

Reasoning Rebellion: E.P. Thompson, British Marxist Historians, and the Making of Dissident Political Mobilization

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Prelude: Problematizing a Tradition

THE DEATHS IN JUNE 2002 of Rodney Hilton and Royden Harrison,¹ as well as the convening of a major conference on “The British Marxist Historians and the Study of Social Movements” at the Edge Hill College of Higher Education, Ormskirk, Lancashire, at the end of the same month, remind us of much that needs reconsideration. Foremost is the critical role played by a generation of historians schooled in the experience of war, the popular front, and various movements of alternative and opposition, from the Communist Party of Great Britain to the first New Left, reaching across spectrums that encompassed adult education, campaigns for peace and nuclear disarmament, and active intervention in the trade unions and broad socialist milieux. That the historians associated with all of this produced a justifiably celebrated body of research and writing that has lived on to be highly regarded within the Left and in mainstream historiographic circles, labelled as a particular designation — “*the British Marxist historians*” — is an understandable act of identification, in many ways useful and appropriate. We do not so much stand on the

¹For brief obituaries see Eric Pace, “Rodney Hilton, Marxist Historian, 85, Dies,” *New York Times*, 13 June 2002; Michael Barratt Brown and John Halstead, “Royden Harrison: Pioneer of labour history studies and workers’ education,” *Guardian*, 3 July 2002. This paper discusses the late 1950s, at which time Harrison was pivotal in the underappreciated Socialist Forum movement, which emerged out of attempts to regroup the Left in the midst of the Suez and Hungary crises. This culminated in the Wortley Hall Conference. Harrison and Michael Segal edited the movement’s paper, *Forum*. See Peter Fryer, “The Wortley Hall Conference,” in David Widgery, ed., *The Left in Britain, 1956-1968* (Middlesex 1976), 78-85.

shoulders of these historians, in their collective diversity and in terms of their historiographic accomplishment, as we occupy their shadows.²

Yet I would like to suggest that the term *the British Marxist historians*, whether associated with the Communist Party Historians' Group,³ the founding of the journal *Past & Present*, or the 1956-1957 break from Stalinism announced with the publication of *The Reasoner* and *The New Reasoner* (edited by John Saville and Edward Thompson, and involving writings and administrative work by Dorothy Thompson and a host of others), is perhaps a naming now more in need of questioning than of unambiguous acceptance. To be sure, at the generalized level of discussion through which the term usually circulates, we can locate a sense in which certain Marxist writing associated with now canonical texts constituted a presence easily congealed in an effort to locate exemplary figures who were oppositional both historiographically and politically. When, as people of the Left, we look at this immense and creative research production, encompassing, at the least, Victor Kiernan's writings on imperialism and Shakespeare; Rodney Hilton's understanding of medieval class relations and the transition from feudalism to capitalism; Dorothy Thompson's command of the field of Chartist studies and suggestive explorations of gender, be it in discussions of radical women or Queen Victoria; George Rudé's making of the history of the crowd; not to mention Hobsbawm's reach across the vast expanse of global capitalism from the 17th- through the 20th-centuries, and consequent class struggle, be it located in Columbian peasant plots or on the docks of Victorian London; Hill's historiographic dominance of the English Revolution; or E.P. Thompson's unrivalled influence in creating a new way of looking at class, there is reason to champion an accomplishment quite rare within Marxism as well as among historiographies. This is the strength of Harvey Kaye's approach, which at its best provides an immensely useful formulaic introduction to a range of writings, drawing them into a constructed interpretive circle

²Certainly there seems consensus, even accepting much critique, that we have much to learn from *the British Marxist historians* in terms of the writing of history and even, in E.P. Thompson's case, of socialist journalism. The question of political contribution usually generates more contestation. See for instance Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism* (London 1980).

³Writing on the Historians' Group ranges from right to left: see Gertrude Himmelfarb, "'The Group': British Marxist Historians," in Himmelfarb, *The New History: Critical Essays and Reappraisals* (Cambridge 1987), 70-93; E.J. Hobsbawm, "'The Historians' Group of the Communist Party," in Maurice Cornforth, ed., *Rebels and their Causes: Essays in Honour of A.L. Morton* (London 1978), 21-48; Bill Schwartz, "'The People' in History: The Communist Party Historians' Group, 1946-1956," in Richard Johnson et al., eds., *Making Histories: Studies in History Writing and Politics* (London 1990), 44-95; D. Parker, "The Communist Party and Its Historians," *Socialist History*, 12 (1997), 33-58; Sam Ashman, "The Communist Party Historians' Group," in J. Rees, ed., *Essays on Historical Materialism* (London 1998), 145-160; and Victor Kiernan, "Making Histories," *Our History Journal*, 8 (1984), 7-10.

that rounds out edges of difference in order to make a pedagogical point to readers not necessarily embedded in either the texts or political histories associated with the named collectivity, *the British Marxist historians*.⁴ It is surely time to acknowledge, however, borrowing a metaphor once wielded by a conservative historian, J.H. Hexter, against Christopher Hill, that a tradition of lumping carries with it some vexing inabilities, and that an inclination to differentiate may bring us, at certain points in time, particular benefits.⁵

Perhaps it is now appropriate to address the extent to which this contingent, designated *the British Marxist historians*, is both largely unknown, and possibly a mythical construct or invention of a tradition that has served left and right well, if differently.⁶ We know all too little about the bulk of those historians, publishing and otherwise, who worked with the various period-organized sections of the Communist Party Historians' Group, which was, more correctly, a series of groups.⁷ The majority of these people, including those in a largely non-publishing "teachers" section, are never even mentioned, and a recent interview with Dorothy Thompson, who recalled the importance of women such as Diana St. John, Betty Grant, and Nan Holey, as well as the seldom mentioned Edwin Page, reminds us of how cursory our appreciation of the historians' sections has been.⁸ Hobsbawm's recollection adds names such as Jack Lindsay and Alfred Jenkin, as well as emphasizing the friendships, passions, and conflictual interpretations that characterized commitment to the discussions and debates of the group.⁹ In terms of the initial and pivotal years, 1946-1956, leading and inspirational figures such as Dona Torr, who earned the reverence of most who worked closely with her, remain little more than a shadowy presence.¹⁰ Central authorities, among them A.L. Morton,¹¹ and Basil

⁴See for instance Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians: An Introductory Analysis* (Cambridge 1984); and Harvey J. Kaye, *The Education of Desire: Marxists and the Writing of History* (New York and London 1992).

⁵J.H. Hexter, "The Burden of Proof," *Times Literary Supplement* (24 October 1975), 1250-1252.

⁶See Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge 1983).

⁷See Daphne May, "Work of the Historians' Groups," *Communist Review* (May 1949), 541.

⁸Pamela J. Walker, "Interview with Dorothy Thompson," *Radical History Review*, 77 (Spring 2000), 5-6.

⁹Hobsbawm, "Historians' Group," 25-26.

¹⁰Christopher Hill refers to Torr as "a great historian" who was the inspiration of the Historians' Group, and dedicated his book, *Lenin and the Russian Revolution* to Torr. See Christopher Hill, "The Shock Tactician," a review of Bryan D. Palmer, *E.P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions*, in *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 7 October 1994. Dorothy Thompson's brief recollection of Torr conveys an impression of considerable scholarship, range, and generosity. See Dorothy Thompson, *Outsiders: Class, Gender, and Nation* (London 1993), 10-11; and Walker, "Interview with Thompson," 5-6. Torr's major historical writing, *Tom Man and His Times — Volume One: 1856-1890* (London 1956) was unfor-

Davidson (more rightly situated with the *Universities and Left Review*, and who was never a member of the CP, but who shared other experiences with a generation of communist historians, including war service), are barely mentioned in our discussions of the British Marxist historians. Yet the prolific and insightful Morton published approximately 95 books, articles, and reviews between 1930-1975, anticipating many of the themes that would be explored in the work of E.P. Thompson and Christopher Hill. Davidson, in terms of African history, is arguably as important as E.P. Thompson has been in 18th- and 19th-century British studies, his *Old Africa Rediscovered* first appearing in 1959, opening discussion of "Third World" liberation movements that would be a preoccupation of the anti-colonialist New Left in the 1960s.¹² We must begin to recognize how little we know about this cohort, the British Marxist historians, that we have rather hastily assumed to be an identifiable tradition, an historiographical collectivity.¹³

Even on the basic issue of method, for instance, it would be difficult to ascribe coherence to the British Marxist historians. Hobsbawm, for instance, seldom worked extensively in archival repositories, and rarely ventured into regional/local sources, preferring a kind of metropolitan vision, most congenially developed out of printed sources accessible in major research libraries and amenable to being painted on a "national," even international, canvas. E.P. Thompson, always a *provincial* English writer, in the best sense of that word, produced other kinds of researches. In contrast to those of Hobsbawm, they were always coloured by Thompson's sense of place, his immersion in manuscript and unpublished material, and his blending of published antiquarian, folkloric, and other texts with primary sources.¹⁴ I will never forget Thompson's 1988 lecture on charivaris and rough music at Queen's University, in Kingston, Ontario, where he began his talk with lengthy reference to the first Kingston bylaw passed to curb the proliferation of

tunately terminated prematurely by her death. See also Dave Renton, "Opening the Books: The Personal Papers of Dona Torr," *History Workshop Journal*, 52 (2001), 238-247; and Dave Renton, "Dona Torr: The History Woman," *Socialist Review* (November 1998).

¹¹On Morton see, as a beginning, Maurice Cornforth, "A.L. Morton - Portrait of a Marxist Historian," in Maurice Cornforth, ed., *Rebels and Their Causes: Essays in Honour of A.L. Morton* (London 1978), 7-20; Victor N. Paananen, *British Marxist Criticism* (London 2000), 101-144; and Margot Heinemann and Willie Thompson, eds., *History and Imagination: Selected Writings of A.L. Morton* (London 1990).

¹²Michael Kenny, *The First New Left: British Intellectuals After Stalin* (London 1995), 178-179; and T. Hodgkin, "Where the Paths Began," in C. Fyfe, ed., *African Studies Since 1945: A Tribute to Basil Davidson* (Edinburgh 1976), 6-16.

¹³See for instance Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (London and Durham 1997), 23-24, for indications of fissures in the Communist Party Historians' Group.

¹⁴Among statements of relevance here are E.P. Thompson, "Folklore, Anthropology and Social History," *Indian Historical Review*, 3 (1978), 247-266; and E.P. Thompson, "Anthropology and the Discipline of Historical Context," *Midland History*, 1 (1972), 41-55.

crowds of discordant musickers in the 1830s and 1840s, a document he had unearthed on his own, by making a trek to the local archive. It was typical of Edward to work ceaselessly to *situate* his public lectures in the environment in which he found himself. Hill, different yet again from both Hobsbawm and Thompson, constructed his 17th century studies on the basis, largely, of an encyclopedic command of the extensive pamphlet production of the English Revolutions of 1640 and 1688.¹⁵ Too much, to be sure, can be made of such differences, but Thompson, certainly, was aware of their significance, as a somewhat critical short review of the work and career of George Rudé, revealed.¹⁶ The Hobsbawm-Thompson-Hill contrasts, while obvious, can be supplemented with acknowledgement that other differences, political and cultural, also existed among *the* British Marxist historians, even given longstanding relations of respect, friendship, and common work.¹⁷

In the following pages, then, I have a modest, informational purpose. There is no intention to provide a full history of the attempt to build a British New Left in the late 1950s. Nor do I offer a sustained, thorough intellectual accounting of the role and place of *the* British Marxist historians. Rather, my purpose is suggestive rather than definitive, something of a note on a set of documents that consciously prefers to leave many interpretive and political doors open. In looking at what was undoubtedly the first effort by a bulk of the body known as *the* British Marxist historians to build a social movement, a New Left, I explore the publication launched in 1957 as an expression of the revolt against Stalinism, *The New Reasoner*. A scrutiny of this much-alluded to but seldom read political publication,¹⁸ raises some

¹⁵I am indebted to Dorothy Thompson for suggesting these lines of differentiation, although she should not be held responsible for my formulation of them here.

¹⁶See E.P. Thompson, "Sold Like A Sheep for a Pound," Review of George Rudé, *Protest and Punishment*, *New Society*, 14 December 1978.

¹⁷Among many texts that reveal such contrasts are: E.J. Hobsbawm, "Organised Orphans," *New Statesman*, 66 (29 November 1963), 787-788; Eric Hobsbawm, "E.P. Thompson," *The Independent*, 30 August 1993; Eric Hobsbawm, "Edward Palmer Thompson, 1924-1993," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 90 (1996), 521-539; Hill "The Shock Tactician"; John Saville, "The XXth Congress and the British Communist Party," *The Socialist Register*, 1976 (London 1976), 1-23. Michael Kenny, *The First New Left: British Intellectuals After Stalin* (London 1995), 10-53, places perhaps too much emphasis on E.P. Thompson's "extravagant moods," his "charismatic" and "disruptive" nature and "self-righteous and petulant behaviour," but he does document, through recourse to a close reading of the Saville-Thompson correspondence of the late 1950s and early 1960s, differences in tone and politics.

¹⁸Consider the following: Stephan Woodhams, *History in the Making: Raymond Williams, Edward Thompson and Radical Intellectuals, 1936-1956* (London 2001), stops his account before a discussion of *The New Reasoner* is possible, although he devotes considerable discussion to a publication of the same years, *Universities and Left Review*. Kenny, *The First New Left*, engages with *The New Reasoner* in a sustained and serious way, but his commentary tends to be episodic and develops around specific conjunctures of political fissure and

preliminary questions about the British Marxist historians as a designated cohort and perhaps moves us out of too easy acceptance of what have become comfortable conventional wisdoms, pushing us into understandings of the diverse international, theoretical, and political origins of historical works we have come to admire so much. The accent on these pages is on E.P. Thompson, largely because of his centrality (along with others that will be named, many of whom are not considered part of the British Marxist historians grouping) in *The New Reasoner*, but also because of the place he would come to occupy historiographically with *The Making of the English Working Class*, and within the fallout occasioned by the break-up of the first New Left and its uneasy relationship with the emergence of a second New Left, in which other, younger and different, figures, including Perry Anderson, Tom Nairn, and Robin Blackburn figured forcefully.

Commencing to Reason: 1956

As is well known, E.P. Thompson and John Saville headed an initial voice of challenge against Stalinism, following the Khrushchev revelations at the 20th Party Congress of the USSR in February 1956. As John Saville has recounted, the British Party kept a fairly tight lid on discussion and critique, publishing the odd piece in *World News*, including a lengthy letter by Saville in mid-May and an article by Thompson at the end of June. But on the whole it was apparent by the summer of 1956 that no serious discussion of issues of party democracy and the meaning of Stalinism was going to be allowed, and it was for this reason that Saville and Thompson commenced publication of their duplicated journal, *The Reasoner*. Three issues appeared, in July, September, and November 1956, the latter number coming off the mimeograph machine as Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest. *The Reasoner* editorialized against any ostrich-like hiding from the crisis of Stalinism, insisted that the response of the leadership of the British Party to this crisis had been inadequate in its papering over the very problem that needed extensive and open discussion, and offered reflections of non-communists, such as G.D.H. Cole, on contentious issues, like democratic centralism. Much of the correspondence published, which constituted a minuscule fraction of the letters and comment received (and the editors asked directly why it was that so few were willing to have their thoughts appear in print), was critical of the manner in which Thompson and Saville had acted, but acknowledged that given the views and clearly-recognized stonewalling of the Party leadership, *something* had to be done.

alignment. Finally, in Lin Chun, *The British New Left* (Edinburgh 1993) and Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham, North Carolina 1997) discussion of *The New Reasoner* is somewhat limited and is generally treated, not in its own right, but as an event in the creation of the *New Left Review*.

If two historians did indeed edit *The Reasoner*, they were by no means always of one mind, save for their commitment to socialism and their insistence that the crisis of Stalinism needed to be met head on, not with a rejection of communism, but by a renewal of its practice and program. Thompson was, it seems, more the frustrated poet than the historian during these years, and Saville, at the time cast somewhat in the mould of an economic historian *à la* Maurice Dobb, was occasionally suspicious of Thompson's fixation on culture, although he admired his comrade's resurrection of William Morris. The two men were of course in basic agreement, but also seemed regularly caught in the throes of differing perspectives; their personalities and inclinations often diverged, but they negotiated a mode of presentation that highlighted shared commitments. And beyond these two leading figures, contributions of historians were by no means overwhelming: the economist Ronald Meek, the writer Doris Lessing, the West Fife miners' leader Lawrence Daly – all took their places alongside Bob Davies' account of the 1937-1938 Soviet purges. Among *The Reasoner* contributors to issues two and three (roughly 30 in total, excluding Thompson and Saville), perhaps only Rodney Hilton stands out as easily identifiable as part of the contingent that would later be associated with *the* British Marxist historians. He wrote, not as an historian, but as a Worcestershire communist concerned about contemporary political issues and the necessity of avoiding the appearance that intellectuals and workers were deeply divided over the nature and meaning of the crisis within the British Party. Hilton wanted *The Reasoner*, "for lack of any other Communist expression of opinion," to be a bridge between members of the Party and thousands of others who recognized the need "for the British revolutionary tradition to be embodied in a Marxist political party. It doesn't have to be a bridge across which Communists leave the party, and it shouldn't be a bridge flung out to seduce Labour workers from their present allegiance. But it could be a bridge for ideas to cross about the creation, in whatever form, of the unity of the Labour movement." Saville's view, voiced in a late November 1956 letter to Thompson, that it was the historians, first and foremost among the Party's intellectuals, who had weathered the storms of Party crisis best, may well be correct, and it certainly solidifies notions of *the* British Marxist historians. But within the record of public statement that was *The Reasoner*, this was not a straightforward matter, easily established by the evidence of the period.¹⁹

¹⁹See on this period of 1956-1957 many of the articles in *The Socialist Register*, 1976, but especially Saville, "The XXth Congress and the British Communist Party," 1-23. Hilton appears in *The Reasoner: A Journal of Discussion*, 2 (September 1956), 28-29. Communist Party leaders, at first, did not think the historians' group would be very interested in the 20th Party Congress revelations. James Klugman, scheduled to speak before the historians' group, asked Dorothy Thompson what she thought he should address, adding, "Surely the historians don't want to talk about all this Joe business." See Dorothy Thompson, *Outsiders*, 12.

Thompson and Saville were of course subject to Party pressure to cease publication of their discussion bulletin, and when the third issue appeared they were suspended. They resigned from the Communist Party shortly thereafter, convinced that the Soviet attack on Hungary had discredited their Party. They urged others to take their leave as well. And by this time the atmosphere within the Party had hardened, with the usual campaigns of containment tightening the noose around the neck of dissidence, and the hostility of the loyalist element of the rank-and-file growing more bellicose. *The Reasoner*, born of demand for internal party discussion, had in fact given birth to the disappointing recognition that within the Communist Party of Great Britain little discussion was actually going to be allowed.

New Reasoning/New Left

The Reasoner had not intended to create a social movement. It was premised on a belief that the Communist Party was itself that movement, and that it could be moved away from its leadership's refusals to confront the crises of Stalinism. When this did not happen, the necessity of creating a New Left was apparent, the organ for this being a quarterly journal of socialist humanism, *The New Reasoner*, again edited by Saville and Thompson. If there *is* a political moment when the British Marxist historians intersected decisively with the making of a social movement it was from the summer of 1957 through the autumn of 1959, during which time ten issues of a remarkable publication attempted to stimulate the rebirth of a revolutionary left. It is therefore instructive to look closely at *The New Reasoner* in order to ascertain what kind of social movement it was struggling to create, who participated in this project, and in what ways.

Let us commence with some mundane counts. In 10 issues *The New Reasoner*, exclusive of editorials and book reviews, published about 165 signed contributions, ranging in form from feature articles to notes and documents contributions. Of this total, only eighteen, or a little more than ten per cent, were authored by those who would come to be identified as among the British Marxist Historians. Nine were by E.P. Thompson and John Saville, two each from Royden Harrison, Dorothy Thompson, Christopher Hill, and Victor Kiernan, with a solitary contribution, in the first number, by Eric Hobsbawm (Rodney Hilton and others contributed the odd short review).²⁰ If we eliminate the two founding editors, there is no question that the anthropologist Peter Worsely, the economist Ronald Meek, the sociologist John Rex, the political scientist Ralph Miliband,²¹ and the scientist D.G. Arnot, were the mainstays of the contributors, accounting for twenty essays. Worsley

²⁰E.J. Hobsbawm, "Dr. Marx and the Victorian Critics," *The New Reasoner*, 1 (Summer 1957), 29-39.

²¹It is unfortunate that no mention of Miliband's role in *The New Reasoner* was alluded to in Robin Blackburn, "Ralph Miliband, 1924-1994," *New Left Review*, 206 (July-August 1994), 15-22.

would eventually graduate to the status of editor, joining Thompson and Saville, while Meek, Miliband, and Arnot would find their way on to an expanded editorial board that included, in later issues, Ken Alexander, later to become Sir Kenneth Alexander, Vice-Chancellor of Stirling University, and perhaps Thompson's and Saville's most active and acute editorial adviser; Michael Barratt Brown, a Workers' Education Association lecturer with a research interest in issues of finance and international trade; Malcolm MacEwen, a communist journalist who had worked on the *Daily Worker* through the 1940s and up to 1956; and literary figures Doris Lessing, Mervyn Jones, and Randall Swingler. Harry Hanson, who lectured in Public Administration at Leeds University, often provided rejoinders to major articles, especially those written by E.P. Thompson, whose contributions were all, with the exception of a review of some writings on Peterloo and an article written under a pseudonym on William Blake, essays in political theory and journalism, especially concerned to articulate the meaning of socialist humanism and how it stood in contrast to older Marxist traditions and related to the emergence of a New Left. Behind the scenes, Alfred Dressler was, in Thompson's words, a "seemingly omniscient editorial adviser on the Soviet Union ... and sometimes courier between West and East."²²

A closer probing of the content of *The New Reasoner* reveals four related themes: internationalism, social science in the service of social transformation, the creativity of culture, and the need for organization.

The internationalism of the journal was both unmistakable and understandable. In struggling to bring forth a new socialist humanism from the ashes of Stalinism, Thompson and Saville were inevitably drawn into a discourse that spoke with varied accents and in different languages. Predominant among these were East European inflections, for events in Poland and Hungary had been of fundamental importance in highlighting what was wrong with Soviet-style communism. *The New Reasoner's* inaugural number contained a Hungarian retrospective by future Trotskyist Peter Fryer, reviewing a cluster of books on the events of October/November 1956, as well as a lead article by the philosopher Hyman Levy. The latter explored the historically conditioned materialist constraints of Soviet Socialism, locating Stalinism's worst features in what Levy explained was an understandable dissonance between a socialized economy and a culture and political order embedded in centuries of Czarism. Ironically, given the extent to which Thompson's critically poised initial discussion article in the same issue, "Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines," insisted on the need to jettison a theoretical language of base and superstructure, which he felt undermined a labour theory of humanist

²²Numbers of articles come from my own tallies of a complete run of *The New Reasoner* in my possession. Editorial board memberships are also constructed from this source, but for other comment see as well E.P. Thompson, "Preface," in Malcolm MacEwen, *The Greening of a Red* (London 1991), ix; and John Saville to Dorothy Thompson, 25 June 2002 (in possession of the author).

value by relegating men's and women's creative acts hierarchically, from which flowed Stalinism's contempt for the people, Levy spoke of Soviet Socialism in terms of an economy and a politics separated by a "gap between basis and super-structure," a divide that insured society's inevitable distancing from "socialist coherence."²³ Sputnik gave birth to a symposium, in which the advances of science in the USSR were contrasted with the limitations of freedom: "Yesterday, humanity dreamed of conquering gravity," concluded one participant, "today, it dreams of conquering stupidity, evil, and injustice. Man lives not by sputniks alone, but also by justice and liberty."²⁴

This grappling with socialism's international record was evident in *The New Reasoner's* obvious commitment to the literary realm, where once-censored short stories of the Hungarian communist, Tibor Dery (whose imprisonment in 1957 *The New Reasoner* protested), were published, Polish writer W. Woroszyński was excerpted, and the poetry of East European dissident communists Gyula Illyes, Lajos Tamási, and Adam Wazyk featured. Wazyk's "A Critique of the Poem for Adults" seemed to speak poignantly to Levy's analysis of Soviet Socialism: "They lived by the light of dawn and sowed the gloomy dark of night." Indeed, *The New Reasoner* was arguably the single British conduit most committed to translating and adapting the poetic voice of East European liberatory communism to English speaking audiences in the late 1950s. Silenced in their own lands, these victims of Stalinist repression were given expression in the fraternal pages of Britain's reasoning rebels: "Rather storms boil round me than with false peace, irresolution betray your white brow and its brave message, wounded revolution!" Supplementing these suppressed sonnets of the Eastern bloc were other voices of poetic protest, including the Turkish dissident, Nazim Hikmet. From out of the bowels of United States McCarthyism came the verse of Tom McGrath,

It is the poem provides the proper charm,
Spelling resistance and the living will,
To bring to dance a stony field of fact
And set against terror exile or despair
The rituals of our humanity.

as well as the lonely plea to defend freedom by the distinguished playwright, Arthur Miller.²⁵

²³See Peter Fryer, "Hungary in Retrospect," and contrast Hyman Levy, "Soviet Socialism," 8; and E.P. Thompson, "Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines," 130-131, both in *The New Reasoner*, 1 (Summer 1957), 71-78, 4-12, 105-143.

²⁴"A Sputnik Symposium," *New Reasoner*, 4 (Spring 1958), 91-100.

²⁵See Tibor Dery, "Behind the Brick Wall," Adam Wazyk, "Critique of the Poem for Adults," (first two lines of poem quoted above), and Tom McGrath, "Against the False Magicians," in "Four Poems," (five lines of poetry quoted above) in *The New Reasoner* (hereafter *NR*), 1 (Summer 1957), 39-53, 56-60; Arthur Miller, "The Freedom of the Writer," and

Internationalism also surfaced regularly on the pages of *The New Reasoner* through the reprinting of timely translated statements from other countries, including Jean-Paul Sartre's "Is This The Time?," a section of a 50,000 word essay that had appeared in *Les Temps Modernes* and took a brave stand against the war in Algeria, spoke out against imperialism in the escalating Suez crisis, condemned the Soviet invasion of Hungary, and addressed the meaning of Stalinism and the need to reconfigure the Communist Party of France, one of the most dogmatic and unreconstructed of Soviet apologists in Europe. Claude Bourget offered an unashamed critique of "the imperial Frenchman," writing from the vantage point of a new *Parti d'Union de la Gauche Socialiste* (UGS), and when this body convened a congress late in 1958, inviting dissident communists and left socialists from across Europe and North Africa, Dorothy Thompson attended and reported on the proceedings for *The New Reasoner*, the only group from the English Left represented. Poland's dissident communist youth leader, Roman Zimand, was reprinted, as was the Italian socialist, Franco Fortini, whose "Letter to a Communist" struck out against cultivating illusion concerning both the Socialist and Communist Parties, as well as nurturing nonsensical notions that it was possible to "abstain from socialist struggle." The murder of Hungarian communist, Imre Nagy, was noted in the journal with a boxed quotation from his writings on socialist morality, and, a year later, commemorated with a statement by his comrade Tibor Meray. Contrasts were evident in the republication of documents from Yugoslavia, dealing with new perspectives on socialism and state bureaucracy, comments on the wider *Programme of the League of Yugoslav Communists* by Ralph Miliband, and presentations of the milder revisionism evident in East Germany, drawn together for *The New Reasoner* by a Hungarian exile, Dora Scarlett, as well as in Ronald Meek's travelogue, "A Dogmavisionist in Warsaw," which outlined his experiences in lecturing to Soviet and Polish audiences on economics.²⁶

Nazim Hikmet, "Three Poems," and "The Swimming Pool," *NR*, 2 (Autumn 1957), 114-131; Alexander Yashin, "Levers," *NR*, 3 (Winter 1957-1958), 26-38; Tibor Dery, "Odysseus," *NR*, 4 (Spring 1958), 58-79; Guyla Illyes, "Ode to Bartok," *NR*, 5 (Summer 1958), 69-72; Adam Wayzk, "The Railway Carriage," *NR*, 6 (Autumn 1958), 32-34; Lajos Tamasi, "A Rhapsody," *NR*, 7 (Winter 1958-1959), (second two lines of poetry quoted above), 75-78; and W. Woroszyński, "The Cruel Star," *NR*, 10 (Autumn 1959), 50-55.

²⁶See, again as a sample, Jean-Paul Sartre, "Is This The Time?" and R. Zimard, "Internationalism," *NR*, 1 (Summer 1957), 87-104; Royden Harrison, "Workers' Councils," *NR*, 2 (Autumn 1957), 99-102; Franco Fortini, "Letter to a Communist," *NR*, 3 (Winter 1957-1958), 113-118; "Excerpts from the Yugoslav Draft Program," *NR*, 5 (Summer 1958), 122-128; Dora Scarlett, "Revisionism in East Germany," *NR*, 6 (Autumn 1958), 131-136; Ronald Meek, "A Dogmavisionist in Warsaw"; Scarlett, "A Bureau in Hungary"; Maria Vejan, "Religion in Poland," and Dorothy Thompson, "Delegation Fraternelle," *NR*, 7 (Winter 1958-1959), 12-19, 52-62, and 103-111; Imre Nagy, "On Socialist Morality," *NR*, 5 (Summer 1958), 88; Tibor Meray, "Imre Nagy, Communist," and review of Ralph Miliband, "The Yugoslav Program," *NR*, 9 (Summer 1959), 68-73, and 133-137; and Claude Bourdet, "The Imperial Frenchman," *NR*, 8 (Spring 1959), 118-132.

Further afield, from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the internationalism of *The New Reasoner* was only slightly less robust. Tom Mboya reviewed Kenyan developments; Cedric Belfrage, editor-in-exile of the American progressive sheet, *The National Guardian*, supplied comment on the compromised Afro-American People's Solidarity Conference in Cairo in 1958 as well as on the governance of Kerala, India where the Communist Party held power but functioned, according to Belfrage, like social democrats; and Peter Worsley and John Rex provided occasional forays into Africa, including a lengthy anatomization of Mau Mau, a discussion of the shifting nature of Labour Party policy as it related to race and the African National Congresses, and comment on colonialism and liberation movements. Arab nationalism was the subject of a major essay by Harry Hanson. Paul Hogarth illustrated his diary of a trip to South Africa with pen and ink sketches of Black Africans, the drawings punctuating a sobering account of racial division that still held forth the promise of potential unity:

South Africa was a depressing place to be in when one saw grotesque injustices and the grossest inhumanity but it was a country where one found the ideas of racial equality and human rights bringing together all kinds of people whatever their colour or creed. It was all very reminiscent of the thirties in this respect. More than one ever realised, successful co-operation between black, brown and white offered a tonic in these disillusioning times of ours.

Ronald Meek took reasoners to the other side of the globe in his discussions of Japanese Marxism.²⁷

It is difficult to pick up the small bundle of *New Reasoners* that constitutes the run of this socialist humanist journal, then, and not be struck by its internationalism, a point that has perhaps registered insufficiently with those prone to see the *New Left Review* as the channel through which an internationalist *avant garde* made its way to the British Left. But the predecessor journal had its pages devoted to the causes of internationalism as well, and decidedly so. Talk of Thompson as incarcerated in his Britishness, which abounds in some circles, misses, surprisingly, the obviousness of his internationalism in the late 1950s.²⁸ His last essay for *The New*

²⁷Peter Worsley, "The Anatomy of Mau Mau," *NR*, 1 (Summer 1957), 13-25; Paul Hogarth, "In Strydom's South Africa," and John Rex, "Africa's National Congresses," *NR*, 2 (Autumn 1957), 46-64, Hogarth quotation from 55; John Rex, "Central Africa and Racial Dictatorship," *NR*, 4 (Spring 1958), 58-67; Ronald Meek, "Japanese Marxism," *NR*, 5 (Summer 1958), 81-88; Harry Hanson, "Britain and the Arabs," *NR*, 6 (Autumn 1958), 2-14; Tom Myboa, "Kenya Reviewed," *NR*, 7 (Winter 1958-1959), 78-89; and John Rex, "The Meaning of the ACCRA Conferences," M.W.K. Chiume, "Nyasaland's Case for Secession," and "Documents," *NR*, 9 (Summer 1959), 84-97.

²⁸ See Ashman, "The Communist Party Historians' Group," 145-160. It is difficult not to come to the conclusion that notions of Thompson's 'populism' and 'Little Englandism' are overdetermined by the *New Left Review* and *Socialist Register* polemics of the mid-1960s,

Reasoner, “A Pessay in Ephology,” was both a balance sheet of the 1959 election, in which Labour went down to defeat, and a declaration that the journal was now ceasing, in order to merge with the *Universities and Left Review*, the better to build a New Left.²⁹ With no desire to “disown his debt” to the Communist Party in which he had for so long toiled for transformation, Thompson paused, before alluding to a British radical, Tom Mann, to salute a contingent of international comrades in Poland, Hungary, East Germany, and France, all of whom had he had been travelling with during the intensity of the 1956-1959 years. When it came time to assess what it was that *The New Reasoner* had been engaged in doing for two years, Thompson listed, first and foremost: “to keep open sources of international exchange and information.”³⁰

Beyond this Thompson also identified what he considered the other main accomplishments of the journal: “to engage in new empirical research into our society; to take part, where we could, in the policy discussions within the labour movement, and to participate in wider intellectual and cultural controversies; and, through all these means, to contribute to a regrouping of forces on the British left.”³¹ In a 1957 statement on “Socialism and the Intellectuals” in the *Universities and Left Review*, Thompson insisted that socialist humanism had before it a particular twinned task, the repudiation of capitalist complacency and its abstract rejection of communism as possibility, as well as the refusal to allow Stalinism to debase communism by undermining basic liberal values such as justice, tolerance, and intellectual liberty in the name of preserving a never-to-be-arrived at social liberty, equality, and fraternity. From both sides of the Cold War oppositions, Thompson saw a widening gulf that was nothing less than the pressured retreat from humanism, a social crisis that threatened the labour movement, the cultures of both the Left and the wider social formations within which it existed, international relations and peace in the atomic age, and the world communist movement. Thompson understood well the argument that the strength of organized labour in the advanced capitalist West, as well as improvements in technology and ever sophisticated

pitting Thompson against Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn, and resulting in some harsh caricaturing. For Thompson’s internationalism commences with his family roots and his father’s relation to India, Frank’s death at the hands of fascists and Edward’s and Dorothy’s involvement in the post-war Yugoslav youth brigades, 1956 and the *New Reasoner*, various campaigns for world peace and nuclear disarmament, beginning with anti-war activity in the early 1950s and closing with the European Nuclear Disarmament movement of the 1970s and 1980s, and ending with Thompson’s researches into his father’s relations with Tagore. For an overview see Bryan D. Palmer, *E.P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (London 1994).

²⁹See for accounts of this development Lin Chun, *The British New Left* (Edinburgh 1993), 10-16; Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain*, 45-78; Palmer, *Objections and Oppositions*, 69-86.

³⁰E.P. Thompson, “A Pessay in Ephology,” *NR*, 10 (Autumn 1959), 1-8, quotation at 4.

³¹Thompson, “A Pessay in Ephology,” 4.

forms of state management, allowed for a “realist” compromise, in which the Left concentrated its efforts on improving the lot of ordinary people through pushing for domestic reform and restraining imperialism internationally through opposing aggression or working to prevent nuclear war. All of these things the reasoners had certainly been involved in. But he refused the inclination to rest in a particular cul-de-sac, as he also would in later *New Left Review* and *Out of Apathy* writings on revolution, by insisting that socialist humanism was more than this. Such concessions to fact could never be accepted by socialist humanists, for this produced a one-sided politics, which drew on “the realism of the sociologist but not the realism of the poet, and socialist humanism seeks to unite the two.”³²

This language is relevant because it addressed, by default, how much *The New Reasoner* was in actuality ordered by broadly sociological as well as historical concerns. The two were not, of course, counterposed in some disciplinary oppositionality. But neither was this semiology of the sociological, by which Thompson did not mean some attachment to an academic discipline given over, in the 1950s, to variants of functionalism, from Parsons to Smelser, or a methodological empiricism of the sort C. Wright Mills was assailing in *The Sociological Imagination*, insignificant.³³ Rather, by sociological, Thompson meant a socio-political analysis of the present crisis, informed by historical sensibilities but oriented toward critique and reconstitution created out of empirical research.³⁴ This sensibility would inform the May Day Manifesto group of 1967-1968, in which Thompson would make common cause with Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams, among others.³⁵ If the British Marxist historians were in fact present at their making, then, as

³²E.P. Thompson, “Socialism and the Intellectuals,” *Universities and Left Review*, 1 (Spring 1957), 31-36. Note, as well, Thompson, “Revolution,” in Thompson, ed., *Out of Apathy* (London 1960), 287-308; and Thompson, “Revolution Again! Or Shut Your Ears and Run,” *New Left Review*, 6 (November-December 1960), 18-31.

³³See C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (London 1959), 50-75, and note the concluding sentence, which reads in part: “What I am suggesting is that by addressing ourselves to issues and to troubles, and formulating them as problems of social science, we stand the best chance, I believe the only chance, to make reason democratically relevant to human affairs” (194) Mills’ text was eminently compatible with the positions developing in *The New Reasoner*, attuned as it was to abstracted empiricism, the bureaucratic ethos, the uses of history, and the nature of democratic politics. Thompson would come to have considerable attraction to Wright Mills. See Thompson, “Remembering C. Wright Mills,” in *The Heavy Dancers* (London 1985), 261-274.

³⁴For a slightly later statement relating to historical research and broad sociological impulses see E.P. Thompson, “History from Below,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 April 1966, reprinted in Dorothy Thompson, ed., *The Essential E.P. Thompson* (New York 2001), especially 486-487.

³⁵Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, and Edward Thompson, eds., *1967 New Left May Day Manifesto* (London 1967); and Raymond Williams, ed., *May Day Manifesto 1968* (London 1968).

some were among the reasoning rebels of 1956-1959, they found themselves in the company of a politicized cohort of social theorists and researchers from other disciplines for whom the empirical idiom was a means of broaching particular questions through investigation and engagement, with the needs of all individuals, workers and intellectuals alike, taken into account, but addressed primarily through class. And this had implications for their later historical writing, which of course was never entirely framed by the kinds of pragmatic empiricism that dominated mainstream historical practice.

In terms of overt political intervention, then, *The New Reasoner* operated largely along a social scientific axis in which its concerns were framed by traditional Marxist understandings of priority, almost all of which related directly to organized labour and working-class entitlements. Many reasoners, the Thompsons among them, were engaged in adult education³⁶ and extra-mural activity, and Dorothy Thompson had worked in various research undertakings that had been framed in the sociological aftermath of the 1942 Beveridge Report, the victory of Labour in the 1945 election, and the gradual extension of the welfare state.³⁷ When John Saville provided one of the most historical articles to appear in *The New Reasoner*, a fairly orthodox “left” assessment of the meaning of the welfare state, in which he insisted that Britain’s reforms in housing, education, and health care were neither socialist nor unique, but rather eminently capitalist and quite typical of 20th century “palliatives” that most market economies found useful to the domestication of the working class, he kicked off a spirited exchange over the meaning of welfare provisioning in modern societies. Dorothy Thompson offered a rejoinder, in which she defended various aspects of state services, not simply as capitalist carrots, but as profoundly anti-capitalist, and thus potentially socialist, warrens of thought and material activity criss-crossing the social relations of market exploitation, the result of historical class struggles. In this she anticipated perspectives, albeit gendered, that would be put forth by E.P. Thompson in various writings of the first half of the 1960s, and that, conceptually, underlay the argument of *The Making of the English Working Class*. But whereas Edward’s tilt towards the warrens of working-class socialism within capitalism generally (with odd exceptions) drew on the reservoir of male labour accomplishment, Dorothy’s allusions gestured more forcefully to women’s experience:

³⁶See Peter Searby, “Edward Thompson as a Teacher: Yorkshire and Warwick,” in John Rule and Robert Malcolmson, ed., *Protest and Survival: Essays for E.P. Thompson* (London 1993), 1-23; E.P. Thompson, *Education and Experience: Fifth Mansbridge Memorial Lecture* (1968), reprinted in Thompson, *The Romantics: England in a Revolutionary Age* (New York 1997), 4-32.

³⁷See Dorothy Thompson, “The Personal and the Political,” *New Left Review*, 200 (July-August 1993), 96.

A whole range of services — the maternity services (apart from the extra payments to insured women), the health service, the pre-school clinics, the school, medical, and dental services, the education system at least until the age of eighteen, as well as partially free services like the school meals, are all provided for people who make no direct payment, and on whose behalf no direct payment is made. In many cases housing subsidies exceed the amount paid in rates by those who receive the benefit of them. There is, in fact, a whole range of services for which no payment is made by the recipient. Most socialists would, of course, agree that a far larger range, including most of the benefits at the moment provided by National Insurance should come into the same category. But the important thing is that these benefits are provided purely on the basis of **need** and not of cash payment, or even of any abstract conception of **social value**. This conception is a profoundly anti-capitalist one. It had to be fought for at every stage, and although the leaders of individual campaigns — such as those for family allowances or free school meals, may have appeared to be isolated humanitarians, their support has always come from the organised labour movement — as well, of course, as from humanitarians in all parts of society.... The real significance of the welfare services, and of the legality of Trade Unions and other working-class organisations, is that these are, objectively, victories for working-class values within capitalist society.

Debate over the nature and meaning of the welfare state thus moved into a discussion of “capitalist society and the new socialist society which is already developing.”³⁸

This indeed was the dialectic that animated much social scientific writing in the pages of *The New Reasoner*, including position papers and articles that constituted clear-cut attempts to intervene in the politics of the labour movement and the possibility of policy emanating from some future Labour government. Among the most dramatic of such writings were John Hughes’ program for nationalisation of the steel industry, various contributions on ‘socialist foreign policy’ and the campaign to derail the rough ride to nuclear armageddon (which quickly became a central preoccupation of the journal, a section “Campaign Notes” detailing the moral protest of reasoners such as Mervyn Jones and Peter Worsley in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament or CND), economic comment on the strength of the British

³⁸Dorothy Thompson, “The Welfare State,” *NR*, 4 (Spring 1958), 125-130, quotations at 127-128, and 130, with a prior contribution by Stephen Hatch in the same issue, 124-125. Also, John Saville, “The Welfare State,” *NR*, 3 (Winter 1957-1958), 5-25; Peter Smith, “The Welfare State,” *NR*, 5 (Summer 1958), 110-114; and Dorothy G. Cole, “Socialist Pensions,” *NR*, 8 (Spring 1959), 15-26. For E.P. Thompson writing that develops Dorothy’s views on anti-capitalist values see, as well, Thompson, “Revolution,” in *Out of Apathy*, 305; Thompson, “Homage to Tom Maguire,” in Asa Briggs and John Saville, ed., *Essays in Labour History* (London 1960), 280-281; and Thompson, “The Peculiarities of the English,” in *Poverty of Theory & Other Essays* (London 1978), 72, 84-85. Of course this is the foundation of Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London 1963). Saville’s article apparently gave rise to a vigorous correspondence between E.P. Thompson and his fellow editor, with much critical exchange. See the brief account, drawing on the Saville-Thompson letters, in Kenny, *The First New Left*, 144-146.

pound and its political significance, and, finally, an ambitious attempt to articulate a wages plan initiated with a Ken Alexander and John Hughes authored 1959 pamphlet, *A Socialist Wages Plan*, published jointly with the *Universities and Left Review*, which gave rise to a round of critique and rejoinder in the final issue of *The New Reasoner*. Something of the political nature of this material comes through the choice of Alexander and Hughes to end their response to critics with a quote from Marx's Resolution at the Geneva Conference of the International Workingmen's Association, admonishing the workers' movement to look "carefully after the interests of the worst paid trades — They must convince the world at large that their efforts, far from being narrow and selfish, aim at the downtrodden millions." From this Alexander and Hughes took the position that,

No socialist trade unionist can ignore this problem in an economy in which three-quarters of the women 'employees' are not organised into trade unions, in which the wages and conditions of the workers in the Wages Council stagnate or improve far less than the those of well organised workers.... Money-wage-militancy can not tackle the social and economic problems of 'the downtrodden millions.'

This was not unrelated to important theoretical attempts to tackle the ossification of Labour Party politics, through analysis of bureaucratization by John Rex, or, in writings by Ralph Miliband, to address the wider politics of capitalist democracy and move socialists off the Fabian ground of Labour Party renewal as a matter of administration only. Taken as a whole these and other *New Reasoner* writings provided varied searchlights on a series of subjects that were destined to figure forcefully in the development of an organizational apparatus and a political program that the dissident communists of the late 1950s acknowledged, for much of the run of the journal, was premature, and required further discussion, thought, and informed activity.³⁹

³⁹ Among many writings: John Hughes, "Steel Nationalisation," *NR*, 2 (Autumn 1957), 6-29; Malcolm MacEwen, "The Two Camps," C. Rajagopalachari, "Positive Co-Existence," Konni Zilliacus, "A Socialist Foreign Policy," and Michael Barratt-Brown, "A Foreign Economic Policy," *NR*, 4 (Spring 1958), 11-67; G.D.H. Cole, "Next Steps in British Foreign Policy," D.G. Arnott, "Ammunition for the Campaign," Ralph Miliband, "The Politics of Contemporary Capitalism," Peter Worsley, "Britain — From Coast to Coast," Roddy Barry, "Is Neutrality Necessary?" *NR*, 5 (Summer 1958), 8-11, 25-35, 39-64, and 107-110; Ralph Miliband, "The Transition of the Transition," John Rex, "The Labour Bureaucracy," Michael Barratt Brown, "The Pound and the One Percent," and the "Campaign Notebook" contributions of Mervyn Jones and Peter Worsley, *NR*, 6 (Autumn 1958), 35-61, 79-91, and 120-130; T.N. Street, "The Pound and the Elections," *NR*, 8 (Spring 1959), 27-35; D.G. Arnott, "Campaign Notebook," *NR*, 9 (Summer 1959), 18-22; Alison Ravetz, "A Note on V. G. Childe," and the section "A Polemic on the Wages Plan," *NR*, 10 (Autumn 1959), 56-66, and 73-106. For particular comment on issues of industrial policy, workers' control, and the trade unions see Kenny, *The First New Left*, 44-46.

Thompson and Saville leavened this political economy loaf with a range of cultural production,⁴⁰ drawing on the literary offerings of Doris Lessing, whose short story “The Day That Stalin Died,” appeared in the second number, Mervyn Jones, the poets, Jack Beeching, Harold Silver, Arnold Rattenbury, and Randall Swingler (as well as republishing Bertolt Brecht and others), and the artist Paul Hogarth, who touched down on pre-revolutionary styles of Russian graphic representation and the successes of Diego Rivera. Hogarth saw the Mexican muralist as “planting seeds of progressive intention in the imagination of generations ... [who came to see] their revolution as a living concept, the warm flesh on the bare bones of political theory.” John Berger was drawn to the Reasoner ranks to elaborate on how art could be eased into the work of sustaining the socialist cause. Comrades who might have been, Harold Laski, V. Gordon Childe, and G.D.H. Cole, were memorialized, and those who, in future years, would be recognized as among *the* British Marxists, Kiernan and Hill, penned commentaries on past contributors to the socialist conceptual arsenal, from Wordsworth to Gramsci. E.P. Thompson had a large hand in the compilation of the “Blake Bicentenary Supplement,” and to avoid overuse of a single byline (since he was providing a signed review essay in the issue), adopted the pseudonym W.P. Jessup to author “The Making of ‘London,’” which echoes themes developed forty years later in a chapter on Blake’s “London” in *Witness Against the Beast*. Kiernan’s extended review of Raymond Williams’

⁴⁰It is critical to note that this was anything but a “culturalism” of the sort suggested by Richard Johnson in essays in John Clarke, Chas Critcher, and Richard Johnson, eds., *Working-Class Culture: Studies in history and theory* (London 1978). Rather, Thompson’s writing in this period and its immediate aftermath, and especially his political interventions in various Left publications with which he was associated, indicated his appreciation of the cultural as *one* domain of struggle within a class politics that would achieve socialism. Thus Thompson was suspicious, in fact, of an emerging “culturalism” in which too much accent was placed on the transformative possibilities of popular culture. This position was beginning to be seen among elements associated with *Universities and Left Review* (especially Stuart Hall), and the developing publications of Raymond Williams, and even Richard Hoggart. Most troubling, to Thompson, was the drift to a reformist and “culturalist” New Left intervention on the question of Britain’s television policy, through a submission to the Pilkington Committee on Broadcasting (1962), the adverse reaction to which presaged the first New Left’s “complete breakdown” according to one recent commentator. Thompson thus deplored some younger New Leftists’ penchant for “educational and cultural therapy,” argued that “we must discuss the uses of literacy a little less, and the uses of history rather more,” and suggested that exploitation, not alienation, needed to be the primary focus of socialist analysis. All of this would resurface in Thompson’s critique of Raymond Williams’ *The Long Revolution*, where he chastized the seeming abandonment of “crucial notions of struggle, of power, of ideology, and of materialism.” See E.P. Thompson, “Commitment in Politics,” *Universities and Left Review*, 6 (1959), 50-52; Thompson, “The Long Revolution, Parts 1 & 2,” *New Left Review*, 9-10 (1961), 24-33, and 34-39; and on all of this and the Pilkington Committee, Kenny, *The First New Left*, 54-66, and 86-118.

Culture and Society (1958) is perhaps the most developed *Marxist historical* engagement with a cultural topic in the pages of *The New Reasoner*, and is noteworthy as stamping the reasoner rebellion of 1956-1959 with some of the common features later to be designated essentials of the British Marxist historians.⁴¹ But this was, nevertheless, far from the core of *The New Reasoner's* cultural agenda, which was marked more decisively in verse and a theoretical or philosophical elaboration of socialist humanism's tenets. In this category were perhaps the most important essays to appear in the journal, albeit ones that would also give rise to dialogues of difference among the Reasoner New Left.

Leading the way was Thompson's "Socialist Humanism," a rambling 38-page densely-packed text that, appearing in the first issue of *The New Reasoner*, far outstripped in length any future contribution to the journal. Concerned largely with Stalinist orthodoxy, Thompson insisted that a revolt against Stalinism was the prerequisite to dissident communism's restoration of "confidence in our own revolutionary perspectives." Culture, and its resuscitation, was central to Thompson's project of renewing socialism. The "belittling of conscious human agency in the making of history" was, for Thompson, the first feature of Stalinism's anti-intellectualism, hoisted on the petard of a base-superstructure oppositional ordering that privileged abstractions and "laws" of historical motion, which Thompson suggested lay at the core of deviations from Marx evident not only in Stalin, but in Lenin's materialism. Soviet academicians had, he argued, "forgotten the continuity of human culture":

⁴¹ Most issues contained poetry contributions, and in many short fiction appeared. Representative was the second issue, with Doris Lessing, "The Day That Stalin Died," Randall Swingler, "The Fall of Babylon," Christopher Logue, "Song of the Dead Soldier," Jack Beeching, "Sorting Furs," and Harold Silver, "Nicholas Guillen," *NR*, 2 (Autumn 1957). The "Blake Bicentenary Supplement" appeared in *NR*, 3 (Winter 1957-1958), between pages 64-65, as well as E.P. Thompson's only historical contribution, a review of some books on Peterloo, "God & King & Law," 69-86. W.P. Jessup, "The Making of 'London'," was written by Thompson. I first suspected this because a) Jessup was Thompson's mother's maiden name; b) W.P. Jessup has no place in the Contributor's Notes; and c) the argument in the article bears considerable resemblance to E.P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (New York 1993), 174-193. Dorothy Thompson confirmed that the essay was indeed written by Edward. Also see, Stephen Hatch, "Laski: An Old Reasoner," *NR*, 2 (Autumn 1957), 67-76; V.G. Kiernan, "Wordsworth Revisited," *NR*, 7 (Winter 1958-1959), 62-74; V.G. Kiernan, "Culture and Society," *NR*, 9 (Summer 1959), 74-83; Christopher Hill, "Antonio Gramsci," *NR*, 4 (Spring 1958), 107-113; Kingsley Martin and Asa Briggs, "Two Tributes to G.D.H. Cole," *NR*, 8 (Spring 1959), 36-39; Paul Hogarth, "Diego Rivera," *NR*, 4 (Spring 1958), inset between 80-81; Hogarth, "Russian Graphic Art of 1905," *NR*, 10 (Autumn 1959), 67-72; and John Berger, "Art and Labour," *NR*, 6 (Autumn 1958), 74-78.

Stalinism attempts to short-circuit the process of social life by disclosing 'economic necessity', by asserting economic, i.e. class, interests as the only 'real sources' of human motivation. This entirely mistakes man's nature, as revealed in his unfolding history.... Economic changes impel changes in social relationships, in relations between real men and women; and these are apprehended, felt, reveal themselves in feelings of injustice, frustration, aspirations for social change; all is fought out in the human consciousness, including the moral consciousness.

Nothing in *The New Reasoner* could have been taken as a repudiation of the centrality of labour in the politics of dissident communism, but Thompson's "Socialist Humanism" essay articulated a new sense of class, in which it was never reducible to an economism, but expanded into a presence that was simultaneously economic, social, political, cultural, and moral. Socialist humanism sought, in Thompson's words, "to make men whole." In this its cues were taken as resistance to both Stalinist and capitalist reductionism. By liberating men and women from a slavery to things, to the pursuit of profit, accumulation, and consumption, or obeisance to "necessity," humanity would create, not only new values, but things in abundance. They would, in short, build and be built. With the threat of total destruction hovering over man, in the form of "a Thing to end all things," the Hydrogen Bomb, Thompson reasserted Luxemburg's earlier catastrophic prophecy, socialism or barbarism, "total destruction or human mastery over human history." "Only if men by their own human agency can master this thing will Marx's optimism be confirmed," Thompson concluded, and "human progress cease to resemble that hideous pagan idol who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain."⁴²

Thompson's long discussion article was sufficiently contentious that it provoked no less than five published responses spread over two issues of *The New Reasoner*, and at least one rejected rejoinder from the Trotskyist Peter Fryer. Critics lined up with Thompson's socialist humanism or attacked his "outrageously wild" targeting of theoretical Marxism, particularly as it appeared in the socialist humanist critique of Lenin's *Materialism and Empiro-Criticism*, a point also to be addressed by Fryer. One disgruntled opponent concluded bluntly: "In attempting to diminish the importance of the materialist base Edward Thompson is flitting on the perimeter of idealism."⁴³

⁴²Thompson, "Socialist Humanism," 105-143, block quotation at 122, other quotations from throughout. The above draws on an assessment of this article that first appeared in Bryan D. Palmer, *The Making of E.P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism, and History* (Toronto 1981), 48-50. It should be supplemented with the usefully critical, and fuller, discussions in Kenny, *The First New Left*, 69-85; and Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism* (London 1980).

⁴³See Harry Hanson, "An Open Letter," and Charles Taylor, "Marxism and Humanism," *NR*, 2 (Autumn 1957), 79-98; and Jack Lindsay, "Socialism and Humanism," John St. John, "Response to Harry Hanson," and Tim Enright, "Materialism or Eclecticism?" *NR*, 3 (Winter 1957-1958), 94-112. On Peter Fryer, rejection of his submission, and Thompson's edito-

Beyond these immediate rejoinders, perhaps the single most important response to the socialist humanist critique of Stalinism in *The New Reasoner*, Alasdair MacIntyre's two part essay, "From the Moral Wilderness," keyed on themes emerging out of Thompson's essay in its jostling with the moral dilemmas of a socialism that MacIntyre understood had always to be historicized: "Means and ends interpenetrate not just in some moral ideal, but in history itself." To be led out of the impasses bounded by capitalism and Stalinism, MacIntyre suggested, it was necessary to rekindle the fires of morality that had been burning at particularly low ember among socialists for some time. It was the historical power of such vision, he suggested, that would lead reasoners out of the moral wilderness.⁴⁴

Thompson's final statement on these issues, "Agency and Choice," defended his original theses and expanded his critique of Stalinism and capitalist philistinism to encompass the limitations of social democracy as well:

Today this philistinism has infected both social-democratic and communist ideology to the core. Although the forms of infection are very different, it produces in both a common symptom: the denial of the creative agency of men, when considered not as political or economic units in a chain of determined circumstances, but as moral and intellectual beings, in the making of their own history; in other words, the denial that men can, by a voluntary act of social will, surmount in any significant way the limitations imposed by "circumstances" or "historical necessity." In the Communist world this heresy against man takes the form of an ideology which buttresses the ruling bureaucracy, fettering initiatives in a thousand ways, by external repression or inward inhibition. In social-democratic thought it reveals itself in an inertia of the will and a moral myopia; an incapacity to look beyond the customary forms and makeshift remedies, to comprehend the pace and significance of change in this century — the colonial awakening, the human potential in the socialist third of the world — or, indeed, to imagine the precariousness of civilisation itself in the face of nuclear peril.

Indeed, Thompson saw the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament as a supreme example of the mobilizing capacity of human potential to resist fatalism, opposing a "moral imperative to all the life-corrupting arguments" of complacency. East and West, the revolt against philistinism was proceeding, in the one case against "necessity," in the other against "expediency." Choices were now on the agenda, as much for socialism as for any existing order of exploitation and oppression, and those choices were determinative of the kind of socialism that was to be made, bringing "the region of conscious human agency [into] the making of history."⁴⁵

rial response see Peter Fryer, "Lenin as Philosopher," *Labour Review*, 2 (September-October 1957), 136-147; "Rejected by the Reasoner," *Labour Review*, 3 (May-July 1958), 92-93; "An Unreasonable Reasoner," *Labour Review*, 3 (March-April 1959), 34-36; and "Letter to Our Readers," *NR*, 5 (Summer 1958), 127-132.

⁴⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Moral Wilderness," and "The Moral Wilderness II," *NR*, 7/8 (Winter 1958-1959) & (Spring 1959), 90-100 and 89-98.

⁴⁵ E.P. Thompson, "Agency and Choice," *NR*, 5 (Summer 1958), 89-106, quotations from throughout.

Thompson had little patience with his critics, largely dismissing them as disparate elements of an orthodox Marxism premised on its closed and self-consistent system. For their benefit he assured them of certain assumptions: 1) The world communist movement was indeed an expression of a revolutionary humanist activism, the resources of which were far from exhausted; 2) The Russian Revolution and its aftermath in Eastern Europe, as well its Chinese equivalent, had fundamentally altered property forms increasing the potential for human advance; 3) These revolutions had, however, degenerated under the weight of a bureaucratic élite, now representing a distinct interest controlling the state apparatus, a process highly restrictive of human potential. Dismissive of what he considered the “state capitalist” arguments of a section of the Trotskyist milieu, Thompson came close to embracing an orthodox Trotskyist view, describing the Stalinist bureaucracy as “parasitic upon a great movement of human liberation, and now that its ideological sterility and restrictive institutions are becoming increasingly a fetter even upon industrial expansion, I think it probable that its positions of power will crumble in the face of innumerable pressures within the socialist countries.”⁴⁶

Thompson conceded most ground to Charles Taylor, who had insisted that if Stalinism was indeed a mutation of Marxism, then Marxism itself had to be something of an incomplete humanism. In what followed, Thompson concentrated his remarks on the dialectical dilemma that all socialists had to confront, how necessity curbed desire. But he insisted that because this happened inevitably, it never justified an ongoing principle in which desire could only be sacrificed on the altar of necessity, and in increasingly large and oppressive doses. Socialist humanism, he insisted, was premised on breaking open the closed system of Stalinist thought and practice:

If we can maintain this position of commitment to the class movement and to the “consequences of consequences,” together with repudiation of many features of Communist thought and organisation, I do not see how we can do it without “dialectics”; that is, without a sense of the way in which the most contradictory elements can co-exist in the same historical event, and opposing tendencies and potentialities can interpenetrate within the same tradition.

Thompson’s final word on the cultural politics of reasoning was a return to “communist” duty:

to express our solidarity with fellow dissidents in the Communist world, to assert our confidence in the vitality of the humanist strand within the Communist tradition, to assist the Western labour movements to an understanding of the kind of society immanent within the late-Stalinist forms, and thereby to re-awaken an appreciation of the community of aspiration among the working people East and West which alone can make possible the reunifica-

⁴⁶Thompson, *Agency and Choice*,” quotations from throughout.

tion (not the pseudo-unity of top-level pacts, but the remaking of principled unity from below) of the socialist movements.

But to do this effectively, Thompson argued, the Cold War had to be relaxed, and the race to nuclear destruction tripped up and halted.⁴⁷

Thompson's "Agency and Choice" appeared in the fifth issue of *The New Reasoner*, and in many ways it aptly synthesized the internationalism, the drawing on social science in the service of transformation and the creativity of human culture that were themselves the wellsprings of debate and discussion within this quarterly. But the purpose of such wellsprings was not just to bring forth ideas and thought, although that is where the reasoners rightly began. Rather, the ultimate purpose was to fuse theory and action. No longer comfortable with what they perceived the rigidities of Leninist models of democratic centralism and vanguard organization, the reasoners were nevertheless, as Thompson himself demonstrated in refusing to abandon the mantle of dissident communist, committed to the kinds of organization and mobilization associated with the best features of the history of the communist tradition. Ideas, principles, and choices they saw as the foundation upon which a New Left could be built. And as *The New Reasoner* passed what would prove its mid-way mark in the summer of 1958, this organizational impulse clearly grew stronger and more pressing.

By the summer of 1959 the Reasoner grouping, mainly in their middle thirties, and a comparable contingent, about a decade younger, around *Universities and Left Review*, were in the process of merging. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) was the mobilizational yeast that brought to rise this organizational development, but there were other stimuli, including the Saville and Thompson-backed, but highly controversial within Reasoner ranks, independent socialist campaign of Lawrence Daly in West Fife, which birthed the Fife Socialist League, outpolled the Communist Party in what had long been an electoral stronghold of miner militants, and challenged the tepid stand of the Labour Party on nuclear weapons.⁴⁸ While the *New Left Review* would be the published articulation of this Reasoner/Left Review fusion, it had been preceded by the establishment of a New Left coffee house in London, and a proliferation of Left Clubs throughout Britain, ten of which were in operation by the end of 1959, and a further five of which were said to be in formation. The Clubs were centers of activity, in which diverse undertakings were emerging: the appearance of a monthly industrial bulletin in Leeds; a conference on industrial problems was being organized out of London, where a series of discussion meetings on the socialist youth movement were also ongoing, as they were in

⁴⁷Thompson, "Agency and Choice," quotations from throughout.

⁴⁸See among many possible sources David Widgery, *The Left in Britain, 1956-1968* (Harmondsworth 1976), 99-130; Chun, *British New Left*, 8-25; and John Saville, "A Note on West Fife," *NR*, 10 (Autumn 1959), 9-13. For a more critical airing of the differences around Daly and West Fife see Kenny, *The First New Left*, 40-1.

Croydon; in the West Riding “Socialism and Nationalisation” was to be the subject of a forthcoming conference; in Manchester and Cardiff the New Left connected with Labour Party figures; and New Left speakers were sharing platforms with counterparts from *Tribune*, *Victory for Socialism*, and *International Socialism*.⁴⁹

Number 9 of *The New Reasoner* carried Thompson’s lead essay, “The New Left,” an editorial call to organizational arms. Some new notes were sounded, most prominently the accent on youth. Elements of a new generation, Thompson argued, were now taking up the cudgels of politics. They did this in new ways, and had no patience for old routines, precisely because their material circumstances were such that they carried little of the baggage their metaphorical parents had been hoisting on their backs for so long. Acclimatized to NATOesque platitudes on the possibility of nuclear annihilation, the younger generation was a demographic and cultural formation given to ironic disillusion, their “classics” not Dickensian accounts of the “dark satanic mills” but the satirical assaults on expediency of *1984* and *Animal Farm*. This younger generation had never looked on the Soviet Union as an heroic workers’ state or a bulwark against fascism. Nor was the Labour Party an answer, its routinized shell of “serious” politics as much a part of the Establishment as it was a blow struck against it. To the extent that some within the new generation rejected all of this, Thompson suggested, they placed themselves against the Great Apathy that had overtaken East and West, and that was materially and ideologically embedded in the twinned Cold War political economy of selective affluence and international immorality, the arms race driving a superpower global exchange that threatened a supremely costly holocaust. Various New Lefts were thus in formation, spawned of heretical revisionisms in the disintegrating Soviet bloc, neutralist sentiment in Yugoslavia and certain Afro-Asian nations, and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in Britain, where socialist reunification was distanced from traditional contests between social democracy and communism, looking forward instead to the displacement of the ruling bureaucracies astride both party formations.

These New Lefts were on guard against dogmatic excesses “and the power drives of the professional revolutionary”; centers of power, in state and vanguard, were often held in disrepute. Culture loomed large in this project, but not, Thompson insisted, as a repudiation of the determinations of the economic, but as a means to liberate men and women from enslavement to things, allowing commitments to values:

For the New Left wants political and economic changes *for* something, so that people can themselves do something with their lives as a whole. We have seen enough of socialism perverted into the worship of poods of grains and tons of steel, with men identified as producers of material values and little else, where ‘consumption’ has always to wait, and where ‘culture’ is a means of social control directed by the Establishment.

⁴⁹“Letter to Our Readers,” *NR*, 10 (Autumn 1959), 128-135.

Thus, the revived left dissidence that Thompson proposed had to guard against all tendencies to become an alternative faction, party, or leadership; it had to resist the pressures to propose itself as an organized replacement for already standing groups, institutions, campaigns, and movements, all of which deserved the support of socialists. Rather, what Thompson envisioned was a New Left that would not stand aside from the trade unions, peace mobilizations, socialist campaigns, even the Labour Party, but reinvigorate the tradition of open association, socialist education, and active involvement in struggle, the purpose of which was a William Morrisque “making of socialists.” The direction of the New Left would be toward the people as a whole, and its purpose must be to break with old modes of agitation, in which the end was too easily corrupted, and concentrate on the means by which “the satisfactions of Socialism” were not postponed to a hypothetical period “after the Revolution” but promoted in the present.

The motto of this New Left, then, was to be “service for the whole movement,” and in the process the New Left’s influence would grow and pervade many traditional quarters of opposition. “The bureaucracy will hold the machine,” Thompson suggested, “but the New Left will hold the passes between it and the younger generation.” This was an organization unlike past organizations, an organization of socialist will, commitment, choice, and value, but an organized expression of this nonetheless. As Thompson noted in the final issue of *The New Reasoner*, with the 1959 electoral defeat of Labour socialist discussion and education had suddenly, once again, become fashionable. But for the New Left the time was one of activity: as the Reasoners and their comrades at the *Universities and Left Review* fused, Thompson called for engagement, “rapidly and confidently — in the construction of the New Left” out of which could come “permanent organisation for the purposes of education and propaganda.”⁵⁰

Denouement & The Politics/Historiography Relation

We now know, in hindsight, something of what came of this project. By the mid-1960s the reasoning rebels had, for the most part, been marginalized in the evolving New Left, which never quite became the social movement that would hold the passes between the revolutionaries of 1956 and the new post-Stalin youth of the 1960s that Thompson had, in 1959, envisioned. *New Left Review* thrived, but as something other than many of those who had been present at its conception and actual birth either imagined or desired. Parents make children, but not entirely as they please; as offspring mature they have been known to turn on their lineage. There was, to be sure, a brief period of comradeship and political accomplishment, but the first British New Left of the 1960s quickly lost its serving mandate, its cohesion

⁵⁰The above paragraphs draw and quote from E.P. Thompson, “The New Left,” *NR*, 9 (Summer 1959), 1-17; Thompson, “A Pssay in Ephology,” *NR*, 10 (Autumn 1959), 5. See also Kenny, *The First New Left*, 38-39.

fractured in an oddly factional dissonance that Thompson, certainly, and likely many others, on all sides, found dispiriting.⁵¹ If it led to some memorable, and analytically productive, exchanges between Thompson and Perry Anderson-Tom Nairn, the mobilizing possibility of a New Left, in the mould of that desired and thought necessary by the Reasoner tradition, was now gone, and gone for good.⁵² New Left Clubs, which had gone up with such a bang in 1958-1959, never managed to negotiate their way out of a dilemma that saw their strength and resiliency simultaneously rooted in local *concerns* and *initiatives*, but dependent on the sustaining continuity provided by a national *centre*. When that national center proved tension-ridden and unable to extricate itself from impasses bred of acute political difference, demoralization spread quickly throughout the clubs, and by 1960-1961 most were declining in memberships and activism.⁵³ The rupture could be dated from seeds of discontent sown in the very conception of the merger of *The New Reasoner* and *Universities and Left Review*, something of a shotgun marriage that was always opposed by Ralph Miliband, the American New Left author Clancy Sigal, and Mervyn Jones,⁵⁴ in the increasingly strained relations of Thompson, Saville, and Stuart Hall, the first editor of the *New Left Review*, throughout 1959-1960; or, finally, late in 1961, at which point things were clearly falling apart.⁵⁵ By 1963 Thompson was writing that the New Left had dispersed itself “both organizationally and (to some extent) intellectually. We failed to implement our original purposes, or even to sustain what cultural apparatus we had.”⁵⁶

⁵¹See, for instance, Thompson’s comments in *Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, 399-400, and in that edition’s version of “The Peculiarities of the English,” 35. Note, as well, Perry Anderson, “The Left in the Fifties,” *New Left Review*, 29 (January-February 1965), 3-18; and Perry Anderson, “Diary,” *London Review of Books* (21 October 1993), 24-25. Accounts abound, but see Chu, *British New Left*; and Peter Sedgwick, “The Two New Lefts,” in Widgery, *Left in Britain*, 131-153.

⁵²See especially, E.P. Thompson, “The Peculiarities of the English,” *Socialist Register, 1965* (London 1965), 311-362; Perry Anderson, “Origins of the Present Crisis,” in Perry Anderson and Robin Blackburn, ed., *Towards Socialism* (Ithaca, New York 1965), 11-52, originally in *New Left Review*, 23 (January-February 1964), 26-53; Anderson, “Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism,” *New Left Review*, 35 (January-February 1966), 2-42; and Tom Nairn, “The English Working Class,” *New Left Review*, 24 (March-April 1964), 43-57.

⁵³Kenny, *The First New Left*, 38-39.

⁵⁴Mervyn Jones, *Chances: An Autobiography* (New York 1987), 165.

⁵⁵On this history of acrimony see Kenny, *The New Left*, 34-38, an account as full as any, but perhaps too prone to lay blame at the feet of E.P. Thompson, whose private communications are always read to accent a mercurial temperament. It needs to be noted that while such ‘internal’ correspondence is indeed illuminating, it does not always bring to the surface an accurate view of more public negotiations and modes of argumentation.

⁵⁶E.P. Thompson, reviewing C. Wright Mills, *Power, Politics, and People*, in *Peace News*, 29 November 1963.

All did not end of course and the post-1956 generation of youthful socialists made their political mark in various anti-imperialist struggles and other activist engagements on the Left, not to mention enriching the arsenal of socialist thought in their readings of “Third World” anti-colonialism and continental Western Marxism, just as Thompson continued to register his protests in various ways. But at this time, it was Thompson’s historical research that was emerging as an international influence, having broken out in his 1963 book, *The Making of the English Working Class*, and hinting at his capacities to reshape interpretation in a powerful 1968 *Past & Present* essay on time and work discipline in industrial capitalism.⁵⁷

Let me close with brief discussion of this political devolution and this historiographic evolution, situating these parallel developments within my earlier tentative commentary on *the* British Marxist historians. Of course they were a presence in *The New Reasoner*. But what is surprising is how subdued that presence was. Thompson exempted, aside from the historically-developed (and somewhat conflicting) arguments of Saville and Dorothy Thompson on the welfare state, and Victor Kiernan’s call for the need for more historical contextualization in the literary criticism of Raymond Williams, the historians tended to confine themselves to reporting on particular events (Royden Harrison) or reviewing specific books. They contributed no commentaries on Edward Thompson’s attempts to develop a theoretical analysis of Stalinism as a basis for the political stand of dissident communism, and thus were hardly central to the crystallization of socialist humanism. Yet it would be out of this Thompsonian engagement with Stalinist anti-intellectualism, and his *New Reasoner* essays that confronted Marxist, Leninist, and Stalinist utilizations of the base-superstructure metaphor and materialism, from which the analytic appreciations of agency and working-class culture would germinate. To be sure, Thompson drew as well on his adult education teaching, on the experience of researching and writing his *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955), and a host of other resources, personal and political.⁵⁸ But in the project of theorizing a communism that was oppositional, and in conceptualizing the project of socialist renewal as well as the organizational making of a New Left, Thompson’s ideas and perspectives on human agency in their historically, class-embedded forms took on a certain clarity. If *The Making of the English Working Class* was the culmination of a decade and more of grappling with various cultural, political, and historical issues, then, it must be acknowledged, as Thompson himself always did, that 1956 and its offspring, the reasoner rebellion, were indeed influences of a significant sort.

This puts in new perspective the origins of *the* British Marxist historians, and the making of this designation. As a nomenclature it postdates not only 1956, but the publication of *The Making of the English Working Class*. Indeed, as a categori-

⁵⁷Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*; and Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past & Present*, 38 (1967), 56-97.

⁵⁸I have alluded to these in Palmer, *Objections and Oppositions*.

zation it emerges in the mid-to-late 1960s, and is associated most obviously with Thompson's text, and the resonance of this book with a decade highly receptive to its perspective. By the mid-to-late 1960s reference to *the* British Marxists had begun; it likely crystallized in North America.⁵⁹ Within and without, a group consciousness, albeit cognizant of difference, had emerged. Christopher Hill's *Times Literary Supplement* review of *The Making* signaled the book's importance in helping to "recapture the agonies, heroisms, and illusions of the working class as it made itself," a project fueled by Thompson's "deeply humane imagination and controlled passion." In a 1972 book that was itself Hill's most imaginative articulation of the radicalism of the 17th century, the old Leninist declared, "It is no longer necessary to apologize too profusely for taking the common people of the past on their own terms and trying to understand them."⁶⁰ Saville, Hilton, even Hobsbawm to an extent, echoed such sentiment, and it perhaps, for a time, overdetermined difference in the making of an identity.⁶¹

The dissident communism of 1956 and the reasoner rebellion had thus served as midwife to the birth of *the* British Marxist historians. A politics of socialist humanism conditioned a historiography that was capable, with the writings *and* the radicalism of the 1960s, of delivering a designation. Yet that politics failed to sustain itself, its momentum, and the organizational and intellectual continuity of the New Left that it was its essential purpose to develop and extend.

And the dialectic of this defeat would eventually manifest itself historiographically, with the British Marxist historians, most emphatically Thompson, assailed. The shots, ironically, would often be fired in their direction, not so much by the right (which did, of course, mount an attack on *The Making of the English Working Class*, but it was one Thompson himself largely beat back)⁶² as by the Left. The assailing "anti-populist/anti-nationalist" strictures of Anderson-Nairn, the structuralist arguments of Althusser, the critique of so-called culturalism associated with Richard Johnson and others linked loosely to the Birmingham Cultural Studies center, and, finally, a crescendo of "post" theoretical adversity struck repeatedly at the historical materialist and socialist humanist projects that came out of 1956 and were associated with the 1960s. If politics made historiography, then,

⁵⁹Note Alan Dawley, "E.P. Thompson and the Peculiarities of the Americans," *Radical History Review*, 19 (Winter 1978-1979), 33-60.

⁶⁰Hill's *TLS* review is reprinted in Christopher Hill, "Men As They Live Their Own History," in *Change and Continuity in Seventeenth-Century England* (London 1974), 239-247, quote from 247; and Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (New York 1972), 14.

⁶¹Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain*, 182-184, which cites, among other sources, interviews with Saville and Hilton.

⁶²See, for instance, the Postscript to subsequent editions of *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth 1968), 916-939.

circa 1956-1965, the failure of that politics has undoubtedly conditioned a part of the unmaking of that historiographic production.⁶³

We need to rethink this political and historiographic denouement. If we begin at the beginning, one chapter of which is most emphatically written between the covers of *The New Reasoner*, our grasp of the successes and the failures, as well as the meanings, of the British Marxist historians may well appear in new light. As socialists, we have perhaps been remiss in attending to our own history, in cultivating it as a resource from which we can learn. Too often we have settled for easy designations, such as *the* British Marxist historians, rather than exploring sensitively and rigorously experiences of difference and dialogue, in which the actual histories lived as well as written abound in complexities relevant for our times.⁶⁴ It is not the case, of course, that those who do not know their history are bound to repeat it, but it

⁶³The literature that could be cited here is prodigious. Note, as a beginning only, the E.P. Thompson-Anderson-Nairn writings of 1964-1965, cited in notes above; Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays*, in which the central essay on Althusser targets a number of British writings, including Barry Hindess and Paul Q. Hirst, *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production* (London 1975); the contributions by Raphael Samuel, Stuart Hall, Richard Johnson, and Thompson in the section, "Culturalism: Debates around *The Poverty of Theory*," in Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London 1981), 375-408; John Clarke, Chas Critcher, and Richard Johnson, et al., ed., *Working-Class Culture: Studies in History and Theory* (London 1979); Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1840-1914* (Cambridge 1991); and Joyce, *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge 1994).

⁶⁴Clearly the inability of the first British New Left — in spite of propitious circumstances of mobilization associated with CND, the commitments of experienced cadre who had grappled with Stalinism and lived the positive dimensions of communist activism, intellectual resources of considerable significance linked to publications such as *The New Reasoner* and *Universities and Left Review*, to list only some of the resources available in 1959-1960 — to create a structured, non-vanguard party social movement demands consideration in light of recent proposals, paced by Sam Gindin's suggestions, on how to rebuild the Canadian Left. Gindin's call for a structured social movement seems remarkably like what E.P. Thompson and others were advocating in 1959. Yet, to my knowledge, not a single contribution to the lengthy discussions in forums growing out of Gindin's position papers in publications such as *Canadian Dimension* (hereafter *CD*), has even alluded to the first British New Left. Central to the failure of the first British New Left, for instance, was the dissonance between local and regional initiative and a centralized national publication/leadership, a problem particularly acute in Canada. For Gindin's proposals and responses see, as representative comment: "Is the Party Over? (Debating the Future of the Left and the NDP)," *CD*, 33 (March-April 1999), 12-17, with statements by John W. Warnock, Cy Gonick, Judy Rebeck, and Victor Olsen. Subsequent issues of *CD*, including 33 (May-June 1999), 18-22; 33 (Fall 1999), 13; 33 (December 1999), 7-10; 34 (March 2000), 8-10; and 34 (September-October 2000), 8-9 also carried relevant comment.

is certainly incontestable that they will not know what to do with it. The pages of history turned by that amazing generation of Marxist historians and practical political activists that we have come to name with the phrases of canonical labeling have much to tell us if we would but read them closely.