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*“A Traditional English (not British) Country Gentleman of the Radical Left”:  
understanding the making and unmaking of Edward Thompson’s English idiom<sup>1</sup>*

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**Abstract**

*This essay discusses E.P. Thompson's relationship with an English sense of tradition, exploring in particular his shifting characterisation of an English idiom in the three closely linked, polemical rejoinders he offered to the ideas advanced by major Marxist intellectual figures in the 1960s and 1970. It draws particular attention to themes that have either been overlooked or relegated to the margins by previous commentary – specifically, his rhetorical style and sense of audience. And it charts a notable, yet largely unnoticed, shift in his thinking in this period – from an appeal to an English sense of tradition to an assertion of the merit of historical forms of understanding.*

*Keywords: E P Thompson, English idiom, dissent, history, Marxist theory*

The arrival of the fiftieth anniversary of Edward Thompson’s watershed volume *The Making of the English Working Class* in 2013 provided the occasion for the continuing reappraisal of what one authority has declared to be ‘incontestably the single most influential work of English history of the post-war period’.<sup>2</sup> It has also stirred recollections of the extraordinary life and career of its author – a well-known public historian, a tenacious political campaigner and one of the last ‘public moralists’ of the last century.<sup>3</sup> Inevitably, it is in relation to the themes of class consciousness, political radicalism and state-orchestrated reaction that *The Making* is most commonly considered. Yet, in the light of a spate of recent historical studies examining ideas of nationhood, in general, and Englishness in particular, in the writing and thought of some of Britain’s leading intellectuals during the twentieth century, there is a growing imperative to address the questions of what weight should be placed upon his reference to an *English* working class, and how important English political and cultural traditions were for Thompson’s achievements and identity as a historian<sup>4</sup> -- a theme anticipated in the judgement offered by Eric Hobsbawm in his obituary of Thompson (published in *The Independent* on 30 August 1993), which is cited in the title of this article.<sup>5</sup>

These themes have certainly figured in the extensive literature that has grown up around Thompson’s writings. But they have, for the most part, either been critically dismissed as a symptom of the kind of moralistic, parochial and anti-theoretical style which some critics have characterised as pathologies of English culture,<sup>6</sup> or been downplayed in accounts that depict him as a major Marxist thinker and historian who happened to be in dialogue with a distinctive, local idiom,<sup>7</sup> or a figure whose Englishness was of an entirely predictable, limiting kind.<sup>8</sup> Equally, the temptation to apply generic labels to his work – for instance as an ‘Anglo-Marxist’, or as an exponent of ‘historical materialism’<sup>9</sup> -- has obviated careful consideration of the ways in which the different figures to whom such labels are applied framed their own relationships to English culture and tradition.

Hobsbawm’s suggestion, by contrast, that Thompson’s relationship with earlier traditions *and* styles of English radicalism may have been integral to his self-presentation as a public historian, and represented a form of performance that was, as he put it, ‘not always convincing’, has been only rarely pursued. In his recent study of Thompsonian thinking, however, Scott Hamilton has made these themes much more prominent.<sup>10</sup> He detects the

emergence of a major fault line in Thompson's thought in the 1960s and 1970s, as the latter abandoned his internationalist aspirations and reverted to an assertive style of English exceptionalism, which resulted in a period of political quiescence, on his part, and ultimately broke apart the 'circuits' that connected his historical scholarship and political ideas. Thompson's final years, Hamilton concludes, were characterised by 'intellectual decline' and the '[abandonment of] all hope of realizing the vision that had sustained him since his youth',<sup>11</sup> in an argument that offers a forcefully stated version of a longstanding idea – that there existed a quite discernibly distinct 'early' and 'late' Thompson in intellectual and political terms.<sup>12</sup>

Hamilton's assessment focuses primarily upon Thompson's relationship with Marxist theory, and does not explore how his radical patriotism maps onto his influential work as a historian or reflections on the nature of historical consciousness. In this article I seek to illuminate these themes and pursue Hobsbawm's intimation that Thompson's relationship with English tradition was more integral to the latter's persona as a historian, and more fraught than is often supposed. In order to do so, I draw particular attention to themes that have either been overlooked or relegated to the margins of commentary upon Thompson's work – specifically, his rhetorical style and sense of audience. I explore these aspects of his writing in the most contentious – and, for some critics, infamous -- essays that he produced during the middle years of his career:<sup>13</sup> his three separate, but closely linked, polemical rejoinders to the ideas advanced by major Marxist intellectual figures in the 1960s and 1970s. These were, in turn: *The Peculiarities of the English*, directed at the leading figures of the younger New Left generation: *An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski* which provided a public reprimand of this, formerly Marxist, Polish philosopher; and *The Poverty of Theory* which lampooned the avatar of Marxist structuralism, French philosopher Louis Althusser.<sup>14</sup> Despite some notable differences – *Peculiarities* involved an extended historical discussion of the deficiencies of his opponents' ideas, while the others reflected the philosophical inclinations of his selected opponents -- these works were intimately related to one another in that they offered an overlapping and evolving set of reflections on Thompson's own, ambivalent relationship with the lineage of English social criticism. He also began to develop in these pieces an extended set of reflections on the importance and distinctiveness of historical forms of understanding. These works remain among the least analysed, and most easily dismissed, of his writings, having fallen from view in part because the Marxist theoretical issues which they addressed have ceased to be of interest to many intellectuals.<sup>15</sup> But this neglect serves to occlude an appreciation of some of Thompson's most important reflections on English cultural criticism and the nature and importance of historical consciousness, and the connections between these themes in his evolving thought.

### *The making of Thompson's idiom*

Each of these essays was viewed by their author as an attempt to persuade his fellow leftists of the enduring importance of the spirit of "1956"<sup>16</sup> -- the moment of geo-political rupture associated with the Soviet invasion of Hungary and the Suez crisis, and profound personal and political upheaval following his, and many others', departure from the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).<sup>17</sup> It was in 1956 too that the idea of a 'New Left' outside the bounds of both Communist and Labour parties began to emerge, and Thompson became one of the leading, talismanic figures of the movement of people and ideas that rose to prominence and fell away sharply between 1957 and 1960 in Britain.<sup>18</sup>

It is well documented that Thompson saw this as an international current, believing that in its different manifestations and idioms, it could contribute to a more creative and morally enriched socialism that might reach across the ‘revisionism’ emerging in response to Soviet authoritarianism in Eastern Europe and the socialist currents gathering outside the Communist parties of the west.<sup>19</sup> But he also identified this new formation in distinctive local terms, seeing it as representing a new connection with the line of social criticism which ran ‘from the antinomianism of the radical civil war sects ... through Blake and an underground tradition of revolutionary opposition during the Napoleonic Wars to William Morris and the “socialist revival” at the end of the nineteenth century’.<sup>20</sup> This reflected a lineage that he first encountered in the radical political culture of Cambridge in the 1930s and which was imprinted by the influence upon him, and others, of cultural critic F.R. Leavis. Like other younger radicals (for instance Raymond Williams), he consciously sought to extend Leavisite criticism in a leftward direction as he was drawn towards the patriotic and libertarian ethos associated with the Communist Party in the Popular Front period.<sup>21</sup> These ideas were cemented and extended following his involvement in the richly talented historians’ group established by the CPGB in 1946 with the aims of wedding Marxist doctrines to local cultural traditions, and crafting a compelling narrative of progressive democratic development to which a wide range of social groups could relate.<sup>22</sup> A recurrent theme in the work and debates associated with this milieu involved the revival of interest in a radical and whiggish understanding of the growth of a popular ideal of English liberty, founded upon the myth of the reclamation of ancient rights.<sup>23</sup> Liberals and radicals drawn to the ethos of the party in the late 1930s shared the broad sense that the humanistic values at the heart of the English cultural inheritance were imperilled by the pathologies associated with modernity – notably the rise of fascism, the growth of the bureaucratic state and the untrammelled power of the modern corporation. Only Communism stood between the preservation of English cultural and political achievements and the descent into barbarism.

Both the left-Leavisite literary sensibility and whiggish radicalism of the historians’ group left indelible imprints upon Thompson. They established in his thought a privileged place for a sense of patriotic affiliation to a radical account of England’s historical development.<sup>24</sup> After the Second World War, he worked as an extra-mural tutor working for the Workers Education Association in Leeds<sup>25</sup> while he set up home with his family in Halifax. These experiences added to his thinking an appreciation of how rooted and self-assured labour movement culture was, in provincial cities and towns outside London.<sup>26</sup> This sensibility underwrote his confident appeal to a dissenting set of English traditions, and also informed his consistent references to an English (rather than British) national culture. This gesture of solidarity with a national-popular sensibility which he took care to distinguish from a British patriotism defined in relation to state institutions offered a telling instance of his intuitive feel for forms of identification that existed separately from the categories and ideologies associated with the dominant political order.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, despite growing up in Oxford, the son of a leading churchman and academic, and himself attending Cambridge, Thompson naturally adopted the *persona* of the provincial outsider willing to speak truth unto metropolitan power – be it intellectual or political in kind. It was often in the places and localities far from the sway of party elites, state patronage and the forces of law and order that new forms of radical understanding and development happened in many of his historical narratives.<sup>28</sup> In the course of these three notable polemics, he went further still, now presenting England itself as a place and a culture that had been marginalised and overlooked by a culturally powerful, deracinated Marxism. And while he did not challenge the fundamental, and largely invisible, conflation of the English people and the British state within the wider political culture in this period, Thompson – like George

Orwell before him – spoke very deliberately to an English sensibility, and only rarely lapsed into the prevailing convention of conflating English and British national identity.

It is, then, not surprising that in explaining what 1956 meant for him, Thompson returned repeatedly to the rich concatenation of thinking that he had imbibed as a young man, at the heart of which lay the lineage of English cultural criticism. What was more surprising was his conviction – until, as we shall see, the late 1970s – that this tradition could still provide a source of meaning and orientation to others. It was his painful recognition that this reference no longer spoke to key parts of his readership that forced a notable shift in the manner in which he characterised his growing alienation from Marxist theory in these years. Thompson invoked this lineage through repeated references to an ‘English idiom’, a term which he never proceeded to define or explicate at any length. This suggestive notion played some important roles in his writing in this period, though it has been entirely overlooked by the commentary upon him. Its singularity stems in part from the range of terms he was careful *not* to employ in relation to this home-grown set of ideas – notably his studious avoidance of the term ‘English tradition’, which was redolent of thinkers, like Michael Oakeshott, associated with the Conservative cause.<sup>29</sup> He also deliberately eschewed reference to national character which was, as Peter Mandler has shown, a staple of political thinking, on left and right, into the late twentieth century.<sup>30</sup>

Idiom was also selected as it carried a loose, double meaning upon which he continually traded. It signalled both a discernible and broadly continuous *manner of expression* – a set of stylistic and rhetorical features, moods and devices which were, he insisted, characteristic of English writing at its best, and simultaneously gestured at a more substantive *frame of reference* which he chose to characterise in subtly shifting ways during these years. At some points he would employ a ‘catch-all’, adjectival term like ‘empirical’ to convey a particular set of intellectual traits and habits. At others, he intimated a dissenting and radical sub-set of thinkers and writings whose relationship to the wider English idiom was rarely specified. Rather strikingly, while he employed this term repeatedly between the writings he produced from 1963 to 1973, it was notably absent from *The Poverty*, published in 1978.

Critical scrutiny of the manner in which he invoked this idiom sheds light upon some of the key arguments and moods at the heart of these essays, and also highlights the connections developing in his mind in these years between the insights and ideas which the English tradition of social criticism could contribute to a revived Marxism and the nature and importance of the historical method. Thompson’s evocation of a national idiom provided an important anchorage for some of the theoretical and epistemological positions he sought to advance against the opponents he selected, and a sense of Englishness (a term he mostly avoided) became the platform from which he launched his counterblasts. This notion was also, therefore, key to his arguments for the importance of appreciating both the national contexts and cultures in which political traditions developed, and the imperative for a historical sensibility to be revived. It was in order to ground and advance these ideas that he returned again and again to the romantic poets, dissenting English radicals, and the satirists and critics who figured in the literary culture at the heart of his intellectual imagination – William Cobbett and Jonathan Swift above all.<sup>31</sup> These references also, crucially, served to legitimise his own self-conscious and potent rhetorical style. And this he employed to the full in his jousts with the stiff, formulaic and hyper-theoretical philosophies he lampooned.<sup>32</sup> He thus introduced into these essays a much wider array of ‘voices’ and modes of address than were usual in the rarefied genre of Marxist theorising, and sought to establish an anti-establishment identity which proved simultaneously alluring and off-putting for different sections of his

readership, and contributed significantly to the antinomian reception which his writings elicited in this phase of his career. Rhetoric, as Wade Matthews has recently argued, was integral, not incidental, to the character and content of Thompson's antinomian arguments. It also represented an important determinant and barometer of the relationship he attempted to establish with his audience in these years.<sup>33</sup>

Thompson was never entirely comfortable or convincing when he was writing in the philosophical mode, or advancing theoretical arguments that did not reference specific historical situations. And in these essays, where he was attempting for long stretches to do both of these things, there is an abiding instability affecting the arguments that he makes, and some revealing tensions are discernible. By the end of the 1970s, he opted for a different way of characterising some of his main arguments, downplaying the notion of a nationally defined idiom and choosing instead to foreground a clash between different political generations in Europe from the 1930s onwards. But his commitment to the unique dimensions of English thought and culture remained central to his thinking, and left a considerable mark upon his ideas about the nature of historical understanding. It is apparent too in his polemical response to one of the key policy issues of the 1970s – the question of the UK's membership of the European Economic Community to which he remained vehemently opposed.<sup>34</sup>

### *An Idiom and Three Polemics*

In this section I explore some of the common and shifting meanings with which he endowed his sense of English idiom, a protean term which, rather typically, he did not subject to any kind of definition. And I aim also to shed light upon the somewhat puzzling disappearance of this construct from the last essay that is considered here – *The Poverty of Theory*.

#### 1) *The Peculiarities of the English* (1965)

*Peculiarities* remains one of the most acclaimed and best known of Thompson's essays. Its status rests primarily upon the quality of the historical arguments he developed in the course of his powerful response to the controversial, theoretically derived account of British historical development advanced by Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn. It expressed his hostility to the broader intellectual project and political stance which had become hallmarks of the journal he had been instrumental in co-founding, and which was the sole remaining institutional monument to the original New Left current in which Thompson had figured so prominently.<sup>35</sup> Under Anderson's editorship it had broken away from the ideas associated with this earlier formation, advocating the wholesale importation of a more rigorous body of Marxist theory from Continental Europe in order to jolt British socialists out of the bad habits acquired from the culture that was their host – moralism, parochialism and empiricism above all.<sup>36</sup> Thompson's response was presented as the long pent-up expression of a frustration he could no longer hold in check. To his dismay, the editors of the journal where he placed this piece – *Socialist Register* -- demanded that some of its most vituperative sections, and *ad hominem* moments, be excised before it was published (these were reinstated by Thompson in a later edition of essays that he published in 1978).<sup>37</sup> But, as with many of Thompson's chosen forms of self-presentation, this was a touch disingenuous. He had made his feelings known in meetings of the *NLR* board, which he attended until his resignation in 1963, and had already offered an extended account of his disquiet in a memorandum – *Where are We Now?* – that he circulated among its members in April 1963, shortly before he resigned.<sup>38</sup>

The argument he set out in this 15,000 word, typewritten essay focused to a considerable degree upon his deep antipathy to the depiction of English culture and historical development as backward and insular. He was especially critical of the fashionable tendency to depict leading French thinkers, most notably Jean-Paul Sartre, as the source of universal truths, rather than as the products of, and contributors to, a particular national culture. While the English idiom was being derided, he believed, the thinking of figures from French intellectual life were being held up as the bearers of theoretically derived truths. Thompson countered that ideas and arguments from the pantheon of English radicalism had been part of, and still contributed to, a wider international discourse on the left.

An English idiom was also used to reference, more generally, the terrain of national-cultural consciousness, from which *NLR*'s theoreticism was seeking to detach itself. In order to 'speak urgently to the people', it was necessary 'to understand their problems and their idiom'.<sup>39</sup> There was, he noted, a highly deracinated style apparent around the journal, and this was the antithesis of two commitments that were, in his mind, indissolubly linked -- an appreciation of the radical possibilities, as well as constraints, of the domestic social situation, and a sense of the importance within English culture of an historical perspective upon the complexities and conflicts of the past. He was, above all, insistent that an indigenous Marxist tradition existed in England, contrary to the caricature that circulated in *NLR* circles,<sup>40</sup> and proposed a contrast between the idea of a disaggregated Marxist tradition, which had gained a foothold in English life through its melding with empiricist thinking of various kinds, on the one hand, and the notion of a universalist set of Marxist doctrines, on the other. He closed by citing the support of the two other major works of the 1950s, with which his own *opus*, *The Making*, was widely connected -- Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society* and Richard Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy*.<sup>41</sup> These, he claimed, were all responses to the 'déracinée elements of the 1930s', that had, accordingly, 'accented their own "Englishness" (or Scottishness or Welshness) as a "brake", a corrective, a control'.<sup>42</sup>

In *Peculiarities*, which was written and published two years later, all these themes recurred, though now Thompson went to considerable lengths to debunk the overarching, Gramscian interpretation of British historical development that had recently been published by Anderson and Nairn. But now Thompson offered a more assertive and defensive account of the value and richness of England's exceptional idiom, and adopted a more nationally self-conscious style of self-presentation as a result. And there emerged within his writing a strain, which was to continue through his later essays, between this form of rhetoric and self-understanding, on the one hand, and his insistence that the insights and ethics of an English line of criticism formed an essential component of the renewal of European Marxism, on the other. But his repeated references to an English idiom served, somewhat confusingly, as a point of reference for both of these contrasting convictions.

Thompson summoned a vigorous defence of England's traditions and gleefully adopted the persona of the parochial and irreverent English critic -- the William Cobbett of his day, bitterly satirising the theoretical hubris of *NLR*. There followed numerous half-ironic, half-embittered pot-shots at his opponents' thinking, and a reprise of the ironically intended Francophobic tone that had surfaced in *Where are We Now?*. Thompson assumed a capacity and inclination for irony among his readership which may not have been entirely warranted,<sup>43</sup> and in adopting the persona of the 'stage-Englishman',<sup>44</sup> he opened himself up to the accusation that he had fallen back upon the kind of parochial patriotism to which Englishness was invariably prone. His bitterly comic posture had the effect too of rendering his palpable sense of isolation among the New Left something of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The assertive exceptionalism which these comic moments accentuated, undercut the more nuanced conception of the intellectual exchange between England and the European Continent which had been prominent in his earlier memorandum from 1963, and which was still a presence in 1965. He issued a forceful challenge, as in his previous text, to the characterisation of empiricism as the English ideology. The idiom, and its leading exponents, were invoked as paragons of the different, balancing elements that were integral to modern culture and thought. The values of both reason and desire were signalled as being imminent within it as he called upon figures such as Francis Bacon and Charles Darwin,<sup>45</sup> as well as William Blake, William Morris and William Wordsworth. Thompson also pointed to the dangers of treating nationally rooted traditions as hermetically sealed rivals, rather than living bodies of thought and tradition that had been formed in part through interaction and interchange upon each other. In this vein he notably refused to be drawn into defending Englishness *tout court*: ‘The point is not to rush in to the defence of British intellectual traditions, or to minimize their characteristic limitations. It is to call for a more collected and informed analysis, and one which takes some account of their historic strength’.<sup>46</sup>

This essay also revealed an emerging connection in his mind between his commitment to an historical appraisal of the specific character of national development and culture, and his rejection of Anderson’s and Nairn’s deployment of an unspecified ‘norm’ against which England was negatively measured.<sup>47</sup> And it was from this contention that there developed his notable insistence upon the imperative to redeem historical understanding, more generally, from the typologies and systems of Marxist theory. The development of a critical historical consciousness was now figured as a vital counter-weight to the fantasies and illusions of ‘Euro Marxism’, and was most likely to be cultivated through a renewed engagement with the tradition of English social criticism. The distinctive historiographical position which Thompson began to set out in the 1970s, and which has exercised considerable influence upon many historians, was thus closely intertwined with his reflections on nationhood and tradition in the English context.

## 2) *Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski* (1973)

In the wake of his public dispute with the leading lights of the New Left Thompson spent a number of years nursing a growing sense of grievance and political isolation, even though this was also the period when his intellectual reputation was probably at its highest, as a result of the impact of *The Making*.<sup>48</sup> He had been invited in 1965 to take up the position of inaugural Director of the Centre for social history at the University of Warwick, which he occupied for six years and which enabled the production of some of his finest historical scholarship.<sup>49</sup> But despite his growing stature in professional historical circles, Thompson remained acutely sensitive to the fall-out from his dispute with the New Left, and continued to lament the growing distance at which many left historians, and intellectuals more generally, held indigenous traditions.<sup>50</sup> In a letter to the editors of the *Socialist Register*, written in 1973, he reported that: ‘I have felt genuinely isolated ... by the sense that a whole idiom and tradition of thought within which I worked was being bypassed and rejected by the young Left’.<sup>51</sup>

The same stew of sentiments was rehearsed in his next major statement about the relationship of intellectuals to Marxism – his *Open Letter* (which also appeared in *Socialist Register*). A well-known philosopher who had held posts at a number of Europe’s leading institutions having left Poland in 1969, and a notable historian of philosophy and theology,



Kolakowski represented a different kind of target for Thompsonian polemic.<sup>52</sup> He ventilated his deep disappointment that a figure he had once seen as a hero had seemingly shifted from one of the Cold War camps to the other, and given up on the endeavour of redefining a socialist commitment in the space in-between. This work has widely been viewed as one of Thompson's most poorly judged and executed works.<sup>53</sup> But, despite its undoubted idiosyncrasies, sanctimonious tone and errors of judgement,<sup>54</sup> it provided an important opportunity for Thompson to develop his reflections on the role and nature of the historical enterprise, ideas which were integrally linked to his adherence to the values of English cultural criticism.

In stylistic terms, Thompson resumed the mock-ironic mode of *Peculiarities*, adopting the *persona* of Shakespeare's fool about to take up the cudgels against one of the Goliaths of European philosophy.<sup>55</sup> His favoured idiom now acquired a new resonance, coming to represent a fading lineage from which his audience was assumed to be somewhat adrift, rather than being a still available tradition as he had assumed in the previous decade. This shift was in part a reflection of his own continuing isolation from the outlook and habitats of the New Left (with the notable exception of his own involvement in the ill-fated *May Day Manifesto* produced in 1968<sup>56</sup>), but also signalled a growing recognition of the declining position of the polity to which the idiom belonged. The parochialism and insularity that Anderson and Nairn had lamented were now widely echoed in political discourse more generally as concern over British backwardness and economic decline – themes that were at the heart of the emerging debate about whether the UK should join the European Economic Community – became more prominent.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, one of the triggers for the resentment Thompson directed at the *NLR* was the decision of its editors to turn down a piece he proposed on this very topic,<sup>58</sup> in which, no doubt, he would have vented his spleen on those who did not share the wider left's entrenched scepticism towards the European enterprise.<sup>59</sup>

In this climate Thompson's idiom took on a more melancholic, bitterly nostalgic air. He supplied a further exposition of its genesis and contours, and, as previously, went out of his way to connect other respected New Left intellectuals, with it, as he approvingly cited Williams contention that it be seen as 'a manner of expression' that contained 'both negative and positive qualities'<sup>60</sup>. Its appearance also helped him re-engage the exceptionalist tone struck in *Peculiarities*. The English, he half-ironically observed, were 'jesters' to the 'priests' guarding the theological and philosophical orthodoxies favoured in mainland Europe.<sup>61</sup> In an extraordinarily sweeping, and ahistorical argument, he sought to defend this contrast on the basis that two great rivals of modern European culture -- Communism and Catholicism – could be seen as different halves of one single universalist proclivity, against which were arraigned the plucky English, a people now defined in part by their religious heritage. 'Our best idiom has been protestant, individualist, empirical, disintegrative of universals; our best moralism has been contextual'.<sup>62</sup> The assertion of the Protestant core to the English heritage revealed one of the residual, and under-played, sources of Thompson's radical patriotism, and also helps explain his suspicion of Catholic intellectuals.<sup>63</sup> Alighting upon an observation made by Kolakowski about the significance of religious symbolism to disparate cultures, Thompson responded in comically melodramatic style: 'not only the atheist but also some primal Lollard or Anabaptist within me rebels'.<sup>64</sup> The very authority implied by the kind of philosophical universalism in which Kolakowski engaged forced him back to 'the old Adam of the English idiom'.<sup>65</sup>

Conflating Protestantism with English particularity served also to embellish the irreverent voice and righteous posture that he adopted throughout this work as he presented himself as the undaunted rebel against absolutisms emerging from across the Channel. In denoting the distinct cultural inheritance that underpinned this resistance, it was, revealingly, to English poetry that he turned. It was this genre that had ‘on occasion, advanced philosophy further than our philosophers’,<sup>66</sup> evoking as it did the multiple forms - emotional, erotic and social – through which the full range of human potential and the deepest moral intuitions could be grasped.

These passages have been viewed by some commentators as symptomatic of a wholesale retreat to the sour and insular tones characteristic of the native tradition. According to Tony Judt, writing a decade later: this was ‘Thompson at his priggish, little-Englander worst: garrulous..., patronizing and sanctimonious’.<sup>67</sup> This charge can be partially offset by an appreciation of the kinds of comedy and irony that Thompson self-consciously employed; but only partially. As with *Peculiarities*, his self-presentation as the stubborn and parochial ‘English country gentleman’ underwrote his defensive attempt to reverse the polarity that flowed from the arguments mounted by Marxist theorists and liberal intellectuals – which descended from the heights of universalistic theory to the foothills of historical process and cultural tradition. A rich array of rhetorical figures and analogies were conjured up to aid these arguments, and these enabled him to tell his story ‘from the point of view of several hyperbolic versions of himself’.<sup>68</sup> He gave a first outing to one of the most vivid, extended metaphors that were scattered throughout his writings,<sup>69</sup> styling himself an old-fashioned, clumsy ‘bustard’, a bird doomed to stay on the ground while, all around him, others soared into the theoretical sky.<sup>70</sup> But he remained strikingly inattentive to the danger that the jokes and the irony came so close to some of the baser prejudices associated with English national sentiment that his left-wing audience was unlikely to feel comfortable sharing the joke.<sup>71</sup>

Yet here too Thompson also supplied a more nuanced, less resolutely particularistic, understanding of the national tradition, though this was somewhat eclipsed by the heavily satirical style he adopted. For he also likened himself to a ‘prisoner’ trapped within ‘a hostile national culture which is itself both smug and resistant to intellectuality and failing in self-confidence’.<sup>72</sup> And the radical lineage was now revealed to be rather awkwardly nested within the wider national-cultural formation ‘... I share the same idiom as that of the culture which is my reluctant host’.<sup>73</sup> And he returned to the idea that the best of English thought represented a precursor for, and contributor to, a wider European discourse: ‘Take Marx and Vico and a few European novelists away, and my most intimate pantheon would be a provincial tea party: a gathering of the English and the Anglo-Irish’.<sup>74</sup> Here, the idiom was quite deliberately framed as nationally rooted but also shaped in relation to other trans-national influences. It was now depicted as Anglo-Irish – presumably to allow space for Swift and Yeats; and, for the first time, the rather unlikely figure of Giambattista Vico -- the eighteenth-century historian and jurist whose philosophy of history was to play a major role in Thompson’s subsequent polemic – cropped up. The idiom was thus conceived as a bridge to, rather than an enclave away from, wider currents of European thought.

And yet despite these notes, the isolationist Anglo-centric rhetoric continued to pull in a contrary direction, and had the effect rendering any sense of European commonality more distant, in imaginative terms, than in his previous writings. Revealingly, he offered a powerful analogy between the sense of national sovereignty that underpinned critical intellectual practice and that which would be jeopardised by Britain’s putative membership of the Common Market. This argument prefaced a Lear-like lament for the fading relevance of the libertarian-communist lineage from which his own powers stemmed, and a ratcheting up

of the dramatic stakes as he conflated its waning powers with those of Britain as a geopolitical entity. The problems of socialist intellectuals, it seemed, were the nation's too, as Thompson offered one of the most visceral statements of the pain and loss felt by parts of the political left, as well as the right, from growing perceptions of British decline:

For I belong to a nation which has lost self-confidence, and whose people certainly lay claim to something less in the scale of human rights (such as self-determination) than do the Norwegians. Our intellectual culture has for so long been insular, amateurish, crassly empirical, self-enclosed and resistant to international discourse that the damage done is probably irreparable.<sup>75</sup>

Despite its poor reputation among Thompson's advocates and commentators, *An Open Letter* is therefore of considerable value to an appreciation of his developing thinking in the 1970s. In contrast to the kinds of scholarship and modes of thinking that were increasingly associated with scholastic Marxism, he restated the importance of a historically informed understanding of the manner in which individual agents made sense of the dialectic of context and choice, and a morally sensitive appreciation of the different moments of heroism and transcendence which historical processes entailed.<sup>76</sup> And it was these themes that were to become defining preoccupations in the better known, and more widely applauded, third of the major antinomian statements he made in these years.

### 3) *The Poverty of Theory* (1978)

This widely cited essay carried forward much of his earlier thinking, and re-used some of the motifs ('the bustard' made a notable return) of its predecessors. But, rather strikingly, it made no explicit mention of, or appeal to, an English idiom. This trope was now quietly set aside, even though the thinking with which it was so closely associated was still ubiquitous. Thompson's jettisoning of this term -- which has gone unnoticed by commentary on his work -- is indicative of a notable shift in his outlook, and signals a rather telling waning of confidence on his part in the durability of the lineage of English social criticism upon which he had hitherto called. But, while Hamilton's account identifies the key shifts in Thompson's thinking in these years as the result of an internal disconnection between his national commitments and Marxist allegiances, it is more plausible to envisage this as a product of his gradual, reluctant acceptance of the waning appeal of this interwoven pattern of sentiment and argument among significant numbers of his readers.

*The Poverty* established Thompson as one of only a handful of recent British historians whose reflections on the philosophy and methodology of social history have been viewed as on a par with other European luminaries,<sup>77</sup> and was greeted warmly by many historians.<sup>78</sup> But, rather than breaking new ground, this essay represented the culmination of tendencies that had been developing within Thompson's thinking during the past two decades, and also represented his first concerted attempt to respond to, rather than merely lament, the waning force of the tradition of moral criticism that had been so constitutive in his thinking. He began by satirising the growing influence of structuralism among British Marxists, especially among academic historians, despite what he saw as the fundamentally anti-historical character of its theoretical *modus operandi*. According to the testimony of his wife and collaborator Dorothy Thompson, it was specifically the growing influence of Althusser's writings 'on graduate students and some younger historians'<sup>79</sup> which triggered this work -- a constituency that was, revealingly, depicted in both generational and academic-disciplinary terms. The bulk of the book consisted of lengthy engagements with the theoretical apparatus set up by Althusser, and a critical assessment of the approach to Marx's own corpus which the latter had adopted. Thompson's sardonic, ironic and vituperative reflections were all

anchored in a sense of proximity to English sources and ideas. He also resumed his habit of conflating his own sense of marginalisation with the waning tradition he hymned, and now supplied a vivid and poignant depiction of the impact upon him of the ‘decade of heroes’, which stretched forward from the mid-1930s, that remained so important for his generation. This historical sketch was offered as part of a broader attempt to contextualise the later historical moment in which structuralist theoretical ideas had come to gain their appeal. During the 1930s and 1940s Marxism had been animated by its deep engagement with various indigenous cultures and traditions, including in the British case an unlikely encounter with an ‘authentic liberalism’.<sup>80</sup> But such ideas had ceased to resonate with younger cohorts for whom the stasis associated with the Cold War, and the consolidation of Western capitalist societies after 1945, constituted the parameters for political thought. And so Thompson now chose to frame his opposition to Marxist theory as a clash between different generations,<sup>81</sup> especially as Marxism was now being redefined as a body of rigorous, systematising theory which existed at some remove from the constraints of history and geographical particularity. In making this argument he dropped his explicit reference to an alternative English idiom and talked more grandly of a lost ‘vocabulary of voluntarism’ which he characterised as the signature of Marxist praxis in this earlier period.

This stance also undergirded the clearer sense of distance which he now established between his own thinking and all current forms of Marxism, as he set out to detail those failings and pathologies which he located in the work of its founding fathers, and also now indicted the authoritarian inclination of those polities that governed in its name.<sup>82</sup> Thompson was now a self-styled outlaw, launching a guerrilla campaign upon the hardened orthodoxies of a scholastic and hyper-rationalist *theology* -- a term he employed throughout. Reprising the heavily ironised mode of his earlier writings, he invited his audience to laugh at the ‘ludicrous’ spectacle of ‘an English empirical historian ... attempting to offer epistemological correction to a rigorous Parisian philosopher’.<sup>83</sup> And here too he was more than willing to push beyond the accepted boundaries of progressive taste in making his point. In an especially vivid, revealing passage, the well-worn irony gave way to the moral righteousness with which it was always in awkward tension. He likened structuralism to a pestilence that has spread across the Channel and done considerable harm to English intellectual life: ‘A cloud no bigger than a man’s hand crosses the English Channel from Paris and then, in an instance, the trees, the orchard, the hedgerows, the field of wheat, are black with locusts. When at length they rise to fly on to the next parish, the boughs are bared of all culture, the fields have been stripped of every green blade of human aspiration ...’.<sup>84</sup> These pastoral references evoked the kinds of national sentiment that had long been anathema, as he well knew, to left-wing intellectuals in Britain. And, in combination with the powerful pestilential metaphor, this passage signalled the familiar combination of heavy irony and a growing urge to offend that had become his rhetorical hallmarks. Elsewhere he played upon the idiom to more innocent, but recognisably English, effect – for instance, in an extended skit translating the ‘dilemmas’ experienced by an imagined female trade unionist into the abstruse absurdities of Althusserian jargon.<sup>85</sup> This exercise hinged – Orwell style – upon the assumed virtues of the everyday vernacular of the anti-theoretical English.

And yet, despite the ubiquitous presence of English literary styles, Thompson chose not to summon a nationally defined idiom as the terrain upon which to muster his own critical argument. Instead, he transposed its constitutive themes into an extended discourse on the importance of historical consciousness – signalling the degree to which his own sense of the value and nature of the historian’s craft represented an organic outcrop of English traditions. This new focus was shaped too by his heightened anxiety at the inroads being made not just

by structuralism itself, but also by the rising prominence and growth of a larger body of social-scientific theorising, the salience of which he regarded as potentially damaging to the status and appeal of historical forms of understanding. His own identification with the newly developing field of social history, and its proximity to social science disciplines such as Sociology and Anthropology,<sup>86</sup> was an important influence here. In *The Poverty* he took a lengthy detour around these issues, offering a critical discussion of the work of another major contemporary social scientist, who, he believed, represented another face of the growth of dangerous forms of anti-historicism – the liberal philosopher Karl Popper.<sup>87</sup>

Against Popper *and* Althusser, he supplied an extended defence of the value of the historical method, and rejected the contrast both defended between scientific and historical forms of knowledge. Neither, in fact, grasped the nature and importance of historical understanding, which he characterised as the achievement of a balance between the categories and frameworks provided by theory, and the disciplines and controls associated with the gathering and non-partisan consideration of evidence. In philosophical terms, he sought to evade the kinds of charges widely levelled against empiricism, maintaining that a grasp of the integrity and complexity of pure experience was not possible, but nor did he believe that historical processes were simply the inventions of their analysts. Interpretation and fact were interpenetrated, and he identified the unending dialogue between them as the source of historical knowledge and critical understanding. And the category of experience was now conceptualised somewhat differently in his thought, now being apart from, and mediating between, social being and social consciousness. This conceptual shift betrayed his growing distance from those forms of Marxism which, he now believed, had collapsed ideologically laden consciousness into the experiences of individuals, thereby negating consideration of the capacity of individuals to make sense of the latter. He objected with some violence to the increasingly fashionable tendency to collapse ‘the empirical’ into the catch-all concept of ‘empiricism’, an increasingly commonly used, pejorative reference in self-consciously theoretical circles.

Importantly, Thompson sought to buttress his position through reference to a broadly drawn, European *and* English philosophical heritage. He explored the contribution to naturalistic understanding associated with Charles Darwin -- a figure whose recurrent appearances in Thompson’s essays have been rather underplayed. Darwin was offered as an exemplar of a mode of critical enquiry that allowed free rein to the different dimensions of human experience without falling into the trap of determinism (a point which was, Thompson observed, also registered by Marx).<sup>88</sup> An additional exemplary figure was Vico. Given only a walk-on part in 1975, he was now applauded at length for his conception of history as ‘an open-ended and ultimately unpredictable set of processes, each of which possessed their own internal ‘logic’.<sup>89</sup> And this plaudit was immediately followed by reference to Thompson’s familiar icons— Morris and Blake – for whom ordinary people were the ‘ever baffled and ever resurgent agents of an un-mastered history’.<sup>90</sup>

And so, while the habit of explicitly referencing his own national idiom was now put aside, his long established sense of English culture as a set of voices within European thought continued to play an integral role in his argument. Attempting to offset the Francophobic humour indulged elsewhere, he struck a more conciliatory tone too. Sartre – whose thinking and influence he had decried in 1963 -- was now reclaimed as a wiser judge of the importance of history than Althusser.<sup>91</sup> And, in an Afterword written later in 1978: ‘there is very much in French intellectual and political life to learn from and to adore. But own

agencies have consistently presented images of French life and politics that are little more than fairy-tales derived from Parisian café gossip'.<sup>92</sup>

Yet, as well as its marked continuities of tone and theme, this work signalled a major decline in its author's confidence that the critical traditions that were so constitutive for him still served as a point of reference for significant parts of his intended audience. But, instead of falling into political despair at this prospect, as Hamilton suggests, he turned instead to the theme of historical consciousness, believing that this afforded more promising territory for the kind of contrapuntal engagement with Marxism and other theoretical trends that he favoured. He closed by declaring his unwillingness to continue engaging with the left-wing intelligentsia, but left open the prospect that a renewal of the kinds of historically inclined, and morally alert, discourse he favoured, might yet happen.

The loss of faith shown by one of its greatest twentieth-century exponents in the resonance and traction of English social criticism over these years, and its impact upon his thinking, have been underplayed in the historiography devoted to Thompson. This represented a moment of considerable strain, perhaps even of crisis, such was his own continuing debt to the modes of writing and thought associated with this idiom. By the end of the 1970s, not only had the language and character of intellectual discussion shifted radically from a decade before, but an appeal to an exceptional, and possibly exemplary, Englishness was, he realised, unwise. One important, if largely unobserved, reason for this change was that debates about British decline and backwardness were now at the forefront of political discourse. In this context, identifying with a manner of thinking and forms of argument that were increasingly cited – by critics of the right as well as the left -- as the source of this national malaise became a much more problematic venture,<sup>93</sup> as even this most proud and stubborn of Englishmen was compelled to appreciate.

### *Conclusions: Evaluating Thompson's idiom*

Important connections were forming in Thompson's mind in these years between the themes of radical patriotism, Englishness and cultural idiom, on the one hand, and the singularity and importance of historical understanding, on the other. And while Hamilton is right to point to these decades as being singularly important for his thought, the notion that *The Poverty of Theory* signalled a rupture between an early and late Thompson is ultimately a misleading one. It represented a culmination of tendencies that had been developing in this thinking since the early 1960s, and led him towards history, and away from national specificity, as the chosen ground for his opposition to developments in Marxist theory. This work also represented a return to some of the intellectual preoccupations that had informed *The Making* (1963). In its widely cited Preface, he had gone to considerable lengths to assert the merits of his conception of class as process, as opposed to its depiction in social scientific thought as product or outcome. This thread was picked up again – both in *Open Letter* and, at length, in *The Poverty* – as he returned to the task of delineating and defending the merits of historical forms of understanding. But now, in the late 1970s, it was Marxism as well as other ideologically informed positions and methodologies, with which he was increasingly determined to quarrel.

In each of the works considered here, an acute, unresolved strain emerged between a highly particularistic mode of English self-understanding and his lingering sense of the interdependency of English and European thought and sensibility. Thompson never

acknowledged or resolved the tensions between these ideas in part because conceptual precision was one of the first casualties of the kinds of polemical hyperbole in which he engaged.<sup>94</sup> Attempts by his interpreters either to diminish the influence of specifically English traditions and ideas upon his thought, or to submerge these within accounts of his Marxism, have thus resulted in the neglect of some revealing inconsistencies and instabilities in his thinking. More generally, the declining faith of one of its greatest exponents in the appeal of the cultural and political ideas that were so important in the 1930s and 1940s is important both for an understanding of Thompson's own thought and for an appreciation of the shifting vocabularies and thinking that prevailed among intellectuals, especially those on the left, during the middle decades of the last century.

This shift certainly had important consequences for his own sense of intellectual identity and political purpose. The line of moral criticism which he had confidently traced right back to the recoil at the horrors engendered by the industrial revolution had supplied the combination of radical authority and righteous, antinomian indignation that informed his sense of himself as a public moralist.<sup>95</sup> Feeling these underpinnings to be ebbing away contributed to the sense of dislocation and ennui, which -- Hamilton rightly points out -- were his abiding feelings in these years. This experience may go some way also to explaining the considerable attraction for him afforded by the opportunity to become a leading figure in the peace movement of the 1980s, which he likened to the kind of populist, cross-class crusade that he had envisaged in 1956, and which supplied a new source of antinomian moral authority.

More generally, those considering the life, work and significance of this major figure, would do well to pay more heed to the kinds of rhetoric that he employed, and to their impact upon his own arguments and intended audiences.<sup>96</sup> This should mean giving consideration to the occasions when rhetoric and argument were mutually supportive, and those when a rather heavy-handed English style of self-presentation tended to cloud and offset his arguments.<sup>97</sup> This flaw was compounded by his habit of defining his own thinking in the course of contrarian polemics. This, combined with his hyperbolic rhetorical style and heavy-handed humour, served to push his argument down an Anglo-centric line which offset his strong and enduring commitment to a European-wide sense of intellectual and political community. Even his opposition to the embryonic European Economic Community was -- contrary to what many on the left believed -- advanced in the name of this latter principle, not out of a residual 'little Englandism', as he rejected a settlement which offered little in terms of democratic accountability to the peoples of Europe and was likely to be captured by corporate interests.<sup>98</sup> The lingering image of Thompson as an anti-theoretical exponent of a parochial English moralism misses this dimension of his thought and legacy. Unable to acknowledge, let alone work through, the tensions arising from the contrasting modes of thought anchored by his affiliation to a dissenting English heritage, Thompson opted to pitch his tent on the safer and more solid terrain associated with his growing reputation as a historian.

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<sup>2</sup> David Eastwood, cited in Collini, 'Enduring Passions', 176-7.

<sup>3</sup> See the various appraisals included in volumes 71 (Spring 2013) and 72 (Fall 2013) of the journal *Labour/Le Travail*; and Kenny 'Introduction'.

<sup>4</sup> See especially Aughey, *The Politics of Englishness*; Collini, *English Pasts* (Oxford, 2009) and *Absent Minds*; Colls, *George Orwell*; Mandler, *The English National Character*; and Stapleton, *Political Intellectuals*.

<sup>5</sup> Hobsbawm, 'Obituary'.

<sup>6</sup> See Anderson, 'Origins of the Present Crisis'; 'Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism'; and 'Components of the National Culture'; and Nairn, 'The English Working Class'.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Matthews, 'Remaking E.P. Thompson'.

<sup>8</sup> For instance Chakrabaty, 'The Lost Causes of E.P.Thompson'. According to Jonathan Rée, 'In retrospect, the question of Thompson's Englishness looks vexatious and insubstantial...', in his 'E.P. Thompson and the Drama of Authority', 220.

<sup>9</sup> See Stedman Jones, 'Anglo-Marxism, Neo-Marxism and the Discursive Approach to History'; and Joyce, *Class*.

<sup>10</sup> Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*

<sup>11</sup> Hamilton, *The Crisis*, 2.

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<sup>12</sup> For a sceptical treatment of this thesis see Matthews ‘The Remaking’.

<sup>13</sup> Hamilton’s *The Crisis*, demonstrates effectively the importance of these texts in the development of Thompson’s thinking.

<sup>14</sup> See Thompson, ‘The Peculiarities of the English’; ‘An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski’; and ‘The Poverty of Theory’.

<sup>15</sup> Collini, ‘Enduring Passions’.

<sup>16</sup> Thompson refers whimsically to these essays as his three failed attempts to ‘beat the bounds of “1956”...’, in ‘The Poverty’, 384.

<sup>17</sup> For an assessment of Thompson’s thinking in the context of the milieu that formed around *The New Reasoner* journal, see Palmer, ‘Reasoning Rebellion’.

<sup>18</sup> See the accounts provided by Chun, *The British New Left*; and Kenny, *The First New Left*.

<sup>19</sup> Davis, ‘Reappraising British socialist humanism’; and Soper, ‘Socialist Humanism’.

<sup>20</sup> Stedman Jones, ‘Anglo-Marxism’, 156.

<sup>21</sup> Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Post War Britain*.

<sup>22</sup> For analyses of some of the thinking of the historians’ group, see Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism*; and Schwarz, “‘The People’ in History.

<sup>23</sup> See especially Lindsay and Rickword, *A Handbook of Freedom*.

<sup>24</sup> Thompson’s older brother Frank was a key important influence too, offering to Edward an illustration of the heroic qualities and exemplary potential of a political commitment forged out of a highly English commitment to communism. See especially Thompson, *Beyond the Frontier*, and Conradi, *A Very English Hero*.

<sup>25</sup> See especially Croft, ‘Walthamstow, Little Gidding and Middlesborough’.

<sup>26</sup> For an oversight of his early life and influences see Palmer, *E.P. Thompson*.

<sup>27</sup> Thompson’s review of Linda Colley’s *Britons* (‘Which Britons?’) offers some interesting indications about the importance he placed upon an evocation of an English, rather than British, national culture.

<sup>28</sup> These themes are explored in Kenny, ‘Edward Palmer (E.P.) Thompson’.

<sup>29</sup> Thompson’s views on Oakeshott are reported in Anderson, ‘Diary’.

<sup>30</sup> Mandler, *The English National Character*.

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- <sup>31</sup> On the didactic implications of his heroic portraits, see Rosaldo, ‘Celebrating Thompson’s Heroes’.
- <sup>32</sup> Collini, ‘Enduring Passions’, 182.
- <sup>33</sup> Matthews, ‘The Remaking’, 270-1.
- <sup>34</sup> On Thompson’s Eurosceptic views see Rule, ‘Thompson, Edward Palmer’.
- <sup>35</sup> On the events leading up to the transfer of editorial and financial authority to Anderson, see Kenny, *The First New Left*, 10-53. And for an account of the intellectual dimensions of, and fall-out from, this dispute see Thompson, *Pessimism of the Intellect?*.
- <sup>36</sup> See especially Anderson, ‘Origins’, and Nairn, ‘The English Working Class’.
- <sup>37</sup> Hamilton reports on some difficult negotiations over these passages, drawing upon Thompson’s correspondence with its editors -- John Saville and Ralph Miliband; *The Crisis*, 116-8. The full version of this essay appears in *The Poverty of Theory*, pp. 35-92.
- <sup>38</sup> This document is available for consultation in the John Saville papers deposited in the library at the University of Hull.
- <sup>39</sup> Thompson, *Where*.
- <sup>40</sup> This was one of a number of subjects on which he declared his intention to write to the exasperated editors of *Socialist Register*, but on which he did not deliver; see Hamilton, *The Crisis*, 106-9, 138.
- <sup>41</sup> Williams, *Culture and Society*; and Richard Hoggart, *Uses of Literacy*.
- <sup>42</sup> Thompson, *Where?*, 14.
- <sup>43</sup> A discussion of Thompson’s humorous style and its consequences, is supplied by Jonathan Rée, ‘E.P.Thompson’, 220.
- <sup>44</sup> Rée, ‘E.P.Thompson’, 220.
- <sup>45</sup> Thompson, ‘Peculiarities’, 334-7.
- <sup>46</sup> Thompson, ‘Peculiarities’, 331.
- <sup>47</sup> Nairn’s reflections on English exceptionalism are explored at greater length in Michael Kenny, *The Politics of English Nationhood* (Oxford, 2014).
- <sup>48</sup> Collini, ‘Enduring Passions’, 176.
- <sup>49</sup> See, for instance, Thompson, ‘Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism’; ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd’; and *Whigs and Hunters*.

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- <sup>50</sup> Hamilton documents these sentiments: *The Crisis*, 125-6.
- <sup>51</sup> Thompson, letter to Saville and Miliband, 20 May 1973: Hamilton, *The Crisis*, 102.
- <sup>52</sup> Judt, 'Goodbye to all that?'
- <sup>53</sup> This point was forcefully registered in Kolakowski's trenchant reply: 'My Correct Views on Everything'.
- <sup>54</sup> These include the lecture he delivered on the continuing socialist potential of Soviet model, and the implied equivalence between his own treatment by the British New Left and that afforded to Kolakowski by the Polish authorities – a point forcefully made to him by Miliband; Hamilton, *The Crisis*, 144.
- <sup>55</sup> Thompson, 'An Open Letter', 32.
- <sup>56</sup> See Williams, *The May Day Manifesto*.
- <sup>57</sup> For an assessment of the evolution and impact of political debates about 'decline' in this period, see Gamble, *Britain in Decline*; and English and Kenny, *Rethinking British Decline*.
- <sup>58</sup> Hamilton, *The Crisis*, 102.
- <sup>59</sup> See especially Nairn 'The Left against Europe'.
- <sup>60</sup> Thompson, 'An Open Letter', 12.
- <sup>61</sup> Thompson, 'An Open Letter', 14.
- <sup>62</sup> Thompson, 'An Open Letter', 14.
- <sup>63</sup> Kohn, 'The Genesis and Character of English Nationalism'. Thompson shared this suspicion with George Orwell: see Colls, *English Rebel*, 186. On other figures in the CPGB's historians' group, for whom Protestantism was also important, see Schwarz, "'The People'".
- <sup>64</sup> Thompson, 'An Open Letter', 14.
- <sup>65</sup> Thompson, 'An Open Letter', 14.
- <sup>66</sup> Thompson, 'An Open Letter', 27.
- <sup>67</sup> Judt, 'Goodbye', 90.
- <sup>68</sup> Rée, 'E.P. Thompson', 215.
- <sup>69</sup> For a critical discussion of the role and effects of such metaphors in his writing, see Eagleton, 'The Poetry of E.P. Thompson'.
- <sup>70</sup> Thompson, 'The Open Letter', 13.

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<sup>71</sup> Rée, 'E.P. Thompson'.

<sup>72</sup> Thompson, 'An Open Letter', 71.

<sup>73</sup> Thompson, 'An Open Letter', 71.

<sup>74</sup> Thompson, 'The Open Letter', 71.

<sup>75</sup> Thompson, 'An Open Letter', 11.

<sup>76</sup> Kenny, 'Socialism and the Romantic Self.

<sup>77</sup> See the assessments provided by Trimberger, 'E.P.Thompson; Rée, 'E.P.Thompson', 217; and McLennan, *Marxism*.

<sup>78</sup> Stedman Jones, 'Anglo-Marxism'.

<sup>79</sup> Dorothy Thompson, 'Introduction', x.

<sup>80</sup> Thompson, 'The Poverty', 264.

<sup>81</sup> This kind of generational language was a familiar motif used by the various parties to this dispute. See, for instance, Thompson 'Peculiarities'; and Anderson, 'Diary'.

<sup>82</sup> Hamilton documents the considerable impact upon Thompson of the authoritarianism he observed, first hand, on a trip to Indira Gandhi's India in late 1976 and early 1977; *Crisis*, 159-61.

<sup>83</sup> Thompson, 'The Poverty', 197.

<sup>84</sup> Thompson, 'Poverty', 358.

<sup>85</sup> Thompson, 'The Poverty', 342-4.

<sup>86</sup> See, for instance, Thompson, 'On History, Sociology and Historical Evidence'; and for an assessment of his impact upon, and difficulties with, sociology and social theory, see: Holton, 'History and Sociology'; and Calhoun, 'E.P.Thompson and the Discipline of Historical Context'

<sup>87</sup> Thompson, 'Poverty', 217-29.

<sup>88</sup> Thompson, 'Poverty', 324.

<sup>89</sup> Thompson, 'Poverty', 280.

<sup>90</sup> Thompson, 'Poverty', 280.

<sup>91</sup> Thompson, 'Poverty', 355.

<sup>92</sup> Thompson, 'Afterword', 404.

<sup>93</sup> See, for instance, Wilson, 'Old and New Left'.

<sup>94</sup> For a perceptive discussion of this point, see Matthews 'The Remaking', 266.

<sup>95</sup> The intellectual lineage of the Victorian public moralist is excavated in Burrow, Collini and Winch, *That Noble Science of Politics*.

<sup>96</sup> For reflections on Thompson's uncertain sense of audience, and rhetorical forms of address, see Collini, 'Enduring Passions'.

<sup>97</sup> Rée, 'Theatre'.

<sup>98</sup> See especially the article he published setting out his objections to the European Economic Community in *The Sunday Times*, 27 April 1975; 'This going into Europe will not turn out to be the thrilling mutual exchange supposed. It is more like nine middle-aged couples with failing marriages meeting in a darkened bedroom in a Brussels hotel for a group grope'.