

## E. P. Thompson: A Life of Struggle

François JARRIGE

**A great historian of the English working class, a major intellectual figure in debates surrounding Marxism in the years 1960-1970, and an anti-nuclear activist who initiated an environmentalist critique of capitalism—such were the many faces of Edward Palmer Thompson, whose work deeply permeates the different social sciences to this day.**

Long little known in France, the work of English historian E. P. Thompson has now gained significant recognition, as reflected in recent translations and publications.<sup>1</sup> A major figure of British historiography and an insatiable activist, Thompson developed an original body of work while simultaneously waging virulent political battles. His influence rapidly reached beyond the mere world of historians: By renewing the study of social classes and the law, by placing actors and their experience at the heart of his thinking, and by exploring the roots of capitalism and popular resistance in original ways, he left his mark on the social sciences of the second half of the twentieth century. Though he was the object of intense criticism during his lifetime, he has been repeatedly canonized since his death in 1993. A look back at the trajectory and commitments of one of the great intellectual figures of the twentieth century is therefore essential.

### The “Decade of Heroes”

Thompson was born into a cosmopolitan family (his father taught Bengali after having lived in India), in Oxford, in 1924. The period that ran from the Popular Front to the Liberation played a decisive role in his intellectual and political formation. He later called it the “decade of Heroes”—a period of troubles and difficulties, but also one of courage and hope.<sup>2</sup> In 1942, while still a student at Cambridge, he joined the small British Communist Party. He then served in the Army, participating in military campaigns in North Africa and Italy. His older brother, who had become a Communist in the wake of the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War and the persecutions of Hitler, died in 1944 while serving as liaison between the British Army and Bulgarian communists and antifascist partisans. Thompson was deeply affected by this death.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See for instance the new paperback edition, published in 2012 in the collection “Point Histoire,” of *Formation de la classe ouvrière anglaise (The Making of the English Working Class)*; the first (partial) translation of *Whigs and Hunters* (1975) as *La guerre des forêts. Luttés sociales dans l’Angleterre du XVIIIe siècle*, presented by Philippe Minard, Paris, La Découverte, 2014; the translation of *Customs in Common* (1991) by Jean Boutier and Arundhati Virmani as *Les Usages de la coutume. Traditions et résistances populaires en Angleterre (XVIIe-XIXe siècle)*, Paris, EHESS/Gallimard/Seuil, 2015; moreover, a study day dedicated to the relations between Thompson and France, which brought together French and British researchers, was organized at Oxford in November 2013 by the EHESS and the *Maison Française d’Oxford*.

<sup>2</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, London, Merlin Press, 1979, p. 264.

<sup>3</sup> One of the best biographies of Thompson is Bryan Palmer’s, which was published shortly after his death: *E. P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions*, London, Verso, 1994.

Back in England, Thompson shared in the euphoria of victory and celebrated the ongoing strikes and major social reforms. He also participated, in 1946-1947, in the construction of the “Youth Railroad” in the new socialist Yugoslavia, alongside peasants, workers and students; this life-changing experience made him especially sensitive to the “self-activity” of the people.<sup>4</sup> Thompson then settled in the North of England, south of the Pennines, in a region that had undergone industrialization in the nineteenth century. In this place saturated with the memory of the labor movement, he took part in the popular education movement and taught adults at Leeds University, this being the only position available for a young Communist intellectual at the time.

The beginnings of the Cold War and the memory of the Resistance to Nazism kept Thompson close to the Communist Party. He campaigned against the Korean War, chaired the Halifax Peace Committee, and then became secretary of the Yorkshire Federation of Peace Organizations while also editing its local journal. During that period, he became attracted to literature. His first major work was dedicated to the figure of William Morris, whom he tried to rehabilitate as a socialist thinker and a forgotten figure of European communism.<sup>5</sup> His interest in the anti-industrialist, romantic socialism of Morris no doubt provided him with the resources to gradually move away from the Communist orthodoxy that prevailed at the time.

### **From Communist Historian to Humanist Socialist**

In the 1950s, Thompson belonged to the Communist Party Historians Group, and gradually became one of its figureheads. His first works were born out of the intellectual emulation that accompanied the 1952 creation of *Past and Present*—a journal founded at the initiative of such Communist historians as Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, Rodney Hilton, and George Rudé, all of whom were anxious to break with the conservatism that dominated the British academic field at the time.<sup>6</sup> The journal provided a forum for debate that was largely open to non-Marxist historians. Whereas in France Communist intellectuals were under the strong supervision of the Party, in Britain those ties were looser, and historians were in fact at the forefront of the opposition to the movement’s official line. The year 1956, marked by the Khrushchev report on Stalin’s crimes and the bloody suppression of the Hungarian uprising, constituted a turning point. Thompson then broke with the Party leadership and relentlessly denounced the Soviet regime.<sup>7</sup>

The following year, Thompson founded the *New Reasoner* (named so after a radical periodical of the nineteenth century) with his friend John Saville, in order to contribute to the emerging reflection on the future of socialism. As was the case with the *Socialisme ou Barbarie*

---

<sup>4</sup> E. P. Thompson, “Interview with E. P. Thompson,” in Henry Abelove, *Visions of History*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1976, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1955.

<sup>6</sup> Thompson, however, joined the editorial board only after 1968. See Eric Hobsbawm, Rodney Hilton, and Christopher Hill, “Past and Present: Origins and Early Years”, *Past and Present*, 100, 1983, pp. 3-14.

<sup>7</sup> Much has been written on this generation of Marxist historians. See for instance Harvey J. Kaye, “E. P. Thompson, the British Marxist Historical Tradition and the Contemporary Crisis,” in *The Education of Desire: Marxists and the Writing of History*, London, Routledge, 1992 pp. 98-115; Donald Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left and the Origins of Cultural Studies*, Duke UP, Durham, 1997; in French, Xavier Lafrance’s interesting presentation, “Edward Palmer Thompson,” in Jonathan Martineau (ed.), *Marxisme anglo-saxon: figures contemporaines*, Montréal, Lux Éditeur, 2013, pp. 69-98.

experiment conducted at the same time in France around Claude Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis, the aim of this journal was to restore the moral credibility of the communist project by denouncing Stalinist dogma, deviations, and aporias. From the first issue, Thompson defended a “humanist socialism” that would recognize the critical autonomy of individuals against the abstraction of productive forces, and attacked Stalinism, which, like capitalism, “reduced human beings to things, commodities or appendages to machines.”<sup>8</sup> In 1960, he took part in the creation of the *New Left Review*, which became the intellectual platform of the New Left whose aim was to revisit Marxism apart from Stalinist orthodoxy. However, in 1962, Thompson left the editorial board after breaking with the new line promoted by Perry Anderson, which he considered to be both too abstract and too theoretical and, most importantly, too disconnected from the labor movement.

In short, when *The Making of the English Working Class* appeared in 1963, Thompson was politically isolated. This remarkable book nevertheless gained him wide recognition, and suddenly caused him to be celebrated as both a Marxist theoretician and a pioneer of a renewed social history. Written between the late 1950s and 1963, the book was quickly regarded as a major work, with Hobsbawm comparing it to an “erupting historical volcano.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, *The Making of the English Working Class* bore the imprint of its author’s theoretical and political commitments, and inflected historical thinking in several decisive ways. To begin, it proposed a “history from below,” that is to say, a history of marginality, revolt and resistance that pays close attention to the people’s autonomy of thought and action.<sup>10</sup> In sixteen very dense chapters, each illuminating one aspect of England’s “industrial revolution” (e.g., the popular traditions of the eighteenth century, Methodism, the social struggles of the Luddite up to the first unions), Thompson revived the “heroic culture” of those who sought to keep the “liberty tree” alive. Against the economism and determinism conveyed by a simplified Marxism, Thompson emphasized the experience and agency of actors. Against economic reductionism, he aimed to reconceptualize historical materialism and to rethink social classes.<sup>11</sup>

For him, “class” was neither a “structure” nor a “category,” but “something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships.” A social class is therefore the social and political expression of a conflictual process grounded in the experiences of men and women conceived as historical actors. By “class consciousness,” Thompson referred to the way in which these experiences are translated “in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms.” His writing was original because it no longer viewed history as unfolding through organizations alone, and because it refused to consider actors as passive receptacles of ideas that exceed them. “No ideology is wholly absorbed by its adherents,” he writes, “it breaks down in practice in a thousand ways under the criticism of impulse and of experience.” In these conditions, the making of the working class could not be reduced to a simple mechanical process; it “is a fact of political and cultural, as much as of economic history.

---

<sup>8</sup> E. P. Thompson, “Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines,” *The New Reasoner*, 1, Summer 1957, pp. 105-143.

<sup>9</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times. A Twentieth-Century Life*, London, Abacus Book, 2002, p. 214

<sup>10</sup> E. P. Thompson, “History from Below,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 April 1966, pp. 279-80.

<sup>11</sup> William H. Sewell, “How Classes are Made: Critical Reflections on E. P. Thompson’s Theory of Working Class Formation”, in *E. P. Thompson: Critical perspectives*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1990.

It was not the spontaneous generation of the factory system. [...] The working class made itself as much as it was made.”<sup>12</sup>

While Thompson was largely unknown outside the circles of the radical left prior to the publication of his book, the latter propelled him to the center of world historiography in just a few years. By initiating a non-reductionist historical exploration of social classes, Thompson went against the grain of dominant intellectual traditions. He opposed economic history, which drew on classical political economy, as much as on Marxist analyses, which reduced classes to mere economic relations of production. In addition, by rejecting simplistic determinisms, he introduced a more reflexive approach towards the major categories and objects of the social sciences, while also granting autonomy of judgment and action to actors whom he sought to “rescue [...] from the enormous condescension of posterity.”<sup>13</sup> And yet, when the book was published, the response was far from unanimous, with some denouncing Thompson’s “romanticism” and “theoretical presuppositions.” His interpretations were sometimes considered excessive and his reading of the “Industrial Revolution” overly “alarmist.” Despite the controversy, which was kindled by the radicalism of his interpretations and the passion of his prose, the book quickly became a classic in Britain. It was republished in paperback in 1968, before being translated and commented upon in various countries.<sup>14</sup> The book first circulated in the Anglo-American world: it was widely read and discussed on US campuses, and, in the 1970s, it influenced the early works of young radical historians in India—later gathered under the label of “Subaltern Studies”—who undertook research on popular resistances to imperialism and capitalism. By the 1980s, Thompson had become one of the most cited twentieth-century historians in the world,<sup>15</sup> even though the logic of appropriation of his work varied between disciplines and countries—as is illustrated by the case of France, where *The Making of the English Working Class* was translated only in 1988.

### **The Time of Consecration and Controversy**

The years between the publication of *The Making of the English Working Class* and Thompson’s powerful comeback in the political arena in 1980 were especially prolific and productive intellectually. In 1965, Thompson left Yorkshire and settled in the Midlands; there, he became director of the Center for the Study of Social History at the very young Warwick University, which rapidly became a center of attraction for talented young historians. Though this stable institutional position did not last long—given that he noisily resigned in 1971 to protest against the growing subservience of the university to private interests—it did allow him to initiate numerous studies.

After 1965, Thompson pursued his work by examining the period prior to the making of the working class. In several landmark texts, he renewed the historiography of the English

---

<sup>12</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, London, IICA, 1963, pp. 9, 10, 392, 194.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> For a brief presentation of those debates and the book’s reception, see F. Jarrige, “Edward P. Thompson, l’historien radical,” preface to *La Formation de la classe ouvrière*, *op. cit.*, pp. I-XXVI; F. K. Donnelly, “Ideology and Early English Working-Class History: Edward Thompson and His Critics,” *Social History*, 1(2), May 1976, pp. 219-238.

<sup>15</sup> According to the *Arts & Humanities Citation Index*, as quoted by Eric Hobsbawm in the obituary he published after Thompson’s death: “E. P. Thompson: Obituary” *The Independent*, 30 August 1993.

eighteenth century, and deepened the study of capitalism and of resistance to domination.<sup>16</sup> Thus, in 1967, he explored the changes in people's relation to time as well as the new "systems of power" introduced by industrial capitalism. He showed that the latter did not limit itself to economic exploitation, but also shaped the organization of time and emerging subjectivities.<sup>17</sup> In several other highly influential articles, he re-examined the popular cultures of the eighteenth century as they manifested themselves in such practices as grain riots or poaching.

The notion of "moral economy," which Thompson introduced in 1963 and explicated in a major article published in 1971, is probably his most widely discussed proposition. It was aimed at construing the actions of rioting crowds as disciplined and rational popular practices, rather than as mere instinctive reactions to hunger.<sup>18</sup> The author's intellectual coup was to introduce a "moral" dimension to the Marxist analysis of social relations. This "moral economy" of the poor or the crowd designated "a traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community,"<sup>19</sup> which implied that systems of norms and obligations shape popular actions. The notion has been under debate for the last forty years, inviting criticism as much as praise. The first to take hold of it was the anthropologist James C. Scott, who went searching for the "moral economy" of peasants in Southeast Asia. Subsequently, many researchers transposed this notion, which was coined to describe the action of eighteenth century English peasants, to other contexts—e.g., to the so-called developing countries, but also to industrial workers, and even to the field of science production.<sup>20</sup> In 1991, Thompson himself reviewed the uses of this notion and the "controversy" it gave rise to: "Nothing has made my critics angrier than the notion that a food rioter might have been more 'moral' than a disciple of Dr Adam Smith," although, he added, "that was not my meaning." "Moral economy" initially referred to the forms of organization of the old peasant society, namely the fact that "each part is related to the whole and each member acknowledges her/his several duties and obligations."<sup>21</sup> Faced with the proliferation of uses of the concept, Thompson himself restricted its meaning. The debate has raged on thereafter regarding its contours, limitations, and possible epistemological contributions.<sup>22</sup>

In his works, Thompson tirelessly continued to try and "rescue" the actors of the past "from the enormous condescension of posterity." It is this ambition that lies behind his extensive investigation of poachers, through which he proposed to rethink the role of law in society. In his

---

<sup>16</sup> A complete bibliography of Thompson's works was published in Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland (eds.), *E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives*, op. cit., pp. 276-280.

<sup>17</sup> E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism," *Past and Present*, 38, 1967.

<sup>18</sup> E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the 18th Century," *Past and Present*, 50, 1971, reprinted in *Customs in Common*, New York, Penguin Books, 1993 [1991], pp. 185-258.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>20</sup> See James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1976, p. 8; Andrew Charlesworth and Adrian Randall (eds.), *Moral Economy and Popular Protest: Crowds, Conflict and Authority*, London, MacMillan, 2000; Lorraine Daston, *L'économie morale des sciences modernes. Jugements, émotions et valeurs*, Paris, La Découverte, 2014 (presented by Stéphane Van Damme).

<sup>21</sup> E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy Reviewed," in *Customs in Common*, op. cit. p. 271.

<sup>22</sup> In French, see the analyses and clarifications of Dominique Margairaz and Philippe Minard, "Marché des subsistances et économie morale: ce que 'taxer' veut dire," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 352, 2008, pp. 53-99; or those of Didier Fassin, "Les économies morales revisitées," *Annales HSS*, Nov.-Dec. 2009, 6, pp. 1237-1266.

book *Whigs and Hunters* (1975), he opposed the reductive interpretation put forward by “some theorists [...] unable to see the law except in terms of ‘the fuzz’ setting about inoffensive demonstrators or cannabis-smokers.” Against overly formalistic or instrumental approaches, Thompson anticipated the upcoming epistemological renewals by showing that “people are not as stupid as some structuralist philosophers suppose them to be,” and that they know how to mobilize the law to serve their own cause. Indeed, “the law had been less an instrument of class power than a central arena of conflict.”<sup>23</sup>

All these rich and theoretically fruitful historical investigations are inseparable from the battles that Thompson waged in parallel with “structural” Marxism. During the 1960s, Thompson had been defeated and pushed into the political minority. Taking advantage of his new reputation and recognition as a historian, he sought to pursue the struggle on the terrain of ideas.<sup>24</sup> Thus, he debated with the New Left’s rising stars, defending, for example, the legacy of British political radicalism against those who lamented the lack of a Marxist tradition in Britain.<sup>25</sup> The conflict was also historiographical, and focused for instance on the description of the English bourgeoisie in the seventeenth century or on the interpretation of reformist traditions in the British labor movement. In particular, Thompson criticized the theoretical illusions of Perry Anderson, whom he saw as a victim of his own fascination with French philosophers; he struggled especially against the seduction exercised by structuralist Marxism and the “idealism” of Louis Althusser on the British intellectual left.<sup>26</sup> Contrary to what has sometimes been said, Thompson was not opposed to theory, but asked that it be confronted with historical dynamics. As Xavier Lafrance explains, he called on philosophers to “get off the lofty spheres of ‘theoretical practice’ and to develop concepts that are adequate to the analysis of historical processes.”<sup>27</sup>

Yet unlike the Polish dissident philosopher Leszek Kolakowski, whom he opposed in the mid-1970s in a famous controversy concerning the interpretation of Marxism, Thompson continued to define himself as a socialist and to claim affiliation with the Marxist tradition. He argued that the latter was in no way reducible to its twentieth century caricature or to the crimes of Stalin,<sup>28</sup> and insisted on the existence of a dissenting tradition and on possible alternatives to Stalinist Marxism. At the time, he was close to the sociologist Raymond Williams; he also contributed to drafting the *May Day Manifesto* (1967-1968), a famous text of the New Left that distanced itself from the myths of modernization—this “technocratic model of society, conflict-free and politically neutral, dissolving genuine social conflicts and issues in the abstractions of ‘the scientific revolution,’ ‘consensus,’ ‘productivity.’” In the 1990s, Michael Löwy proposed to interpret Thompson’s work as an attempt to reformulate “in heterodox Marxist terms, [...] the Romantic tradition of critique of industrial capitalist civilization.”<sup>29</sup> Thompson’s originality and

---

<sup>23</sup> E. P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1975, pp. 262-264.

<sup>24</sup> Scott Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory: E. P. Thompson, the New Left and Postwar British Politics*, Manchester University Press, 2011, p. 119.

<sup>25</sup> E. P. Thompson, “The Peculiarities of the English,” *The Socialist Register*, 1965, re-edited in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, London, Merlin Press, 1978.

<sup>26</sup> Notably in his essay *The Poverty of Theory: Or, an Orrery of Errors*, published in 1979 in London in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*.

<sup>27</sup> Xavier Lafrance, “Edward Palmer Thompson,” in Jonathan Martineau (ed.), *Marxisme anglo-saxon, op. cit.* p. 81.

<sup>28</sup> In 1973, Thompson published “An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski” in *The Socialist Register*. Kolakowski responded the following year in an essay entitled “My Correct Views on Everything.”

<sup>29</sup> Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, “Le courant romantique dans les sciences sociales en Angleterre: Edward P. Thompson et Raymond Williams,” *L’Homme et la société*, 1993-4, 110, p. 43.

political isolation stemmed from his rejection of modernism—whether of the left or the right—that is, his refusal to adhere too easily to the ideology of linear and inevitable progress that had served to cement industrial societies after 1945.

This aspect of Thompson's romantic Marxism is actually key to understanding his work and commitments, but also the many misunderstandings and criticisms that these have provoked. Like other thinkers of anti-industrialist, romantic socialism—for instance, Lewis Mumford who wrote in the US in the same period—Thompson attempted to forge an alternative path. He searched for it in the past, in long forgotten intellectual traditions, but also in popular resistances to capitalism. In one of his last texts, he explicated his project as follows. Economic man and capitalist modernity have reshaped needs and opened a path that “may threaten the [human] species itself (both South and North) with ecological catastrophe,” but it is the presuppositions now shared by both the right-wing liberals and the “state communists” that ought to be challenged. “We shall not ever return to pre-capitalist human nature, yet a reminder of its alternative needs, expectations and codes may renew our sense of our nature's range of possibilities.” History can help us to imagine the new human nature that will have to be invented when the models of capitalism and “state communism” are exhausted.<sup>30</sup>

### **In the Face of Exterminism**

Thus, Thompson became a widely read and celebrated historian after 1968. His writings resonated with the political and theoretical renewals that were unfolding in the 1970s. His critique of industrial illusions was especially in tune with the rise of political ecology, and his interest in culture, in actors, and in their experiences provided tools to renew the social sciences. In North America, he was read on campuses by student protesters who tried to reinvent social history and defended a new approach to the labor movement. Also during those years, he travelled and gave numerous lectures around the world. In 1976-1977, he went to India, where he left his mark on young radical historians who later gathered under the label of “Subaltern Studies.”<sup>31</sup> In France, he participated with Hobsbawm in the social history round tables organized by Clemens Heller in Paris.<sup>32</sup> However, the late 1970s marked an apparent break in the trajectory of Thompson, who decided to put aside his work as a historian in order to devote himself to the anti-nuclear movement. In his beautiful testimony, Hobsbawm—the other great figure of Marxist historiography in Britain—expressed regret about a choice that led Thompson to turn from history and to leave unfinished “his potentially epoch-making historical work.”<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, Thompson's anti-nuclear engagement was nothing new, and his activism was in continuity with his earlier work and positions. In 1979-1980, as the Cold War was rekindled in ways that reinforced his pessimism, Thompson contributed to drafting the *Appeal for European Nuclear Disarmament* in response to NATO's decision to install missiles in Britain and on the European continent. In this text, he called for a nuclear-free Europe and worried about “the

---

<sup>30</sup> E. P. Thompson, “Introduction: Customs and Culture,” in *Customs in Common*, *op. cit.*, p. 15; E. P. Thompson, “Romanticism, Utopianism and Moralism: The Case of William Morris,” *New Left Review*, 99, Sept.-Oct. 1976.

<sup>31</sup> Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, “The Making of the Working Class: E. P. Thompson and Indian History,” *History Workshop Journal*, 43, Spring 1997, pp. 177-196.

<sup>32</sup> See the testimonies of Michelle Perrot and Patrick Fridenson: “Rencontres avec Eric Hobsbawm,” *Le Mouvement Social* 1/2013 (242), pp. 149-155.

<sup>33</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life*, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

increasing spread of nuclear reactors and the growth of the industry that installs them.”<sup>34</sup> As the liberal and militarist right came to power in England and the United States, Thompson became an active militant, breaking with the usual caution of the historical profession. Born in Britain, the movement rapidly spread throughout Europe, and gave rise to a vast and peaceful anti-nuclear campaign. Thompson dedicated himself to it with passion in the first half of the 1980s: he wrote dozens of articles for the European and American press, frequently appeared on television, and gave multiple conferences and interviews in England and abroad.<sup>35</sup> He attacked the two blocs, which caused him to be denounced both as a CIA agent and as a Soviet one, and urged his contemporaries to abandon the logic of the Cold War in order to reinvent a pacified society. In his view, just as the English workers of the early nineteenth century had rebelled against the new system of exploitation of industrial capitalism, citizens of the East and West had to rebel collectively against the indiscriminate development that was heading straight towards the thermonuclear meltdown. The notion of agency—or capacity to act—at the heart of his historical thinking remained central to his engagement. Against all fatalism, he called for a popular insurrection to resist the emerging abyss and invent a democratic Europe.

While most intellectuals of his generation lost interest in, or at least kept a prudent silence on the topic of nuclear technology, Thompson initiated a vast reflection to elucidate the issue. In a famous text that was widely commented upon and quickly translated only to be largely forgotten afterwards, he compared the “Satanic mills” of the nuclear age to the first factories of the industrial revolution. He questioned the kind of society that produces “the means of human extermination,” and put forward the concept of “exterminism” to account for it.<sup>36</sup> He outlined a historical and sociological analysis of nuclear technology and the arms industry according to which these tend to structure society as a whole: “Exterminism designates these characteristics of a society—expressed, in differing degrees, within its economy, its polity and its ideology—which thrust it in a direction whose outcome must be the extermination of multitudes.”<sup>37</sup> In a prophetic and alarmist tone for which he was much reproached afterwards, Thompson analyzed the irreversible and autonomous dynamics of industrial development in the atomic age, claiming that the latter tends to contaminate all of society, to militarize civilians, and to impose a modernizing framework which renders impossible all critical discourse. In his view, “secondary differences must be subordinated to the human ecological imperative.”<sup>38</sup>

When, in the late 1980s, the anti-nuclear movement lost momentum, Thompson completely withdrew from politics. He also appeared to renounce Marxism, and said that he had grown tired of the endless debates surrounding it. For all that, he was not one to abandon his ideals and surrender to the triumphant liberalism of the 1980s. He relentlessly criticized authoritarian ideologies, and refused to join the chorus of sycophants who praised the end of

---

<sup>34</sup> The text of the *Appeal for European Nuclear Disarmament* can be found in E. P. Thompson and Dan Smith (eds.): *Protest and Survive*. Monthly Review Press, 1981 [1980], p. 163.

<sup>35</sup> Michael D. Bess, “E. P. Thompson: The Historian as Activist,” *The American Historical Review*, 98(1), 1993, p. 34.

<sup>36</sup> His article “Notes on Exterminism: The Last Stage of Civilization” was first published in the *New Left Review* (121, May-June 1980) before being re-edited in several works and translated into French in E. P. Thompson, *L’exterminisme. Armement nucléaire et pacifisme*, Paris, PUF, 1983, at the initiative of Étienne Balibar, with responses and commentaries by Noam Chomsky, Rudolf Bahro and Raymond Williams.

<sup>37</sup> “Notes on Exterminism, the Last Stage of Civilization,” *op. cit.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

history, the universal triumph of liberal capitalism, or the American way of life. Whether “humanist,” “romantic” or “pacifist,” his socialism continued to adapt to current world issues so as to contest capitalist development and the ravages it brings. By combining the rigor and demands of historical writing with the passion of the polemicist, Thompson tried to hold together intellectual work and political engagement not by opposing them, but by making them nourish and reinforce each other. More than twenty years after his death, and as the financial and environmental crises accompany new imperialist wars, the horizon outlined by his work should remain ours.

Published in *Books&Ideas*, March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2016

© [booksandideas.net](http://booksandideas.net)