenomenon. If facts did not fit their ideas and policies, then ideas and policies would have to be demolished and scrapped. For materialism is the enemy of dogmatism and self-deception.<sup>35</sup>

The Hungarian revolution illuminated reality in a flash of lightning. It revealed the dream-world in which so many of us have been living; in which our hopes, desires and illusions had done service for facts.<sup>36</sup>

In arriving at this conclusion Fryer came to recognize that many of his earlier stories had been distorted by a rhetoric which he had naively but enthusiastically accepted:

...the leaders of the Communist Party...act as if they were philosophical idealists. They do not even start from their own preconceived ideas, but from the ideas and preconceptions and policies of somebody else - of whoever happens to be winning, or to have won, in the top leadership of the Soviet Communist Party. These ideas and policies become a procrustean bed into which they try to squeeze the facts, twisting and moulding, lopping and mutilating and doctoring facts to make them fit, and even inventing some. If the facts do not fit, so much the worse for the facts. Idealism is the enemy of creative Marxism, of any kind of creative, independent thought.<sup>37</sup>

For Fryer, then, the significance of events in Hungary lay in the fact that

...our preconceived theories were shattered overnight...we must no longer try to twist or stretch or mutilate the facts to make them fit the procrustean bed of textbook formulas of Soviet foreign policy.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Fryer, Appeal, 45.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>38</sup>Fryer, Hungarian Tragedy, 10.

One's senses had to be relied on; communists were not or should not be "purists and cliché-mongers".<sup>39</sup> The facts were there for all the world to see:

Here was a revolution to be studied not in the pages of Marx, Engels and Lenin...but happening here in real life...A flesh and blood revolution with all the shortcomings, contradictions and problems - the problems of life itself.<sup>40</sup>

If discontent had been diffused within the BCP prior to Hungary it certainly had a focus now. For here

...was Stalinism incarnate...the abandonment of humanism, the attachment of primary importance not to living, breathing, suffering and hoping human beings, but to machines, targets, statistics...and, of course, tanks. Struck dumb by Stalinism, we ourselves distorted the fine socialist principle of international solidarity by making any criticism of present injustices or inhumanities in a communist led country taboo. Stalinism crippled us by restraining our moral passion, blinding us to the wrongs done to men, if these wrongs were done in the name of communism. We communists have been indignant about the wrongs done by imperialism...but our own one-sided indignation...has left a sour taste in the mouth of the British worker who is quick to detect and condemn our hypocrisy.

Stalinism is Marxism with the heart cut out, de-humanized, dried, petrified, rigid and barren. It is concerned with "the line", not the tears of Hungarian children. It is pre-occupied with abstract power, not with the dictates of conscience and common humanity. (emphasis in the original)<sup>41</sup>

The leadership of the BCP demonstrated repeatedly through their actions the extent to which those features which Thompson had characterized as Stalinist ideology were deeply embedded within its bureaucratic structure. The BCP insisted on idealizing reality and this tendency can be seen from the manner in which R.P. Dutt's 'Notes of the Month' in the December issue of Labour Monthly assessed events in Hungary. Dutt agreed that the Hungarian demonstrations

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 89.

<sup>40</sup>Fryer, Hungarian Tragedy, 52.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 94-95.



manifested "...genuine grievances and deep national feelings..." However, he went on to observe, that within

...this mass ferment, there was also at work, as the only organized force ready to exploit the confusion, the armed gangs of counter-revolution with the key forces previously equipped and trained by the West, and with a manifest conscious and unified political and military strategy.<sup>42</sup>

Dutt's analysis drew upon such reputable bourgeois papers, such bastions of objective reportage, as The Daily Mail and Daily Express to back up his claims and chose to ignore the evidence presented by Fryer. The omissions and distortions in his account, like the tissue of lies, duplicity and deceit the BCP had been trotting out for months was finally failing to convince. Many refused to willingly be accomplices to crimes any further. This attitude was well expressed in a letter published in The New Statesman:

The following letter was sent to The Daily Worker on 18 November. As it appears that it will not be published, the signatories will be grateful if you could find space for it.

All us have, for many years, advocated Marxist ideas both in our own special fields and in political discussion in the labour movement. We feel, therefore, that we have a responsibility to express our views as Marxists in the present crisis of international socialism.

We feel that the uncritical support given by the Executive Committee of the Communist Party to Soviet action in Hungary is the undesirable culmination of years of distortion of fact and failure of British communists to think out political problems for themselves. We had hoped that the revelations made at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union would have made our leadership and press realize that Marxist ideas will only be acceptable in the British labour movement if they arise from the truth about the world we live in.

The exposure of grave crimes and abuses in the USSR, and the recent revolt of workers and intellectuals, against the pseudo-communist bureaucracies and police systems of Poland and Hungary, have shown that for the past twelve years we have based our political analyses on a false presentation of the facts - not on out of date theory, for we still consider the Marxist method to be correct.

If the left-wing and Marxist trend in our labour movement is to win support, as it must for the achievement of socialism, this past must be correctly repudiated. This includes the repudiation of the latest

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<sup>42</sup>Rajini Palme Dutt, "Sanity in a Storm," Labour Monthly, 38(12), December 1956, 544.

outcome of this evil past, the Executive Committee's underwriting of the current errors of Soviet policy.

Not all the signatories agree with everything in the letter, but all are in sufficient sympathy with its general intention to sign with this reservation.<sup>43</sup>

In short, the axiomatic relationship between the cause of the Party and the cause of socialism which, with certain exceptions, had been taken for granted until February 1956 could not be so readily assumed after Khrushchev's revelations. This equation was becoming increasingly tenuous as The Reasoner controversy developed and, for thirty per cent of the membership, quite meaningless after 5 November 1956. This is not to say that the leadership made no attempt to counter the arguments contained in either this or similar letters. Thus, the letter to The New Statesman drew an immediate and complete repudiation from George Matthews. Matthews made a point of the obvious: the signatories were all intellectuals. He based his entire rebuttal on this fact. Intellectuals were, he noted, vulnerable to social and occupational pressures from which manual workers were immune. The implication to be drawn from this claim was that all the criticism of party policy could be attributed to the residual influence of bourgeois categories of thought. Matthews, in other words, insisted on explaining reality through an idealized conception of it.<sup>44</sup> Once again, however, experience was to provide contradictory evidence, since manual workers were to resign their membership in large numbers and for precisely the same reasons that intellectuals were:

I believe, as an industrial worker, that the communist intellectual has a far more difficult problem than myself to face, surrounded as he is by an almost totally hostile class and unsupported by a strong working-class base...[but] to me it is a matter of pride that so many of our intellectual comrades are standing firm...

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<sup>43</sup>The New Statesman, 1 December 1956. The letter was signed by fourteen leading left wing intellectuals, including Thompson.

<sup>44</sup>George Matthews, "Lessons of a Letter," World News, vol.4. 1957, 24-26. Also see John Mahon, "Inner-Party Democracy," World News, vol.3 1957, 550-54.



Do not our intellectual comrades merge more and more into our party life as the years go on? I think they do. Have they not got the capacity to express certain views which at certain times can represent the whole party. I think they can.

The myth of a rock-like working class and wobbly intellectuals should be thrown out once and for all. Many industrial comrades are worried about Hungary; some very good ones have left.<sup>45</sup>

Among the 'very good ones' was the president of the National Union of Miners, Laurence Daly.

Several months before Hungary, Daly had expressed serious reservations about the direction the

BCP appeared to be moving in:

I am no intellectual, having been a coalminer all my life...Others in this area who agree with me, including coal miners, cobblers and housewives are as deeply concerned as any "intellectual" with the political and moral questions arising from the Khrushchev speech. Their attitude is simply expressed by saying, "we can't go round the doors and state an honest case for the party now. We are still playing 'about turn' when the Soviet leaders say so, and the workers feel, therefore, that we can quite easily defend similar instances and crimes in the future as we did in the past. They will not trust us unless we change our attitude and the party leadership shows no sign of doing so..." However inadequate and hypocritical British capitalist democracy may be, the average worker does feel that he has the right...to express his own opinion freely on political and other affairs, worship freely in his own way, get a fair trial if he is arrested, listen to different points of view and make up his own mind...

Workers cherish these rights, however restricted, and have refused to give any substantial political support to the C.P. largely because they feared that many of these rights would disappear if they came to power. (emphasis in the original)<sup>46</sup>

Elsewhere, Daly was a good deal more specific in rejecting the claim that the problem with the BCP was merely one of disaffected intellectuals. In his own constituency of Fife, long regarded as one of the most loyal communist constituencies on the electoral map, and with an

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<sup>45</sup>Brian Behan, "Unity in the Party," World News, vol.4 1957, 76-77.

<sup>46</sup>Lawrence Daly, "The Long Road Back," The Reasoner: A Journal of Discussion, no.2 September 1956, 27.

occupationally homogenous proletarian base, precisely the same concerns were being expressed and the same disaffection registered.<sup>47</sup>

The preceding paragraphs provide sufficient context within which to locate the final stages of The Reasoner controversy. They demonstrate the extent to which the journal was an authentic expression of deeply-felt concerns within the party. They also show the deeply rooted nature of the leadership's intransigence. For Thompson, the Soviet invasion signalled the need to drop all political niceties and he did so in a pointed and emotional article which was hurriedly written shortly after news of the Soviet invasion broke on Sunday 4 November and in time to be appended to the final edition of The Reasoner which appeared on 5 November.

Thompson began by noting that, while there may have been counter-revolutionary elements present in Hungary, it was false to dismiss a genuinely popular and widespread democratic initiative. Hungarians did not want to embrace western capitalist democracies who, nobody could have forgotten, had less than a week earlier unleashed their latest bout of imperialist blood-letting in Egypt. The CPSU and its British affiliate saw the world in black and white terms: either one agreed with the prescribed version of Marxism or one was guilty of expressing deviationist and revisionist tendencies. Second, he saw in The Daily Worker's call to Hungarians to forgive and forget the past and to get on with the job of constructing a socialist society further evidence of the party's absolute refusal to come to terms with its past and to exhort its members to continue in the role of unthinking accomplices to the perpetuation of crimes in the name of political expediency. Both the party's interpretation of events in Hungary and its refusal to see any legitimacy in the growing number of criticisms could, Thompson maintained, be explained by reference to Stalinism:

From start to finish, from February onward, our leadership has sided...with Stalinism...they have run two lines of argument. First, all these "wrong things" ("which we could not know about") were associated with the influence of one man in Russia, and the 'cult' of his "personality"; second

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<sup>47</sup>Lawrence Daly, "The Fife Socialist League," New Left Review, no.4 July-August 1960, 69-70.



Stalin's theory was admirable but (unknown to us) an alarming gap opened up, between his theory and his practice.

Convenient arguments, these, for our leadership; since they absolve us from all responsibility for having passed "wrong information" and justified "wrong things": they absolve them from all need to drive out the influence of Stalinism upon their own theory and practice, and that of our Party.<sup>48</sup>

But Stalin's person and Stalin's theory could not, as we have already seen, be so conveniently separated: it was not so much Stalin who stood in need of condemnation, but Stalinism. Thompson proceeded to dismiss each of its constituent parts: "The mechanical theory of human consciousness"; the Party's belief in its own infallibility; the refusal to permit open and reasoned discourse and its dismissal of all criticisms as evidence of a relapse into a bourgeois idiom; its subordination of

...the moral and imaginative faculties to political and administrative authority...the elimination of moral criteria from political judgement...the deliberate encouragement of anti-intellectual trends amongst the people...the mechanical personification of unconscious class forces, the belittling of the conscious process of intellectual and spiritual conflict.<sup>49</sup>

It was not possible to remain in the BCP if the party required, as a condition of membership, the refusal to express any view contrary to official policy. Since the EC had been prepared to endorse a resolution supporting the Soviet Union's suppression of what Thompson and many others regarded as an authentic socialist and democratic initiative, the Party effectively defined the only remaining option. The Party had demonstrated, finally, its total lack of commitment to promoting the aspirations of working people:

The ridiculous structure and strategy of the BCP which within the heart of an advanced political democracy, where above all it is the hearts and minds of the people which must be won for socialism, cannot help but foster within itself an elitist outlook. Despite all the resolutions for building the 'mass party', the masses refuse to be politically convinced by

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<sup>48</sup>E.P. Thompson, "Through The Smoke of Budapest," The Reasoner: A Journal of Discussion, no.3, November 1956 (Supplement), 4-5.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 6.



the most self-sacrificing of economic actions alone. The mind of the people lies open but the communist stubbornly addresses himself to the 'economic base.' The working man asks moral questions: the communist only hands him a rent petition. Despite all the talk of "faith in the people..." Stalinism conceals a colossal contempt, a vast and all-embracing attitude of patronage to working men and women. This is the political expression of Stalinism; its veiled hostility to democratic initiative of every form.(emphasis in the original)<sup>50</sup>

### III

Two questions remain to be dealt with in this discussion of Thompson's critique of Stalinism. First, one should note the prominence of historians among the dissidents in 1956. Thompson and Saville were both historians affiliated with the Communist Party Historians' Group (CPHG), as indeed was Christopher Hill, one of the signatories of the minority report of the Commission on Inner Party Democracy. As early as April 8th the CPHG had expressed concerns about the leadership's response to the Twentieth Congress:

Resolutions were passed expressing profound dissatisfaction with the Twenty Fourth Congress of the British Party for its failure to discuss publicly the implications for the British Party of the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU...and with the failure of the Party leadership to make a public statement of regret for the British Party's uncritical endorsement of all Soviet policies and views, the meeting calling for it to make one as soon as possible, as well as to initiate the widest possible discussion of all the problems involved for the British Party in the present situation.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>E.P. Thompson, "Socialism and the Intellectuals," Universities and Left Review, no.1, Spring 1957, 34.

<sup>51</sup>CPHG, "Minutes," quoted in Bill Schwarz, " 'The People' in History: The Communist Party Historians' Group, 1945-56," in Richard Johnson et.al eds., Making Histories, 83.

Why should historians have taken such a leading role in focusing the concerns of Party members? Part of the answer is suggested in a letter that Thompson received from Saville at the height of the Hungarian crisis:

It is, I think, significant, that of all the intellectual groups in the Communist Party, the historians have come out the best in the discussions of the last nine months - and this is surely due to the fact that over the past decade the historians are the only intellectual group who have not only tried to use their Marxist techniques creatively, but have to some measure succeeded...and it is precisely the creative writers who should have seen more clearly the heart of things. Of what, otherwise, does their 'creativity' consist?<sup>52</sup>

One of the primary concerns of the CPHG had been to re-appropriate the past from the clutches of bourgeois historiography. This polemical role required them to return to the extant record and ask different questions of it; indeed, to consider sources hitherto ignored. Moreover, such an activity tended to sensitize historians to the active relationship between the past and the present. Bourgeois historiography, the argument ran, tended to idealize the past in terms of its class's self-image and to discount ideas which could not be accommodated within that image.

Another important consideration in accounting for the prominent role taken by historians can be gleaned from Eric Hobsbawm's retrospective of 1956:

History is the core of Marxism...our work as historians was embedded in our work as marxists which we believed to imply membership of the Communist Party. It was inescapable from our political commitment and activities. Eventually this very sense of unity between our work as historians and communists led to the crisis of 1956-57

...historians...were drawn into the centre of the debate because historical analysis was at the core of Marxist politics...the crucial issue of Stalin was literally one of history: what had happened and why had it been concealed. Moreover, as the discussions immediately made clear, the suppression of Soviet history could not be divorced from the question why other parts of contemporary history had not been confronted - not least the hotly disputed episodes in the British Communist Party...even more fundamentally, such failures raised the

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<sup>52</sup>Saville, "The Twentieth Congress and the British Communist Party," 7.



general question of how Marxists ought to confront contemporary history and reality.<sup>53</sup>

Historians, then, played a key part in the debates because the defence of history had fostered a mentality which demanded an open and honest approach to the present. Simultaneously this 'mentalité' required an assessment of what was to be understood by Marxism and a consideration of its contemporary status.

An assessment of Marxism was crucial for Thompson because it bore centrally upon the importance which he attributed to utopianism. The utopian impulse had inspired the hope of many in the 1930s that social regeneration was to be found in. But what was left of this impulse when:

The great ideals of Communism were now associated with concentration camps, secret police and tanks. An ideal stick had been fashioned for the right to use...The stick was eagerly grasped. A whole generation of conservative and cold war liberal theorists constructed their critique - and at the centre of most lay a particular interpretation of utopianism.<sup>54</sup>

Utopianism, to the Right and in the context of the cold war, meant totalitarianism; an equivalency that no one more than Orwell helped to establish in the popular imagination. If Utopianism held out the promise of a better life than the present, 1984 established precisely the opposite connection:

...never again will you be capable of ordinary human feeling. Never again will you be capable of love, or joy of living, or laughter or curiosity, or courage or integrity. You will be hollow, we shall squeeze you empty and then we shall fill you with ourselves.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>Eric J. Hobsbawm, "The Historians Group of the Communist Party," in Morris Cornforth, ed., Rebels and Their Causes: Essays in Honour of A.L.Morton (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978), 26.

<sup>54</sup>Geoghegan, Utopianism and Marxism, 83.

<sup>55</sup>George Orwell, Nineteen Eighty Four (London: Penguin, 1984), 206.

Thus O'Brien in his interrogation of Winston. A little later in the grilling Winston is asked if he understands the Party's purpose, and when he replies that it must obviously be in the interests of the majority O'Brien informs him that:

The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake, we are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power, not wealth or luxury, or long life or happiness: only power pure power...Power is not a means it is an end, one does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes a revolution in order to establish the dictatorship. The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power...power is in inflicting pain and humiliation. Power is tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing. Do you begin to see then what kind of world we are creating. It is the exact opposite of the stupid hedonistic utopias that the old reformers imagined. A world of fear and treachery and torture, a world of trampling and being trampled upon, a world which will not grow less but more merciless as it refines itself. Progress in our world will be progress to more pain. The old civilizations claimed that they were founded on love or justice. Ours is founded upon hatred...If you want a picture of the future imagine a boot stamping on a human face - forever.<sup>56</sup>

In this world 2 + 2 can equal 5 and love, for man's fellow man, be displaced by love for the abstraction. We are never certain whether Big Brother actually exists, but we do know that Julie does. Yet Winston's love for Julie is, in the end, displaced by his affection for the image that appears all around him.

The image of Marxism that Orwell popularized was one that Thompson was so concerned to refute:

Stalinism is socialist theory and practice which has lost the ingredient of humanity. The Stalinist mode of thought is not that of dialectical materialism, but mechanical idealism...instead of commencing with facts, social reality, Stalinist theory starts with the idea, the text, the axiom; facts, institutions, people, must be brought to conform to the idea...Stalinist analysis, at its most degenerate, became a scholastic

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 211-15.



exercise, the search for formulations 'correct in relation to text but not to life.'<sup>57</sup>

The Stalinist idealized reality through his own abstract categories and these were placed above real men and women. This was theoreticism and it had little in common with socialism. Thompson emphasized the distance between his understanding of Marxism-socialism and that advanced by the CPSU/BCP by characterizing it as 'socialist humanism':

Socialist humanism asserts that real human needs (bearing in mind the difficulty of this term) are the only valid criterion by which to assess institutions and social and economic arrangements. These must be made to measure people rather than people being chopped about or stretched on a procrustean bed in order to measure...historical necessity. In line with this assertion a long-derided trend within the socialist movement appears to be reviving a utopian...socialism; that is, the vindication of the right of the moral imagination to project an ideal to which it is legitimate to aspire and the right of reason to inquire into the aims and ends of social arrangements.<sup>58</sup>

Elsewhere, he characterized socialist humanism in terms that recall the criterion adopted by Romanticism<sup>59</sup> and, by William Cobbett:<sup>60</sup>

[socialist humanism]...is humanist because it places once again real men and women at the centre of socialist theory and aspiration instead of the re-sounding abstraction - the Party, Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist, the two camps, the vanguard of the working class - so dear to Stalinism. It is socialist because it re-affirms the revolutionary perspectives of communism's faith in the potentialities not only of the Human Race or the Dictatorship of the Proletariat but of real men and women.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>Thompson, "Through The Smoke Of Budapest," 6.

<sup>58</sup>E.P. Thompson, "Agency and Choice: A Reply to Criticism," New Reasoner, no.5, Summer 1958, 91.

<sup>59</sup>See the discussion in chapter 1, 55 and passim

<sup>60</sup>Thompson, The Making, 836.

<sup>61</sup>Thompson, "Socialist Humanism," 109.



Stalinism, by contrast, could do little other than exude an attitude of profound condescension to the past, the present and future. For Thompson, Stalinism denied that which constituted the essence of humankind - its creative and revolutionary potentialities and its ability to bring history under its sway by denying 'the phantoms of the mind' a determinate role in the historical process.

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I am not familiar with the personal factors which converged to project Thompson into such a prominent role in the debates within the BCP in 1956. However, as I suggested in chapter 2, his interpretation of Morris suggests an unarticulated uneasiness with the position represented by official communism. Moreover, there are certain documents available in the public realm which tend to confirm this impression. For example, Stalinism certainly violated the memory of his brother, Frank Thompson, who had died fighting for Bulgarian partisans in 1944 and who, a few months before his death, had written:

There is a spirit abroad in Europe which is finer and braver than anything that tired continent has known for centuries, and which cannot be withstood. You can, if you like, think of it in terms of politics, but it is broader and more generous than any dogma. It is the confident will of whole peoples, who have known the utmost humiliation and suffering and who have triumphed over it to build their own life once and for all.<sup>62</sup>

The idea contained in the last sentence reminds one of the manner in which Thompson interpreted News from Nowhere, and I have already indicated the way in which his work has been influenced by that text. But Edward Thompson had himself, a few years later, come into

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<sup>62</sup> Frank Thompson, in T.J. and E.P. Thompson, eds., There is a Spirit in Europe: A Memoir of Frank Thompson (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1948), 8. One should also note Thompson's comments in Merrill, "Interview with E.P. Thompson," 11-12.

contact with an experience which gave to these sentiments a palpable quality. During the late summer of 1946 Thompson had commanded a contingent of volunteer youth workers engaged in the construction of a railway between Samac-Sarajevo, Yugoslavia. The account of these experiences, which appeared in a text edited by him,<sup>63</sup> indicated the extent to which he and his co-workers, of many nationalities, felt that they were making a contribution not only to the post-war reconstruction of Yugoslavia, but to the creation of a new socialist society. Socialism, moreover, was taken to mean not merely a concern with re-building the economy, but was envisioned with a way of organising human relationships. "The values of a growing socialism," he wrote,

are new values, those bound up in a co-operative ethic, and in a new emphasis on man's obligations to his neighbours and to society...I found this atmosphere of social creativeness inspiring. (my emphasis)<sup>64</sup>

This inspiration clearly stayed with him because the conception of socialism as a means of organizing human relationships according to co-operative rather than competitive values is manifest throughout his work.

Thompson's experiences in 1946 also reach back into the war and merge into a general context defined by those attempts to resist fascism which characterized the 1930s and 1940s:

The workers on these projects were the natural inheritors of the spirit of the partisans. They were proud to acknowledge this. The positive qualities won in those days - the comradeship, self-abnegation and conscious unity - instead of evaporating, as in some other countries, in the swamps of economic anarchy, black marketeering and re-newed disruptions, were carried forward intact into the days of peace...There can be no heroism in labour equal to that in war. Its fruition and recognition appear to rise in a society whose values are strange to those who have learned the code of capitalism. It springs from the pride of ownership, by the ordinary man, of his own country, its sources of wealth and its means of production.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>Thompson, ed., The Railway.

<sup>64</sup>Thompson, "Omladinska Pruga," 3.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 2, 3.



One wonders as to the particular influence of Thompson's experiences in Yugoslavia and the war in shaping certain of the emphases in The Making.<sup>66</sup> Certainly the emphasis, indeed the insistence upon the importance of conscious agency, was present for it was the people themselves, and not the government, who had taken the initiative to build the railway: "It was their own will to do this, but history had forced the decision."<sup>67</sup> People make their own history, said Marx, but they do not always make it in conditions of their own choosing.<sup>68</sup> Thompson's defence of a materialist conception of history, in terms of the reciprocity between 'social being' and 'social consciousness', echoes these sentiments. For Thompson, this is what 'dialectical materialism' meant and he found it at work in Yugoslavia. People have the capacity to exercise their own choices, but these cannot be of any type. In Yugoslavia, the context was provided by the war; a context that men, in resisting fascism, had hoped to avoid. Nevertheless they attempted to insert into this determinate context their own aspirations and to shape it in a direction chosen by them.<sup>69</sup>

The creation of new values was expressed through cultural activities: art and poetry were seen to be an integral part of the labour process.<sup>70</sup> The world was not perceived, as it is in

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<sup>66</sup>Thompson's discussion of the contexts shaping the 'voluntarist' and 'structuralist' idioms that have infiltrated Marxism during the twentieth century is relevant here. See Thompson, "The Poverty of Theory," 71-75.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 5.

<sup>68</sup>"Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under any circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past." Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, in McLellan, Selected Works, 300.

<sup>69</sup>The argument here is analogous to the defence of creative labour that Thompson identified in the Romantic tradition and especially in the work of Blake and Morris.

<sup>70</sup>One should note here the characteristic mode of presentation in New Reasoner and New Left Review (at least until Anderson assumed editorial control with issue 13-14). Articles dealing with political commentary (domestic and international) and industrial relations were typically juxtaposed with poems and short pieces of creative writing. This was a format that Thompson still feels to be important: see, for example, E.P. Thompson, The Heavy Dancers (London: Merlin Press, 1985). The conclusion to this dissertation will discuss the general relationship between poetry and politics in

orthodox Marxism and Social Democracy, as a discrete set of autonomous realms of activity where all was given over to worshipping material progress. Art and the application of ideals to social and political practice was seen, by Thompson, to be an integral aspect of the process of social life.

As early as 1947, then, Thompson was defending a position which, in its essentials, contained the germs of the criticisms directed at the cold war ideologies in and after 1956 and which, eventually, came to structure The Making. If nothing else:

The Railway taught, as no course of instruction could ever have done, democratic initiative and self-government and the values of community living...It taught the responsibilities of the individual in a society in which only the co-operation of every member resulted in the success of the whole. It taught the new values of labour, of labour freely and enthusiastically given and honoured in achievement...the railway itself was building new industries, new knowledge and new friendships, new relations between the sexes, a new outlook, new qualities in man, a new society. (my emphasis)<sup>71</sup>

The railway was an effort in creative labour; labour in which man would define for himself his own needs. In acting to realize these wants man comes to know and relate to the world as his own rather than as an alien and external object which oppresses and denies the realization of his potentialities. The values which the railway created were human values; values beyond the comprehension of those tutored in capitalist ethics. Co-operative values, his account makes clear, were radically inconsistent with those sustaining capitalism. It is in this inconsistency that one must understand the revolutionary qualities that Thompson invests in communal values.

While it would indeed be enlightening to know more about Thompson's experiences, one can aver, from the evidence that is available that the contradiction between 1947 and 1956 could not but place him in a position where, to paraphrase Morris, he had to 'kick against the

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Thompson's work, although to a certain extent the rationale ought to be apparent from the earlier discussion of Romanticism in general and Morris in particular.

<sup>71</sup>Thompson, "Omladinska Pruga," 24.

pricks of authority.' Like the Romantic poets, Morris, and the dispossessed craftsmen who form the focus of attention in The Making, Thompson was compelled to say enough was enough when, in his own experience, there was so obvious a disjunction between theory and practice. It should not surprise one, then, that his resignation from the Party did not entail a rejection of communism:

I believe that our party contains within its ranks many of the best, most self-sacrificing, intelligent and courageous representatives of the British people. I am proud of what our party has done for the British working class, for the colonial peoples and against fascism and the threat of war. I respect those comrades who have given the best of their lives to the party...I am not proud of our failure to root ourselves more deeply in British life, of our own failure to interpret creatively our democratic traditions, of our confusion of the true principle of internationalism with a servile attitude to the Soviet state. I am not proud of the way in which we have alienated many thousands of the best of British people by our own rigidity and folly. I am not proud of the vacillation which our present leadership has shown over the last few months. I am not proud of the silence which I and others have kept for too long over these and other matters. One thing only will give me back my sense of pride - when we find once again principled socialist policies and a leadership truly representative of the British working class.<sup>72</sup>

Thompson did not find in the experience of 1956 a reason to surrender to the 'liberal gods' but retained his commitment to those humanistic impulses which he believed had inspired many socialist initiatives.<sup>73</sup> Nor did he abandon utopianism or the belief in man's potential to conceive of and to find the courage to act upon ideas that might one day realize an alternative social vision. Indeed, 1956 was not for him, as it was for so many, an end to a belief in utopianism, but a beginning.

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<sup>72</sup>Thompson, "Reply to George Matthews," 14-15.

<sup>73</sup>Thompson, "Socialism and the Intellectuals," 31 and passim.



## Chapter 5

### Political Apathy: Sources and Solutions

The resignation of some 10,000 party members in the months following Hungary was a significant haemorrhage in the BCP. Despite the leadership's attempts to deny the fact, it included a substantial number of working people. Not all those who dissented from the party's official line agreed with the position advanced by The Reasoner.<sup>1</sup> In the eyes of its editors, however, there appeared to be sufficient concern for, and interest in, the types of socialist ideas they had articulated to justify the formation of a new journal to keep the ferment of ideas bubbling.<sup>2</sup> The New Reasoner (NR) was Thompson's and Saville's response to the situation created by events within the BCP during 1956. The Reasoner had attempted and failed to promote the internal reform of the party; NR dissociated itself from the party and advocated an independent socialist position characterized

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<sup>1</sup>For example, several hundred dissident BCP members gravitated to a Trotskyist tendency, the Socialist Labour League, under the leadership of Gerry Healy. This was one of several such tendencies in Britain that had developed out of the Fourth International (established, 1938). Although the divisions between them do not concern us, the differences separating them from the 'new reasoners' are relevant. Essentially, the Trotskyist perspective focused on the determinist aspects of Marxism and advanced an insurrectionary and cataclysmic revolutionary strategy. British Trotskyism is explored in John Callaghan, The Far Left in British Politics (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987). The cataclysmic model was explicitly rejected by Thompson: E.P. Thompson, "Revolution," in Thompson, ed., Out Of Apathy, 299-301. Indeed, Thompson felt that Trotskyism shared many of the attributes that he had criticized in Stalinism: Thompson, "Socialist Humanism," 139-40; Thompson, "The New Left," 14-15. Thompson's criticisms of Trotskyism were not unqualified because he found certain aspects of this position to be 'constructive' and 'welcomed' their contributions: see E.P. Thompson, "Revolution Again! Or Shut your Ears and Run," New Left Review, no.6, November-December 1960, 22. At the same time, though, one should also note the observations in Palmer, The Making of E.P. Thompson, n.14, 53.

<sup>2</sup>New Reasoner was a quarterly journal which commenced publication in the Summer of 1957. It ran through ten issues and eventually amalgamated with Universities and Left Review in the Autumn of 1959 to form New Left Review.

as 'Socialist Humanism'.<sup>3</sup> Although there were a number of theoretical differences among those who contributed to NR,<sup>4</sup> there was a general consensus on the need for a revision of Marxist theory. Marxism and Stalinism were taken to be quite distinct. The differences, if properly specified, would, it was believed, play an important role in the labour movement and its struggles with capital. For Thompson, the end of these struggles was the revolutionary transformation of society. The transformation would be from social relationships based upon acquisitive values to those founded upon co-operative ones.

There must be an insistence on the extent to which the NR group was sensitized to and centrally interested in promoting the aspirations of working people through a Marxist idiom because NR was only one, and in terms of readership the less popular of two tributaries feeding into the New Left.<sup>5</sup> The other tendency in the early New left was represented by the journal Universities and Left Review (ULR). ULR was the product of an intellectual culture increasingly frustrated with British society's inability to offer any values more meaningful than the constant drive to satisfy material and social gratifications.<sup>6</sup> ULR reflected the interests of intellectuals and those professions which welfare capitalism had largely brought into being: town planners and architects, social workers and teachers. With one exception, its founders, in contrast to NR's, had no roots in

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<sup>3</sup>Thompson, "Socialist Humanism," *passim*.

<sup>4</sup>"While there are points at which we disagree (especially Alasdair MacIntyre, who as a Trotskyite differs in some way from all the other contributors) we have attempted a real collaboration." E.P. Thompson, "At the Point of Decay," in Thompson, ed., Out of Apathy (London: New Left Books, 1960), 14. See Thompson's qualified criticisms of Alasdair MacIntyre in E.P. Thompson, "At the Point of Production," New Left Review, no.1, January-February 1960, 68. One should also note the general importance that Thompson believed MacIntyre's work had for the historian: Thompson, The Poverty of Theory, 401.

<sup>5</sup>Stuart Hall, "ULR to New Left Review," Universities and Left Review, no. 7, Autumn 1959, 2.

<sup>6</sup>"Editorial," Universities and Left Review, no.1, Spring 1957, 1.



the traditional labour movement.<sup>7</sup> Since they did not draw upon the same traditions they did not express the same degree of confidence in the potential agency of working people. Indeed, ULR conceived of working people as the passive victims of the manipulative techniques of the mass media, the educational system, and the various welfare, political and industrial bureaucracies. These agencies were seen to be forming new and unaccountable accretions of power within British society. They were held to be responsible for defining and sustaining acquisitive values, and represented social forces which working people could neither understand nor control. Rather than being capable of presenting a distinctive set of values in opposition to capitalist democracy, working people were perceived as becoming more and more like the middle class in its political attitudes and social aspirations. For ULR, only intellectuals were capable of standing back from the multiplicity of pressures tending to bourgeois conformity. Only they could identify the precise configuration of socio-economic power, and propose remedies for the problems of affluent Britain.

Traditional socialist arguments, ULR maintained, were either incapable or unwilling to confront significant cultural and social problems that were increasingly characterizing Britain. The Marxist and Labour Left seemed intent upon clinging to the clichés of the 1930s. But these attitudes appeared to make little sense in the context of affluence. The social democratic mainstream of the Labour Party, meanwhile, appeared to be in the process of transforming itself into a proto-capitalist party more concerned with supporting a new status quo than with offering any meaningful

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<sup>7</sup>The exception was Raphael Samuel who had been an active member of the Communist Party since his early teens and who regularly attended the meetings of the Historians Group. For details of his background see Raphael Samuel "The Lost World of British Communism," Parts 1 and 2, New Left Review, numbers 154 and 156 respectively. The other editors were Stuart Hall, Gabriel Pearson and Charles Taylor. They were engaged in post graduate research in literature and philosophy and all had been active in socialist politics as undergraduates at Oxford in the early 1950s. The origins of ULR, within the context of university politics, is discussed in David R. Holden, "The First New Left in Britain," Ph.D diss, University of Wisconsin, 1976, 147ff. I have relied upon Holden's account which, in turn, was based upon interviews with a number of the original editors of ULR.

alternatives to it. For ULR, however, it was important to initiate non-sectarian discussions on the left which offered a theoretical analysis of contemporary reality and defined a political strategy in terms of that analysis.

To a certain extent NR and ULR did share a number of interests in common and the fact that they did cover the same ground explains the amalgamation of the two journals by the end of 1959 into New Left Review (NLR). The shared interest was a concern with the problem of apathy. Apathy was seen to be expressive of an overwhelming political and ideological consensus:

Everywhere, education...had become profoundly hostile towards utopian and optimistic ideals; pessimistic about human nature, it was dominated by conservative theories of politics and psychology...whether officially Marxist or functionalist, social analysis...consistently lacked vision, tending to reify a systematic present and a focus on structure and function, rather than on 'contradictions', 'creativity', 'alternatives' or 'possibilities'; draining issues from politics it sustained a theoretical apparatus that was no more than an abstraction of the dominant system in which actors (men)...played appointed functional roles in a pre-ordained pattern (society).<sup>8</sup>

It was impossible to conceive of change in this society because at every turn people met a barrage of influences exhorting conformity. The New Left's emergence can be seen as an attempt to challenge these beliefs and to present alternative social visions to the 'common sense' of the time.

A society founded upon different values and social relationships was important for both the Marxist and non-Marxist left. For NR and ULR capitalist society was unacceptable because it denied to the individual any wants or rights other than those of the consumer:

They saw society with democratic forms of government, but not a democratic way of life. As a consumer, the citizen was the hero of modern capitalism, free to buy and equal to all other citizens in front of the bargaining counter. However, it was an illusory freedom and sham equality. The genuine needs of any citizen for security of employment, of

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<sup>8</sup>Nigel Young, An Infantile Disorder: The Crisis and Decline of the New Left (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1976), 10. See also Thompson's critique of Parsonian sociology and its application to historical analysis: Thompson, "The Poverty of Theory,"



adequate health care, of a worthwhile education were denied, while artificial needs based on material affluence and competitive success were created.<sup>9</sup>

The individual was seen to be alienated from himself and his fellow men; alternative wants were denied effective expression as were the means for realizing them. NR and ULR differed, however, both in their assessment of the sources of alienation and in the strategies to be adopted in confronting and overcoming the all-pervasive sense of apathy which flowed from them. These differences stemmed from their different origins. Specifically, the differences expressed different relations to the Marxist tradition. The theoretical differences were never fully resolved and go some way to explaining why the New Left failed to make a significant impact on the political left.

Perhaps a more important reason for the early New Left's failure was that the New Left was not really a movement at all. Rather, it should be seen as an intellectual tendency whose success depended upon its ability to influence both the Labour Left and CND. CND was arguably the most significant, certainly the most inspirational, feature on the political landscape of the left in the period 1958-1961. However, CND was not brought into being by the New Left; it had an independent genesis. Nevertheless, the New Left saw in the emergence of CND signs that the apathy which had characterized politics until the late 1950s was beginning to erode. CND injected a moral tone into politics and the mass demonstrations suggested the tapping of utopian energies. CND cut across traditional political loyalties. It did not appear to be guided by considerations of electoral expediency and it placed on the political agenda questions which had little to do with consumerism.

But CND was neither ideologically nor strategically coherent, and there were significant differences between it and the New Left. In particular, many of those attracted to the anti-nuclear

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<sup>9</sup>Geoffrey Foote, The Labour Party's Political Thought: A History (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 289.



movement did not invest in that movement the potential agency for effecting a revolutionary transformation of society in a way that Thompson did. Thompson saw in the issue of 'the bomb' the focal point of contemporary class struggle. However, very few in either CND or the Labour Left agreed with this claim. They viewed political activity in quite a different way from Thompson and the revolutionary potential of the disarmament movement was not as apparent to them as it was to Thompson.

The discussion in this chapter will proceed in the following way. First, I examine Thompson's explanation of the various pressures acting to enforce a consensus in post-war Britain. These pressures included intellectual and political influences. Their cumulative effect denied the possibility of change by reinforcing an image of man as an individual acquirer whose needs were best served by the existing order of society. Thompson's explanation of apathy is then considered in the light of his relationship to other New Left thinkers. The final section discusses the general character of the disarmament movement.

## I

"In terms of traditional 'politics'", Thompson wrote, "we have been living through the decade of the Great Apathy."<sup>10</sup> Apathy was normally explained by reference to the fact that affluence had made people too prosperous to worry about politics. The implicit comparison with the 1930s appeared to give this explanation some credence. For Thompson, however, apathy was less an indication of indifference than an expression of impotence. Affluence did not bring in its wake contented prosperity: "we need only scratch the surface of social life to find not contentment,

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<sup>10</sup>Thompson, "The New Left," 3.

but envy, frustration..."<sup>11</sup> It was the task of the media, of advertisers and politicians, to fan this discontent by their constant exhortations of competitive impulses. The sole criterion of success in this society was defined by material achievements; Joe Lampton, the central character in John Braine's Room at the Top, symbolized an ideal to be emulated. Joe Lampton, like Kingsley Amis' 'Lucky Jim' Dixon, extolled the virtues of the individual ego and denied the value of socially responsible or collective attitudes. Braine's and Amis' characters might have been fictional, but they were symptomatic of much that was wrong with the 1950s:

What is peculiar to the apathetic decade is that people have increasingly looked to private solutions to public evils: private ambitions have displaced social aspirations. People feel, in the prevailing apathy, that they are impotent to effect any change. (emphasis in the original)<sup>12</sup>

Of course, to change the world to something other than it is presupposes, first, that we can conceive of alternatives and, second, that there is some agent to give expression to our ideals. There must be some sense of collective purpose and, hence, a belief in the desirability of cooperation and collective values. But at all points, contemporary Britain reinforced the ideal of individual achievement within an opportunity state. How, then, was it possible to envisage change. For Thompson, the only answer lay in a return to those cooperative ideals advanced by socialists and communists. This tradition, he maintained, had expressed genuine humanistic impulses and it was important to specify the ideals which it had advanced and to dissociate these ideals from the Cold War caricature of communism. I have already argued that Stalinism did much to foster the caricature and I now want to consider the ways in which Thompson believed that Western intellectuals contributed to such a distortion.

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<sup>11</sup>Thompson, "At the Point of Decay," 5.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

In essence, Thompson claimed that intellectuals reacted to communism in a way that paralleled the response of the early Romantic poets to the French Revolution. In both cases, aspirations for a more humane world were identified with the successes of a new state. The failure of the French and Russian revolutions to fulfil their promise resulted in a rejection not only of the new political state, but of the very ideals those states were seen to embody. The effect was to bring forth vigorous denunciations of the original ideals. The French and the Russian revolutions were seen by their early adherents to induce practices which were the antithesis of those ideals which had initially attracted support. As a result, Thompson argued, there was a tendency to generalize from these specific experiences and for intellectuals, in particular, to assert that any ideals which offered the hope of radically changing existing society must collapse into tyranny. Given this conclusion, it seemed safer for intellectuals to distance themselves from politics.

The withdrawal of intellectuals from political activity was, for Thompson, a key factor in contributing to the pervasive sense of apathy in post-war Britain. In denying that men could change their world, intellectuals were cultivating the terrain in which feelings of passivity and impotence took root. Individuals might have criticisms of their society but one's immediate historical experience had taught the absurdity of believing that a solution could be found in collective mechanisms of affirmative action. These were the ideals which communists espoused. Yet these were not the ideals which intellectuals found in communist practice. If the experience of the late-1930s taught this (that is, through the betrayal of the purges and the Russo-German pact, 1939), then the propaganda agencies of the West re-doubled their efforts in emphasizing the duplicitous character of communism with the onset of the Cold War. Liberty, Equality and Fraternity were seen to be a smokescreen behind which a cynical and manipulative bureaucracy was at work. Communism was becoming identified with the political imperatives of the Soviet state.

What could be desirable in those ideals which communists advocated if communists had been prepared to treat fellow communists as ruthlessly as they had treated fascists?

Thompson's criticisms of the interpretation of communism offered by disenchanted intellectuals focused upon its ahistorical and selective character. In some cases, Thompson observed, intellectuals had actually re-written history by denying the aspirations which they had themselves once affirmed. Auden's 'Spain' is illustrative of Thompson's argument.

'Spain' first appeared in 1937, at a time when Auden was committed to humanistic ideals. Thompson interpreted the poem as an attempt to grapple with the problems produced by an acquisitive culture. This culture was identified as the source of the contemporary malaise which was manifesting itself in Spain. The poem emphasized the extent to which the outcome of man's future depended upon the types of choices he was prepared to make in Spain. But when the revised version appeared in 1940 several crucial passages had been omitted. Rather than Spain being seen as symbolic of a particular human condition, it was now seen as a symbol of the human predicament. In 1937, good and evil were clearly defined and could be assigned the objective social referents of communism and fascism respectively. By 1940 the divisions were no longer apparent; communists were equally evil. Auden believed that his own experiences demonstrated that evil was endemic to the human condition. Capitalism was no longer the problem; rather, capitalism was seen to be symptomatic of an inherently evil human nature. Political action was not the means to resolve the problems of the world; it was much more likely to aggravate them. Herein lay one of the sources of intellectual quiescence: a profound spiritual disenchantment:

The most marvellous thing about strict adherence to the doctrine of original sin (in its Manichean connotation) is that there is nothing to be done about it. The sin is there, and to attempt any large-scale demolition project would be blasphemy. The quietist knows that "all societies and epochs are transient details": he has attained through mediation and spiritual exercise to the great Natopolitan truth first stumbled on by Henry Ford: 'History is bunk'.

And this truth leads onto a moral determinism no less rigid than in orthodox Stalinism. If, in the one, evil may be justified in the name of 'historical necessity', then in the other it is accepted as a necessary part of the human condition. (emphasis in the original)<sup>13</sup>

If man is seen to be inherently evil then there is no point in attempting any social change. The very fact that communism was identified with all aspirations for change made it, within the context of the Cold

War, a good deal easier to deny the possibility of "...the revolutionary potential - not only within Russian society alone - but within any society, within man himself."<sup>14</sup>

Nearly all of Auden's early poems were, Thompson noted, "submitted to a similar process of political bowdlerization because they indicated an affirmation which, by 1940, [he] had abjured".<sup>15</sup> The cumulative effect of this process was to transmit to future generations a false sense of the past.

Thompson identified a similar process, and for the same types of reasons, at work in Orwell's work. Although Orwell did not emasculate his own past in exactly the same way, he did present a view of his experiences which may record his interpretation, but it is an interpretation that cannot be allowed to pass uncontested "as a sober historical evaluation"<sup>16</sup> of the motives informing the Socialist generation of the 1930s.

Orwell, Thompson claimed, dismissed the promises of the 1930s as a swindle, but he did so in such a way as to convey the impression that it was only the ideals associated with

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<sup>13</sup>Thompson, "Outside the Whale," 154-55.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 156.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 148.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 161.



communism that went wrong. He wrote as one who was personally betrayed rather than as an objective observer attempting to grapple with communism's development as a historical question:

Orwell is like a man who is raw all down one side and numb on the other. He is sensitive - sometimes obsessively so - to the least insincerity upon his left, but the inhumanity of the right rarely provoked him to a paragraph of polemic...what is noticeable about Orwell's characterization of communism in *Inside the Whale* is that time after time his prejudices are angry, antagonistic responses to the ruling left orthodoxy, so laying the basis for a new orthodoxy-by-opposition. He assumes communism to be a Bad Thing, driven forward by the mainspring of its own bad will - the power drives of the Russian State and the deracinated romanticism of Western intellectuals.<sup>17</sup>

Orwell's histories have no context and do not allow one to understand:

...the complex and contradictory character of the communist movement, the inner tensions were never seen. Who would suppose, from Orwell's indiscriminate rejection, that there were many communists...who shared his criticisms of orthodoxy...That within the rigid organization and orthodoxy, the communist movement in the thirties (and forties) retained (in differing degrees in different contexts) a profoundly democratic content and the deep sense of political responsibility of the rank and file? But Orwell was blind to all such discriminations, - and in this he anticipated the wholesale rejection of communism which became a central feature of Natopolitan ideology.<sup>18</sup>

Thompson's verdict on Auden and Orwell is that they must be judged as representative of those who were

...trapped in that movement of thought and sensibility which - commencing with the abstract rejection of communism - leads on to the retreat from humanism.

Dogmatic anti-communism, which begins by rejecting certain ideas or reacting against certain events, and which ends by rejecting or condemning hundreds of millions of people, is bound to lead on to despair. Analysis must commence with historical actualities; and first with the multitudes of human beings whose aspirations are expressed in terms of communist thought and political organization. Those who allow disgust with the illiberal and authoritarian features of orthodox communism to dominate their outlook, only too often end by damming up within themselves the

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<sup>17</sup>Thompson, "Outside the Whale," 161.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 162.

profound and active sympathy called forth by those epics of human achievement led by communists in our time.<sup>19</sup>

According to Thompson, then, the disenchanted had "sowed...the seeds of profound self-distrust"<sup>20</sup> and "had passed onto the next generation only the great negative of impotence".<sup>21</sup>

But it is not the epitaph which the historical thirties deserved, any more than the self-flagellation of Wordsworth's solitary is a true comment upon the men of the corresponding societies. It may be years before an objective judgement upon the period can be made. It will not be made until speculations upon motive are placed firmly back in the context of the time. Men were not placed in some pure climate of choice, but in a context of savage counter-revolution and military politics which none had chosen. If their choices had been wiser, world war might conceivably have been averted or limited. If their actions had been more self-centred, then the war would certainly have been lost. (my emphasis)<sup>22</sup>

Thompson's critique of Western intellectuals emphasized the way in which they were responsible for contributing to a false sense of history. Intellectuals denied the validity of certain types of motives. But motives can only be understood by locating them within actual historical contexts. When this context is removed, these motives appear, in the light of subsequent historical developments, to be irrational and are illustrative of the extent to which intellectuals do not understand political life. Why would any reasonable person willingly give their support to ideals which entail authoritarian practices? Yet, when motives are assessed retrospectively and without any sense of context it appears as if intellectuals are willing to endorse such ideals. When, however, one examines the actual context in which people made their choices the past appears in a different light.

My recollection is that those who went to Spain and those who supported them in Britain, spent much of their time in warning of the dangers of

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<sup>19</sup>Thompson, "Socialism and the Intellectuals," 31.

<sup>20</sup>Thompson, "Outside the Whale," 164.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 168.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 168-69.

a flood of violence if the Spanish lesson went unheeded. Further, if we are to talk...about romanticism and irrationalism in the thirties it is worth recalling that intellectual liberty...was one of the first issues which intellectuals believed to be at stake in Spain...If men went to Spain, believing that certain events were taking place and that certain consequences would flow from their actions, it seems to me that we are less than just, and diminish the human status, if we ignore the conscious act of choice. (my emphasis)<sup>23</sup>

In denying the affirmatives, and in assimilating all expressions of communist endeavour to Stalinist orthodoxy, the disenchanted contributed to a "spiritual impoverishment" that has denied the imagination a purposive role to play in politics.<sup>24</sup> The political and the intellectual realms were divorced. The present was better than any imagined future. As a result, political activity was reduced to questions of expediency, to manipulating the present:

Economists are forever "priming pumps", politicians "meeting contingencies", trade union leaders keeping up with the cost of living index. The most challenging moral issue is reduced to a nice choice of expediencies. At the heart of a disintegrating imperial system, with the weapons of annihilation poised over the earth, the Natopolitan walks carefully down well-known streets...He would feel naked without the 'circumstances', like the familiar shops and offices, which shelter him on every side.

The circumstances are there, true enough, though most of them are of Natopolitan making. What is so signally lacking is the will to change them. How far they can be changed we cannot tell until the attempt has been made. But we can be sure that if we do not change circumstances, circumstances will change nonetheless; and they are likely to change for the worse. It is not change, but social stasis, which is the illusion. Apathy is a morbid condition of the will. (emphasis in the original)<sup>25</sup>

While reform of the existing system may be entertained, its revolutionary transformation was inconceivable. All those who contend such possibilities could be presented as if they were either subversives or impractical idealists:

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<sup>23</sup>Thompson, "Socialism and the Intellectuals," 33.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 35.

<sup>25</sup>Thompson, "Outside the Whale," 181.

Historical determinism, in Western capitalist society, does not take the form of a proclaimed philosophy buttressed by the organs of the state; instead it enters in the disguise of slavery to expediency. Theoretically, men are free to choose and to change their social arrangements; and various institutions are provided, including two political parties, like the two ends of a pair of dumbbells, on which they can exercise their choosing muscles. But, in fact, the results of their choice are pre-determined within the narrow limits of 'expert opinion', the needs of the economy, 'practical considerations', pressure of circumstances...where the dissident communist is accused of ignorance of 'objective' scientific laws, the left wing socialist is accused of 'utopian pipe dreams' and told that 'the voters won't wear it'.<sup>26</sup>

It is true that, within the rules of the political game prescribed by bourgeois mores, attempts to advance wants without an exchange value or to promote values geared to cooperative rather than competitive ends are considered utopian. But the pejorative sense in which such ideals are dismissed as utopian - as electoral liabilities - directs one's attention to the nub of the problem: why won't the voters wear it? If people are exhorted at every turn to believe that their wants consist solely in the acquisition of an increasing number of material goods then they will certainly find difficulty in giving expression to alternative wants. People may benefit from material goods, but the social system in which they are acquired distorts their real interests.

When Thompson wrote of human wants he was directing his attention to the way in which these reveal themselves as people experience the social relationships that they find themselves in. It is one thing to be told that one can benefit from the existing organization of society. It is something else to inquire into the way in which people would respond to this society if they were aware that alternatives might allow them to develop potentialities denied by capitalism. For Thompson, it was concrete human wants and not some abstract conception of them which must be accounted:

The only valid criterion by which to assess institutions and economic and social arrangements: these must be made to measure people, rather than people being chopped about or stretched on a procrustean bed in order

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<sup>26</sup>Thompson, "Agency and Choice," 90.

to measure 'circumstances' or 'historical necessity'. In line with this assertion, a long derided trend within the socialist movement appears to be reviving utopian...socialism; that is, the vindication of the right of the moral imagination to project an ideal to which it is legitimate to aspire; and the right of reason to enquire into the aims and ends of social arrangements irrespective of questions of immediate feasibility, in brief to ask questions of the order of 'Why?' and not only of "How?"<sup>27</sup>

To ask "Why?" implies some criterion of moral evaluation which is not given by the 'common sense' of the day. The latter takes as a given that existing social arrangements are, in principle, adequate and that while there may be a need to make certain changes it is not necessary to overhaul the fundamental values sustaining this society. This 'common sense', Thompson maintained, was based upon a manufactured consensus which functioned to delude people as to their true interests. These interests can only be understood if one is prepared to take seriously the views of those who actually experience the reality of capitalism. The experiences of working people have as much validity as those who tell us that capitalism is socially beneficial but who refuse to take seriously the views of those who experience life differently.

Thompson's argument, then, indicated two conceptions of morality. Both were seen to be rooted in material life, but while the one imposed itself upon social life as the natural order of things, the other insisted that the experiences of those who do not benefit from capitalism are equally valid. The former saw society as expressive of man's nature; the latter questioned the adequacy of reducing human wants to economic categories.

A moral choice is being made when we seek to alter social arrangements and this choice is also a political one. But it is not political in the sense that this term is understood by conventional politicians. Politics, as Thompson used the term, involved relationships of power which are given by the distribution of material interests within a society. Since most politicians took the basic values of this society as a given it was not possible for them to envision social change in other

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 91.



than a reformist sense. To advance beyond reformism presupposed a willingness to challenge those values which sustained capitalism. It was Thompson's contention that this transition will only commence when people begin to re-order their values.

In essence, Thompson was arguing for a revolution in human values. Unless people change the way in which they think about their social relationships it will not be possible to advance to a more humane and just society. In this section I have discussed some of the obstacles that Thompson believed stood in the way of developing a sense of the collective well-being. Cooperative values had become too closely identified with a particular view of communism. This association, however, was one that Thompson held to be false and rested upon ahistorical accounts of communism's development. Nevertheless, it was an association which he believed had profoundly disabling consequences. In effect, it denied the possibility of imagining alternative social arrangements. As a result, the arguments of the disenchanted dovetailed with and reinforced certain political developments. These developments were also working to support the status quo and the denial of the view that men could shape history to express their concrete wants. The next section considers some of these political developments by examining certain themes in the post-war history of the Labour Party. It then discusses Thompson's general attitude to the Labour Party and focuses specifically on the inadequacies he found in its conception of socialism.

## II

Until 1948 the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) had been guided by the notion of 'Corporate Socialism' or the belief that socialism could be brought into existence by bringing certain sectors of the economy under state control. This idea manifested itself in the nationalization proposals of Atlee's first administration and in the introduction of a fairly comprehensive welfare

system. The early legislative programme of the government was a product both of the memories of the 1930s and an attempt to implement equalitarian ideals forged in the context of war. Moreover, it expressed the belief that the vagaries of a market economy could be eliminated through Keynesian planning techniques.<sup>28</sup> From 1948, however, the government began to adopt a policy of consolidation or the belief that while socialism was fine in principle it would, in practice, require longer to implement than the optimistic forecasts of 1945 suggested.<sup>29</sup> In effect, the policy of consolidation explicitly recognized the constraints imposed upon a party which, despite its professed allegiance to Clause 1V, had never seriously entertained the possibility of challenging the property sanctions governing a liberal-capitalist society. It was one thing to extend war-time controls by nationalizing inefficient industries in peace time, notably the mines and railways. It was quite another to extend collectivist principles to a profitable industry. Thus the furore which erupted over the government's attempt to appropriate the iron and steel industry indicated the difficulties of implementing a socialist ideal in a capitalist society. The very fact that the Labour Party recognized

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<sup>28</sup>National Executive Committee, Let Us Face the Future: A Declaration of Labour Policy for the Consideration of the Nation (London: Labour Party Publications, 1945), 1, 5.

<sup>29</sup>National Executive Committee, Labour and the New Society: A Statement of the Policies and Principles of British Democratic Socialism (London: Labour Party Publications, 1950). The policy of consolidation is discussed in Ralph Miliband, Parliamentary Socialism: A Study in the Politics of Labour (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961; 2nd revised edition, London: Merlin Press, 1972), part III, "The Climax of Labourism."; and Kenneth O.Morgan, Labour in Power, 1945-1951 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984). Although Miliband did not have access to the same archival material that Morgan did, his account of these years is, and especially in the context of this dissertation, preferred. This is partly because Morgan's interpretation was generally unacceptable to Thompson: see E.P. Thompson, "Mr Atlee and the Gadarene Swine," The Guardian 3 March 1984, 9. Thompson's review of Morgan's book criticized its 'institutional' approach and its tendency to 'sanitize' other - popular - historical traditions by simply omitting them from consideration.

But Miliband's importance, here, also stems from his close association with New Reasoner. In the editorial to New Reasoner no.3 (Autumn 1957) Thompson and Saville called for an analysis and critique of the theory, organizational structure and strategy of the Labour Party. New Reasoner hoped to advance an alternative to the revisionist ascendancy, which reached its apotheosis in 1957 with the publication of Industry and Society and Bevan's volte face at the Party's Annual Conference. Miliband's articles in subsequent issues of the journal can be regarded as the response to that request (see note 60 below)

these limitations could be seen in the visible retreat from the position it advanced in its 1945 election manifesto when compared to that outlined in its 1950 manifesto. This shift demonstrated the gradual re-orientation of its intellectual moorings.

From the late 1940s 'Corporate Socialism' was supplanted by an increasingly assertive revisionist school of thinking. Where the former had approached socialism fairly tentatively, it had nevertheless accepted it as an article of belief. The latter denied the centrality of common ownership as the party's overriding concern and they drew upon what appeared to be convincing evidence. Affluence and 'full' employment undermined the claim that capitalism was inherently unstable; and with it, one of the primary rationales governing the immediate post-war legislative initiative vanished. Moreover, the popular image of the Cold War relationship between socialism and totalitarianism provided a strong moral argument against further nationalization.<sup>30</sup> The very fact that Labour was to lose two consecutive elections, in 1951 and 1955, to a conservative party which had, however grudgingly, accepted the principles of a mixed economy, reinforced the perceived necessity to abandon the collectivist and 'cloth-cap' approach to socialism. Electoral contingencies, in other words, helped to re-direct Labour Party thinking.

The first clear signs that the Labour Party was in the process of transforming its ideological premises can be seen from the contributions made by Party intellectuals and cadres to The New Fabian Essays.<sup>31</sup> Labour's *raison d'être* was no longer assumed to be that of creating a society of equals - if, indeed, it had ever been that - but was taken explicitly as concerned with creating the conditions encouraging equality of opportunity, while simultaneously recognising that capitalism was not the threat it had once been assumed to be. The clearest expression that views as to the character of capitalism were changing could be seen from the publication of John

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<sup>30</sup>Perry Anderson, "The Left in the Fifties," New Left Review, no.30, March-April 1965, 4.

<sup>31</sup>R.H.S. Crossman, ed., New Fabian Essays (London: Dent, 1950)

Strachey's Contemporary Capitalism<sup>32</sup> which rejected the Marxist position he had advanced in the 1930s.<sup>33</sup> Marx, Strachey argued, had correctly delineated the character of nineteenth-century capitalism. His followers, however, in adopting a dogmatic and exegetical approach to his work, had failed to recognise capitalism's capacity to transform and humanize itself. For Strachey, the key to the change lay in the 'Managerial Revolution.'<sup>34</sup> The administration of capitalism now rested in the hands of experts or technocrats who were guided by considerations of rational competency rather than the blind quest for profit. As a result, they were more likely to be concerned with maintaining a smoothly functioning market system and with avoiding the excesses common to the myopic, 'robber baron,' phase of capitalist development.

Strachey's arguments were taken a good deal further by Richard Crossman,<sup>35</sup> Anthony Crosland<sup>36</sup> and Hugh Gaitskell<sup>37</sup> who, collectively, articulated a vigorous defence of the thesis that capitalism had entered a socially responsible phase. The corollary to this intellectual metamorphosis was simple: if the party was to continue to present itself as a viable electoral concern it could no longer advance the claims of a specific class when these, as traditionally conceived, were opposed to those principles of social organization now been openly and fully

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<sup>32</sup>John Strachey, Contemporary Capitalism (London: Gollancz, 1956). Strachey's arguments were initially presented in a lecture to the Fabian Society: John Strachey, Labour's Task (London: Fabian Publications and Victor Gollancz, 1951).

<sup>33</sup>John Strachey, The Nature of the Capitalist Crisis (London: Victor Gollancz, 1935); John Strachey, The Theory and Practice of Socialism (New York: Random House, 1936)

<sup>34</sup>James Burnham, The Managerial Revolution (London: Harmondsworth, 1945)

<sup>35</sup>R.H.S. Crossman, Socialist Values in a Changing Civilisation (London: Fabian Publications and Victor Gollancz, 1956). R.H.S. Crossman, Socialism and the New Despotism, Fabian Tract no.298 (London: Fabian Publications, 1956).

<sup>36</sup>C.A.R. Crosland, The Future of Socialism (London: Cape, 1956).

<sup>37</sup>Hugh Gaitskell, Socialism and Nationalization, Fabian Tract no.300 (London: The Fabian Society, 1956)

endorsed by the Party's ideologues and leaders. It was in this that the primary division within the party during the 1950s was to be found, with a rump organized around Aneurin Bevan's continued insistence on the need to advance the ideals which had carried the party into office in 1945.

The cumulative effect of revisionist thinking could be seen in the publication of the party's policy document, Industry and Society, which was endorsed at the Annual Conference in October 1957, and which provided the basis for Labour's electoral campaign in 1959. But "the stock broker's approach to socialism"<sup>38</sup> did not help to win "the glossy election."<sup>39</sup> The lesson drawn from this defeat was that the party had failed to distance itself sufficiently from its older image. This perception lay the basis for a major debate on the utility of clause IV to the modern PLP at the Party's Annual Conference in 1959.

During the 1950s the revisionist position had been sustained by the apparent stability of the economy. Although there were signs that this stability might not be a permanent feature it was not until the end of the decade that economic trends began to undermine the optimistic assertions of the revisionists. The decline in economic growth prompted some serious re-thinking. An example of this can be seen in the subdued tone informing the second edition of Crosland's The Future of Socialism. In the first edition Crosland had argued that 'full' employment and the safety nets provided by welfare agencies had eroded primary poverty and that this had been replaced by secondary poverty; that is, if people were poor then poverty could be attributed to their own ignorance. In fact, Crosland had revised his own optimistic assessments of Welfare Capitalism two years earlier in a pamphlet commissioned by the Fabian Society <sup>40</sup> and had elaborated upon his

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<sup>38</sup>Ralph Miliband, "The Sickness of Labourism," New Left Review, no.1, January-February 1960, 6.

<sup>39</sup>Mervyn Jones, "The Glossy Election," New Reasoner, no.8, Spring 1959, 1-14.

<sup>40</sup>Anthony Crosland, Can Labour Win (London: Fabian Society, 1960).



revised position in The Conservative Enemy.<sup>41</sup> Drawing on J.K. Galbraith<sup>42</sup> and a burgeoning social survey literature claiming to have 're-discovered' primary poverty,<sup>43</sup> Crosland was now prepared to admit the problem of 'private affluence and public squalor.' He was not, however, willing to attribute the source of poverty to any inherent deficiency within the functioning of the market system. Instead, he saw the source of the problem as lying in certain attitudes. It was the government and not private enterprise who would and should determine how much to spend on health, housing and education. The justification for any increase in public expenditure should be sought on compassionate grounds, for no attempt should be made to narrow the horizons of the 'opportunity' state. The Labour Party should work within the existing socio-political framework and not concern itself with a structural overhaul of capitalism. It should, moreover, seek to develop existing technological capacities; capacities which Crosland felt to be thwarted by Conservative parochialism.

Crosland's arguments were by no means unique. Similar analyses guided those who contributed to the Fabian Society series Signposts for the Sixties. This series was important because:

Instead of calling for a structural extension of the public sector by a wider transfer of existing industries from private to public ownership, it in effect proposed to build up the public sector alongside the intact private sector, by creating new public enterprises in the 'science-based' and 'growth' industries, where the government already financed the bulk of research. The idea was politically a small master-piece. Throughout the fifties the party had been stalemated by conflicting pressures of the left, arguing that common ownership was intrinsic to any definition of socialism, and

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<sup>41</sup>C.A.R. Crosland, The Conservative Enemy: A Programme of Radical Reform for the 1960s (New York: Schocken Books, 1962)

<sup>42</sup>John Kenneth Galbraith, The Affluent Society (London: Hamilton, 1958).

<sup>43</sup>Especially relevant here was Richard Titmuss, Essays on the Welfare State (London: Allen & Unwin, 1958).

the right arguing that nationalization was so unpopular that it was disastrous electorally.<sup>44</sup>

What Signposts proposed, and the PLP under the leadership of Harold Wilson sought to implement, was a compromise: a future labour government would create its own profitable industries. The left would be happy, since public control would again find a place on the political agenda. At the same time the fears of the right would be allayed because this proposal was not a traditional form of expropriation. In essence, Wilson "caught the national and party mood in his approach to a technocratic-classless society as the dynamic solution to Britain's problems."<sup>45</sup> Wilson's 'technologism', however, despite its modifications, was consistent with the overall thrust of revisionist thinking in its emphasis upon managerialism and efficiency.

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These arguments might pass for socialism in the Labour Party, but, for Thompson, they demonstrably would not do. In his opinion, Old Left and Revisionist Right shared a fundamental misconception in the belief that socialism amounted to little more than seeking redress for material disadvantages within the framework of capitalist society. Granted this premise, however, revisionism could be advocated as a logical development. But the premise was false. While the attempt to gain material improvements for working people may have been a necessary one, it has never, in itself, been a sufficient goal for socialists. Those who have conceived of socialism in such a narrow manner have done the movement a serious dis-service. To be so myopic about the goals of socialism is to confine human nature within an economic framework:

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<sup>44</sup>Anderson, "The Left in the Fifties," 8-9.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 9. See also Perry Anderson, "Critique of Wilsonism," New Left Review, no.27, September-October 1964, 3-27.



It is often said that the original 'dynamic' of the socialist movement derived from the 'politics of hunger.' Now that extreme want and unemployment are things of the past, socialists should dilute their politics in an effort to adjust to the mood of the electorate; or they should look for another dynamic. It is true that absolute standards of welfare have risen (making the politics of absolute hunger irrelevant). What is false is the suggestion that the elimination of extreme want has ever been, for socialists, a sufficient end in itself. Rather this end has been shared with the radical and liberal traditions.<sup>46</sup>

For Thompson, what marked socialism off from these other traditions was the concern to create a society of equal beings and not equality of opportunity within an unequal society:

The socialist end has been the creation - not of equality of opportunity, within an acquisitive society - but of a society of equals, a cooperative community. The pre-requisite for this is the replacement of production for profit by production for use.<sup>47</sup>

This was Morris's understanding of socialism and it was one that Thompson explicitly identified with:

Without the displacement of the dynamic of the profit motive all other measures will prove ineffectual and it is in the definition of this as an essential means which distinguishes the socialist tradition. (emphasis in the original) <sup>48</sup>

This statement of socialism has been at variance with the Parliamentary Labour Party's view of labour politics which "has consisted,

not in the expression of a revolutionary class consciousness, but in the harnessing of class grievances to a liberal-radical programme. The characteristic appeal of labour has not been for a new system, but for fair shares within the existing system, a fair deal and equality of opportunity. The definition of class relationships fell less upon the line of ownership than upon the line of class privilege; it was tory exclusiveness,

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<sup>46</sup>E.P. Thompson, "At the Point of Decay," 5.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid.

<sup>48</sup>Thompson, "Revolution," 289.

heartlessness and social advantage that served to define the context and goals of the labour movement's conception of socialism.<sup>49</sup>

Rather than offer an alternative vision to capitalism, and one which expressed the distinctive interests of working people, the labourist tradition has been directed by men who have assimilated bourgeois values. The Labour party has defined its role as a political broker, balancing the interests of labour and capital in such a way as to preserve the framework of parliamentary democracy.<sup>50</sup> Labour has defined its primary goals in economic terms, seeking the resolution of

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<sup>49</sup>Thompson, "Revolution Again," 27.

<sup>50</sup>This thesis was advanced in the pages of New Reasoner by Ralph Miliband: "The Politics of Contemporary Capitalism," New Reasoner, no.5, Summer 1958, 39-52; "The Transition of the Transition," New Reasoner, no.6, Autumn 1958, 35-48. These articles, together with "The Sickness of Labourism," New Left Review, no.1, January-February 1960, 5-9, formed the basis of his extended analysis of the history and contemporary relevance of the Labour Party as a potential agent for advancing to socialism that he developed in Parliamentary Socialism: A Study in the Politics of Labour.

Miliband argued that capitalist societies had exhibited a tendency in the past to adopt authoritarian social and political characteristics. Although he noted the presence of many democratic mechanisms in contemporary Britain, he also observed a tendency for power to become increasingly concentrated in unaccountable bodies; including the Labour Party.\* Gaitskill's refusal to abide by the decision of the Annual Conference on the question of Unilateralism in 1960 appeared to confirm this argument. The accretion of power, in unaccountable bodies, could partly be attributed to the increasing acceptance of capitalism (in comparison to the 1930s, for example, there was very little intellectual or political criticism),\*\* more generally it was seen to have been facilitated by the all-pervasive sense of apathy that characterized the 1950s. Indeed, the direction that the Labour Party was heading in appeared to leave very little to distinguish it from the Conservative Party. In the early 1960s \*\*\* Miliband felt that, with vigorous propaganda directed at the broader labour movement, the Party could be transformed into a party that genuinely represented the interests of working people:

"...it is not inevitable that the Labour Party should continue towards the political graveyard. It is within its power to re-trace its steps and dedicate itself anew to the socialist policies which are its only alternative." ("The Sickness of Labourism," 8)

\*Also note the following: Ken Alexander, "Power at the Base," in Thompson, ed., Out of Apathy, 243-80; John Rex, "The Labour Bureaucracy," New Reasoner, no.6, Autumn 1958, 49-61.

\*\*This aspect of Miliband's argument was developed in two articles by Raphael Samuel: "The Boss as Hero," Universities and Left Review, no.7, Autumn 1959, 25-31; " 'Bastard' Capitalism," in Thompson, ed., Out of Apathy, 19-55.



economic grievances within the existing political order. The fact that the party endorsed existing social arrangements necessarily forced it to pander to the shallowest aspirations of the electorate.

In turn, this policy encouraged a pragmatic and expedient view of political reality:

Too many intellectuals who join the labour party seemed to get swallowed up in the seas of expediency. They concern themselves not with what is potential, but with what in the short-term is politically practicable...they cease to think as socialists and neglect a great part of the work of socialist intellectuals which I take to be that of helping people to become aware of the vast human potentialities - economic, spiritual, intellectual - denied or frustrated by capitalist society; of helping people to change their ideas and values within capitalist society until they see and feel it to be an intolerable and wasteful system which despite the precarious modifications of the present decade it still remains. (my emphasis)<sup>51</sup>

If the definition of socialism as the redress of economic grievances was lamentably limited then so too was the claim that a parliamentary elite could define what should count as socialism. For Thompson, a political party which had accepted the rules of parliamentary practice necessarily lent itself to a hierarchical and bureaucratic form. This elitism was not how he conceived of socialist activity:

We do not see the socialist movement as merely a movement with a different objective from other political movements; we see it as different kind of movement made up of different kinds of people. It cannot be a movement of top people who lead...and of "good party workers" who are led. It must be a movement in which...the objective itself, a society of equals, finds living embodiment...<sup>52</sup>

A society of equals would only be created if a socialist movement treated the experiences of its members as valid and different from those interests that capitalist democracy ultimately secured. At no point in its history had the Labour Party advanced alternative ideas to

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\*\*\*Miliband was, however, less optimistic in the second edition of Parliamentary Socialism.

<sup>51</sup>Thompson, "Socialism and the Intellectuals," 34.

<sup>52</sup>E.P. Thompson, "A Pssay in Ephology," New Reasoner, no.10, Autumn 1959, 4-5.



those of dominant social groups. In the 1950s it was seen to be outbidding the Conservative Party in its claims to represent capitalist interests:

The British Labour Party, throughout its history, has tended to neglect a point of production of equal importance - the point at which socialist ideas and policies are produced. The British Labour Party can still muster 12 million odd votes at the polls, but for all its organizational strength it does not subsidise or support a single quarterly journal of serious socialist theory.<sup>53</sup>

Because the Labour Party was led by people who endorsed a political regime promoting interests at odds with those of working people, the Party's claim to represent the latter was seen by Thompson to be specious.

### III

Thompson took the work of the socialist intellectual to lie in helping working people "to become aware of the vast human potentialities...denied or frustrated by capitalist society..." This emphasis implied the need to "[construct]

...an alternative 'cultural apparatus'...which by-passes the mass media and the party machinery, and which opens direct channels between significant groupings inside and outside the labour movement. (emphasis in the original)<sup>54</sup>

Thompson was not alone in his insistence on the importance of the value of propaganda in attempting to foster a socialist consciousness. The non-Marxist tendency of the New Left, represented by the journal ULR, also emphasized the 'educative' role of propaganda. But there was one important difference in their respective approaches. For Thompson, propaganda was designed to assist working people in becoming aware of the distinctive character of their interests.

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<sup>53</sup>Thompson, "The Point of Production," 68.

<sup>54</sup>Thompson, "The New Left," 8.

He accepted, unequivocally, the class character of different material interests and did not doubt the capacity of working people to think about and to act upon their interests. ULR, however, tended to assume that the working class was the object of successful bourgeois manipulation. In consequence, workers were incapable of formulating a coherent world view that might challenge this hegemony. The only solution was for socialism to be brought to working people by a self-conscious intellectual elite.

While Thompson defended the integrity and potential agency of the working class, ULR invested its faith in the agency of intellectuals. The position adopted by ULR was well summarized by C.Wright Mills. He claimed that the idea of conceiving of the working class as the central agency of change was a,

...labour metaphysic...a legacy from Victorian Marxism that is now quite unrealistic...It is with this problem of agency in mind that I have been studying...the cultural apparatus, the intellectuals - as a possible immediate radical agency of change.<sup>55</sup>

ULR was pre-occupied with examining the cultural conditions contributing to political apathy. These conditions were located principally in the media:

ULR's approach to working class political attitudes was itself a cultural one. Rather than deal extensively with the organized labour movement [it focused on] the general way of life upon which the institutions of the labour movement were based...in contrast to the individual and competitive social values ...of the middle class, ULR found in working class culture the embryonic form of democratic community it desired for the socialist Britain. What alarmed many of the ULR group was the apparent post-war trend towards an atomistic society and the threat that this posed for the survival of traditional working class social values.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>C. Wright Mills, "Letter to the 'New Left Review'," New Left Review, no.5, September-October 1960, 22.

<sup>56</sup>Holden, "The First New Left", 167.



Richard Hoggart's work, The Uses of Literacy,<sup>57</sup> played an important role in shaping ULRs belief that the media were responsible for undermining values of class solidarity by promoting, through a new popular culture, values supportive of the market economy. As a result, the extent to which working people were alienated from effective control over their lives was extended from the work place to leisure activities. Hoggart indicted the media for eroding traditional working-class values of cooperation, mutuality and self-respect. This was a value system in which people related to others as real people and not as the means to the pursuit of externally defined ends. According to Hoggart, a conception of society as a status hierarchy, and one based upon competition and greed, was rapidly supplanting older ideals of social organization in the minds of working people. Although Hoggart recognized the relationship between the media and the formation of new attitudes to be a complex one, he nevertheless assumed it to be a uni-directional one working inexorably to break down an older way of life.

Hoggart's argument, that the material conditions sustaining the basis of class differentiation was being undermined, was reinforced by Stuart Hall's "The Sense of Classlessness."<sup>58</sup> Britain, Hall argued, had, materially, not become any less of a class-divided society. But the media were inducing important perceptual changes, for subjectively fewer people believed that the character of class differences was as extensive as it had been even as late as the inter-war years.

Hall developed his argument in the context of a broad historical framework which necessarily glossed over many issues. He argued that, in the nineteenth-century, working people knew themselves only as exploited producers. This awareness served to define both their consciousness and organizational forms in an antagonistic relationship to the bourgeoisie. By the

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<sup>57</sup>Richard Hoggart, The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working- Class Life with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957)

<sup>58</sup>Stuart Hall, "A Sense of Classlessness," Universities and Left Review, no.5 Autumn 1958, 26-31.

mid-twentieth century, however, this consciousness was changing "because of increased purchasing power. The commodities which the worker as producer makes at the factory, he purchases back as a consumer in the shops."<sup>59</sup> For Hall, the welfare state, the decline of mass unemployment, increased productivity and the spread of credit facilities had all contributed to the material integration of working people into the market. At the same time, the spread of advertizing and high-powered salesmanship functioned to create increasing levels of psychological acceptance. Hall and others argued that the long-term effect of these developments was to make capitalism appear to be more socially acceptable.<sup>60</sup>

There were a number of problems with this diagnosis of the relationship of the working class to the wider society, and some of these were identified with those temperamentally aligned with ULR. For example, although Hall specifically rejected the arguments of the Old Left on the grounds that they were too narrowly conceived in economic terms,<sup>61</sup> his own analysis tended to make a simplistic connection between increasing material prosperity and a growing sense of classlessness. In Raymond Williams' view, this assumption was symptomatic of more pervasive middle-class views of working people:

...it is generally difficult for the English middle class to suppose that the working class is not desperately anxious to become just like itself. I am afraid this must be unlearned. The great majority of English working people want only the middle class material standard and, for the rest, to go on being themselves.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., 29 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>60</sup>Especially Miliband and Samuel. See references in note 50 above.

<sup>61</sup>Hall, "Sense of Classlessness," n.3, 32.

<sup>62</sup>Raymond Williams, Culture and Society, 1780-1950 (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958, reprinted with a postscript, London: Penguin Books, 1985), (page references are to reprint edition), 224.



For Ralph Samuel,<sup>63</sup> Hall had mis-represented the character of nineteenth-century capitalism. Hall's claim that distinctive working-class communities had emerged as a defensive response to a visible enemy really only applied to the earliest and most insecure phase of industrial capitalism. In other words, Hall's argument related to the period before the introduction of greater capital investment with its more stable financial institutions. These developments had facilitated the development of more quiescent social relations following the demise of Chartism after 1848. Moreover, Hall exaggerated the extent to which working-class communities had been diluted in recent decades by social and geographical mobility. If anything, these features were more prominent in the nineteenth century:

The means of persuasion were in some ways more powerful than today for they were anchored to a shared social and religious ethic: non-conformity was both religious doctrine and social morality; it was a common bond between the entrepreneur and many of his workers... and non-conformity had its secular counterpart in the doctrines of self-help and thrift.<sup>64</sup>

Finally, Samuel argued, Hall relied too uncritically on Hoggart's view that traditional working-class communities have indeed been eroding. This claim assumed that there was such a phenomenon as 'the traditional working-class community'. This was an important consideration because one of ULR's central arguments was that this type of community contained within it the elements of the socialist society it hoped to see in Britain.

For Thompson, the central problem with ULR was its tendency to give priority to intellectual experience at the expense of working class experience. ULR intellectuals, he argued, defined working class needs in terms of needs derived from their own experiences and the manner in which they perceived capitalism to be affecting this experience. The operational assumption of

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<sup>63</sup>Ralph Samuel, "Class and Class Consciousness," Universities and Left Review, no.6, Spring 1959, 44-49.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 46.



ULR was that working people merely assimilated the ideas with which they were assailed. Since they were believed to be incapable of positing alternative social visions, socialism had to be brought to them.

To a certain extent Thompson was able to understand the reasons why ULR should view the working class as a victim of forces beyond their control and his critique was a qualified one:

I do indeed find in ULR one of the most healthy and constructive growing points for revolutionary socialism in this country; I do not doubt for a moment the integrity and commitment to the socialist cause of its editors. And yet this movement of ideas has emerged at a time when...the political consciousness of our working people is dulled and their creative political initiatives are at their most sluggish for many years. The younger generation which has matured in this context has inevitably generalized from this experience.<sup>65</sup>

Elsewhere, Thompson wrote that,

[t]he younger generation have no memories of labour as a movement of storm and protest, and men struggling and sacrificing to lift themselves out of cramping and de-humanizing conditions. They were born, rather, into the world of the block vote; it is the trade union which tells them what they can and can not do.<sup>66</sup>

Equating the concerns of labour exclusively with those of the modern bureaucratized trade union reinforced the image of socialism as being concerned only with economic questions. The fact that institutional juggling and perfidy characterized labour politics in the 1950s, moreover, did not mean that this had always been the case, and it did not mean that labour's political behaviour must always be like this. The younger intellectuals might be exonerated, but others should have known better. Thus, Thompson criticized The Uses of Literacy as a "...highly misleading

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<sup>65</sup>E.P. Thompson, "Commitment in Politics," Universities and Left Review, no.6, Spring 1959, 51.

<sup>66</sup>Thompson, "The New Left," 4-5.

document."<sup>67</sup> Hoggart idealized the working class of the 1930s as homogeneous and conflict-free. He falsely believed that the characteristic attitudes of the working class could be elucidated from the papers they read and the 'life-styles' they engaged in. More importantly, the text said very little about politics and minimized the role of an active political minority in sustaining socialist ideals in an era of political betrayal.

These two themes, that of heterogeneous communities and politically conscious minorities, were important aspects of Thompson's critique of the socialist position represented by ULR. He stressed that "working class history is not the record of a coherent 'way of life'; it has always been a way of struggle between competing moralities."<sup>68</sup> By "competing moralities" Thompson had in mind different value systems which sustain alternative forms of social organization: the one geared to production for profit, the other for use. Alternatively, the first is a system in which needs are given by market criteria and the second is one in which people define their own needs. The first denies and the second fosters the idea that men are agents in the making of their own history. Hoggart communicated to ULR intellectuals a sense that working people are not capable of agency because they merely assimilate the ideals presented to them in the capitalist media. But, Thompson argued, there has been a long tradition of political minorities who have attempted to resist the values advanced by capitalist agencies.

Thompson further argued that there was a sense in which ULR intellectuals shared certain of the assumptions of the dominant ideology. Both emphasized the acquisitive characteristics of working people and suggested that, because this was becoming a more pronounced feature of working class life, their political consciousness was being eroded. In Thompson's view, this type of

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<sup>67</sup>Thompson, "Commitment in Politics," 53.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 56. (emphasis in the original)



argument was based on a false premise: given certain economic features one can specify a particular consciousness. Thompson stated the matter thus:

...what is at issue is whether we are really living through a period in which working class consciousness as such is disintegrating, or whether it is changing its form...whether a new kind of consciousness may be arising which it is our business to define and give new form. If the characteristic working man of the 1830s was the handloom weaver or the artisan, so the characteristic labour man of the 1930s may be thought to be the miner or the worker in heavy industry - and we have come to identify all working class traditions with his traditions and see cause for dismay in the decline of his influence. But there is nothing inherently socialist in the production of coal or machine tools as opposed to services or cultural values. (emphasis in the original)<sup>69</sup>

Socialists could not give adequate expression to this new consciousness if they assumed in advance that they knew what working people wanted. Although this was exactly what Thompson's analysis led him to conclude they were doing. But it also led him to suggest that if socialist intellectuals could eschew those ideological assumptions which continued to colour their view of reality then they may "...precipitate a new consciousness."<sup>70</sup> And this consciousness,

...could well become a revolutionary consciousness, since the notion of the common good (unlike the notion of opportunity) implies a revolutionary critique of the entire capitalist system. The demands which will be made - for common ownership, or town planning, or welfare, or democratic access to control of industry or the mass media - cannot be met by a wage increase here or a ladder there. And in struggling for these demands people will learn through experience the incompatibility between capitalist irresponsibility and the common welfare and the need for revolutionary change. (my emphasis)<sup>71</sup>

Intellectuals, however, "will only defeat and isolate themselves if they assume the hubris of 'main agents', since the kind of society which we want is one which is impossible without the participation

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<sup>69</sup>Thompson, "Revolution Again," 26.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 28.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid.

of the whole people at every level."<sup>72</sup> This participation ought to be encouraged by socialist propaganda. But if this propaganda was to have any impact ULR intellectuals had to recognise

...the thought that is central to socialism - and which, above all, must unite intellectuals and the working class in a common cause - that man is capable not only of changing his conditions, but also of transforming himself; that there is a real sense in which it is true that men can master their own history...what we must re-affirm, is the revolutionary potentialities of man. We must regain this understanding, for unless we have it, we can never make the potential actual. (emphasis in the original)<sup>73</sup>

Although NR and ULR merged to form NLR, the new journal, by Thompson's own admission, "was...a failure: it was premature in the sense that organizational unity preceded instead of following upon intellectual unity."<sup>74</sup> The basic reason for this failure was that the ULR tendency was not able to affirm the thought that Thompson considered central to socialism.

#### IV

In the 1980s Thompson played a leading role in the nuclear disarmament movement and wrote extensively on the issue.<sup>75</sup> Although his writings on disarmament in the late 1950s were

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<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>73</sup>Thompson, "Socialism and the Intellectuals," 36.

<sup>74</sup> Thompson; quoted in Holden, "The First New Left," 328.

<sup>75</sup>The principal texts were: E.P. Thompson, Beyond the Cold War: A New Approach to Arms Control and Nuclear Annihilation (New York: Pantheon, 1982); "European Nuclear Disarmament: An Interview with E.P. Thompson," Socialist Review, 58, (1981), 9-34; E.P. Thompson, The Heavy Dancers (London: Merlin, 1985); E.P. Thompson, The Heavy Dancers: Writings on War, Past and Future (New York: Pantheon, 1985); E.P. Thompson, Infant and Emperor: Poems for Christmas (London: Merlin, 1983); E.P. Thompson, "A Letter to America," The Nation, 24 January 1981, 67-93; E.P. Thompson, "Notes on Exterminism: The Last Stages of Civilization," New Left Review, no. 121, May-June 1980, 3-32; E.P. Thompson "Protest and Survive," in E.P. Thompson and Dan Smith, eds., Protest and Survive (London: Penguin Books, 1980), 9-61; E.P. Thompson and Ben Thompson, eds., Star Wars: Self-Destruct Incorporated (London: Merlin, 1985).



quite sparse, it is apparent that he saw the production of nuclear weapons as symptomatic of a general malaise induced by an acquisitive culture:

...socialists must confront the capitalist system, where the bomb is endorsed by the media, which are upheld by advertizements, which stem from the private concentrations of power, which exploit people both as producers and consumers by creating a mental environment which foster acquisitive and impoverishes community values...This...is the House which the Irresponsible Society is building for Jack; and we have declared it all to be wrong. (my emphasis)<sup>76</sup>

The culture which extolled individual success also manufactured the instrument of man's negation. For Thompson, a critique of the nuclear policy focused attention on the value system which sustained this policy. It was not possible to envision a meaningful policy of disarmament unless this value system was replaced. Conventional politicians could not be expected to tackle these issues because they were a product of this mentality. It was for this reason that Thompson was to identify, in the mass protests which began at Easter 1958, the possibility of an extra-parliamentary solution to the problems of capitalist society.

The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament actually began as a small, single-cause pressure group directed by a number of well known intellectuals. They were mainly interested in influencing the Labour Party rather than initiating a mass movement. This approach

...reflected a deep and prior pre-disposition, socially and culturally as well as politically, towards labourism. Most of CND's leaders had been involved previously in labour pressure groups of varying types - usually in the peace or social fields - and they regarded the disarmament movement as been of the same genre.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>76</sup>Thompson, "Revolution Again," 21.

<sup>77</sup>Richard Taylor and Colin Pritchard, The Protest Makers: The British Nuclear Disarmament Movement of 1958-1965 Twenty Years On (London: Pergamon Press, 1980), 57.

The CND leadership believed that the problem was with one specific policy and this policy was not seen to manifest any structural deficiencies in the operation of the socio-political system.

Historians have attributed the spark igniting the mass protest movement to an article in The New Statesman written by J.B. Priestly.<sup>78</sup> Priestly argued that it was immoral for the government to anchor its defence policy to the hydrogen bomb. The dangers of annihilation, which the argument emphasized, struck a responsive chord and revealed the range of concern, for the first Aldermaston march on Easter weekend, 1958, attracted between 5,000 and 10,000 participants and received widespread and favourable coverage. One should mention the context that this concern was expressed in.

In April 1957 the minister of defence, Duncan Sandys, announced the end of national service and the re-orientation of British defence policy along the nuclear axis. Six months earlier Britain had shown, in the Suez crisis, a determination to defend her great power status. Given the failure of traditional 'gun-boat' diplomacy it was reasonable to believe that other means might be considered to secure the same ends. It was this perceived fear that shaped the protest movement.

The protest movement has been seen by some historians as introducing a different concept of political activity. This was a concept which offered a potential challenge to the right claimed by party politicians to act as the arbiters of political conflict:

...CND offered...opportunities for active participation and creative spontaneity not to be found in the highly structured politics of the Old Left...CND, with its tendency to direct action, signalled an end to both the passive acceptance of the top-down decision making and the compromising of moral principles for the sake of political expediency. With CND politics was no longer the preserve of specialists, but a field of activity open to all. The new politics of CND was not explicitly socialist; but as the campaign grew, its example of an intensely moral and active dissent became an inspiration for all...who were seeking to reverse

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<sup>78</sup>J.B. Priestly, "Britain and the Nuclear Bombs," New Statesman, 2 November, 1957.

the slide into moral and political apathy which had developed during the Cold War era.(my emphasis)<sup>79</sup>

CND, as a 'movement of political amateurs', stood in stark contrast to the professional and careerist politics characterizing the Labour Party pragmatist. Such conceptions of political activity were, in fact, seen to threaten well-established vested interests. "The politicians found that CND was a threat because it would not be contained by the mechanism of party...there was no formal membership." Rather, CND represented a "spontaneous national upsurge channeled outside the framework of labour politics, independent of party organization." <sup>80</sup>

The Labour Party signalled its concern with the publication of its policy paper, Disarmament and Nuclear War: The Next Step. "The central proposal of the document, aimed at stealing CND's thunder, was for the formation of a non-nuclear club."<sup>81</sup> Labour would accede to CND's demands for unilateralism, with the proviso that other nations, save the United States, followed suit. But for Labour to presume upon the foreign policy interests of other states was to pursue a 'will o' the wisp' and Hugh Gaitskell, the Party's leader, knew it. The paper was designed to distort the focus of the campaign. But it was not only the PLP that expressed concerns about extra-parliamentary tactics as a means to change government policy. For example, a leading figure on the Party's left, Ian Mikardo, insisted that:

...the only political force capable of effecting such a change was the Labour Party...The fact of the matter is that the battleground was the Labour Party. It was the only arena in which the campaign could ride.(emphasis in the original) <sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup>Holden, "The First New Left," 216-17.

<sup>80</sup>Young, An Infantile Disorder, 76. (my emphasis)

<sup>81</sup>Richard Taylor, Against the Bomb: The British Peace Movement, 1958-1965 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 290-91.

<sup>82</sup>Ian Mikardo, quoted in Taylor and Pritchard, The Protest Makers, 59.



It is true that at the Party's Annual Conference in 1960 a motion was carried in favour of unilateral nuclear disarmament, and against the express wishes of the PLP leadership. Thompson's enthusiastic response to this decision, however, tends to create the impression that this could be attributed exclusively to pressure from the protesters.<sup>83</sup> The consensus that emerges from those who have studied this question in detail suggests that unilateralism was carried because it received the support of a number of large trade unions which had traditionally supported the Party leadership. Certainly these unions reversed their position at the Annual Conference in 1961. The question that should be asked is why did unilateralism gain support in 1960 but lose it the following year. The probable answer is that the terms in which the disarmament issue were understood had changed as a result of a shift in government policy. Until the Spring of 1960 CND and the Labour left had focused their attack on the British Independent Nuclear Deterrent or BIND. The central plank of BIND was the Blue Streak project. It was this project that was seen to be a 'mistaken policy'. Britain's wider commitments within NATO were not questioned, which was hardly surprising since Atlee's first administration, 1945-50, had played a leading role in helping to create this organization. When the government abandoned the Blue Streak project in 1960, and when the implications of this sank in there appeared to be no good reason to support unilateralism.

The attitude towards disarmament displayed by CND and Labour was quite different to the one that the New Left expressed. The New Left's position was stated cogently by Stuart Hall:

...it is clear that CND cannot afford to base its case on a policy of 'clean hands for Britain alone.'...We must be careful to insist that Britain must unilaterally disarm not merely to salve her own conscience, not merely to cut the cost of defence to the taxpayer, but in order to use that renunciation as a political lever...The point would be that Britain...disencumbered of both bomb and alliance, would then be free to act as a rallying point outside both nuclear alliances...a focus for all those other nations, within and without both alliances which could be persuaded

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<sup>83</sup>Thompson, "Revolution Again," 29-32.



by the weight of international opinion to join in an offensive for disengagement and disarmament.(emphasis in the original)<sup>84</sup>

This statement insists that the disarmament movement had to be seen not as an end, but as a means to an end. For Thompson, this meant a path out of apathy towards socialism:

Should the protest movement in Britain gain sufficient strength to force our country out of NATO, consequences will follow in rapid succession. The Americans might reply with economic sanctions. Britain would be faced with the alternatives of compliance or of far-reaching re-orientation of trade. The dilemma would agitate the consciousness of the whole people, not as an abstract theory of revolution but as an actual and immediate political choice, debated in factories, offices and streets. People would become aware of the historic choice presented to our country, as they became aware during the Second World War. Ideological and political antagonisms would sharpen. Non-compliance with America would entail winning the active, informed support of the majority of the people for policies which might bring with them dislocation and hardship. One choice would disclose another, and with each decision a revolutionary conclusion might become more inescapable. Events themselves would disclose to people the possibility of the socialist alternative; and if events were seconded by agitation and initiatives of organized socialists in every area of life, the socialist revolution would be carried through.<sup>85</sup>

Like Morris, Thompson defended a conception of socialism as a grass roots activity. Socialism had to be built from the ground up, for it was only in the identification of specific grievances that people would come to realize the ways in which capitalist social relations frustrated their interests. People would also come to see, moreover, the ways in which they shared certain interests in common with others, despite the differences in their specific material situations, and the manner in which these interests were ultimately aligned against capitalist interests. Specific grievances could not be identified by theorists or political elites who had lost touch with reality. Rather, they had to be specified in relation to the actual configuration of social relations at the local level. This did not mean that the theorist had no role to play. Indeed, the role of socialist

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<sup>84</sup>Stuart Hall, NATO and the Alliances (London: CND pamphlet, 1960); quoted in Taylor, Against the Bomb, 55.

<sup>85</sup>Thompson, "Revolution," 306-7.

intellectual was considered by Thompson to be crucial for guiding and channeling political energies. But theory had to respond to changes in material experiences and not claim to offer an alternative to the demanding task of political struggle. Nor should the socialist limit grievances to wage demands alone:

The elaboration of a democratic revolutionary strategy, which draws into a common strand wage demands and ethical demands...demands research and discussion journals, books, Left Clubs. It demands organization for education and propaganda. It demands the exchange of ideas between specialists and those whose experience - in nationalized industry or local government - enables them to see more clearly than the theorist the limits of the old system, the growing points of the new.<sup>86</sup>

Again, Thompson's conception of socialism shared much in common with Morris'. Socialism was concerned not merely with organizing production, but with organizing social relationships as well. And social relationships involve questions of morality and power. A revolutionary socialist strategy would not obtain its goals unless the movement was an educated one, and recognized the extent to which its goals would only be realized if it was to engage in a contest for ethical and political change.

For Thompson, socialism's realization ultimately implied a strategy of political struggle. This strategy, however, was not worked out by Thompson. Instead, he appeared to rely upon CND to exert political leverage on the Labour Party.<sup>87</sup> It is true that at CND's annual conference in April 1960 a policy endorsing Britain's withdrawal from NATO was adopted. But this policy was never popular with CND's hierarchy and it had little influence on the PLP. Indeed, by late 1961 the Party had revoked its earlier decision to endorse unilateralism and was well on the way to becoming united under Harold Wilson's technologism. CND, moreover, was rapidly losing public support as some of its more extreme members - The Committee of 100 - engaged in various acts of 'civil

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<sup>86</sup>Ibid., 305-6

<sup>87</sup>E.P. Thompson, "A New Political Basis," Peace News, 6 October, 1961.



disobedience'.<sup>88</sup> At a minimum, the type of revolutionary strategy that Thompson had in mind would have required some degree of coherence on the New Left. I have already referred to the theoretical differences separating Thompson from other New Left thinkers. Although I did not have an opportunity to view Thompson's correspondence it is clear that these differences must have played some role in contributing to the demise of the first New Left and its political and theoretical reorganization under Perry Anderson's editorship of New Left Review in late 1962.

But it is equally clear that the political context itself was in the process of transforming itself into a form that was not conducive to Thompson's conception of socialism. With the rapid decline of CND after October 1961 and the reunification of the Labour Party it seemed as if objective referents upon which one might attach hope were disappearing from the world. Certainly after 1965 Thompson relapsed into a long period of political silence, and one which remained unbroken until 1973.

This chapter has focused upon the conditions which Thompson believed contributed to the all-pervasive sense of apathy in the 1950s, and those factors which offered a way out of apathy. Thompson's explanation of political apathy identified three inter-related sources. First, he indicted left-wing intellectuals for betraying the socialist ideals of the generation of 1930s. Their retrospective characterization of the communist initiative was presented in such a way as to convey the impression to the post-war generation that all revolutionary change had to be violent, 'mindless', and could only be maintained through periodic purges and bouts of blood-letting. This conception of socialism, which was reinforced by the BCP, played a crucial role in supporting the status quo: as long as the Soviet Union existed, Western societies could justify nuclear stock piling and portray

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<sup>88</sup>Taylor, Against the Bomb, 190-272; Taylor and Pritchard, The Protest Makers, 79-83; Michael Randle, "Non-violent direct action in the 1950s and 1960s," in Richard Taylor and Nigel Young, eds., Campaigns for Peace: British Peace Movements in the twentieth century (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987, 131-161.

all attempts to advance alternative social arrangements as subversive or 'utopian'. One should understand Thompson's insistence on portraying socialist initiatives in his histories as educated and concerned with promoting ethical and intellectual demands as a deliberate attempt to counter this conception of revolutionary socialist activity.

But intellectuals were not alone in fostering the conditions conducive to apathy. The British Labour Party's conception of socialism was seen by Thompson to engender reformism. The PLP and trade union hierarchies were staffed with time-servers, concerned with the preservation of their own interests within the wider society. For Thompson, a socialist strategy "[demanded]...a break with the parliamentary fetishism which supposes that all advance must wait upon legislative change."<sup>89</sup> The reason for this was that

[m]ost popular gains have been won, in the first place, by direct action...it is the greatest illusion of the ideology of apathy that politicians make the events. In fact, they customarily legislate to take account of events which have already occurred...the context will dictate to the politicians, and not the reverse. And socialists must make the context. (my emphasis)<sup>90</sup>

The context must be made from the ground up. People must actively desire change, and they will not be able to do so unless they perceive the way in which capitalism as a system does not, ultimately, promote their interests. Their interests may not be immediately apparent to them, and it is incumbent upon the socialist intellectual to assist them in understanding the way in which capitalism functions. A revolutionary movement must be educated if its political energies are not to be wasted. But the intellectual cannot assume that the experiences of working people are less authentic than his own. Nor can these experiences be reduced to a single - economic - criterion. In limiting the definition of socialism to economic categories, and in arrogating unto themselves the

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<sup>89</sup>Thompson, "Revolution," 306.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., 306-7.



responsibility of defining appropriate strategies, the elites of the social democratic and communist left were denying working people the right to participate in the making of their own history.

According to Thompson, people can be said to be acting as agents in the making of their own history once they begin to assert their own aspirations and engage in political struggle to secure their realization. The political and ideological context of the Cold War may have made this conception of socialism appear remote. But in the years after 1956, the ideology of apathy seemed to be fracturing at a number of points. For Thompson, these years promised more than they eventually delivered. But it was the promise that was important. It is with this promise in mind that he wrote his histories.

## Chapter 6

### Politicizing the Historical Narrative I: Themes

So far this work has raised the issue of the political and polemical function of Thompson's history. This chapter develops the theme at greater length. Thompson has expressed a concern to use history so as to demonstrate alternatives to the present. That is to say, while there may seem to be no possibility of change now, men have encountered similarly hostile environments in the past. But their actions have belied claims that they must passively accept the world as they find it. An important part of the context structuring The Making was an all-pervasive sense of contemporary apathy. In turning the historical account to the present, Thompson hoped to reveal the powers slumbering within men. History defined the terrain on which the ideological battles of the present could be waged and the possibilities of the future envisioned.

The Making of the English Working Class can be regarded as an exemplar of these claims, and this will be examined more thoroughly in the next chapter. This chapter can be regarded as a preface to that discussion for it elucidates Thompson's approach to history by way of considering several infrequently discussed articles.

#### I

In Thompson's view, the way in which working-class traditions have been presented justified the Labour Party's conception of its present organizational form. Historians of the labour movement, however, adopted certain techniques which resulted in the presentation of a partial view of the movement's development. They relied too heavily upon the methods of political and constitutional historians. Such methodology confined labour historians to the written records of

certain individuals lodged in national archives. Relying upon such limited types of institutional evidence had two adverse effects. First, it reinforced the contemporary view that legitimate political activity must be confined to institutional politics. The past is plundered for evidence to support the Labour Party's contention that improvements in working class life must be realized through a parliamentary medium. Moreover, these improvements are equated with material gains. Such gains are seen to have been obtained through the representatives of working people rather than through the conscious efforts of the working class itself.

Second, in depending upon the evidential reliability of records, whether official, biographical or autobiographical, the views and interests of the non-literate were subordinated to those of the literate. Moreover, there was a tendency to draw selectively from the documents of the 'representatives' of working people. This dual bias conveyed the impression that Labour's progress depended upon the efforts of a few talented national leaders; an emphasis which reinforced some of the dominant images in contemporary Britain.

Quite apart from the intellectual condescension built into this type of historiography, Thompson noted the geographical preference for London sources:

Provincial leaders are commonly denied full historical citizenship; if mentioned at all they are generally credited with various worthy second class abilities but rarely regarded as men with their own problems, their own capacity for initiative, and on occasion a particular genius without which national programmes and new political philosophies can never be wedded to movements of men.<sup>1</sup>

Historians who ignored the role of local activists advanced explanations which had a sense of the improbable. A national leader's ideas were somehow attached to the mass movement at the base. Any ideas expressing social relations and conditions at the local level - conditions which

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<sup>1</sup>Thompson, "Maguire," 277.



national leaders were likely to be unaware of <sup>2</sup> - were ignored. Thus, the relationship between the national and provincial levels appeared as one of spontaneous outbursts in the localities which were directed by far-seeing national leaders. Such outbursts, moreover, were often related to economic grievances. The national leaders did the thinking; those in the provinces were assumed to be incapable of purposive thought and merely followed instructions from on high.

The character of Thompson's critique of this approach to labour history was well expressed in the following observation:

The customary national picture of the West Riding breakthrough attributes the emergence of the ILP to one event - the great strike at Manningham Mills, Bradford. Pressed forward blindly by economic hardship and the effect of President McKinley's tariffs, the good-hearted non-conformist Yorkshire weavers turned instinctively to...Keir Hardie. But this will not do at all. It does not explain why a strike at one firm could have become the focus of discontent for the whole Riding. It does not explain the nature of this discontent. It does not explain why the Yorkshire ILP was so deeply rooted, so stubborn in the face of Liberal blandishments, so competently led. It passes over incidents of equal importance to the Manningham strike. It implies an appalling attitude of condescension to those provincial folk who are credited with every virtue except the capital human virtue of conscious human action in a conscious historical role. (my emphasis)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Thompson, William Morris (1955), part III, passim.

<sup>3</sup>Thompson, "Maguire," 278-79.



In traditional accounts, the I(ndependent) L(about) P(arty) emerged when it did for reasons of economic discontent and was inspired by the commendable bourgeois virtue of self-improvement.<sup>4</sup> For Thompson, the problem with this type of explanation lay not only in its reductionist tendencies. Difficulties also arise from its exclusion from consideration of the broader temporal and material context; considerations which must be included in any historical explanation if it is to make sense of the reasons moving people to action. In examining the actual context which gave the ILP its particular colouration, Thompson argued that:

...the two-party system cracked in Yorkshire because a very large number of Yorkshire men and women took a conscious decision to form a socialist party. The fertilization of the masses with socialist ideas was not spontaneous but was the result of the work, over many years, of a group of exceptionally gifted propagandists and trade unionists. This work...required...tenacity and foresight, qualities of mass leadership and the rare ability to relate theory to practice without losing sight of the theory in the press of events. (my emphasis)<sup>5</sup>

The immediate object of Thompson's criticism was an institutional and hierarchical view of Labour politics. More generally, it can be said that Thompson was directing his polemic at the ideological assumptions of the two main Cold War ideologies. Adjectives such as 'blindly', 'spontaneously', and 'instinctively' connote antithetical meanings to those contained in the concept of creative agency. Thompson's point was that socialism could not be equated with the desire to remove economic distress alone, and it cannot be seen as the product of irrational behaviour. Rather, socialism had to be seen as requiring constant intellectual and moral effort as well as practical activity. Both the theory and the action must serve the needs and interests of those who

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<sup>4</sup>By traditional accounts, I have in mind the approach to labour history characteristically adopted prior to The Making. That is to say, those emphasizing the institutional development of the movement without considering the broader socio-cultural context that these institutions were shaped in. Representative examples of this historiographical tendency might include: G.D.H. Cole and Raymond Postgate, The Common People, 1746-1938 (London: Methuen, 1938); Henry Pelling, The Origins of the Labour Party, 1880-1900 (London: MacMillan, 1954).

<sup>5</sup>Thompson, "Maguire," 279.

do not benefit from existing social arrangements. These arrangements must be assessed from their perspective. The assessment cannot be imposed by intellectual and political elites claiming to know the needs and interests of working people better than they know them themselves.

Thompson went to some lengths to stress the extent to which ideas had to be developed within the context of local communities if they were to move working people to political action: "In such communities," characterized by a dense network of personal and social relations, and geographically isolated, "an alien agitator from outside would make little headway, but once local leaders moved, the whole community might follow."<sup>6</sup>

Until the 1880s, however, there were few demands for political changes. Rather, the political mood of the West Riding was one of complacent self-congratulation for the achievements of mid-Victorian prosperity and resounding applause for the Liberal Party's role in bringing these to pass. When working people started to press their claims in the 1880s it was through the medium of organizational forms which they had largely developed on their own initiative to meet local needs:

In one sense the ILP gave political expression to various forms of independent and semi-independent working class organizations which had been built and consolidated in the West Riding over the previous thirty years - co-operatives, trade unions, friendly societies, various forms of chapel or educational or economic 'self-help'...the trade unions were the weakest.<sup>7</sup>

It is true that trades' councils were an established feature of the West Riding's political landscape by the 1870s. It is also true that these bodies were to play an important role in the subsequent development of the Labour Party. But their significance in shaping the development of the ILP in the West Riding has, Thompson suggested, been overplayed. By the latter part of the

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 280.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.



century trades' councils had become institutions representing the interests of skilled craftsmen. As such, they had gone over to Lib-Labism. These councils said little for the unskilled and those who had not been granted political citizenship in 1867. In fact, the trades' councils were seen by Thompson to have acted as a definite impediment to the ILP's development.

According to Thompson, then, historians had missed important developments. They had done so because they viewed the past through the ideological presuppositions of the present. The latter assumed that people act only for economic reasons. Historical explanations had, therefore, to be couched in these terms. Hence, the emphasis on the role of trade unions in historical accounts of the Labour Party's evolution. This type of explanation, moreover, assumed that material interests were homogeneous. This assumption was false:

The West Riding woolen trade provides a notoriously difficult field for generalization, owing to its manifold sub-divisions, local variants and specialized markets. While American tariffs might create chaos in the fine worsted industry, they would leave Batley, the new 'shoddyopolis', unaffected.<sup>8</sup>

Material interests simply were not uniform. The working class, despite the claims of both the Old Left and the New Left, can be shown to have been internally differentiated. Moreover, these interests changed over time. As a result, the types of demands which people made also changed. As early as the 1870s there had been an increased demand for a variety of West Riding textile products. This demand had been met with the construction of new mills, which, in turn, engendered expectations of increased profits and wages. By the mid 1880s these expectations were being frustrated by the pressure of mounting foreign competition; although many employers had begun to respond to such threats by the late 1870s. The McKinley tariffs were not introduced until 1890. By then, working people had experienced more than a decade of increasingly exploitative work relations. According to the Old Left's explanatory framework one should have expected a

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<sup>8</sup>Thompson, "Maguire," 283.

spontaneous outburst of socialist discontent a good deal earlier than it actually occurred with New Unionism in the late 1880s. To explain the latter, the historian must consider the presence of certain variables:

It was the enormous publicity provided by The Yorkshire Factory Times, founded in 1889, of the successful struggles of the unskilled workers in London and (above all) in Leeds, of the indefatigable activity of socialist and new unionist propaganda which provided the catalyst for the movement in 1890-93. (my emphasis)<sup>9</sup>

Necessity might have been a spur to action, but it did not itself determine the forms which political action took. This activity depended upon whether or not people were prepared to act and such a decision was itself dependent upon the extent to which the ideas which were been presented to them made sense of their experience.

It was Thompson's claim that the appearance of the ILP signalled a potential rupture in the ideological fabric of late Victorian Britain. He based this conclusion on the extent to which class experiences were expressive of material interests that were ultimately grounded in different conceptions of social organization. These conceptions can be elicited from the typical pattern of middle class and working class organizational forms. The former expressed the values of competitive individualism; the latter those of co-operation. The emphasis here should be placed upon the word potential; to make the potential actual required sustained propaganda aimed at making working people aware of the distinctive character of their interests and the manner in which capitalist social relations frustrated these. Indeed the ILP would probably not have emerged had it not been for the efforts of local socialists who were:

...virtually detached from London and thrown on their own resources...But their own resources were not slender. The years of seemingly fruitless propaganda, when the joint forces of Leeds and Bradford socialist had tramped like a group of youth hostellers, spreading 'the gospel' in villages and singing Morris' songs in country lanes had not been wasted. Maguire and Jowett, in their very early twenties, both showed astonishing maturity,

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 285.



they had acquired a fund of experience, a clear theory of politics and a self confidence and elan which prepared them for those vintage years when (in Ben Turner's words) "it was not a labour of love, but a labour of joy, for the workers seemed awake."<sup>10</sup>

Despite their numerical minority these early socialists believed that they would succeed; they had faith in the potential of working people and were prepared to work tirelessly to cultivate it. The consciousness which did eventually manifest itself in political organizations was not, therefore, something that was generated spontaneously but had to be created by ceaseless efforts.

A similar line of reasoning characterized Thompson's interpretation of other historical phenomena. Thus, Chartism, was often presented as a simple bread and butter issue and one which could be correlated with fluctuations in the trade cycle. This interpretation was resisted by Thompson: "...while the movement was fuelled by economic grievances, the form and direction of the movement was directed by political and cultural influences."<sup>11</sup> This does not mean, as many commentators on Thompson's work seem to think it means, that these influences were divorced from material reality. On the contrary, the cultural and political traditions which working people drew upon had very real material referents in the context of their experience. They responded, in terms of that experience, to changes in their material lives and it is these responses and not some idealized characterization of them which are important. Moreover:

...this consciousness - and its appropriate forms of organization - was made, not 'generated'; and it is only necessary to glance at The Northern Star to see that it was the constant day to day work of the chartist leader and organizer to weld together the most disparate elements - weaver and factory worker, artisan and Irish - and to discount divisive sectional interest in the common interest of class. Moreover, material factors did not dictate that Chartist consciousness must be such - the conditions might equally well have facilitated other class alignments, and partial suffragists, educational and temperance reformers, and the Anti-Corn Law Leaguers were constantly seeking to detach sections of the workers from

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 298-99.

<sup>11</sup>Thompson, "Revolution Again," 25.

Chartism and attach them to the radical free trading middle class.  
(emphasis in the original)<sup>12</sup>

Chartism could not have become a viable political force had it not been for the efforts of a conscious and diligent minority attempting to specify common class interests as and against those of the middle class. Chartism, it is true, failed to realise its objectives. Thompson attributed the failure to structural changes within the organizational composition of the working class - the material conditions and cultural influences sustaining the movement had largely been overtaken by the late 1840s.

Although the claims which the Chartists advanced were taken up later in the century by the ILP one cannot trace an uncomplicated lineal descent between the two movements. In form, the ILP may have been animated by similar co-operative ideals. In substance, however, its claims were quite different and reflected different interests and social relations. Both advanced ideas that were potentially revolutionary, but the form that this revolutionary course might have followed would have been quite different.<sup>13</sup> But in both cases the important point to be made is that when a historian eschews presentist assumptions and inquires into the actual motives informing action he can observe the efforts of men attempting to assert their aspirations.

Thompson, therefore, can be said to have marshalled historical arguments in order to wage political battles in the present. In contrast to the view advanced across the ideological spectrum during the era of the Cold War, that men cannot alter the present in any significant respect, Thompson presented history in a way that insisted on the possibility of man's agency.

If one saw in man's past only the evidence of victimhood then one was justified in being pessimistic as to his future. But this pessimism was really no more than the product of a

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>See the discussion of Thompson's understanding of class as a historical relationship in the Introduction above. In addition to the references cited there note Thompson, "Peculiarities," 295.



particular historical moment. In recognizing this transience, and in seeing in the past the record of man's conscious struggles and achievements, one can conceive of a more optimistic vision for his future.

History was important to Thompson because he believed that it allowed men to draw inspiration from previous struggles and to make them aware of the powers slumbering within them in the present. Men were not likely to be moved in the absence of hope; presenting history in an activist rather than a quietist idiom was, in Thompson's view, likely to encourage this hope.

## II

If Thompson wanted to bring hope to the present by according dignity to the struggles of the past, then he had not only to overcome the profound hostility of the Cold War mentality to all forms of utopian thought, but he had also to query many of the assumptions about the working class informing the non-Marxist left. The previous chapter noted ULR's tendency to view working people as the passive victims of the mass media. While the working class was seen to be essential to the task of creating a socialist society, it was the intellectuals who would define the scope and character of socialism. This section will pursue some of the themes developed in chapter 6 by way of a review of some of the arguments developed in Raymond Williams' early work.<sup>14</sup>

According to Thompson, Williams was the single most important influence on the development of the non-Marxist New Left in the late 1950s.<sup>15</sup> Like Thompson, Williams concerned

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<sup>14</sup>Raymond Williams, Culture and Society 1780-1950. Raymond Williams, The Long Revolution (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961; reprint, London: Pelican Books, 1984), (Page references are to reprint edition).

<sup>15</sup>"...[Williams'] work is very important indeed, and that - so far as we can speak of a New Left - he is our best man." E.P. Thompson, "The Long Revolution 1," New Left Review, no.9, May-June 1961, 24.

himself with an evaluation of the Romantic tradition and its contemporary relevance. But while Thompson, through the medium of his assessment of Morris, was in the process of re-working Marxism, Williams abandoned the Marxist heuristic and replaced it with a communications model.<sup>16</sup> And while Thompson insisted upon the centrality of working class agency to any socialist strategy, Williams' work gave prominence to the agency of intellectuals.

In Culture and Society Williams examined the responses of a number of intellectuals to social, political and economic changes in England since the late eighteenth century. He argued that a distinctive concept of culture began to take shape in their work and that this understanding now decisively influenced the way in which we think about social relationships. Until the Industrial Revolution the word culture referred to a process of training. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, it was acquiring associations with the products of art and learning; that is, culture was becoming synonymous with intellectual practice. Moreover, it was also coming to possess an evaluative component, so that by the middle of the century 'culture' meant a distinctive "body of moral and intellectual activities" which offered themselves as "an absolute" and "a court of human appeal", adjudicating on what counted as an acceptable "way of life."<sup>17</sup> 'Culture' supplied the criteria by which to evaluate and criticize existing social relations. Typically, anything tainted with commercialism was held in disdain.

These two meanings - 'culture' as intellectual practice and 'culture' as a way of life - had significant political implications. In the sense of culture as the product of intellectual endeavour, Williams identified pernicious class overtones. Since most art and learning are produced

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<sup>16</sup>One should also note Raymond Williams, Communications (London: Penguin Books, 1963). This text summarized, in a more accessible form for the general reader, the theory that he was working towards in Culture and Society and The Long Revolution.

<sup>17</sup>Williams, Culture and Society, 17, 18.



by an educated elite, the working class can be said to have contributed little to the development of culture. In Williams' view this

classification is both false and dangerous. It is dangerous because it allows the bourgeoisie to claim as its pride and product a great cultural tradition which it can then easily contrast with the meagreness of what we offer as working class culture. Many people have been misled, politically, by the consequences of this. Their social allegiances and judgements have been over-ridden, often, by this feeling, that what they value in art and learning, has in some ways to be set against the claims of the working class movement. The opposition is...unnecessary because there is...no simple equation between the dominance of an economic class and the production of art and literature...In the nineteenth-century mainstream, for example, there is a great deal of conscious opposition to the bourgeoisie and its ideas...the mainstream was, in varying degrees, liberating and humane, in ways that the bourgeoisie, as an economic class, could not possibly be.<sup>18</sup>

If, however, one considered the term culture as a way of life, then it was possible to specify a significant contribution from working people:

The major cultural contribution of the working class in this country has been the collective democratic institution formed to achieve a general social benefit. It is true that the liberalizing middle class is capable of setting up institutions which function democratically within themselves, but it is always a characteristic of these institutions that they are ultimately exclusive: they cannot of themselves be extended to cover society as a whole...[Although]...many working-class organizations...begin as interest groups of a similar kind...the characteristic of these is their further association...to the point where they cover or seek to cover the interests of the whole society. The growth of the labour movement as a whole is a primary instance.<sup>19</sup>

It was in the first sense, however, that the term culture was often understood. Since working people have contributed little to the development of culture in this sense they tend to be viewed with condescension. Hence, the literary diversions which entertain them can be dismissed as the products of a mass culture which threaten, in their crudity, the aesthetic products of a rich

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<sup>18</sup>Raymond Williams, "Working Class Culture," Universities and Left Review, no.2, Summer 1957, 29.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 31.

tradition. According to Williams, culture as an intellectual practice tended to a form of elitism and social domination:

The institutions of education and communication were created for and not by the working class, with the intention of moulding public opinion in the ideas of the dominant social images - the eternal nature of the social hierarchy, the organized market, the natural distinction between the expert elite and the ignorant many. In this way dignity was stripped away from the working class, who absorbed the inferior status accorded to them by the dominative culture.<sup>20</sup>

This 'dominative culture' established prejudiced perceptions of working people: they were regarded not as individuals, but as part of the masses. This was a perception that Williams' work was concerned to resist:

There are, in fact, no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses...What we see, neutrally, is other people, many others, people unknown to us. In practice, we mass them, and interpret them, according to some convenient formula. Within its terms the formula will hold. Yet it is the formula, not the mass, which it is our real business to examine.<sup>21</sup>

This formula was seen by Williams to be structured with the intentions of the governing groups in mind:

The formula...will proceed from our intentions. If our purpose is art, education, the giving of information or opinion, our interpretation will be in terms of the rational and interested being. If, on the other hand, our purpose is manipulation - the persuasion of a large number of people to act, think, feel, know, in certain ways - the convenient formula will be that of the masses.<sup>22</sup>

If, however, one accepted the term culture in its second sense, then the positives which inhere within working class organizational forms - democratic and cooperative values which encourage respect for men as men and not in terms of external criteria - could be seen to

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<sup>20</sup>Williams, "Working Class Culture," 30.

<sup>21</sup>Williams, Culture and Society, 289.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 292.

contribute powerfully to the development of a 'common culture.' In such a world, the ideals of equality of being and self respect become a reality. It would not, however, be possible to move towards an alternative way of life unless we cease to view people in terms defined by culture in the first sense. Until perceptions change, the majority will remain a mass, constituted of mediocrity and with little to contribute to the social well-being. Stated baldly, it was necessary to change the way in which working people in particular and social relations in general were perceived. In Williams' view, existing perceptions stem from the character of the messages communicated in the media. Therefore, change must commence by altering these messages.

Williams pursued his analysis of culture in The Long Revolution. This text traced the development of a democratic, an industrial, and a cultural revolution since the eighteenth century. The democratic revolution normally refers to political changes, but Williams invested the term with a wider set of meanings. He argued that there had been a general reaction against older patterns of authoritarian social relationships. This reaction had been coupled with a "rising determination...that people should govern themselves, and make their own decisions, without concessions of this right to any particular group, nationality or class." <sup>23</sup>

The Industrial Revolution contributed significantly to shaping the pattern of social relationships. Although Williams identified a connection between the 'patterns' of 'decision making' and 'maintenance', the terms he employed for the democratic and industrial revolutions respectively, he argued that the relationship was a complex one, containing many contradictory elements. Rather than conceiving of these patterns or elements as distinctive and autonomous, as was characteristic of bourgeois thinking, or that of orthodox Marxism, these elements had to be seen both in their individual development and in their mutual interactions. Society could only be understood if it was apprehended as a complex totality:

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<sup>23</sup>Williams, The Long Revolution, 10.



...it seems clear that industrial development is a powerful incentive to new forms of democratic organization...[however] the apparent needs of industrial development, at many levels, from the process of accumulating capital to the status of the worker in a very extensive and divided technical system, sometimes delay, sometimes frustrate the aspiration to share in the making of decisions. The complex interactions between the democratic and industrial revolutions is at the centre of our most difficult social thinking.<sup>24</sup>

This interaction was, in Williams' view, a stumbling block to meaningful social change. Thus, at the time of the publication The Long Revolution, while the British people had just experienced a decade in which 'they'd never had it so good', the country's economic prospects did not look at all rosy. Williams argued that it would make sense to consider long-range planning. However, the likelihood of plans been given the attention they merited appeared to be remote because of

...the deep revulsion against general planning ...and this revulsion is itself in part a consequence of one aspect of the democratic revolution - the determination not to be regimented.<sup>25</sup>

But this revulsion could also be attributed to the way in which capitalist society encouraged people to relate to the economic process as individual consumers:

If we were not consumers, but users, we might look at society very differently, for the concept of use involves general human judgements - we need to know how to use things and what we are using them for and also the effects of particular uses on our general life - whereas consumption, with its crude hand-to-mouth patterns, tends to conceal these questions, replacing them by the stimulated and controlled absorption of the products of an external and autonomous system.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 321.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 323.



Capitalist society was 'marketed' in such a way as to suggest that it existed merely to facilitate the individual's immediate gratifications. Williams regarded this conception of the relationship between the individual and society as a false one because:

...there are many things of major importance that we do not use or consume individually, in the ordinary sense, but socially. It is a poor way of life in which we cannot think of social use as one criterion of economic activity...<sup>27</sup>

The cultural revolution was responsible for extending literacy and other forms of communication media to an ever-increasing audience. This revolution must also be assessed in its own right and in terms of the reciprocal relationships between it and the other two revolutions. For example, new techniques of production facilitated the extension of various media, while the aspiration to exercise control over one's life, reflected in the growth of democracy, resulted in the exertion of various pressures demanding the extension of such media. But the manner in which culture itself was thought about also played a role in structuring conceptions about democratic and industrial organization. Thus, when considered as an intellectual practice culture can be contrasted with the products of a mass culture, readily found wanting, where the 'masses' are held to be incapable of exercising rational control over their lives. Logically, therefore, the 'masses' required guidance in both the industrial and political spheres. Culture, thus defined, can become a justification for the maintenance of authoritarian social relations despite the apparent evidence derived from the record of the democratic revolution. In short, Williams believed that these revolutions represented ideals which have yet to be fulfilled.

The historical and contemporary interaction between the systems of decision-making, maintenance and communications was, Williams argued, of profound importance because:

Our whole way of life, from the shape of our communities to the organization and content of education, and from the structure of the family, to the status of art and entertainment, is being profoundly affected

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 324.

by the progress and interaction of democracy and industry, and by extension of communications.<sup>28</sup>

The particular interaction of these elements changed over time and "shape[d] the meanings and values which are lived in works and relationships."<sup>29</sup> This interaction was seen to determine the way in which people characteristically interpret the world and the manner in which experiences are recorded. Or, in his terminology, the particular interaction at any one time determined "the structure of feelings" prevailing in a given society.<sup>30</sup> Williams illustrated the operation of such structures through seven case studies in the second part of the book. The conclusions arrived at there were then brought to bear upon an analysis of 'Britain in the 1960s.'

The central argument in the final part of The Long Revolution amounts to a defence of the idea of a 'common culture' outlined in Culture and Society.<sup>31</sup> The characteristics of this common culture were well summarized by one of Williams' early reviewers:

The culture of a community of equals in which men and women are either valued as real individuals or, where that kind of closeness is impossible, by a common general respect. In such a community work and art would each have a new meaning. Men would be men and not 'economic men' or 'aesthetic men'. Learning would be the most valuable real resource of society and education would become 'something which we should have to produce a special argument to limit rather than a special argument to extend.' Democracy would be the process of arriving at common decisions and going on to implement them.<sup>32</sup>

The conclusions arrived at there were then brought to bear upon an analysis of 'Britain in the 1960s.'

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 12.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 319.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid, 64ff.

<sup>31</sup>Williams, Culture and Society, 304-23.

<sup>32</sup>Asa Briggs, "Creative Definitions," New Statesman, 10 March 1961, 386.

## III

The publication of The Long Revolution prompted an extensive and critical, albeit a sympathetic, review from Thompson.<sup>33</sup> Thompson's criticisms, however, were not directed exclusively at Williams: his strictures were also addressed to ULR.

In Thompson's opinion The Long Revolution constituted little more than a number of definitions which had been wrested out of the generative context illuminating their original meanings. Moreover, Williams relied uncritically upon the work of bourgeois intellectuals who criticized the economic attitudes of their class, but who remained firmly within the orbit of that class's ideological assumptions. The critiques of industrial capitalism, which began to emerge with

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<sup>33</sup>E.P. Thompson, "The Long Revolution 1," New Left Review, no.9, May-June 1961, 24-33; and "The Long Revolution 2," New Left Review, no.10, July-August 1961, 34-39 (page 35 was inadvertently omitted and included in New Left Review, no.11, September-October 1961; references to this page are cited as 34a).

Burke in the late eighteenth century, were essentially negative in the sense that they were principally concerned with the effects of socio-economic changes upon the intellectual's position in society; aesthetic values were been reduced to a 'cash-nexus'.<sup>34</sup> Williams' claim that it was possible to trace a tradition of social criticism which might be drawn upon and merged with the democratic impulses behind the working-class tradition was, Thompson averred, in need of qualification in two distinctive ways. First, the alleged tradition was hardly a coherent one. For example,

...[Carlyle] was essentially a negative critic. In his political conclusions he was not only reactionary, but actively malignant -jeering at the Chartist leader, Ernest Jones, in prison - letting fall his denunciations on the heads of Owenites, Chartists and industrialists alike.<sup>35</sup>

In other words, the inadequacy of Williams' use of the term 'revolution' lay in the fact that:

If there is a revolution going on then it is fair to suppose that there is a revolution against something (classes, institutions, people and ideas) as well as for something.(emphasis in the original)<sup>36</sup>

It was not only necessary to inquire into the things which intellectuals criticized. It was also important to ask of the values they favoured. As Thompson's biography of Morris made clear, there were very few intellectuals in the nineteenth century who actually supported the aspirations of working people. This was because intellectuals generally failed to recognise anything worthwhile in working class life. The exception was, in fact, Morris. This fact alone, in Thompson's view, raised serious doubts as to the validity of Williams' claim for the existence of a coherent tradition of social criticism.

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<sup>34</sup>The phrase is Thomas Carlyle's. See the discussion in chapter 2 above.

<sup>35</sup>Thompson, William Morris (1955), 60.

<sup>36</sup>Thompson, "The Long Revolution 1," 25.



The second problem with Williams' understanding of the sources feeding into a common culture stemmed from his somewhat abstract approach to the working class. He actually said very little about working people's ideas. This was probably because of his own self-imposed prohibitions to viewing 'culture' too exclusively in terms of intellectual practice. This prohibition, Thompson argued, minimized the importance of ideas and diverted one's attention to the institutional expressions of working class life. As a result, analyses of this 'way of life' ignored the reasons which working people had for bringing certain organizational forms into existence. Thus, Williams correlated increasing levels of literacy with a heightening interest in political democracy. While it was possibly true that an increasing demand for political literature reflected an increasing level of political consciousness, the aims which that consciousness expressed may have been quite other than those which the dominant social groups conceived to have been the end of political activity. Rather than 'reading publics' being homogenous, as Williams' argument implied, they must, on the contrary, be seen as internally differentiated:

...there have always been a number of reading publics differentiated not only according to educational and social levels, but, crucially, in their manner of production and distribution of the product and of the relations between the writer and his audience.<sup>37</sup>

While intellectuals and working people may have indicted capitalism they did so for different reasons: "as the common people took over the tradition, they brought to it a different experience and asked different questions."<sup>38</sup> Williams' reliance upon literary evidence excluded traditions which were not normally expressed in terms of a literary culture. Conversely, if Williams' definition of the way in which working people have contributed to the stock of ideas leading to a common culture was accepted, then those contributions which were the products of intellectual

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>38</sup>Thompson, "The Long Revolution 2," 34a.

practice must be omitted from consideration. This, in turn, reinforced Cold War assumptions which denied the relationship between ideas and political practice other than in terms sanctioned by the status quo. To project alternative images to the status quo was seen to be utopian, and utopianism was derided by social democrat and communist alike. Although working people may have a different view of existing social relationships, their ideas are denied credence by the dominant ideologies. In refusing to examine the ideas which informed working-class organizations, Raymond Williams was unintentionally contributing to the constraints imposed by the Cold War ideologues upon the possibility of realising alternative social visions.

Williams' definitions of culture, therefore, had the effect of denying the importance of conscious and creative efforts exhibited by working people in the past. They were presented as if they did not play an active role in history. Rather, they appeared as the victims of forces beyond their control, while the abstract 'structures of feeling' assumed the role of vectors of change. The following illustrates Thompson's argument in this respect:

It seems obvious that industrial democracy is deeply related to questions of ownership; the argument against the political vote was always that the new people voting, 'the masses', had no stake in the country. The development of new forms of ownership, then, seemed an essential part of any democratic advance; although, in fact, the political suffrage broke ahead.<sup>39</sup>

This statement demonstrates Williams' method of conceiving of society as a totality constituted of several inter-related elements, none of which is assigned causal priority in the process of change. After quoting this statement Thompson asked: "whose argument against the political vote? To whom did the question of ownership seem bound up with that of political democracy?"<sup>40</sup> Certainly not to all working people. This was a bourgeois criterion and one which most working

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<sup>39</sup>Williams, The Long Revolution, quoted in Thompson, "The Long Revolution 1," 26.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

people did not subscribe to because it had little meaning to the property-less. In stating the historical record as he does, Williams aligns himself too closely with the middle class intellectual:

If he had said that "the political suffrage was won," it would have implied the questions by whom and against whom...nor do I think this to be a quibble. Behind the words 'broke' and 'won' one might detect two very different statements about history: "history happened like that" and "men have made history in this way."<sup>41</sup>

Another example of William's tendency to gloss over the nature of conflicting interests can be seen from his discussion of the nineteenth century press:

While the struggle to establish an alternative popular press is mentioned, it is done so as an annex apart from the main narrative - it is not seen as a continuing part of the same story, where power, the pursuit of profit and democracy interlock...the...narrative passes by all those points at which power intervened or at which choices were involved which might have led to a different outcome. We are left with an impression of a great 'expansion' and of a concentration of ownership. And if this was the story then it had to be so. This must lead on - as it does in the final section of the book - to the conclusion that if there is to be a remedy then it must come through far-reaching administrative measures which will ensure a newly independent press. But I hold this to be utopian. We shall never develop an opinion strong enough in this country to force such measures, which oppose at a critical point, the interests of the capitalist class, unless we are strong enough to found an independent socialist press which can voice and organize this opinion.<sup>42</sup>

Williams, and many of those writing for ULR, seemed to assume that the path to socialism lay largely in changing the type of messages communicated through the media. This claim, however, ignored the material interests which such messages were designed to promote:

...there is not one history of journalism in this country, but two. In the capitalist history, there are 101 pressures tending to conformity and accommodation with the status quo. These range from government or editorial censorship, the influence of advertisers, proprietors and sales charts, to the individual journalists' desire for reward in coin, influence or prestige. The freedom and independence of capitalist journalism (including much intellectual, and even academic journalism) co-exists uneasily with, and is generally negated by, the prevailing unfreedom of the

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

commercial ethos; not only sales values and pressures, but news values, editorial values and class proprieties.

On the other side of the watershed, all the trends run the other way. Socialist journalism is unpaid or underpaid, advertizing revenue is withheld, distributors and wholesalers are reluctant or even hostile, capital is not available or is available on terms which are unacceptable. The publication and distribution of a socialist journal is, in itself, a socialist action which runs athwart the normal drives of capitalist society. For its very existence it must depend upon the voluntary, cooperative ethos of socialism. (emphasis in the original)<sup>43</sup>

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An interesting historical example of what Thompson meant when he argued that socialism could not be talked into being by rational argument can be seen from his study of Henry Mayhew's work.<sup>44</sup> Mayhew's principal work, London Labour and the London Poor, originated as a series of inquiries into the 'labouring classes.' It was commissioned by The Morning Chronicle between October 1849 and December 1850. The inquiry was prompted by a short-lived effusion of middle class guilt; pangs of conscience relieved at the fact that, unlike their European contemporaries, they had escaped relatively unscathed from the revolutions of 1848. The bourgeoisie were, moreover, concerned about the most recent, and as it transpired, final, visitation of cholera on a relatively large scale. The Morning Chronicle wanted to investigate the causes both of plebian discontent and the plague and, on the basis of the results, to propose ameliorative solutions. As it turned out, its solutions would be couched within the language of orthodox political economy. This policy was to lead to a parting of the ways between Mayhew and the paper because his inquiries led

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<sup>43</sup>Thompson, "At the Point of Production," 68-69.

<sup>44</sup>E.P. Thompson, "Mayhew and the Morning Chronicle," in E.P. Thompson and Eileen Yeo, The Unknown Mayhew (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 11-50. E.P. Thompson, "The Political Education of Henry Mayhew," Victorian Studies, vol.11, September 1967, 41-62.



him to question the validity of these claims. The process by which Mayhew was to arrive at this position was taken by Thompson to constitute "The Political Education of Henry Mayhew."

To a certain extent Mayhew might have been predisposed to treat the experiences of the poor as authentic because he had originally:

...entered journalism in the 1830s...when it was still a profession dominated by all varieties of popular radicalism. The profession looked back to the years immediately after the wars when William Hone and George Cruickshank had established a new style of savage satire. The humourist and the earnest radical reformer shared the same world ...After 1832 the ways were clearly dividing. One way led to political Owenism and Chartism, the other to Punch; and although journalists of both tendencies could find common cause in hostility to orthodox political economy and to the dogmas of the Poor Law Commissioners, they came to these positions from different premises.<sup>45</sup>

Radicals, in other words, might have shared common enemies - hostility to bourgeois values, aristocratic fecklessness and clerical parasitism - but they did not all press the same claims, and they did not do so because they represented different constituents with different experiences:

Some part of the radicalism of the Punch circle was, like some parts of the radicalism of the 1960s, more a matter of gesture and of style than of practice. And, as in the 1960s, satire became a means of disguising a general ambivalence of political and social stance.<sup>46</sup>

In the 1830s and the 1840s Mayhew was either unwilling or unable to transgress the limits of political posturing prescribed by Punch's self-imposed mandate. How did Mayhew advance beyond irreverence to a point where he came to sympathize with the experiences of those he encountered in his investigations? The answer was that the facts that he encountered through empirical investigation did not square with the assumptions of Victorian economic thinking. Moreover, he came to reject the types of solutions advanced by politicians, economists and the middle class because they evaded the real sources of poverty in order to preserve their material

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<sup>45</sup>Thompson, "Political Education," 42.

<sup>46</sup>Thompson, "Morning Chronicle," 16.

interests. Indeed, he moved in the direction of advancing an alternative political economy. Once he commenced to propose solutions which were at odds with bourgeois conventions he found himself out of a job:

[Mayhew's earliest investigations] documented with case after case, the fact that thousands of girls in the outwork dress-making and clothing trades earned piece-rates so low that, as a matter of course, they supplemented these by occasional prostitution.<sup>47</sup>

To the Victorian middle class, prostitution was a cardinal sin, a vice expressive of the moral licentiousness of the poor. Although Mayhew was critical of prostitution, his invective was not reserved for the poor, whom he regarded as victims:

He developed the technique of juxtaposing large general statistics...and actual individual case histories. He preceded his documentation of prostitution with the tables of the military allowances for the purchasing of clothing, details of the involvement of the military and civil contractors, or of Regent Street tailoring shops which drew the patronage of aristocracy, clergy and professors of political economy.<sup>48</sup>

Mayhew discovered that there were 500,000 females in these trades in excess of demand. This figure, according to Lord Ashley, one of The Morning Chronicle's proprietors, might have been providential for the colonies were in need of exactly this number of women:

The important, often stressed, point, was that philanthropy and political economy were in equation: the slopworkers were poor because they were in excess of demand. And with the thought that they might soon leave these shores, the half-open shutters of the middle class conscience could again begin to close.<sup>49</sup>

The Morning Chronicle started a subscription list, headed by the Queen and Prince Albert, to raise money for the purpose of paying the costs of transportation. Not every one agreed that this was in the best interests of the country, though. For example, The Economist, with The

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 47.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 48.



Morning Chronicle's circulation figures in mind, argued that not only would this venture divert capital from useful domestic projects, but it would also encourage paupers to rely upon assistance rather than upon their own resources. The Economist did not, however, have an answer for The Morning Chronicle's

...ultimate utilitarian argument in defence of philanthropy: 'A state provision for the poor does more to undermine the spirit of self-reliance than all our charitable institutions and benevolent schemes put together. But would the most ultra-Malthusian risk the total and immediate repeal of our poor law? And if not, why not? Because it would bring about a revolution.'<sup>50</sup>

Mayhew himself took no part in the debate initiated by his revelations. Instead, he continued to pursue his own inquiries into an examination of the dishonourable practices in the tailoring trades.<sup>51</sup> While investigating the relationship between prostitution and slop work, Mayhew was moving towards the conclusion that the women had been driven onto the streets out of necessity rather than choice. The real problem lay not in moral laxity but in un-regulated labour, which was something beyond their control. This line of reasoning was forced upon him with greater conviction following a meeting with workers in the tailoring trades in November 1849:

The meeting...expressed its conviction...that the cause of the declension of wages had been the change from day work to piece work; that this change had led to a greater competition among working men and to the introduction of female labour...Before this...a journeyman tailor could support a wife and a family by his own labour...The depression had not risen from the excess in the number of tailors, but from females and children, who originally did no work, being brought into the trade.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 49.

<sup>51</sup>Dishonourable practices refer to the practices of employers to sub-contract work to less skilled workers, and particularly to women and children, thereby undermining the economic and social position of skilled men.

<sup>52</sup>Thompson, "The Morning Chronicle," 51.

The problems of poverty were attributed directly - by the working men themselves - to structural changes in production over which the tailors had no control. These changes, moreover, were seen by the tailors to have been brought about against their conscious wishes. Mayhew's further investigations into the boot and shoe trades underscored this point, forcing him to query some of his most fundamental beliefs:

Mayhew (by pre-disposition a free-trader) became impressed with the evidence...while free trade suited the capitalist, protection often served the working man better. At the least he insisted that the working man's own statements on this side of the question be inserted. But (he complained) the editor resorted increasingly to petty censorship.<sup>53</sup> (my emphasis)

In fact, The Morning Chronicle preferred to publish facts which confirmed its own, and those of its readers, preconceived views, rather than any that would throw doubt upon these. In October 1850 The Morning Chronicle published a defence of the practice of 'putting-out' work in an attempt to undermine Mayhew's central argument regarding un-regulated labour. Specifically, the paper was concerned to refute those parts of Mayhew's analysis casting serious doubt on the integrity of a well-known London tailoring firm which advertized frequently in The Morning Chronicle.

#### IV

The point behind the discussion of Mayhew's work is to demonstrate the way in which Thompson employed an historical argument to make a political point. Raymond Williams argued that social change must commence by altering the way in which we perceive people. In effect, this was to be brought about by changing the types of messages that cultural agencies transmitted. His analysis, though, appeared to ignore the material interests which give rise to certain forms of communication. Interests are interests between people and these imply, among other qualities,

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 53.



relationships of power. If one hoped to change the manner in which people communicate between one another, then one should be prepared to recognize that certain interests will be seen to be threatened, as others are advanced, and these will be defended. In writing about 'systems of maintenance' etc, Williams' analysis removed from consideration the fact that these systems referred to people with different interests to promote and defend. He ignored the conflicting character of material interests and obscured the types of obstacles to be overcome by those seeking to transcend capitalism. Thompson summarized the types of problems that Williams' analysis engendered in the following way:

...at the centre [of these systems] there are men in relation with one another: that "organizing the industrial process" involves ownership, that ownership involves power, and that both perpetually feed property-relationships and dominative attitudes in every field of life. And that between this system and a human system there lies, not just a further episode of "expansion" and "growth" but a problem of power.<sup>54</sup>

Thompson's study of Mayhew illustrated a further aspect of his own historical method and it was one which emphasized the contrast between his attitude to working people and that to be found in the non-Marxist New Left. According to Thompson, Mayhew's

...main work is to disclose, in enormous detail and with great force of contrast, the character of orthodox political economy, as it was seen from the underside. His method is, in fact, anti-statistical and constructively so; by counterpoising statistical generalities, with actual life histories and individual witnesses, he is both offering a running commentary - and criticism - of the generalities, and offering a different framework within which they may be read. (my emphasis)<sup>55</sup>

Mayhew approached his investigations with certain presuppositions, but these were gradually eroded under the weight of empirical evidence. Mayhew, however, might have ignored the contradictions between the theory and the practice had he not been prepared to accept, as

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<sup>54</sup>Thompson, "The Long Revolution 2," 34.

<sup>55</sup>Thompson, "Morning Chronicle," 58.

authentic, the experiences of those whom he came into contact with. It was this willingness to accept the views of working people which distinguished Mayhew, and Morris, from so many other nineteenth-century critics of industrial capitalism.

It was the non-Marxist New Left's refusal to treat seriously the experiences of working people that lay at the heart of Thompson's critique. This refusal can be seen from the way in which they used the phrase 'whole way of life' to specify the necessary features of a 'common culture'. Thompson regarded this as a highly problematic concept because: "To decide which activities are characteristic implies some principle of selection and some theory of social process."<sup>56</sup> The idea of a 'whole way of life' was typically used in a way that suggested the principle of selection was derived from the experiences of middle-class intellectuals:

...the predominant associations are with leisure activities, the arts and the media of communication. 'Whole' is forgotten...and we slide from 'way of life' into 'style of life'. When we speak of an individual's way of life, we usually mean to indicate his style of living, personal habits, moral conduct and the rest, rather than his position, work, power, ideas and beliefs.<sup>57</sup>

In proposing the notion of 'way of life' ULR intellectuals were identifying what they would like to see changed in their way of life. These changes were then held out as the ideals to which working people should aspire. What was missing from these critiques, though, was any consideration of the needs and interests of working people.

Perhaps the most harmful effect that Williams' approach to historical and contemporary analysis had was in its sense of suggesting that things happen to people over which they have no control. Certainly in Culture and Society there was no analysis of the efforts which working people had made to assert their concerns. This tended, as Thompson suggested, to the conclusion that if change is to come then it is the intellectuals who must take the initiative. But,

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<sup>56</sup>Thompson, "The Long Revolution 1," 33.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

as Thompson's analysis of both the failure of national socialist organizations in the 1880s to benefit from New Unionism and his assessment of the ILP's emergence make clear, working people have had to take the initiative themselves in the past. They had to do so, because they did not have the benefit of intellectual and political elites. This argument was one of Thompson's principal claims in The Making of the English Working class. The final chapter examines this argument in some depth.



## Chapter 7

### Politicizing the Historical Narrative II: The Making<sup>1</sup>

Stalinist and bourgeois ideas are normally thought to have given rise to diametrically opposed ideologies.<sup>2</sup> In this dissertation I have attempted to indicate the ways in which Thompson believed them to be unified by shared conceptions of human nature. In particular, he argued that they shared a tendency to economic reductionism and deterministic explanations which left no scope for human agency. That is to say, neither conceptual scheme left any intellectual space for the role of ideas in shaping the historical process in other than a very limited sense. In one way or another, man was presented as a victim of socio-economic forces. This chapter takes up the themes which

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<sup>1</sup>This chapter explicates the themes that Thompson developed in The Making in relation to the political and intellectual arguments that earlier chapters have drawn attention to. It is not a work of critique. I have limited my discussion to exegesis partly because a sustained critique was not my original intention, and partly because I am not familiar with a number of relevant sources to tackle such a project. There are, in any case, a number of studies which criticize certain aspects of Thompson's methodology and historical claims. In the former category one should note Perry Anderson's work and in particular his Arguments within English Marxism. While Craig Callhoun, The Question of Class Struggle: Social Foundations of Popular Radicalism During the Industrial Revolution (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), represents one of the few extended treatments of Thompson's historical claims in The Making.

<sup>2</sup>The term 'bourgeois' may be thought to be too vacuous to have any analytical worth. It seems to me, though, to fairly represent those ideas, whatever the precise ideological persuasion of their proponents, that are in one way or another supportive of acquisitive or market values. This is my understanding of the way in which Thompson uses the term. It is certainly the basis of his analysis of class in the studies that this dissertation has examined. It is, perhaps, most clearly spelt out in Thompson, "Peculiarities," 251-52. Despite the lucidity of Thompson's arguments in that article, his use of the term bourgeois appears to have escaped Anderson's attention; he upbraided Thompson for (mis-)applying the term in one of its Marxist senses (that is, as referring to 'the industrial bourgeoisie'). See Perry Anderson, "Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism," New Left Review, no.35, January-February 1966, 2-42, and especially 8-9.



have been developed in this study by examining the way in which they structured The Making of the English Working Class.

The chapter is organized around Thompson's understanding of the materialist conception of history. In chapter I, this conception was defined as the dialectical intercourse between social being and social consciousness. This definition can be regarded as the theoretical statement of Thompson's understanding of class formation that was outlined in the introduction. Section I considers the material context and section II the "traditions, value-systems, ideas..." which interacted with the material context. The result of this interaction, the emergence of a distinctive class, is considered in the final section.

## I

Marxists in the Leninist tradition have insisted on the role of technological change in shaping new social patterns and attitudes. The source of this argument derived from Marx's remark that the hand mill gave feudal society its specific colouration and the steam mill capitalism's.<sup>3</sup> But

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<sup>3</sup> Thompson, The Making, 208. What Marx actually said is quite relevant here: "Social relations are closely bound up with productive forces. In acquiring new productive forces men change their mode of production; and in changing their mode of production, in changing the way of earning their living, they change all their social relations. The hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist." Karl Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy, in McLellan, Selected writings, 202.

One should note that Marx does not say that productive forces determine social relations. There is a link between them, but the nature of the relationship is left ambiguous. The ambiguity stems from something that is left unspoken between the first and second sentences: how do men acquire 'new productive forces'? For Thompson, the missing link - which becomes pronounced in Marx's economic writings from the late 1850s - is the absence of any consideration of the relation between man as a thinking, creative and moral being, and the forces of production. I have discussed Thompson's general criticisms of the base/superstructure metaphor in the preface and in chapter 3. In this context, the following remarks are pertinent:

"...there is a 'silence' as to cultural and moral mediations; as to the ways in which the human being is imbricated in particular determined productive relations; the way these material experiences are handled by them culturally; the way in which there are certain value-systems that are

when Marx asserted this, he was merely echoing views shared by many social commentators in the early nineteenth century:

However different their judgements of value, conservative, radical and social observers suggested the same equation: steam power and the cotton mill = the new working class. The physical instruments of production were seen as giving rise in a direct and more or less compulsive way to new social relationships, institutions and cultural modes.<sup>4</sup>

The tendency to think in such terms was reinforced by the fact that popular activity coincided with marked structural changes in the cotton industry attendant upon the introduction of the steam driven mill. Engels observed that:

...the first proletarians were connected with manufacture, were engendered by it...the factory hands, eldest children of the Industrial Revolution, have from the beginning to the present day formed the nucleus of the labour movement.<sup>5</sup>

Although Thompson agreed that the cotton industry was the leading sector of the Industrial Revolution and that the factory system was modelled upon the cotton mill, he insisted that

[w]e should not assume any automatic, or over-correspondence between the dynamic of economic growth and the dynamic of social and cultural life. For half a century after the 'break-through' of the cotton mill

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consonant with certain modes of production, and certain modes of production and productive relations that are inconceivable without consonant value-systems. There is not one that is dependent upon the other. There is not a moral ideology that belongs to a "superstructure"; there are these two things which are different sides of the same coin...In [The Making] I tried to give that silence a voice." Merrill, "Interview with E.P.Thompson," 20-21.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 209.

<sup>5</sup>Engels, The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844; quoted in Ibid.

(around 1780) the mill workers remained as a minority of the adult labour force in the cotton industry itself.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, those who took the lead in protest activity came not from the new industrial-urban districts, but from amongst outworking communities in the surrounding rural neighbourhoods and from artisans working in small shops in London. London, itself, experienced little heavy industrialization until after mid-century. Moreover, those who did protest industrialism were not advocating strategies which were the lineal forebears of those advanced by orthodox Marxists. Rather, they were concerned to defend customary patterns of behaviour and, in particular, their status as independent craftsmen.

The bourgeois view, in contrast, offered an optimistic assessment of the Industrial Revolution. This position assumed that, because the Industrial Revolution entailed a gradual diffusion of higher absolute and relative material standards, the process as a whole should be seen to have been a desirable one. Although it recognized the presence of protest activity, no effort was made to inquire into the reasons informing such activity. Rather, protest was seen to have been a temporary phenomenon; it required a period of adjustment for people to appreciate the benefits flowing from industrialization. This argument, of course, presupposed that man is fundamentally an acquisitive being and that all his needs and wants could be catered to by an ever-expanding economy. It was, therefore, unnecessary to inquire into the needs of real people:

The objection to the reigning academic orthodoxy is not to empirical studies *per se.*, but to the fragmentation of our comprehension of the full historical process. First, the empiricist segregates certain events from this process and examines them in isolation. Since the conditions which gave rise to these events are assumed, they appear not only as explicable in their own terms but as inevitable...there is a secondary stage where the empiricist may put these fragmentary studies back together again, constituting a model of the historical process made up from a multiplicity of inter-locking inevitabilities, a piece-meal processional...where each element is explicable and appears also as a self-sufficient cause of the

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 211



other events. We arrive at a post facto determinism. The dimension of human agency is lost, and the context of class relations is forgotten.<sup>7</sup>

Thompson then proceeded to apply this general criticism of the assumptions informing bourgeois historiography to an analysis of three broad occupational groups: the farm labourers; artisans and outworkers. Historians have often praised enclosure for leading to more efficient forms of agricultural practice. As a result, increasing quantities of cheaper and more nutritional food were made available. Rural labour was freed, thus placing enormous reserves of human energy at the disposal of a developing industrial economy. The influx of cheap labour facilitated cheaper production and hence the diffusion of higher living standards throughout society. Thompson, however, found very little that was commendable in the mechanisms employed by those promoting enclosure:

...the spirit of agricultural improvements in the eighteenth century was impelled less by altruistic desires... 'to feed a growing population' than by a desire for fatter rent-rolls and larger profits... enclosure was a plain enough case of class robbery, played according to the fair rules of property and laid down by a parliament of property owners.<sup>8</sup>

Thompson saw enclosure as the culmination of a long-term process in which market principles were gradually nibbling away at the customary rights of the 'common people'.<sup>9</sup> Although

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 223-24.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 237-38.

<sup>9</sup>Although I do not discuss Thompson's historical writings after The Making in any detail, his work continued his inquiry into the changing character of rural social relations in the eighteenth century; and it emphasized the extent to which a market mentality was increasingly structuring such relationships. The following references are cited in chronological order: Thompson, "Peculiarities," 251-55, 259-60; E.P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism," Past and Present, 38, 1967, 56-97; E.P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," Past and Present, 50, 1971, 76-136; E.P. Thompson, "Anthropology and the Discipline of Historical Context," Midland History, 1, 1972, 41-55; E.P. Thompson, "Alexander Pope and the Windsor Blacks," Times Literary Supplement, 7 September, 1973; E.P. Thompson, "Patrician Society, Plebian Culture," Journal of Social History, 7, 1974, 382-405; E.P. Thompson, "The Crime of Anonymity," in Douglas Hay et al., eds., Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth Century England (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), 255-344; E.P. Thompson, Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975); E.P. Thompson, "The Grid of



contemporary propagandists defended the social benefits that would flow from enclosure, rural labourers could see few benefits. Rather, they interpreted the changes that were affecting their livelihoods as being imposed upon them and against their own conscious wishes.<sup>10</sup> In Thompson's opinion, the eighteenth century was characterized by an increasing number of conflicts that expressed alternative views as to the appropriate manner in which social relations ought to be organized: the one based upon production for the market, the other based upon production for need. In the one, need was given by the market, in the other, by wants which people themselves defined as necessary. To a certain extent working people were able to gain redress for their grievances by resorting to protest because the market mentality had not asserted its will uniformly upon a paternalist conscience. The governors, to varying degrees, shared an understanding of the factors motivating the poor - at least in their shared dislike for the capitalist middleman - and regarded them, within limits, as legitimate. However, the framework of relationships which facilitated the process of negotiation, within which grievance-resolution mechanisms operated, was gradually eroding and in the 1790s effectively dismantled.

According to Thompson, enclosure shaped political attitudes because it articulated conceptions of social organization quite alien to those sustaining an ever-expanding capitalist society:

Throughout the nineteenth century the urban workers made articulate the hatred for the 'landed aristocrat' which perhaps his grandfather had nourished in secret...the yearning for land arises again and again, twisted in with the outworkers' desire for independence...perhaps its vestiges are still with us today, in allotments and garden plots. Land always carries

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Inheritance: A Comment," in Jack Goody and Joan Thirsk, eds., Family and Inheritance: Rural Society in Europe, 1200-1800 (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1976), 328-60; E.P. Thompson, "Folklore, Anthropology and Social History," Indian Historical Review, 3, 1978, 247-66; E.P. Thompson, "Eighteenth Century English Society: Class Struggle Without Class," Social History, 3, 1978, 133-66.

<sup>10</sup>And they were quite articulate in expressing their concerns. See Thompson, "The Crime of Anonymity," passim.

associations - of status security, rights, more personal than the value of the crop.

It is a historical irony that it was not the rural labourers, but the urban workers who mounted the greatest coherent national agitation for the return of land. (my emphasis)<sup>11</sup>

These are hardly the types of arguments one would expect to find an orthodox Marxist advancing. Thompson was claiming that, to a certain extent, working class political strategies were defined in terms of ideas preceding the Industrial Revolution.

After discussing the agricultural labourers, The Making turned its attention to those groups directly engaged in the industrializing economy. Although England was rapidly industrializing in the early nineteenth century the characteristic form of employment for many people was as an artisan employed in a small workshop where face-to-face relationships between employers and employees formed the typical working relationship. Artisans, like the field labourers, thought of their livelihoods less in terms of material income than in those of the degree of status and independence their occupations afforded:

The wages of skilled craftsmen at the beginning of the nineteenth century were often determined less by supply and demand in the labour market than by notions of social prestige or custom...Customary traditions of craftsmanship normally went together with a 'fair' price and 'just wage'. Social and moral criteria...are as important in early trade union disputes as strictly economic arguments. (my emphasis)<sup>12</sup>

These criteria were not merely restricted to conditions of work, but included a pride in craftsmanship and a belief that a certain level of skill was required to perform a task - a level should be maintained by the enforcement of long-standing apprenticeship regulations. Remuneration was defined in terms of skill and the degree of control involved over the labour process. Although the term artisan covered a wide variety of occupations, Thompson focused his attention upon a

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<sup>11</sup>Thompson, The Making, 254, 256.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 260, 261.

grouping earning approximately 30 shillings a week. Those in this category were particularly vulnerable to the practice of labour dilution that an ever increasing number of employers adopted as a means by which to jack up their profits.

Thompson's interpretation of the position of artisanal labour in the early nineteenth-century economy was quite at odds with conventional interpretations. Thompson quoted one historian within this tradition who claimed that "in 1831 the cost of living was 11% higher than in 1790, but over this span of time urban wages had increased, it appears, by no less than 43%." <sup>13</sup> For Thompson, this type of argument was grossly misleading. Quite apart from its assumptions as to the motivations informing human behaviour, it applied only to very skilled craftsmen engaged in fulltime and continuous employment. But this same period was also one of

...chronic under-employment in which the skilled trades are like islands on every side threatened by technological innovation and by the inrush of unskilled and juvenile labour. Skilled wages themselves often conceal a number of enforced out-payments: rent of machinery, payment for the use of motive power, fines for faulty work or indiscipline ...sub-contracting was predominant in mining, iron and pottery industries and fairly widespread in building.<sup>14</sup>

The existence of 'out-payments' and 'sub-contracting' implied certain types of relationships; specifically, those of domination and subordination. Moreover, the different material interests which were contained in these relationships were not drawn along an axis of owners and non-owners. Rather, there were gradations of ownership.

The final group that Thompson considered were those employed in the out-working textile trades in the Midlands, Lancashire and Yorkshire. The actions of these workers, he insisted, must be understood in terms of their attempt to defend interests which they believed to be threatened. They did not believe that their interests were threatened by mechanization as such, but

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<sup>13</sup>T.S. Ashton, The Industrial Revolution, 1760-1830; quoted in *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 269.

by the changing basis of employer policies and the growing support such policies were finding amongst the magistracy and the government.

Thompson was careful to specify geographical and occupational variations within this category of workers and he did so with the intention of emphasising the fact that their actions were a response to very specific, albeit similar, material conditions. Although there were differences between the stockings, croppers and weavers, in terms of the extent to which they were able to exercise control of the work process, they all believed themselves to be craftsmen and aspired to the status of independence. This aspiration was similar in intent to that expressed by the rural worker:

If the agricultural labourers pined for land, the artisans aspired to an 'independence.' This aspiration colours much of the history of early working class radicalism.<sup>15</sup>

In both cases, this aspiration was sharpened as it confronted aggressive market interests. For example, the expansion of demand for textiles in the late eighteenth century raised the price of labour, and thus prices, as employers competed amongst themselves. The attraction of new employment in the minds of working people was not, however, for material gratification per se; it was seen as a means by which they might fulfil their aspirations. The consequences, though, were the exact opposite of those intended. As more and more people became entangled within capitalist social relations, then their dependency upon the vagaries of the market increased. The balance of control over the work process shifted radically in the employer's favour. When the demand which had originally prompted these changes slackened, working people found themselves the subject of a variety of profit-saving devices. Initially, they attempted to defend their interests through constitutional measures, but as this avenue was increasingly blocked off to them they resorted to their only remaining option - direct political action.

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 289.



This, in summary, is the gist of Thompson's explanation of the material context within which Luddism must be read. Although an abbreviated account cannot possibly do justice to the nuances of argument, certain aspects of it warrant attention.

The croppers were highly skilled artisans, responsible for the finishing processes in the manufacture of cloth. Their role in the labour process placed them in a good position to organize and this was something they had an increasing need of following the wide-spread application of the 'gig mill' and the introduction of the shearing frame. The response to these developments should not be seen as a response to machinery alone:

The gig-mill was an old invention; indeed, much of the conflict leading up to Luddism turned on a statute of Edward I under which its use was prohibited...The struggle against the gig-mill reaches far back into the eighteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

By the late eighteenth century the actions of employers and magistrates suggested that they were either unaware of or indifferent to this legislation. But:

...the croppers were aware of it and held that their protection against displacement by machinery was not only their 'right' but also their constitutional right. They also knew of a clause in the Elizabethan Statute of Artificers enforcing a 7 years apprenticeship, and of a Statute of Philip and Mary limiting the number of looms which might be employed by one master.<sup>17</sup>

Parliament obviously thought little of this protective legislation, because in the early years of the nineteenth century it passed suspending measures with little or no discussion. In the eyes of the croppers, the authorities appeared to be in collusion with the employers and they responded by setting up a protective body, 'The Institution' (1802). This was established along the lines of a sick club (trade unions being prohibited under the Combination Acts, 1799-1800) and functioned to canvass and focus public opinion on the constitutional efforts of the croppers. These

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 572.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 575.

attempts, Thompson suggested, were indicative of widely shared concerns not only for the croppers themselves but because their case was symptomatic of other trades' problems. Parliament's response to a petition from The Institution in 1806 was to set up a committee of inquiry into the state of the woollen trade, but its proceedings were far from being objective. The representatives of the artisans, as well as the legal counsel they had engaged:

...were brow-beaten and threatened by the advocates of laissez-faire and the anti-Jacobin tribunes of order. Petitions were seen as evidence of conspiracy. It was held to be an outrageous offence that they had collected money from outside their own ranks and had been in contact with the woollen workers in the west. They were forced to reveal the names of their fellow offices, their books were seized, their accounts scrutinized. The Committee dropped all pretence of judicial impartiality and constituted itself into an investigating tribunal.<sup>18</sup>

The cropper's case was seen as evidence of a Jacobin conspiracy and in 1809 all protective legislation was repealed.

Bourgeois historiography assumes the market to be an impartial arbitrator, which acts of its own volition; mortals are believed to have had little effective control over its machinations. But clearly, in the history of the croppers' attempts to defend their interests, we have an instance of powerful vested interests creating the conditions which facilitated the development of the institutions of private property. Moreover, the actions of working people could not be dismissed as blind and unthinking, because they were guided by considerations which, within the context of their expectations, were highly rational. These expectations derived from their material interests - or position within the work process.

Thompson identified similar inadequacies in the orthodox Marxist account of early industrial struggles. These struggles were seen to be symptomatic of that spontaneously generated consciousness with which 'Marxists' were so enamoured. But it was interpreted as a consciousness

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<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 577.

which, because it didn't articulate a specifically socialist agenda, must be explained away as illustrative of 'primitive trade unionism'; that is, as a false consciousness. But neither the actions of these people, nor the legislative responses to them, were caused by technological change. On the contrary, legislation was one of the causes of such change, at least to the extent that it created those conditions furthering the development of certain interests at the expense of others.

Missing from both sets of explanations was any consideration of what working people themselves had to say. Their views were, instead, collapsed within categories of thought derived from the present. In the process all human motivation was assimilated to economic factors.

After discussing the general character of the early industrial struggles, Thompson directed his attention to Luddism. His assessment of this phenomenon again challenged many of the ideological presuppositions informing the social and economic historiography of the early nineteenth century:

The character of Luddism was not that of blind protest, or that of a food riot...Nor will it do to describe Luddism as a form of primitive trade unionism...the men who organized, sheltered or condoned Luddism were far from primitive. They were shrewd and humourous; next to the London artisans some of them were amongst the most articulate of the 'industrious classes.' A few had read Adam Smith, more had made a study of trade union law...[They] were capable of managing a complex organization, undertaking its finances and correspondence.<sup>19</sup>

They exhibited the traits of morally responsible and rational people who defended their aspirations and goals in terms of values which they, correctly, perceived to be under threat of extinction. These values were defined specifically in terms of their material interests and these were quite distinctive and opposed to those of the bourgeoisie. Indeed, the older moral economy, of which their actions were expressive, stood in the way of capitalism's realization:

Luddism must be seen as arising at the crisis point in the abrogation of paternalist legislation and in the imposition of the political economy of

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 593-94.

laissez-faire upon, and against the will and conscience of working people.  
(my emphasis)<sup>20</sup>

It was because Luddism represented a point of conflict between two irreconcilable 'ways of life' that Thompson regarded it as:

...a quasi insurrectionary movement which continually trembled on the edge of ulterior revolutionary objectives. This is not to say that it was a wholly conscious revolutionary movement; on the other hand it had the tendency towards becoming such a movement, and it is a tendency which is most commonly understated.<sup>21</sup>

One of the reasons why the revolutionary potential of Luddism was not recognized by historians can be traced to the way in which the concept of revolution in particular, and that political activity in general, was understood. Thompson's understanding of what should be understood by revolutionary activity has been discussed elsewhere in this study. In the 1950s politics was typically conceived in institutional terms, and in Britain it was common to make a distinction between economic and political activity. The relationship between the Parliamentary Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress can be taken as representative of the division as it existed in the practices of the official labour movement. This distinction however, did not exist in the minds of the Luddites: political demands implied a demand to change the socio-economic system because the claims which the Luddites advanced were founded upon principles of social organization which were incompatible with those sustaining capitalist institutions - especially parliament. Parliamentary democracy was and remained an institution supportive of private property. So, when the Luddites demanded political change they were, potentially, advancing towards a revolutionary understanding. In conceiving of their actions as blindly responding to changes which they did not understand, bourgeois historiography can transport their revolutionary ideals to the realm of fiction. Similarly,

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 594.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 604.



the revolutionary import of Luddism was lost upon the orthodox Marxist because no distinctively 'socialist' claims could be recovered from the episode.

Luddism, then, was seen by Thompson as rational attempt to defend a particular way of life. Although Luddism was a temporary phenomenon, the issues which it focused attention upon could also be identified in other forms of protest over the next few years. This was hardly suprising, because in the industrializing north whole communities, often organized around one or two industries, were devastated by the intrusion of capitalist social relations. Such relations, of course, also impacted upon the urban artisan who, similarly,

...set a premium on the values of independence. But they had, more than the city artisan, a deep sense of social equalitarianism. As their way of life, in the better years had been shared by the community, so their sufferings were those of the whole community...This gave a particular moral resonance to their protest...they appealed to the essential rights and elementary notions of human fellowship and conduct rather than to sectional interest. It was as a whole community that they demanded betterment, and utopian notions of designing society anew at a stroke - Owennite communities, the universal general strike, the Chartist land plan - swept through them like fire on a common. But essentially, the dream which arose in many different forms was the same - a community of independent small producers, exchanging their products without the distortions of market and middlemen.<sup>22</sup>

In such communities the values of co-operative effort, creative labour and production geared to human needs could readily take root and flourish:

By 1819 whole communities of...weavers had adhered to the cause of reform; and from this time until the last Chartist years, weavers and stockingers were always amongst its staunchest and most extreme adherents. Successive failures in the agitation for parliamentary protection led directly to the question of reform - or the overthrow of the seat of government itself. They could not hope to improve their position by trade union action alone. (my emphasis)<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 326.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 710.

By reform they did not mean reformism. Indeed, the aspirations which they advanced were rooted in a value system which could not be contained within that sustaining parliament. Reform was seen as a means to an end and not the end in itself. In this aspiration, working class reformers marked themselves off from middle class reformers. They also distanced themselves from the labourist tradition, a tradition that The Making traces to Paineite Jacobinism in general and to the efforts of Francis Place in particular.

Place figures prominently in The Making because historians have drawn extensively upon his archives and, in so doing, they have reproduced his understanding of legitimate political activity. This understanding was that of the labour movement in the 1950s. But there was another tradition of working class history that Place and his successors effectively de-legitimized:

...as early as 1795, he saw the role of the working class reformers as accessories to middle class or aristocratic reformers in parliament. Working men could not hope to bring about reform by and for themselves, but should give support to others 'most likely' to win concessions. This...entailed attending on a crisis...rather than a policy of hastening the crisis by popular agitation. It is the policy of those self-respecting tradesmen...who preferred to build bridges to the middle class than to try and bridge the gulf between themselves and the tumultuous poor. As such, it represents the withdrawal from the agitation among 'members unlimited'... (emphasis in the original)<sup>24</sup>

The self-improving, 'morally' upright and constitutionally minded artisan, who devoted himself to 'intellectual' activities and scorned the spontaneity of the poor, might have been a characteristic feature of the metropolitan landscape and other large urban centres with relatively diffuse economies and occupational hierarchies which the upwardly mobile might climb. But he would have had little to say for the interests of those in northern communities. As to why he would not, one has to understand the different ideas and values which structured the actions of people in these two traditions. The next section discusses Thompson's understanding of these differences.

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 152-53.

## II

The previous section emphasized the fact that popular protest in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century cannot be understood if it is examined in terms of modern economic categories. Such categories of thought, Thompson argued, led historians to dismiss protest activity as irrational because it did not conform to their expectations of rational behaviour. As a result, the intentions of those who protested were written out of the historical record. This process of delegitimization was reinforced by a modern tendency to rely uncritically upon contemporary practices to assimilate different forms of protest into the single category of riotous behaviour. In the eighteenth century, a riot referred to two distinctive types of activity: the bread or food riot, and those forms of protest directed to a political goal.<sup>25</sup> Although both types of action were guided by shared assumptions as to the nature of the relationship between the individual and the community, and the respective rights and obligations of both, they were not exactly of the same order. The food riot was very much a plebian affair. It was an activity in which the 'common people' defined their own goals and acted on their own initiative to secure them. The political riot, in contrast, was, until at least the early 1790s, a form of protest in which elite groups played upon popular sentiments and manipulated their understanding of the freedoms provided by the constitution to goals defined by these elites.

There were, as one might expect, political reasons informing Thompson's discussion of riots. He wanted to illustrate the factors contributing to, and inhibiting the formation of, an

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<sup>25</sup>In this context, the phrase 'political goal' should be understood in relation to an institutional definition of politics. Food riots might also be regarded as political if the term is taken to embrace the concept of power; that is, as an element which is intrinsic to all social relationships rather than an attribute of political organizations. The distinction is not an insignificant one, although it is one that is often ignored.

independent plebian consciousness. This section considers Thompson's interpretation of these factors. The discussion also examines the importance which he attributed to religious influences in the process of consciousness formation. This part of the discussion considers Thompson's interpretation of dissenting traditions during the eighteenth century and the way in which he believed these shaped the development of two distinctive working class traditions.

The bread riot has often been presented as a knee-jerk reaction to socio-economic change. For Thompson, however, it

...rested upon more articulate popular sanctions and was validated by more sophisticated traditions than the word 'riot' suggests...the bread or food riot...was rarely a mere uproar which culminated in the breaking open of barns or the looting of shops. It was legitimized by the assumptions of an older moral economy which taught the immorality of any unfair method of forcing up the price of provisions by profiteering upon the necessities of the people.

In urban and rural communities alike, a consumer consciousness preceded other forms of political or industrial antagonism. Not wages, but the cost of bread, was the most sensitive indicator of popular discontent.<sup>26</sup>

People responded less to the problem of scarcity or high prices. Rather, they were concerned with the reasons why goods were scarce or prices high. The reasons may be self-evident to the modern economist, but not to people for whom such thinking was quite alien. Plebian protesters did not attribute blame to autonomous market forces; they blamed engrossing middlemen for selling wheat at a price other than the customary one for the locality. When ordinary people rioted they did so in defence of their own interests. Their actions "were popularly regarded as acts of justice, and their leaders held as heroes. In most cases they culminated in the enforced sale of

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<sup>26</sup>Thompson, The Making, 67-8.



provisions at the popular price."<sup>27</sup> "...[B]ehind every such form of popular direct action some legitimizing notion of right is to be found."<sup>28</sup>

Thompson interpreted the bread riot as exemplifying differing attitudes towards the concept of property:

...there have always persisted popular attitudes towards crime amounting to an unwritten code quite distinct from the laws of the land. Certain crimes were outlawed by both codes: a wife or child murderer would be pelted or execrated on the way to Tyburn...But other crimes were actively condoned by whole communities - coining, poaching, the evasion of taxes...This distinction between the legal code and the unwritten popular code is a common place at any time. But rarely have the two codes been more sharply distinguished from each other than in the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>29</sup>

As the eighteenth century progressed, the practices which were sanctioned by the popular code and, to varying degrees, by the governors, were gradually displaced in the interests of the propertied. Parliament demonstrated its willingness to enforce the interests of the latter by legislating into existence an increasing number of capital statutes for hitherto accepted practices.

Throughout most of the eighteenth century, political protest was expressed within the framework of a constitutional rhetoric. By this, Thompson had in mind a collection of libertarian beliefs that were encapsulated in the idea of 'the freeborn Englishman'. It was generally believed that the Revolution settlement of 1688 had established the Englishman's right to certain liberties. It did not matter if the reality of the constitutional arrangements inaugurated at the end of the seventeenth century were designed to protect the interests of certain propertied groups against those

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 70.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 73.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 64.

of the monarchy.<sup>30</sup> The important point about the eighteenth century constitution was that most people believed that it afforded them certain rights. Participants in political riots would have

...felt themselves, in some obscure way, to be defending the 'constitution' against alien elements who threatened their 'birth-right'. They had been taught for so long that the Revolution settlement of 1688, embodied in the Constitution of King, Lords and Commons, was the guarantee of British independence and liberties, that the reflex had been set up - Constitution equals liberty.<sup>31</sup>

Political riots were unified in their concern to redress perceived imbalances within the Constitution. The ideology of Constitutionalism was, to a certain extent, regressive because it prevented people from perceiving the precise character of their own interests.<sup>32</sup> In the early 1790s, however, under the twin impact of the French Revolution and the publication of Paine's The Rights of Man, the character of political riots began to alter. The French Revolution established the precedent that it was possible to construct society anew from rational principles. Despite its limitations,<sup>33</sup> Paine's work played a key role in re-structuring the character of political riots. Up to and including the Church and King riots in Birmingham in December 1791, political riots were guided by the assumptions of Constitutionalism. After the publication of The Rights of Man these riots began to reflect different assumptions.

Thompson emphasized the fact that Paine drew upon well-established traditions and sentiments within English Radicalism to make his case. He did so with the intention of emphasising the extent to which the character of political developments in England during the 1790s were structured by indigenous traditions rather than by reference to the French example:

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<sup>30</sup>Thompson, "Peculiarities," 252, 268.

<sup>31</sup>Thompson, The Making, 85.

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<sup>33</sup>I have discussed the limitations that Thompson identified in political Jacobinism in chapter 1.

Too often events in England in the 1790s are seen only as a reflected glow from the storming of the Bastille. But the elements precipitated by the French example - the dissenting and libertarian traditions - reach far back into English history. And the agitation of the 1790s, although it lasted only five years (1792-96), was extraordinarily intensive and far-reaching. It altered the sub-political attitudes of the people, affected class alignments and initiated traditions which stretch forward into the present century...Constitutionalism was the flood gate which the French example broke down, but the year was 1792, not 1789, and the waters which flowed through were those of Tom Paine. (my emphasis)<sup>34</sup>

This is not to say that French developments had no bearing at all upon English events. For example, the 'terror' and the execution of the King prompted many middle-class enthusiasts for the Girondin constitutional experiments to withdraw their support for revolutionary initiatives. However, the response of the English bourgeoisie was also determined by the threats they perceived to be contained in the growing support for Paine's arguments exhibited by non-property owners. The attraction of Paine's equalitarianism frightened the middle class into the arms of the governors.

Thompson characterized the 1790s as a decade in which working people were manoeuvred into a position of economic and political apartheid. As the middle class withdrew their support from the cause of reform, they found their interests advanced by a governing elite who were only too willing to dismantle the protective legislation standing in the way of the market economy's ascendancy.<sup>35</sup> Until the late eighteenth century this legislation had been employed by plebian protesters to resolve grievances. In the 1790s, however, there was an increasing tendency to associate all forms of protest with Jacobinism. According to Thompson, this association influenced the manner in which contemporaries and historians interpreted developments in this period:

Such a disposition on the part of the propertied classes was not...conducive to accurate social observation...it reinforced the natural tendency of authority to regard taverns, fairs, any large congregations of

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<sup>34</sup>Thompson, The Making, 111.

<sup>35</sup>Thompson, "Peculiarities," 259-61.



people, as a nuisance - sources of idleness, brawls, sedition or contagion. And this general disposition...to 'judge' the evidence was abetted from three other directions. First, we have the utilitarian attitudes of the new manufacturing class, whose need to impose a work discipline in the factory towns made it hostile to many traditional amusements and levities...

The second pressure that Thompson identified was Methodism. This made a distinction between the moral, "chapel-going good and the dissolute bad." Finally, there was the influence of those self-improving, auto-didactic, working men who emphasized "the sober constitutional ancestry of the working class movement." The latter's abhorrence of the improvidence and ignorance of the poor "was bound to shape their interpretation of contemporary events and, since they have left written records, shaped the way in which historians view the period."<sup>36</sup>

The ideas bound up in the notions of the 'freeborn Englishman' and that of the 'moral economy' played a crucial role in structuring the character of plebian protest. However, the precise forms which such protest activity was also shaped by dissenting traditions. In fact, Thompson maintained that one cannot understand eighteenth century political attitudes unless one considers the legacies of seventeenth century religious disputes.<sup>37</sup>

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During the seventeenth century political and religious conflicts were inseparable. The desire to seek political change was animated by an intense spiritual or emotional energy; men were driven by the conviction that it was possible to effect social regeneration. From the middle of the

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<sup>36</sup>Thompson, The Making, 59-63.

<sup>37</sup>Thompson, "Peculiarities," 268-272.



century, this energy was increasingly drained from political commitments. The withdrawal that had been set in motion by the time of the Restoration continued for more than a century:

Puritanism - Dissent - Nonconformity: the decline collapses into surrender. Dissent still carries the sound of resistance to Apollyon and the Whore of Babylon. Nonconformity is self-effacing and apologetic: it asks to be left alone.<sup>38</sup>

This decline, however, was not a uniform one and Thompson identified two strands flowing from seventeenth century Puritanism:

1. Although the 'rich man's Puritanism' was waning by the early 1650s, there was a sense in which it was kept alive by the Settlement of 1688. On the one hand, the Revolution settlement tolerated liberty of conscience. On the other, it imposed, through the Test and Corporation Acts (1695) a number of civil and political disabilities. The latter established an unequivocal identity of interest between Anglicanism and the State. Dissenters were free to pursue their own intellectual inquiries and social practices without being harassed in a way that their Continental counterparts were. But they were not fully integrated into the fabric of civil and political life. It was from this contradiction that Thompson traced the arguments for liberal constitutional reform.

One of the more significant consequences flowing from the freedoms afforded to the dissenters was the emergence of the dissenting academy. This institution played a key role in disseminating a mentality conducive to the development of industrial capitalism. In particular, these 'intellectual enclaves' contributed to the emergence of more rational forms of inquiry and, thereby, eroded older patterns of mystical and religious thought. The religious thinking of certain dissenting

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<sup>38</sup>Thompson, The Making, 385.

sects was tending to rationalism and empiricism -precisely the attributes that facilitated the development of capitalist social relations.<sup>39</sup>

The drift in religious sensibilities was reflected in the movement from Trinitarianism, through Arianism, Socianism, Unitarianism and, for some, Deism. Arianism rejected the Trinity. Christ was still regarded as the son of God, but He was no longer seen to possess the co-equal and divine status that the Trinitarians assigned Him; He was held to be a mortal being. Socianism went further in denying the divinity of Christ's creation and saw Him as an historical being whose life should be held up as a moral exemplar. If Christ was not divine, then the Catholic and Anglican belief in atonement, through His intercession, was a false one because the idea of original sin was unintelligible. Man, therefore, should be seen as being who was capable of ordering his own affairs.

The political consequences flowing from the rejection of Christ's divinity lay in a rejection of the mystical foundations of the State: the institutions of the State were submitted to an increasing number of rational criticisms. These criticisms, however, did not extend to a revolutionary critique of society. Instead, they were couched in the language of Constitutionalism. The Constitution had remained intact while a whole range of new propertied interests had emerged since 1688. In terms of the criteria governing the original settlement, the exclusion of these interests could not be justified on rational grounds.

The significance which Thompson invested in these developments is suggested in the following observation:

...the rational christianity of the Unitarians, with its preference for 'candour' and its distrust of 'enthusiasm' appealed...to some of the tradesmen and shopkeepers of London and to similar groups in the large cities. But it seemed too cold, too distant, too polite and too much

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<sup>39</sup>See Thompson's discussion of the Dissenting Academies in "Peculiarities," 269.

associated with the comfortable values of a prospering class to appeal to the city or the village poor.<sup>40</sup>

'Rational christianity' appealed to those artisanal traditions which sought improvement within the existing framework of society. This was the tradition that found much that was attractive in Paine's rational defence of reform, and from whence the labourist tradition developed. It is also the tradition that spawned most of the theorists, historians and national leaders of the working class movement.<sup>41</sup>

2. If Puritanism led in one direction to the liberal principles of tolerance, equality of opportunity and 'the rights of man', another strand led in quite a different direction. Thompson traced the second tendency

...back to the defeat of the Levellers in the Commonwealth. When the millennial hopes for the rule of the saints was dashed to the ground, there followed a sharp dissociation between the temporal and spiritual aspirations of the poor man's Puritanism.<sup>42</sup>

This 'poor man's Puritanism' combined contradictory elements. A potentially revolutionary component co-existed with a powerful inhibiting element. These elements allowed sects

...to combine political quietism with a kind of slumbering radicalism - preserved in the images of sermons and tracts and in democratic forms of organization - which might, in any more hopeful context, break into fire once more.<sup>43</sup>

For most of the eighteenth century the element of political quietism dominated, since few could see any hope of realising spiritual aspirations in the world. Further, many of the older sects, drawing upon a Calvinist heritage, had relapsed into social exclusiveness in order to preserve

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<sup>40</sup>Thompson, The Making, 31.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 58.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 32.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 33.

their doctrines from temporal corruption. It was this religious tendency, Thompson suggested, that Methodism appealed to.

Thompson characterized Methodism as filling a void within the spiritual market place. Although it accepted an earlier belief, that spirit resided in all men, it did not draw any notion of social equalitarianism from this premise. Instead, Methodism advanced the idea that salvation was to be obtained by focusing on the inner world. Methodists were pre-occupied with the individual sinner. If there were problems in the world they could be traced to original sin; evil was an individual state and not a social one. The emphasis on the individual sinner weakened,

...the poor from within, by adding to them an active ingredient of submission; and [Methodists] fostered within the Methodist Church those elements most suited to make up the psychic component of the work-discipline of which the manufacturers stood most in need.<sup>44</sup>

Methodism found a particularly receptive audience in those northern communities that were been brought increasingly within the orbit of capitalist social relations. That is, in precisely those areas where there was a compelling need for a disciplined labour force. Methodism's central doctrines may not have been deliberately contrived to serve the needs of capitalist interest, but they were seen by Thompson to have assisted and facilitated the development of these interests.<sup>45</sup> Methodism insisted upon the importance of labour as a means to salvation:

God's curse over Adam, when expelled from the Garden of Eden, provided irrefutable doctrinal support as to the blessedness of hard labour, poverty and sorrow.

Since joy was associated with sin and guilt and pain (Christ's wounds) with goodness and love, so every impulse became twisted into the reverse,

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 390.

<sup>45</sup>Compare the type of reasoning here with Thompson's criticisms of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's apostasy, and with his indictment of those intellectuals whose disillusionment with communism contributed the active ingredient of apathy in post-war Britain; that is, the will not to seek any change in existing social relations: "In confronting Communism, business man, general and poet found they had a common language - however their interpretation of its terms might differ." Thompson, "Outside the Whale," 178.



and it became natural to suppose that man or child only found grace in God's eyes when performing painful, laborious or self-denying tasks. To labour and to sorrow was to find pleasure, and masochism was 'love'.

The negation of love was tending towards the cult of its opposite; death...Death was the only goal which might be desired without guilt, the reward of peace after a life-time of suffering and labour.<sup>46</sup>

Methodism taught humility and the idea that it was

...presumptuous to suppose that a man might save himself by an act of his own will. The saving was the prerogative of God and all man could do was to prepare himself, by utter self-abasement, for redemption.<sup>47</sup>

The Methodist preached a dogma that was not at all dissimilar from Stalinism in its consequences for denying human agency. Like Stalinism, moreover,

Methodism was a strongly anti-intellectual influence, from which British popular culture has never wholly recovered...poetry was suspect, and philosophy, biblical criticism or political theory was taboo. The whole weight of Methodist teaching fell upon the blessedness of the 'pure of heart' no matter what their rank or accomplishments. This gave to the Church its equalitarian or spiritual appeal. But it also fed...the philistine defences of the scarcely literate. "It is carte blanche for ignorance and folly," Hazlitt exploded: "Those who are either unable or unwilling to think connectedly or rationally on any subject, are at once released from every obligation of the kind, by being told that faith and reason are opposed to one another."<sup>48</sup>

Irrationalism left the uneducated poor the victim of the manipulator and demagogue.

In the material context which existed in post revolutionary Russia these attributes facilitated Stalinism.<sup>49</sup> In the context of early nineteenth-century England, they vitiated the formation of independent working class organizations. In both cases, the denial of rational thought led to the

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<sup>46</sup>Thompson, The Making, 401, 409, 410.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 404.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 811.

<sup>49</sup>Thompson, "Socialist Humanism," 110.

surrender of one's consciousness and conscience to external agencies, and with it the drift to authoritarian social forms was made easier.

Methodism, however, was not uniform in its effects; indirectly, it helped working people become politically conscious:

Methodism (and its evangelical counterparts) were highly politically conscious religions. For 100 years before 1789, dissent in its popular rhetoric had two enemies: sin and the pope. But in the 1790s there is a drastic re-direction of hatred: the pope was displaced from the seat of commination and in his place was elevated Tom Paine. "Methodism," Bunting declared, "hates democracy as much as it hates sin." But constant sermonizing against Jacobinism served also to keep the matter in front of the public's consciousness.<sup>50</sup>

Moreover, Methodism was not internally coherent and certain aspects of it drew upon democratic tendencies within old dissent. These conflicted with Wesleyanism's authoritarian roots in Anglicanism, and tory notions of hierarchy and order that Wesley brought to the early movement. The conflict eventually manifested itself in the Killamite secession in 1797. Although the development of the latter was not spectacular, Thompson interpreted its presence as casting doubt upon Halevy's thesis that Methodism should be accounted the sole reason why England did not have a revolution in the 1790s. Thompson also pointed to the fact that the most significant phase of Methodist recruitment was in the period after the counter-revolutionary initiative had been taken by the authorities in 1795-96. This observation led him to characterize Methodism in similar terms to that of old dissent. That is to say, Methodism appealed to those whose hopes for social regeneration were frustrated and who, in consequence, retreated to an inner world of spiritual consolation that Methodism catered to:

Methodism may have inhibited revolution; but we can affirm with certainty that its rapid growth during the wars was a component of the psychic process of counter-revolution. There is a sense in which any

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<sup>50</sup>Thompson, The Making, 430-31.

religion which places great emphasis on the after-life is the chiliasm of the defeated and hopeless.<sup>51</sup>

But in contexts which gave rise to the belief that spiritual aspirations might be realized in the world, the very same people who had been attracted to Methodism were to be found engaged in political activity:

There were a few Methodist Jacobins, more Methodist Luddites, many Methodist weavers demonstrating at Peterloo, Methodist trade unionists and Chartists. They were rarely... initiators...But they were often to be found as devoted speakers and organizers who carried with them the confidence of their whole communities.<sup>52</sup>

Methodism, then, in spite of its own best intentions, succeeded in fostering the social and spiritual equalitarian impulses that had characterized the 'poor man's Puritanism'. The central feature of this tradition was its commitment to the belief that all men were equal. It was this sense of equalitarianism that had a particular resonance in those weaving communities that were devastated en masse by the 'spirit of capitalism'. Thompson's argument might be stated more strongly: had Methodism emphasized the positives in old dissent, rather than drawing upon its worst aspects, then the character of working class history might not have been so dominated by the rationalism of the urban tradition.

### III

The discussion in the preceding sections has drawn attention to the material and socio-cultural factors which Thompson believed to have shaped the development of the early working class in England. The themes that I have focused upon can be summarized in the following manner:

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<sup>51</sup>Thompson, The Making, 419.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 430.



Thompson insisted that class was as much a cultural as an economic formation and that the class consciousness found in real history could not...be typified as 'the appropriate and rational reactions imputed to a particular position in the process of production.' To think thus, led to a facile dismissal of the real traditions, value systems and ideas in which men and women have embodied class experiences as 'false.' It was one facet of that 'enormous condescension of posterity' which assumed that the repressed had no understanding of their own struggle, and it opened the way to the elite party as the 'true' bearer of proletarian consciousness. Thompson insisted on freeing the historical process from determinism and teleology, and restoring human agency to it. He rebuked the prevailing right wing orthodoxies of economic history for their shallow and propagandist pre-occupation with economic growth and their incomprehension of exploitation and conflict which lay behind aggregate accounts of economic change.<sup>53</sup>

This section will discuss Thompson's interpretation of the development of working class Radicalism from the mid 1790s to the early 1830s. I have already drawn attention to the fact that the reform movement assumed an increasingly plebian character after the publication of Paine's Rights of Man and as a result of developments in France. Although the working class reform movement can be seen to be exhibiting the beginnings of independent plebian political action, it had to come to terms with a number of significant obstacles. For example, the introduction of the Two Acts in 1795 effectively prohibited Jacobin ideas by criminalizing the Corresponding Societies. As a result, the movement lacked a national focus. Moreover, with the withdrawal of middle class enthusiasm for parliamentary reform plebian reformers found themselves isolated:

In the decades after 1795 there was a profound alienation between classes in Britain, and working people were thrust into a state of apartheid whose effects - in the niceties of social and educational discrimination - can be felt to this day. (emphasis in the original) <sup>54</sup>

This state of affairs was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it meant that

[w]herever Jacobin ideas persisted...men were no longer disposed to wait upon the example of a Wilkes or a Wyvill before they commenced a

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<sup>53</sup>"Introduction", B. Waites, T. Bennet, and G. Martin, eds., Popular Culture: Past and Present (London: Croom Helm, 1982), 16-17

<sup>54</sup>Thompson, The Making, 195.



democratic agitation. Throughout the war years there were Thomas Hardys in every town and in many villages throughout England, with a kist or a shelf full of Radical books, biding their time, putting in a word at the tavern, the chapel, the smithy, the shoemaker's shop, waiting for the movement to arrive. And the movement for which they waited did not belong to gentlemen, manufacturers or rate-payers; it was their own. (my emphasis)<sup>55</sup>

On the other hand, "...the movement badly needed the intellectual resources of the educated middle class, some of whom had been most affected by revolutionary disenchantment...it could not survive for ever on Rights of Man." <sup>56</sup> There were, of course, working class intellectuals, but Thompson only identified two of any stature; John Thelwall and Thomas Spence. Their work illustrates the strategic dilemmas that were to confront working class reformers until the decline and eclipse of Chartism by 1848. Essentially, this dilemma expressed itself as a choice between moral and physical force arguments and both can be identified in many political struggles during the first half of the nineteenth century. Thelwall's

...radicalism was generally confined within the area defined by Paine; but his emphasis, far more than Paine's, was upon economic and social questions. He voiced the claim of the artisan for an independent livelihood by moderate labour; denounced legislation which penalized 'the poor journeymen who associate together...while the rich manufacturers, the contractors, the monopolists...may associate as they please.' He disclaimed levelling notions and criticized as speculative and remote schemes of land nationalization...He upheld the independent manufacturer, who might raise himself by 'the sweat of his own brow.' But 'production was a mockery, if it was not accompanied with just distribution...A small quantity of labour would be sufficient to supply necessities and comforts, if property was well distributed.' Enemies to wise distribution were 'land monopoly', enclosures, and the 'accumulation of capital.'<sup>57</sup>

This was the ideology of the small artisan who perceived his independence to be threatened by a host of parasitic interests shored up by government legislation. Like Paine, Thelwall

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 201.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 196.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 174-75.

did not attack the principle of private property. Unlike Francis Place, though, Thelwall rejected assimilationist tactics and insisted upon the irreconcilable differences between the artisan's interests and those of the middleman. But Thelwall was not prepared to countenance conspiratorial and violent insurrectionary means. He persisted in seeking quasi-legal means to advance artisanal interests in the face of repressive legislation, and never denied the importance of agitation among 'members unlimited.' He even succeeded in bridging the gap between the world of plebian discontent and that of the Romantic critique for a brief moment in 1796-97.<sup>58</sup>

Thomas Spence, however, did advance ideas which were sympathetic to violent insurrection and "the methods of the underground - the secret press, the anonymous handbill...the tavern club..."<sup>59</sup> His ideas, moreover, were developed by one of his followers, Thomas Evans, in a direction which offered a "definition of class...clearer than any offered by Paine" in the sense that it recognized that all reforms which fell short of altering the distribution of property would achieve little other than cosmetic effects.<sup>60</sup> Although Thompson could find no evidence to implicate Spence directly in conspiratorial actions <sup>61</sup> he noted that Spence had been associated with the London Corresponding Society and that members of the L.C.S. had actively propagandized among sailors prior to the naval mutinies at Spithead and the Nore in April and May 1797. These mutinies, Thompson argued, may have been more significant than historians have credited them:

It is foolish to argue that, because the majority of sailors had few clear political notions, that this was a parochial affair of ship's biscuits and arrears of pay, and not a revolutionary movement. This is to mistake the nature of popular revolutionary crises, which arise from exactly this kind

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<sup>58</sup>Thompson, "Disenchantment or Default?," 156ff.

<sup>59</sup>Thompson, The Making, 177.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 178.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 177.

of conjunction between the grievances of the majority and the aspirations articulated by the politically conscious minority.<sup>62</sup>

Certainly the fact that 'subversive' elements appeared to have infiltrated the heart of the defences of imperial Britain caused the government to re-double its repressive measures.

Thompson adduced further evidence for the existence of a revolutionary underground by indicating the links that were brought to light in the aftermath of the Irish revolt in 1798 between the United Irishmen, London and provincial radicals.<sup>63</sup> "Historians," he wrote, "have scoffed at the evidence of underground activity, and yet, in the circumstances of 1796-1801, it would have been more surprizing if this development had not taken place."<sup>64</sup> Since all avenues for resolving grievances had been blocked off one can understand why people would have been pre-disposed to 'illegal' methods. This was especially true in the provinces and to a very large extent can be attributed to the introduction of the Combination Acts. These Acts provided a link between industrial and political grievances and had the effect of re-defining the character of Jacobinism: as the Radical tradition developed in the industrializing North and Midlands it became less concerned with advancing political rights in a narrow sense and more concerned with querying the existing distribution of power within society. The former emphasized political rights, the latter social rights. The one accepted existing social relationships, the other offered a radical alternative to them.

The Making was particularly concerned to defend 'the illegal tradition' or those extra-parliamentary methods which had little in common with the labourist-constitutionalist tradition which descended from Francis Place. In part, Thompson wanted to demonstrate the lines of continuity between the 1790s, and hence eighteenth-century political traditions, and political activity

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 184.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 186-90.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 182.



in the post-war years, so as to illustrate the rationality of protest activity; it was neither blind nor spontaneous. It might appear this way to historians who relied upon certain archival sources and who tended to present events as discrete phenomena with no apparent connection to one another. But when one turned to views of the protesters themselves and examined their actions within a broader historical framework - that is, within the context of developing social relationships - these actions made perfect sense. But Thompson was also concerned to minimize the role attributed to material factors in shaping the political consciousness of working people in this period: their actions were guided, to a certain extent, by ideas inherited from before the onset of industrialization.

One of the difficulties Thompson encountered in proving the existence of an illegal tradition was with the sources. These are either scanty - those who engaged in secret activities, he observed, were unlikely to have committed much to paper - or tainted by the partial evidence of spies or informants; a practice that was paid by piece-rate and conducive to embellishment. Moreover, this tradition, which punctured the surface temporarily in 1801-2 and with Luddism in 1811-12, was associated with outworking communities which were, by their very nature, opaque.<sup>65</sup> As a result, "the secret political tradition appears either as a series of catastrophes...or else as a trickle of propaganda so secretive and small-scale."<sup>66</sup> It was to be expected that this tradition was a secretive one. In the first years of the nineteenth century the authorities believed there to be widespread sedition abroad:

Napoleon's continental blockade brought to Britain stagnant industries, unemployment and soaring food prices...There were food riots throughout the country. And there is evidence to suggest an organized, insurrectionary underground.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup>Thompson discusses the problematic nature of the sources in *Ibid.*, 529-39.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 540.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, 492.



Perhaps the most disturbing evidence, as far as the government was concerned, came to light in the trial of Colonel Despard. Despard was arraigned, along with six guardsmen from the London and Chatham barracks, on a charge of high treason - of plotting to assassinate the King and the cabinet, and of inciting dissension within the Army - in November 1802, and executed, with his co-defendants, in January 1803. Thompson rejected those accounts of the affair which present Despard as either deranged in his commitment to an insurrectionary conspiracy or as having a negligible following. Rather, Despard had contacts with the united Irishmen, former members of the L.C.S and the 'black lamp' in Yorkshire:

When a full view is taken of the evidence the Despard affair must be seen as an incident of real significance in British political history. It linked the struggles of the Irish nationalists...with the grievances of London labourers, and of croppers and weavers in the north of England.<sup>68</sup>

The government responded to the affair by re-suspending habeas corpus. This response partly explains the fact that the reform movement outside London remained silent:

After Despard's execution, such groups of Painites in manufacturing communities will have lost any national links. They drew back into their own communities...as they drew back, so their ideas were shaped...by the peculiarities of each community. The foci of discontent will have become economic and industrial; it was easier, in Bolton or Leeds, to organize a strike or a demonstration at the price of bread, than a political discussion, a petition, or an insurrection. The Jacobins or Painites disappeared; but the demand for human rights became diffused more widely than ever before. (my emphasis)<sup>69</sup>

...what had once been a propaganda of a minority had now become 'intimately connected with the state of society.' And the stock upon which Jacobinism had been grafted was the illegal trade union. There is little evidence as to any deliberate decision on the part of Painites to 'permeate' trade unions and friendly societies. But at any time before the

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<sup>68</sup>Thompson, *The Making*, 527.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 545

1840s it is a mistake to segregate in our minds political disaffection and industrial organization. (my emphasis)<sup>70</sup>

Reform initiatives were also driven underground as a result of the changing character of the war with France. With the Peace of Amiens, April 1802-May 1803, there had been a temporary respite in the hostilities, which had continued unrelentingly since May 1793. The peace was the occasion for ebullient celebrations in London and a very important election in Middlesex. This was fought on the issue of the 'freeborn Englishman', because the campaign focused attention upon the maltreatment of ex-LCS prisoners held under the rules of the suspension of habeas corpus in Coldbath Fields prison. Sir Francis Burdett took up the cause of 'no more Bastille' against the sitting member who had ministerial backing. The celebrations greeting Burdett's victory rivalled those accompanying peace. The evidence of Jacobinism insurgency that Thompson identified in this and other events during 1802-3 was significant because

[i]t seemed that a movement of greater force than that of 1792-95 was maturing. The course of English history might have been different if there had been five years of peace. But events occurred which threw all into confusion.<sup>71</sup>

Part of this confusion was given by the Despard affair which occurred in the context of deteriorating Anglo-French relations. Moreover, there was also a pronounced shift in the way in which radicals perceived developments in France:

In 1802 Napoleon had become First Consul for life; in 1804 he accepted the crown as hereditary Emperor. No true follower of Paine could stomach this...The First Empire struck a blow at English republicanism from which it never wholly recovered. The Rights of Man had been most passionate in its indictment of thrones, Gothic institutions, hereditary distinctions; as the war proceeded, Napoleon's accommodation with the

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 545-46.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 494.

Vatican, his king-making and his elevation of a new hereditary nobility, stripped France of its revolutionary magnetism.<sup>72</sup>

Jacobinism, as a distinctive political doctrine, was discredited and former adherents, in ways not dissimilar to BCP members in 1956, were disoriented. One can note other parallels. The very fact that Stalinism discredited Marxism did not, as we have observed, mean that capitalist society was any better; it merely meant that the task of revolutionizing capitalist social relations was made more difficult and demanded the re-thinking of accepted ideas. Similarly, Bonapartism did not make Pittism any more congenial:

If Napoleon was an enemy because he was a despot who had concentrated all power in his hands, what was to be said of Pitt who...had eroded British liberties, jailed men without trial, bribed the press and used every form of ministerial influence to shore up his power?...Despotism ought to be fought at home as well as abroad.<sup>73</sup>

In this context Paine had very little to say, although many continued to work in his shadow. This was one reason why Thompson lamented the loss of the educated middle class to the reform movement. As it was, the reform initiatives during the remaining years of the war were undertaken by men who attempted to work within the existing political structure. These attempts were, therefore, confined to the metropolis which had a fairly wide-based freehold franchise and where "the channels of communication between middle-class and working-class reformers remained open".<sup>74</sup> Perhaps the most significant development in this respect was the formation of the Westminster Committee. This was established in 1807 as a means of co-ordinating propagandist efforts among freeholding artisans in an effort to secure the election of a radical parliamentary candidate.

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<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 494-95.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 497-98.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 513.

The victory of 1807 was a half-way house between the patrician techniques of the Wilkites and the more advanced forms of democratic organization. The gains were important. A new meaning had been given to the notion of 'independence'. Hitherto, the word had been a synonym for opulence and landed interest...The Westminster Committee...had organized victory independently of their own candidate...In this sense the people of Westminster felt the victory to be their own.<sup>75</sup>

But the Westminster Committee was not to remain committed to its democratic origins. Indeed, it was to come increasingly under the influence of Benthamite thinking, and, in the process, acquired many of the anti-democratic traits associated with bureaucratic formations. In a sense, it more appropriately represents the origins of the modern Labour Party. It spoke for the interests of the self-educated artisan who worked alongside a few professional men to promote the cause of household, as distinct from universal, suffrage. These people "tended to despise the political backwardness of the labourers and the demoralized and criminal poor."<sup>76</sup> But the demoralized were precisely those suffering most under the impact of industrialization:

In the Midlands and the north, Radicalism was driven underground, into the world of the illegal trade union; it became associated with industrial grievances, the secret meeting, and the oath. Until 1815 neither Burdett nor Cobbett meant much in the heartlands of the Industrial Revolution. The Westminster Committee had no message for the Luddites. North of the Trent we find the illegal tradition.<sup>77</sup>

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I mentioned in the introduction to this study that one of Thompson's objectives in writing The Making was to resist the contemporary interpretation of class - shared also by many thinkers associated with the New Left - which saw it as a homogeneous phenomenon that appeared

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 508-9

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 513.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 514.



to transcend time and place. In many ways, this conception of class was a straw man that could readily be used to dismiss the possibility of working class agency. Against this ideological view Thompson insisted upon seeing class as the outcome of social relationships: and the precise character of these relationships cannot be understood unless one examines the precise context that they develop(ed) in. The precise configuration of social relationships varies and it is for this reason that one must understand the reform movement as a heterogeneous phenomenon:

The complexion of the reform movement differed from one region to another, and this had a bearing upon strategy and emphasis...In south Lancashire, where the gulf between the great manufacturers and the workers was the deepest, the working class reform movement was most 'independent', keeping its distance even from active middle class reformers in Manchester. In the West Riding economic cleavages were not so sharp, the hand loom weavers did not enter the worst phase of crisis until the late 1820s, and in Leeds there was some cooperation between artisans and middle class reformers. In Birmingham, where social gradations shelved less steeply and where artisans still aspired to becoming a small master there was a vigorous indigenous Radicalism supported by many employers and to some degree under middle class leadership.

The radicalism of Manchester, Birmingham or Leeds, bore a direct relationship to the structure of each community. It is less easy to indicate an authentic London Radicalism [and] London...rarely appeared as a national focus for popular reform organization until the eve of 1832. (my emphasis)<sup>78</sup>

The problem lay largely in London's size and in the diversity of its occupational structure. In the manufacturing districts it was possible for a local leadership, assured of community support, to arise. This was especially true in the smaller and occupationally homogeneous Pennine or Midlands weaving community. Although there were a number of radical districts in London "[t]here is a sense of impermanence about the London leadership...Moreover, London Radicalism had emerged from the wars already much divided."<sup>79</sup> Thompson identified three broad groupings:

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 668-69.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 669.

the "cautious constitutionalists" represented by Place and Burdett and the Westminster Committee; the conspiratorial Spenceans who haunted the London tavern world; and those who were in the tradition of agitation among members unlimited - Major Cartwright, 'Orator' Hunt and William Cobbett.<sup>80</sup>

In the year or two following the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 the conspiratorial tactics of the Spenceans were to play a prominent role in radical London politics. The Spenceans were responsible for organizing three mass demonstrations of the unemployed at Spa Fields at the end of 1816 (16 November, 2 and 9 December). On each occasion there was drunken riotous behaviour, but Thompson emphasized the orderly character of the majority in attendance. Nevertheless, the authorities focused attention on the actions of a few and used them as an excuse to clamp down on all reform initiatives, including those of Major Cartwright and the Hampden clubs.

The Hampden clubs had originated in London in 1812. The first club was composed of an elite body of reform-minded Whigs, although it was employed by Cartwright as a vehicle to channel discontent in a direction of reform that antedated the developments of the 1790s. Cartwright was specifically interested in a programme of reform that embraced household suffrage, annual elections and secret ballots. He was in the older Wilkesite tradition of the gentlemanly directed reform agenda. He rejected the autonomous and insurrectionary methods of the Luddites and in a number of nationwide tours in 1812, 1813 and 1815 attempted to "divert insurrectionary discontent into constitutional forms." In effect, he wanted to "lay the basis for a nationwide movement continually petitioning parliament."<sup>81</sup> This was very much a middle class tactic and, as we have observed in the discussion of the events culminating in Luddism, had very little meaning

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<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 674-75.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 666.

to people living in weaving communities. In part, the reason for this lay in the fact that the political claims advanced by Cartwright et.al. had very little impact upon their immediate experiences. But one should also note that working people in the urban hinterlands had in fact employed the method of the petition as a means to resolve their industrial grievances and the authorities had demonstrated their unwillingness to accept their claims. Eventually, those who suffered most from the effects of industrial capitalism were to rally behind the banner of constitutional reform, but they were to do so only after other methods failed and for reasons other than those informing the views of national leaders.

Although Luddism, as a distinctive movement, was effectively suppressed in 1812, there were several incidents in the post-war years which, when considered in isolation from one another, appear as sporadic and irrational outbursts of frustration, but which also reveal, in their aims, an affinity with those of the Luddites. The reason for this is simple: "...the people of these townships and villages were at the heart of the conflict between unplanned economic individualism and an older way of life."<sup>82</sup> Perhaps the most significant event in these years, in terms of its effects on the development of the provincial reform movement, was a rising at Pentridge, Derbyshire, on 9 June 1817. Historians, Thompson observed, have tended to minimize the significance of this event as an example of a wholly autonomous plebian affair. Instead, they have over-emphasized the importance of government informers, and particularly the role of 'Oliver', in the events leading up to the night of the rising. Oliver certainly kept the government apprized as to the plans of the conspirators, but these plans were well-advanced by the time he had managed to infiltrate their network; a network that Thompson traced through the underground world of the London taverns to a number of provincial centres. In Thompson's view, the conspirators had a fairly well-developed set of regional contacts - and there were several other risings on 9 June, most notably near Huddersfield - and a

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<sup>82</sup>Ibid., 711.

fairly clear set of objectives. In particular, they intended to march upon London, gathering support on the way. As to what they hoped to achieve in London was unclear. This notion of revolutionary activity, Thompson argued, may appear naive to the sophisticated political sensibilities of the present, but it is not acceptable to dismiss it by our standards. More important than the intentions of the conspirators, however, was the response to the event. Although Oliver's role was never discussed in the subsequent trial of the Pentridge conspirators, the Leeds Mercury did publish an account of his involvement. These revelations had a profound impact on public opinion:

The employment of informers had become virtually a routine practice on the part of the magistrates in the larger industrial centres during the Luddite years; and ever since the 1790s a part of the government's own resources had been appropriated for such secret service purposes. But the practice was regarded by a very wide section of public opinion as being wholly alien to the spirit of English law...there were thousands of shopkeepers, country squires, Dissenting ministers and professional men who, in 1817, had no idea that such things could take place in England.<sup>83</sup>

Conspiracies were bad enough, but the government was guilty in the eyes of middling opinion of a more heinous crime. The effect of this affair

...was to strengthen the constitutionalist, as opposed to the revolutionary, wing of the reform movement. A rising without Oliver would have panicked the middle class to the side of the administration. A rising with Oliver threw whigs and middle-class reformers onto the alert.<sup>84</sup>

The government succeeded, with the help of a hand-picked jury, in securing the execution or transportation of the leading figures in the Pentridge rising. But acquittals were secured for a number of London radicals in 1817-18. If the government's actions offended the deeply held convictions of the 'freeborn Englishman', they also served to re-direct the plebian reform movement into the grooves of a determined constitutionalism. Over the course of the next two years a series of meetings were held throughout the country insisting on the need for reform.

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<sup>83</sup>Ibid., 726.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., 737.



The fact that the protesters typically presented their case in an orderly and well-argued manner presented a serious problem for the authorities since they had hitherto defended repression by characterizing working people as a disorderly rabble. These demands culminated at a mass protest meeting at St Peter's Fields - Peterloo - in Manchester on 16 August 1819. To a certain extent, the consequences of this event were more important than those flowing from Pentridge:

...it was...[the] discipline of the sixty or hundred thousand who assembled at St Peter's Field which aroused such alarm...we must understand the...fear evoked by the evidence of the translation of the rabble into a disciplined class...The policy of open constitutionalism was proving more revolutionary in its implication than the policy of conspiracy and insurrection...Confronted by this swelling power, Old Corruption faced the alternatives of meeting the reformers with repression or concession. But concession in 1819, would have meant concession to a largely working-class reform movement; the middle-class reformers were not yet strong enough (as they were in 1832) to offer a more moderate line of advance. This is why Peterloo took place.<sup>85</sup>

Peterloo was a massacre in which the Manchester yeomanry was set loose on an unarmed crowd of children, women and men who had assembled peaceably to hear a number of speeches advocating reform. The local magistrates, endorsed by the government, claimed that events happened too quickly and that circumstances got out of control. This view of Peterloo, as a series of unintended consequences, is one that historians subsequently rehearsed.<sup>86</sup> But it is not a view

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<sup>85</sup>Ibid., 748-49.

<sup>86</sup>Thompson's insistence on interpreting Peterloo as a deliberate disciplinary mechanism, that was designed to quell post-war Radicalism, can be found elsewhere in his writings. E.P. Thompson, "God and King and Law," New Reasoner, no.3 Winter 1957-58, 69-86. Review of: R.J. White, Waterloo to Peterloo (London: Heinemann, 1958); Donald Reed, Peterloo (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1958). E.P. Thompson, "Man Bites Yeoman," Times Literary Supplement, 11 December 1969, 1413-16. Review of, Peterloo 1819: A Portfolio of Contemporary Documents (Manchester: Manchester Public Libraries, 1969); Joyce Marlow, The Peterloo Massacre (London: Rapp and Whiting, 1969); Robert Walmsley, Peterloo: The Case Re-opened (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1969).

Thompson's criticism of Reed, Walmsley and White was of the same order. He argued that, to varying degrees, these authors had: (i) isolated Peterloo from its 'sociological' and historical context; (ii) relied almost exclusively upon 'official' accounts of the day's events, while ignoring the eye witness accounts of those in the crowd. The combined effect of such selective methodological procedures was to make the event appear as accidental: as something which the authorities had no

that Thompson endorsed for it is one that is based upon a very partial view by certain contemporaries and a very selective foray into the archives by historians. The authorities, at the local and national level, were well aware that a mass demonstration was being planned. Indeed, it had originally been scheduled for 9 August. The reality of Peterloo is that the authorities intended to use the meeting as an excuse to set a moral-disciplinary example to quell post-war discontent. Physical repression was followed by the Six Acts. This legislation greatly expanded the summary powers of the magistracy and raised the stamp duty on periodical publications to a level beyond the purchasing capacity of most working people in an effort to stop the dissemination of 'seditious' ideas. But Peterloo also had profound psychological consequences:

It was without question a formative experience in British political and social history...Peterloo outraged every belief and prejudice of the 'free-born Englishman' - the right of free speech, the desire for 'fair play', the taboo against attacking the defenceless.<sup>87</sup>

Peterloo might have evoked feelings of outrage and disgust, but it was followed by no attempt to seek retribution, no attempt to stage a violent revolution. And there were good reasons why this did not happen:

...all the great centres of the handworkers were from 100 to 200 miles away from London. Had the textile centres been in Essex, the nail-making villages in Sussex - had the weavers brought their banners to Spa Fields instead of St. Peter's Field - the course of English history would have been changed. As it was, whenever insurrectionary sentiment smouldered in the [provinces] it had no obvious objective close at hand.<sup>88</sup>

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control over and merely responded to the situation as it developed. Such histories, Thompson maintained, have the effect of reinforcing 'Natopolitan' views that man is merely the passive victim of circumstances beyond his effective control. When, however, Peterloo is placed within the broader temporal and social framework (of developing social relationships over several decades) that Thompson located it in, and a less partisan view of the available sources are taken into account, the event appears as anything other than fortuitous. The lesson that Thompson drew for contemporary political practice is obvious.

<sup>87</sup>Thompson, The Making, 754, 756.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., 711.



Those who assembled at Peterloo, like those who rose at Pentridge and the Luddites before them, represented the interests of the dispossessed outworker. They advanced alternative values and conceptions of social organization. Whether they adopted conspiratorial or constitutionalist tactics did not make any difference to the revolutionary character of their claims. These claims were revolutionary because they could not be contained within a society given over increasingly to the imperatives of the market. Perhaps one should say that their claims were potentially revolutionary because the precise nature of the difference between their values and the dominant society was not made apparent until the early 1830s. One of the more important reasons for this lay in the manner in which the enemy was presented: arguments were not couched in class terms, but in terms of the threats posed to the independence of artisans by parasitic interests. In this respect, it is important to understand certain 'intellectual' developments in the 1820s.

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The 1820s are often portrayed as years of relative quiescence when compared to the immediate post-war years and the early 1830s. But the 1820s were also

...the years of Richard Carlile's contest for the liberty of the press; of growing trade union strength and repeal of the Combination Acts; of the growth of free-thought, co-operative experiment and Owenite theory. They are years in which individuals and groups sought to render into theory the experience...of the Industrial Revolution, and the experience of popular radicalism...There is a sense in which we may describe the popular radicalism in these years as an intellectual culture.

...working men formed a picture of the organization of society, out of their experience and with the help of their hard-won and erratic education, which was above all a political picture. They learned to see their own lives as part of a general history of the conflict between the

loosely defined 'industrious classes'...and the unreformed House of Commons. (my emphasis)<sup>89</sup>

One of the Six Acts had been aimed specifically at popular journalism, for it had raised the stamp tax to a level that effectively placed radical papers and journals beyond the reach of ordinary working men. The struggle to repeal 'taxes on knowledge' formed one of the central planks of radical activity during the 1820s and helped to demonstrate the extent to which the government legislated in favour of certain interests as and against others. Thompson characterized Carlile's role in the struggle for an unstamped press as representative of the concerns of a much broader artisanal culture. But the single most important influence in shaping the character of working people's thought during these years was William Cobbett. Cobbett

...created this radical intellectual culture, not because he offered its most original ideas, but in the sense that he found the tone, the style and the arguments which could bring the weaver, the school master and the shipwright, into a common discourse. (emphasis in the original)<sup>90</sup>

But there was also a sense in which Cobbett's arguments acted as an impediment to the development of a distinctive working class consciousness:

He could not allow a critique which centred on ownership; therefore, he expounded...a demonology, in which people's evils were caused by taxation, the national debt, the paper money system and by the hordes of parasites...Characteristically, Cobbett's prejudices keyed in with the grievances of the small producers, shopkeepers, small farmers and consumers. Attention was diverted from the landowners or industrial capitalist and focused on the middleman...The arguments were moral as much as economic. Men were entitled to wealth, but only if they could be seen to be hard at work. (emphasis in the original)<sup>91</sup>

Like the early Romantics, Cobbett couched his arguments in a moral language. The world should not be the way that it was. To locate sources of human valuation in social conventions

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<sup>89</sup>Ibid., 781, 782.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., 820.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., 832-33.



led to a debasement of man's worth as a man. Social arrangements, Cobbett maintained, should be assessed in terms of their contribution to the well-being of men:

Once the real condition of the working people...is made not one, but the test of all other political expedients, then we are close to revolutionary conclusions...Cobbett's touchstone was an...insurmountable barrier between his kind of political theory and the ideology of the middle class utilitarian. (emphasis in the original)<sup>92</sup>

Although historians have used the term 'radical' to characterize the actions of working peoples' and the middle class property owners' attempts to secure parliamentary reform, they have effectively obscured two quite distinctive sets of interests. Both wanted to see an end to 'old corruption', but they did so for different reasons. The differences did not impress themselves upon the consciousness of working people until after the introduction of a property-based franchise. Nevertheless, one can observe these differences retrospectively. Cobbett, after all, was voicing the concerns of those who had suffered most at the hands of those interests represented by the advocates of free trade:

...Cobbett was the 'free born Englishman' incarnate. He gathered up all the vigour of the eighteenth century tradition and took it forward with new emphasis into the nineteenth century. His outlook approximated most closely to the ideology of the small producers. The values which he endorsed...were those of sturdy individualism and independence. (emphasis in the original)<sup>93</sup>

Cobbett was communicating to working people what they had thought, and were thinking, about their experiences of struggle. Their enemy had not been seen to be the industrial capitalist, but the middleman or parasite. It was the latter who they had come into daily contact with and he was interpreted through the traditions of the 'freeborn Englishman'. The middleman, that is, was seen to be the principal threat to their independence. The very fact that Cobbett

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<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 833.

<sup>93</sup>Thompson, The Making, 834.

articulated the character of the enemy in terms of parasitism, allowed working people to define their grievances in terms not at all dissimilar to those of the middle class radical who directed his invective at 'old corruption'. As a result, working people were not able to perceive the irreconcilable differences between their interests and those of the bourgeois reformer.

But there were a number of other factors which contributed to the distortion of the working man's vision. For example, Richard Carlile might have played a key role in focusing political discontent on the issue of the press, but his thinking was, in its uncritical reliance upon Paine's arguments, some thirty years out of date:

The derivation from Paine is explicit. It is not only the acknowledgement of a debt, but the assertion of doctrinal orthodoxy: "The writings of Thomas Paine alone, form a standard for anything worthy of being called radical reform. They are not radical reformers who do not come up to the whole of the political principles of Thomas Paine."<sup>94</sup>

In the 1790s Paine's invective was reasonably close to the right targets <sup>95</sup> - God, King and Law. But to single these out in such an uncompromising and strident tone in the 1820s was to ignore many important changes:

The cry, a bas les aristos, has less force when we consider the real structure of power as the Industrial Revolution advanced, the complex interpenetration of aristocratic privilege and commercial and industrial wealth...The polemic tends to disperse itself into abstractions; it does not grip and engage...<sup>96</sup>

Owenism also offered a theory that contained contradictory elements. On the one hand, Robert Owen's alternative to capitalist society was couched in the language of the beneficent paternalist: "...the notion of working class advance, by its own self-activity towards its own goals, was

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<sup>94</sup>Ibid., 838.

<sup>95</sup>Only reasonably close, because as Thompson demonstrated in his discussion of Blake's "London" the issues were more complex than Paine believed them to be. See chapter 1, section IV above.

<sup>96</sup>Thompson, The Making, 839.

alien to Owen."<sup>97</sup> His ideal community would instruct in rational and cooperative ideas. Because he established his communities away from major centres of population, his quixotic notions were not perceived by the authorities to represent a serious threat to the established order. On the other hand, Owenism's utopian vision of society appealed to the values of community and solidarity among the dis-possessed. The emphasis upon cooperation was the exact opposite of bourgeois individualism and dovetailed with radical traditions of mutuality. Moreover:

Owen taught that the profit motive was wrong and unnecessary: this keyed in with the craftsman's sense of custom and fair price. Owen endorsed the view, held also by Cobbett, Carlile and Hodgskin, that the capitalist was largely parasitic in his function...This keyed in with the grievances of artisans or little craftsman-master against contractors and middlemen. Owen taught that 'the natural standard of human labour' should be taken as the 'practical standard of value'; and that products ought to be exchanged according to the labour embodied in them: this keyed in with the outlook of the shoe-maker, cabinet-maker and brushmaker, who lived in the same court and who did in any case on occasion exchange services.

Indeed, the germ of most of Owen's ideas can be seen in practices which anticipate or occur independently of his writings.(emphasis in the original)<sup>98</sup>

Mutuality and cooperation were, in Thompson's view, the foundation of the working class movement. They find expression in the practices of friendly societies and the early trade unions and must be understood as developing out of specific material experiences and intellectual

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<sup>97</sup>Ibid., 859.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid., 869.

traditions.<sup>99</sup> In fact, one of Thompson's principal criticisms of Richard Carlile was the tendency in

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<sup>99</sup>There are four points to note here:

(1) One of Thompson's principal criticisms of Raymond Williams's (chapter 6, section III above) and ULR's (chapter 5, section III above) interpretation of working class experience was their tendency to idealize this experience in terms of the experience and interests of middle class intellectuals. In a sense, this tributary of New Left thinking brought definitions to the working class, and, in the process, denied the integrity of the latter in terms of 'its' understanding of 'its' material experiences.

(2) The Making emphasized the extent to which working class organizational forms had their origins in material and cultural experiences that preceded the Industrial Revolution. The tendency in much contemporary labour historiography was to examine the bureaucratic origins of the modern Labour Party. This Weberian and Whiggish emphasis denied those ideas and practices which could not be readily assimilated to such 'rational' formations. Hence, the historiography of the Labour movement typically commenced with a discussion of the craft unions (that is, those of highly skilled workers in the 1850s such as the engineers: "Peculiarities," 281). But these unions had their origins in much deeper historical traditions, and it was these traditions that The Making, as we have observed, was partly concerned to authenticate.

(3) The orthodox Marxist tradition - that is, the one that Thompson defined his Marxism in opposition to - drew heavily upon the Leninist notion that working people, if left to their own devices, were more likely to develop a trade union consciousness than a revolutionary or true class consciousness. This observation eventually led to the arguments justifying all the actions of a political elite: see The Making, 10.

(4) One of the principal differences separating Thompson from the second New Left was the extent to which the Nairn-Anderson theses, upon which it was premised, drew heavily upon Old Left 'economist' arguments to explain why the first New Left had failed. In particular, their denial of working class agency was based upon an interpretation of the history of labour that gravitated to Labour's origins in the craft unions of the 1850s: Perry Anderson, "Origins of the Present Crisis," New Left Review, no.23 January-February 1964, 26-53; Tom Nairn, "The Nature of the Labour Party 1," New Left Review, no. 27 September-October 1964, 38-65; "The Nature of the Labour Party 2," New Left Review, no.28 November-December 1964, 33-62.

These arguments reveal a number of parallels with the 'Labour Aristocracy' debate in the late 1960s and 1970s, and it would be interesting to know how influential New Left Review, under Anderson's editorship, was in shaping some of the terms of this debate. The Labour Aristocracy debate attempted to explain the reasons why, in the decades following the demise of Chartism, Britain was characterized by political quiescence/apathy. Its central contention was that stability could be attributed to the emergence of financially secure unions which established links with Liberalism, and acted as a buffer between the governors and the governed. More precisely, this stratum of the working class acted as a conduit for the communication of middle class social and political values.

One of the clearest statements of this thesis, from a Leninist perspective, is John Foster, Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution (London: Widenfeld and Nicolson, 1974). Foster's study should be read in conjunction with Thompson's review of it: E.P. Thompson, "Testing Class Struggle," Times Higher Educational Supplement 8 March 1974, (history supplement), i. Thompson's arguments here parallel the criticisms of Anderson's "Origins" that he outlined in "Peculiarities," 247-48, 274-85. Thompson's critique of both, in respect of their treatment of working class history, focused on their use of abstract or 'platonic' categories of analysis, which were drawn



his political position to deny the centrality of these values to working class life:

Every citizen owed no deference to authority and should act as if it did not exist...he held the citizen owed a duty to his own reason; he was not bound to consult others...nor to submit to their judgement...the notion of party was offensive. The power of reason was the only organizer which he admitted, and the press the only multiplier...Did he not know that the essence of the working class radical movement consisted in each man 'consulting with his neighbours.'<sup>100</sup>

Mutuality, Thompson maintained, marked the working class radical off from the middle class radical. Indeed, there was a sense in which Carlile's position defended a form of Lockean individualism. The position of working people was better expressed in the motto of John Gast's Trades Newspaper - "They helped everyone his neighbour."<sup>101</sup>

Despite the criticisms that working men made of their society it was not until the mid 1820s that the beginnings of a clear understanding of the precise character of capitalism took shape. By the early 1830s

...men like Hetherington, O'Brien and James Watson...had learned to see capitalism, not as a collection of discrete events, but as a system. They had learned to project an alternative, utopian system of mutuality. (emphasis in the original)<sup>102</sup>

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directly from Lenin, and which paid no attention to the actual material contexts that they were supposed to be analyzing. It is interesting to observe that, while Anderson's reply to Thompson's criticisms, "Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism," repudiated Thompson's allegations that he was uncritically applying Leninist categories to analyze modern British history, Anderson was to make explicit his (temporary) allegiance to Leninist strategies in an article written in 1965: "Problems of a Socialist Strategy," in Perry Anderson and Robin Blackburn, eds., Towards Socialism (London: Fontanna, 1965), 221-90.

In addition to the material cited in the previous paragraph, there are useful summaries and bibliographies of this debate in: John Field, "British Historians and the Concept of the Labour Aristocracy," Radical History Review, no.19 Winter 1978-79, 62-85; Robert Gray, The Aristocracy of Labour in Nineteenth-century Britain c. 1850-1914 (London: MacMillan, 1981).

<sup>100</sup>Thompson, The Making, 840, 841.

<sup>101</sup>Quoted in *Ibid.*, 853.

<sup>102</sup>*Ibid.*, 887.

This was not an abstract understanding but something that was forced upon these men by their experience. The views of O'Brien are illustrative:

Previously to the passing of the Reform Bill the middle orders were supposed to have some community of feeling with the labourers. That delusion...vanished completely with the enactment of the starvation law. No working man will ever again expect justice, morals or mercy at the hands of a profit-mongering legislature.<sup>103</sup>

These two classes never had, and never will have, any community of interests...Property...this is the thing we must be at. Without a change in the institution of property, no improvement can be made.<sup>104</sup>

O'Brien did not advocate violent change, but in the years after 1832 he advanced, through the pages of the Poor Man's Guardian and a number of other journals, the notion that working people should attempt to secure the vote as a means to advance their interests through parliament - a notion that found expression in Chartism. Although Thompson did not pursue his narrative into an analysis of Chartism, it is apparent that he saw the themes which were developed in The Making as a necessary backdrop to understanding that movement:

There is a sense in which the Chartist movement commenced, not in 1838 with the promulgation of the 'six points', but at the moment when the Reform Bill received the Royal Assent.<sup>105</sup>

The fact that was impressed upon working people in 1832 was that they had been struggling to secure the vote since 1819 as a means to an end, while the middle class radical saw the vote as an end in itself. The one hoped to transform society in a direction consistent with their interests, the other hoped to secure full citizenship within a society that in many respects furthered their interests.

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<sup>103</sup>James Bronterre O'Brien, Two Penny Despatch, 10 September 1836, quoted in *Ibid.*, 904.

<sup>104</sup>James Bronterre O'Brien, Destructive, 9 March, 24 August 1833, quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup>Thompson, The Making, 909.

In the months leading up to the Reform Act very few working people had perceived the significance of this distinction; The whig prime minister, Lord Grey, was shrewd enough to recognize it though, for he persisted, against a recalcitrant House of Lords, in pushing through a property- based franchise as a means of detaching the middle class from the general agitation for reform. In the years after 1832, working people were to realize the nature of the difference between their interests and those of the middle class. And in coming to perceive it they sought means to implement their goals. The last example of a wholly autonomous solution to working class grievances, in the period under consideration, was advanced in the pages of the radical journal, The Pioneer. This envisioned a council of trade unions to act as an alternative to the House of Commons, an alternative which would

...direct the commercial affairs of the country, according to the will of the trades which compose associations of industry. This is the ascendancy of scale by which we arrive at universal suffrage. It will begin in our lodges, extend to our general union, embrace the management of trade, and finally swallow up the whole political power.<sup>106</sup>

One should note the parallels between the reasoning supporting this view and the defence of socialism from the ground up that Thompson found in Morris and which he himself attempted to advance through the medium of the Left Clubs in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In both cases, reform is intrinsically related to the discovery of wants, and hence alternative values - which, in turn, serve to define political strategies -through the medium of one's immediate experiences and not through the medium of abstract speculation divorced from the context of struggle. Unfortunately, the "vision" encapsulated in the pages of The Pioneer

...was lost, almost as soon as it had been found, in the terrible defeats of 1834 and 1835. And when they had recovered their wind, the workers returned to the vote, as the more practical key to political power. Something was lost: but Chartism never entirely forgot this pre-occupation with social control, to the attainment of which the vote was seen as a means. These years reveal a passing beyond the characteristic outlook of

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<sup>106</sup>Pioneer, 31 May 1834, quoted in *Ibid.*, 913.



the artisan, with his desire for an independent livelihood 'by the sweat of his brow', to a newer outlook, more reconciled to the new means of production, but seeking to exert the collective power of a class to humanize the environment: by this community or that cooperative society, by this check on the blind operation of the market-economy, this legal enactment, that measure of relief for the poor. And implicit, if not always explicit, in their outlook was the dangerous tenet: production must be not for profit, but for use.<sup>107</sup>

#### IV

The working class that Thompson asserted came to maturity in the early 1830s was not the same as that which existed in the 1880s, 1930s or 1980s. This was not some transcendental phenomenon, but the product of very specific historical developments. But it was no less revolutionary a force. Thompson's claim to have 'discovered' a revolutionary proletariat while Marx was barely into adolescence has attracted criticism from across the ideological spectrum.

Part of his critics' objection may be understood as arising from a complete misunderstanding of the way in which Thompson employed the term 'revolution'. There was a sense in which The Making was read through preconceived views as to the meaning of this term: revolution was associated with a particular interpretation of Marxism. If Thompson had understood revolutionary activity in these terms then it would be simple enough to argue that his case could be dismissed for imputing intentions to his agents which they could not have possessed. But Thompson, we have observed, did not think of revolution in these terms. Rather, this concept implied a point of conflict between different moralities or ways of organising social relationships.

In defending the initiatives of plebian protesters as revolutionary, Thompson was also drawing attention to the possibility of a different form of political activity to that characterizing

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<sup>107</sup>Ibid.



modern British politics. Working people were attempting to defend interests which, manifestly, could not be advanced through the medium of political institutions designed to promote the interests of the propertied. In effect, Thompson was concerned to legitimize a form of political activity which contemporaries were intent upon suppressing. Their efforts have been reinforced by historians who have not only drawn selectively upon the available sources but, as a result of subsequent historical developments, approach their material with certain presuppositions in mind. In particular, the past was, in the post-war years, perceived through the context of the Cold War. The status quo advanced a particular conception of man's nature and all ideas, in this context, which advocated alternative social visions could be dismissed, pejoratively, as utopian. That is to say, those advancing them had no idea about political realities. It was easy, given this mentality, for historians to exhibit an attitude of profound condescension to the past.

Those who protested at Peterloo on 16 August, 1819 had similar objectives in mind to the Luddites, and these objectives were defined in relation to the same antagonist. Both were concerned to defend social relationships that were perceived to be bordering on extinction. Their actions were not mindless or irrational, but made perfect sense in the light of the ideas, traditions and values which they drew upon. And these traditions, we have observed, had their origins in a material context that preceded the onset of industrialization. As Thompson put it: "...the backbone of the reform movement" was made up of people who were "in the main handloom weavers..."<sup>108</sup> These people responded to changing social relationships and attempted to defend older values and a way of life against those values sustaining the market. This was the focus of conflict; conflict, that is, was not defined in terms of a response to technological changes per se. The conflict was about competing material interests, but these cannot be divorced from competing moralities, nor from the intrinsic character of a power struggle.

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<sup>108</sup>Thompson, The Making, 708.

Cobbett was able to exert such an influence in the development of the working class consciousness because he voiced the concerns of the independent craftsman in weaving communities as much as those of the urban artisan. Cobbett did not make much sense to those in the new factories because the ideology of the independent artisan said little of the factory hand's experience. In the 1820s, however, these experiences were not the most significant within working class experience as a whole.<sup>109</sup> They were to become important after mid century, but in the period that Thompson addressed his attention to it was the artisan's experience that gave the political consciousness of the working class its colouration.

The authorities' response to Luddism had impressed upon the plebian consciousness the extreme unlikelihood of the 'common people' been able to advance their interests within the framework of older paternalistic legislation. Indeed, the reaction to Luddism should really be seen as a continuation of official attitudes to the claims of working people that the authorities had exhibited since the 1790s. The response to Pentridge and Peterloo reinforced the conviction that the governors were willingly legislating in the interests of the propertied class. But Pentridge also suggested the virtues of the constitutional approach as a means by which grievances might be resolved. Peterloo revealed the limits of independent working class constitutional action. The terms in which reform was defined during the 1820s had the effect of suppressing the differences between middle-class and working-class radicalism. In Cobbett's language, they both fought against 'The Thing'; or, Old Corruption, but they did not fight for the same thing.<sup>110</sup> These differences did eventually manifest themselves in quite articulate class arguments. Until the 1820s the language of

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<sup>109</sup>Ibid., 710.

<sup>110</sup>One recalls Thompson's criticism of Williams' claim to have discovered a 'long revolution': "If there is a revolution going on then it is fair to suppose that there is a revolution against something (classes, institutions, people and ideas) as well as for something." Thompson, "The Long Revolution 1," 25.

class was not employed. But, this fact notwithstanding, Thompson argued the class character of differing material interests can be identified in those struggles that were giving shape to the maturing working class consciousness. Like Blake, working people were coming to see that politics, as conventionally understood, was a sham. Although they came to this conclusion on their own and as a result of the manner in which they interpreted their political struggles, it was a recognition that was not arrived at until nearly three decades after Blake had reached it. It is in this lost historical opportunity that Thompson laments the failure to effect a conjunction between the Romantic critique and that of the dispossessed Radical craftsmen.

But The Making ended not only on a note of disappointment, it also expressed a deep respect for those who at least attempted to shape and humanize the historical process:

...the working people should not be seen only as the lost myriads of eternity. They had also nourished, for fifty years, and with incomparable fortitude, the Liberty Tree. We may thank them for these years of heroic culture.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup>Thompson, The Making, 915.

## Conclusion

### I

This study commenced with the claim that Edward Thompson's work, in the years between 1955 and 1963, could be interpreted as an attempt to challenge the common sense of Marxist and capitalist societies.<sup>1</sup> This "common sense" is taken to mean those categories in which people habitually thought.

Thompson's principal objections to bourgeois and Marxist thought were of the same order: they sustained existing social arrangements by denying that men could realize alternative social visions through their own conscious actions. In both cases, this denial stemmed from an abbreviated view of man's nature and of human potentialities. In bringing the evidence of the past to bear upon contemporary argument, Thompson's work rejected this view of man's potential by illustrating the ways in which contemporary interpretations of human nature were the outcome of contingent developments. It may be true that people are exhorted to aspire to goals which can only be handled by modern economic categories of thought, but this does not mean that this way of thinking is natural. Indeed, as The Making argued, working people have attempted to resist the imposition of capitalist definitions. Similarly, Thompson's discussions of the Romantic poets and his defence of 'socialist humanism' demonstrated the ways in which people in the past and the present have been motivated by non-economic goals.

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<sup>1</sup>That is, the years bounded by the publication of William Morris and The Making.



In chapter 1, I drew attention to Thompson's characterization of Blake's work as "a declaration of mental war" against the negatives embodied in the religious and philosophical idealism of his day. One might describe Thompson's own work in similar terms. There is a sense in which Thompson's work, in the years covered by this study, represented the waging of a mental war against the negatives embodied in the abstractions of the Cold War ideologies.<sup>2</sup> But unlike Blake, Thompson has waged more than a mental war, for he shared with Morris the view that nothing can be changed by thought alone: man makes himself and his nature through his actions. And men are more likely to realize their objectives through collective rather than individual action. In both The Making and William Morris Thompson emphasized the importance of cooperative effort as the means by which men might act as agents in the making of their own history.

What, in Thompson's view, were the constraints imposed by bourgeois and Marxist thought upon man's agency? The simple answer is that both denied the utopian imagination a role to play in politics. The goals which men aspired to in the present were those which were given by the present. The aspirations which were fostered in Britain during the 1950s, for example, were ultimately 'designed' to sanction the existing distribution of political, economic, cultural and social rewards. To aspire to goals which could not be assigned an exchange or market value was seen to be symptomatic of an impractical or utopian sensibility. In Eastern European societies man's consciousness was seen to be given, ultimately, by autonomous laws over which men had no control. To think in terms other than those which the dialectic prescribed was counter revolutionary.

Men cannot be free, though, if their thought is pre-determined, and it was Thompson's view that thought in both capitalist and Marxist societies was hemmed in within pre-determined limits. It is true that people in capitalist society are encouraged to think of themselves as free. More

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<sup>2</sup>It would not, however, be difficult to demonstrate that, despite a self-imposed period of eight years political silence, Thompson did not alter his views: see Thompson, "An Open Letter," passim and especially 396.

exactly, they are encouraged to think of themselves as autonomous individuals, each pursuing their own goals within the context of a self-regulating market. The market economy is conceived in a way analogous to that of the dialectic within Marxist thought; it is beyond the effective control of man's agency. Because man's freedom in western societies is defined as the freedom of the individual consumer, then those who advocate a conception of freedom in a social rather than an individualist sense can be presented as a threat to the individual's freedom. For Thompson, this sense of freedom is a form of non-freedom. People do not pursue goals which they have consciously chosen for themselves; rather, their goals are defined for them.

One of the ways in which people can define themselves in non-economic ways is through the medium of creative literature. The creative or utopian or poetic imagination can, Thompson has argued, define alternative values.<sup>3</sup> In chapters 1 and 2, I discussed Thompson's defence of this claim in terms of his understanding of the Romantic critique of industrial capitalism. This tradition, Thompson argued, sustained values which were more truly representative of man's humanity than those been advanced by capitalist interests. These values were those which were formed in primary human relationships; relationships of cooperation, mutuality and respect.

But this tradition also revealed a heuristic that Thompson believed to have particular value for political struggles in the present. One of Thompson's clearest statements of what he understood by this method can be seen from the manner in which he characterized Caudwell's work. Caudwell, Thompson argued, has a style which

...succeeds, in places, in conveying a metaphoric meaning which is not coincident with its apparent rational argument...[it] has, as it were, a dual life; a rational argument and a metaphoric and allusive life...

What is communicated is not just a new 'idea' (or an old idea freshly communicated) but a new way of seeing...such images maybe both concrete and conceptually ambiguous, in the sense that they cannot be

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<sup>3</sup>Thompson typically used these terms synonymously.

slotted into the categories which we have prepared in our minds to receive them....they challenge habitual mental routines...

His way of seeing, his mode of apprehension, was 'dialectical'...a way of seeing coincident and opposed potentialities within a single 'moment' and of following through the contradictory logic of ideological process. This strength is not only a way of seeing, it is a way of teaching others how to see. After Blake and Marx, this faculty of dialectical vision has been rare enough for us to regard it with a special respect. (my emphasis)<sup>4</sup>

Creative literature can reveal wants unrealized (and unrealizable) within the terms prescribed by existing conceptual frameworks. The following appraisal of Morris' communist utopia, News from Nowhere, is illustrative of Thompson's point:

In News from Nowhere...Morris...interweaves the dream and the conscious mind, counterpoising realism and romance...the narrative commences with humdrum everyday reality...passes into the dream of past or future, and returns at the end to the everyday world. But, unlike The Eve of St. Agnes of his poetic master, Keats...reality is allowed to enter the heart of the dream itself, in the person of Morris the narrator; and it is reality which is made more poignant by the dream when we come back to the real world at the end.

Never for long, in News from Nowhere, does Morris allow us to forget this sense of tension between the real and the 'ideal'. This is the role which he constructs for himself as the narrator. As we visit London, listen to the conversations with old Hammond, hear the characters discuss the problems of human morality, we do not relapse into dream - we are sometimes made uncomfortably awake. We are made to question continually our own society. Our own values and lives. This is why the story engages our feelings, moves us and changes us, as all serious art must do. We cannot sit back as passive spectators, looking at a pretty never-never land. Always we are conscious of Morris' troubled brow, his

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<sup>4</sup>Thompson, "Caudwell," 237-38. One should compare this argument with: (i) Thompson, "London," (especially 21-22); (ii) Thompson, William Morris (1976), (especially 790-91, 793). One should also note the dates of publication of the Caudwell, Blake and Morris studies, which came out at about the same time as The Poverty of Theory. In one sense, The Poverty was not merely a critique of theoretical imperialism, it also affirmed the importance of utopian thought. Another of Thompson's articles is suggestive of this interpretation: E.P. Thompson, "Comment: On Common Values? An Argument," Stand, 20 (2), 1979, 48-54 (especially 51, 54). While this dissertation will not attempt to prove this observation it is certainly worth consideration.

sense of not being a part of the scenes through which he moves. He is the link between our experience and the future.<sup>5</sup>

Morris, Thompson continued, created a tension between an unbearable present and a possible future where the wants denied by the present had been realized. But the tension was not merely within the text itself. Morris also created a tension within the reader. Since creative literature can be regarded as a highly sophisticated articulation of social consciousness, the tension that Thompson referred to is that tension between social being and social consciousness which lies at the heart of the Marxist dialectic. This tension can also be characterized as the contradiction between reality and aspiration. That Thompson intended this type of reading can be seen from his insistence that Morris' work juxtaposed realism and romance, the present and a conceivable future.

Morris' future was not the product of vacuous speculations. It was related directly to the present in the sense that it articulated the realization of wants that the present denied. Moreover, these were wants that those characters whom Morris encountered in the narrative had defined for themselves and acted in their past to secure. Social being (reality) is experienced in different ways. Capitalist society does promote the wants of some, but it does not promote the wants of everyone with equal efficacy. It was those wants which were denied by capitalist social relations, and their organizing concepts, that Morris' utopian future sought to give expression to. These wants were wants which were given, but frustrated, by experience in the present. Morris' utopia was related to the present in yet another way. It was not only that social being impinged upon social consciousness (expressed in creative literature) but that social consciousness, in turn, acted upon social being: "the story engages our feelings, moves us and changes us." (my emphasis)

It was Thompson's contention, then, that imaginative literature can and should play a leading role in shaping alternative possibilities to the present: "art operates upon men and

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<sup>5</sup>Thompson, William Morris (1955), 804.



changes them affectively."<sup>6</sup> That is, art can play a role in structuring men's values. In commenting upon the overall significance of Morris' work, for example, he wrote that

...one part of Morris' achievement lies in the open, exploratory character of utopianism: its leap out of the kingdom of necessity into an imagined kingdom of freedom in which desire may actually indicate choices or impose itself as need; and its innocence of system and its refusal to be cashed in the same medium of exchange as "concept", "mind", "knowledge" or political text. (my emphasis)<sup>7</sup>

Thompson's reading of the Romantic tradition made two important claims for poetry. First, in breaking free of the assumptions of existing society, the poet was able to think about that society in ways that were not sanctioned by existing conceptual frameworks. Poetry can function as " 'a consciousness-expanding device'."<sup>8</sup> Second, poetry could shape values, more genuinely expressive of man's humanity, which were denied by this society. Hence, the tension that the poet created between the world as it is and as it could be, might move men to realize desires which were denied in the present. The poet would help men define goals which were more directly related to their needs and interests. In acting to secure these goals men could be said to be asserting their will as opposed to pursuing goals defined for them.

The functions which Thompson attributed to poetry can be identified at a number of points in his work. They are best summed up in the defence of utopianism which he made in his study of Morris. The utopian work, he argued, can play a purposive role in expanding political consciousness by 'educating desire' "to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire in different ways."<sup>9</sup> "Desire can...impose itself as a 'need'".

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<sup>6</sup>Thompson, "Caudwell," 249.

<sup>7</sup>Thompson, William Morris (1976), 798-99.

<sup>8</sup>E.P. Thompson, "Homage To Thomas McGrath," in Thompson, The Heavy Dancers, 330.

<sup>9</sup>Thompson, William Morris (1976), 791.

## II

In the light of the preceding discussion, one can say that Thompson's work sought to challenge the common sense of the Cold War by opposing to the priorities of its protagonists, a view of man and of human values which could not be contained within the conceptual frameworks of competing ideologies. For Thompson, these values can be located both in the past and the present:

...those values which men have affirmed in their past experience remain, in the present, an arsenal from which we choose - although I would wish to add that the arts and the experiential present are also value-formative.<sup>10</sup>

...value will be found, most often, in particular historical contexts, and in particular men and women's struggle with, or adjustment to, or love for, other particular women and men. (my emphasis)<sup>11</sup>

In these passages, Thompson located value in actual historical contexts and in the practices of real people. Neither can be discovered if one imposes one's own theoretical categories upon the historical material. But Thompson also assigned to the poet an important role in organizing and disclosing these values. Elsewhere, he wrote that

...the paucity of relevant poetic statements adjacent to public and social life - the kind of statement which might enable people to envisage political action as the carrier of significant value - may be a very substantial part of our problem. By "our problem" I...mean...the general problem of society void of aspirations, directionless. If we had better

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<sup>10</sup>Thompson, "An Open Letter," 359.

<sup>11</sup>Thompson, "Caudwell," 256.

poetry we might have less bad sociology and less empty and mendacious politics.<sup>12</sup>

This was written in 1979, but it could equally be said to characterize the accepted relationship between art and social life at any point during the Cold War.<sup>13</sup> This is a relationship which Thompson's work has repeatedly resisted. He understands just how difficult it is to aspire to goals other than those which are given by the present if our thought remains locked within the conceptual frameworks supplied by the present. The utopian imagination, however, can transcend the limitations imposed by these categories. If the poet is prepared to accept the legitimacy of different experiences, and not mediate these through abstractions, then he can say something different and important about man's past, present and future.

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Thompson's discussion of the Romantic poets suggested that they were defending values close to those defended by the dispossessed Radical craftsmen. The most important reason why the latter failed to fulfil their aspirations is that they lacked a clear understanding of the precise nature of the social forces they were confronting. They expressed their goals in a language that was rapidly becoming irrelevant. Indeed, many radical leaders encouraged working people to think in terms that did not allow them to draw a clear distinction between their interests and those of the ascendant bourgeoisie. Differing and irreconcilable interests were collapsed within a

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<sup>12</sup>Thompson, "Comment," 50.

<sup>13</sup>This thought has been with Thompson for over four decades. In chapter 5, for example, I discussed Thompson's criticism of the prevailing apathy in terms of the ways in which the Cold War had marginalized the utopian initiative. And this criticism can be found in some of his earliest published work: E.P. Thompson, "Poetry's Not So Easy," Our Time, June 1948, 248-49; E.P. Thompson, "A New Poet," Our Time, June 1949, 156-59.



constitutional idiom; an idiom which identified a shared enemy in 'Old Corruption'. Although Wordsworth and Coleridge distanced themselves from political affairs and returned 'to the national fold', Blake's position was different. He too was isolated from the post-war struggles, but he had also advanced to a clear understanding of the machinations of capitalist society. Had working people been aware of his ideas, Thompson implied, rather than relying upon ideas which did not fundamentally challenge the premises of this society - because they were in many ways drawn from a common stock of meanings which gave this society its "common sense" - then a revolutionary transition would have occurred. It would have occurred because the demands which working people made could not have been contained within the framework of meanings sustaining capitalism.

One can state the contemporary relevance of this type of argument in the following manner. As long as people continue to define political strategies in terms given by the ideological consensus of the present, it will not be possible to envisage change in any meaningful sense. It is true that grievances will express themselves in many ways, but unless these grievances are guided and given some direction to point toward, the energies which they embody will be squandered. In the 'postscript' to the second edition of his biography on Morris Thompson emphasized this point:

For if Morris was emphatically a revolutionary socialist, he didn't suppose the "the Revolution" would, at one throw, "liberate" some healthy mass of "barbarianism", some underground reserves of repressed desire. And if he toyed with such notions on his first commitment to "the cause" between 1883 and 1885, he was rescued by...the sobering experience of very hard and mundane political agitation. Neither his audience nor his comrades...were "barbarians" of that kind; nor, as he knew far better than most Victorian intellectuals, out of his immense practical experience in the decorative arts, was the "ordinary man in the street" an unspoiled vessel of true barbaric art...The "false consciousness of "civilization" was not seen by him as masking some healthy proletarian unconscious. Necessity would itself impel the workers into struggle, but this struggle could attain no goal unless the goal was located by desire and a strategy for its attainment prescribed by socialist theory. First, we must have "courage enough to will"; "conscious hope" must match the response to commercial ruin. Moreover, if socialists failed to educate desire, and to enlarge this conscious hope, "to sustain steadily their due claim to that fullness and completeness of life which no class system can give them", then they would the more easily fall victim of the "humbug" of "a kind of



sham socialism". Or, if the existing society failed to provide even that, and "if we give it all up into the hands of necessity", the result will be a volcanic disaster. The end itself was unobtainable without the prior education of desire or need. And science cannot tell us what to desire or how to desire. Morris saw it as a task of socialists (his own first task) to help people find out their wants, to encourage them to want more, to challenge them to want differently, and to envisage a society of the future in which people, freed at last of necessity, might choose between different wants. "It is to stir you up not to be contented with a little that I am here tonight."<sup>14</sup>

Thompson's views summarize the themes which this study has explored. Many contemporary intellectuals, like their Victorian predecessors, assumed that they could define the path to socialism rather than encouraging working people to define this direction for themselves. For Thompson, it was incumbent upon intellectuals to assist working people discover their own wants and to show them how these wants were denied by existing social arrangements. Once working people had a clear sense of the distinctive character of their interests they would come to realize, through their attempts to assert these interests, that these wants could not be accommodated within the existing society.

One of Thompson's principal objectives in writing The Making was to demonstrate that working people did have the capacity to think and act for themselves. Moreover, he attempted to show that the aspirations which working people advanced did not have to be couched in terms of bourgeois political economy. The idea that working people were not capable of advancing towards a distinctive class consciousness was an intellectual fallacy promoted by Old Left and New Left alike. The effect of this fallacy was to deny any possibility of change: unless intellectuals appealed to the actual needs and interests of working people, rather than assuming that they knew in advance what these were or should be, they would not command their attention. The discussion

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<sup>14</sup>Thompson, William Morris (1976), 805-6.

in chapters 2 and 6 illustrated the way in which Thompson utilized historical argument to make this political point.

When Thompson wrote of necessity impelling people to action he meant that people would respond to changes which threatened their livelihoods. But the responses, like those of the artisans who formed the focal point of The Making, would be politically limited unless they were 'goal-oriented.' And the goals had to be defined outside the framework of reference of capitalist society. In other words, the socialist intellectual had to encourage working people to think of themselves in terms other than 'economic men': "the direct resistance of exploited economic men...can often be bought off in economic ways."<sup>15</sup> The Marxist and social democratic Left (and, indirectly, of the ULR tendency) had, like many of the leaders of the early working class movement failed in this respect. It is less easy to buy people off in the absence of a consensus ad idem.

Thompson argued that Morris' first task was to help people to discover their wants. In effect, these wants can only be discovered if one eschews the common sense of the day, for this encourages people to want wants which are not in everyone's best interests. One might say that Thompson defined the first duty of socialist intellectual as expanding people's consciousness; to get them to think differently. This task can be regarded as central to Thompson's own historical and political work. We have seen the importance which he attached to the utopian imagination in helping working people to think differently about their relationship to the wider society. And one can readily understand his criticisms of those who have sought to limit man's consciousness. Whether the object of his critique be the disenchanted Romantic poet or communist intellectual, the methodist preacher or the Stalinist ideologue, he was concerned to specify the manner in which they limited the area of rational choice. Man cannot be an agent if he is not free to make choices and act to secure their realization.

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<sup>15</sup>Thompson, "Caudwell," 269.



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