

Within recent debates in cultural sociology there has been a justified concern to leave behind some of the functionalist understandings of the past (Alexander 2006, 2007). Here much Marxism and Critical Theory stands rightly accused of neglecting to analyse the relative autonomy of culture. However this is not true of all cultural Marxism and much current cultural sociology risks understating the impact that capitalism has on the cultural sphere. Here what is missing is the importance of a number of emancipatory concerns related to the need to struggle against neoliberalism and capitalism. While this will necessarily be a matter of on-going debate here I seek to explore the contributions to this discussion that could potentially be made by E.P.Thompson. Here my argument is not that Thompson can establish a new paradigm of cultural sociology, but that his work can be fruitfully mined by researchers for a number of critical insights. Most notable in this respect is humanistic Marxism's on-going critique of a number of perspectives that either fail to put a critical account of capitalism at the centre or suggest that the lives of human-beings are entirely determined by coercive structures and institutions. While Marxist humanism has a number of blind spots especially when it comes to theorising modes of domination other than those based upon class it continues to point to both the contradictoriness of modernity and the latent possibilities for human emancipation.

What remains distinctive about Thompson in this respect was both his intense dislike both of structuralism and an approach that seemed to privilege theory over more concrete forms of analysis. Indeed Thompson was an unusual Marxist in that he was probably more at home within a specifically English tradition of poetic writing including Blake, William Morris and Milton than he was in more analytic debates. However, as we shall see, Thompson's own distinctive brand of Marxism continued to influence him throughout his career and he remains within the 'humanist' currents of this tradition. Here I shall argue that in the age of the global 1 per cent and the re-emergence of a more aggressive capitalism and social

movements seeking to challenge the imposition of neoliberal austerity it is indeed time to return to reconsider some of the insights of figures like Thompson. As we shall see, the considerable complexity of his writing and his understanding of new and emergent forms of cultural struggle especially around the idea of the commons means that he continues to have much to say to the cultural sociologists of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Thompson's (2014a) defence of socialist humanism seeks to point to the dangers of both authoritarian Marxism and capitalism while holding out the prospect for a more democratic and emancipated society. While much structuralist and post-structuralist writing has sought to dispense with 'humanist' ideas as 'essentialistic' Thompson suggests a different argumentative strategy (Althusser 1984, Hall 1981). Along with Thompson, Geras (1984), Eagleton (1990), Harvey (2014) and Soper (1990) have all sought to defend the radicalness of Marx's humanism. Such a view rejects the infinitely plastic and pluralistic understanding of the self often suggested by the cultural turn. Instead the humanistic Marx (1975) offers a view of our shared potential for a life beyond the ways in which we are currently constituted by society. Capitalism through the division of labour has a tendency to reduce to reduce human actors to things and to see them in terms of their productive capacity. As Erich Fromm (1963) noted for socialist humanist's what mattered was less Marx's concern for inequality, but alienated labour that sought to reduce our shared humanity to that of the mechanised machine. Such a view suggests that our shared human capacity for a more co-operative and creative society is less than inevitable if it does remain a permanent possibility. For Thompson (2014a:72) an emancipated society can be detected in 'man's need for his fellow man, his undivided social being, and hence it must find expression in love, even when attained only through the throes of class hatred and conflict'. It is then the permanent possibility of a more a more humanistic society that is threatened by the state and capitalism that takes us to the heart of Thompson's thought.

These arguments are suggestive of an anti-capitalist cultural sociology that stresses not only the continued centrality of economy in respect of cultural analysis,

but also of potentially different future for all of humanity. This suggests cultural sociology needs to be explicitly concerned with the attempt to realise more emancipated human societies beyond the rule of capital. More recently the rise of anti-austerity social movements, alter-globalisation movements and anti-capitalist movements have all sought to resist the imposition of more aggressive forms of capitalism. However cultural sociology also needs to investigate other kinds of refusal beyond the orchestrations of social movements. As Cornelius Castoriadis (1997) argues this does not mean we begin our analysis with the oppressive nature of system in the way that characterised structuralist Marxism and the Frankfurt school, but with more everyday forms of resistance. The resistance against capitalism today begins when 'someone refuses to remain a passive object' this is a refusal of hierarchical systems of power that can be traced back to the rule of wealth and private property (Castoriadis 1997:30). As the humanist Marxist John Holloway (2016a:58) argues the refusal of the rule of capitalism and hierarchy is a creative act by which people both maintain their human dignity and can be found as much within activism as it can within more passive forms of resistance (such as foot dragging) whereby ordinary citizens struggle for autonomy from below. Although as E.P.Thompson continued to remind us in seeking to 'make' a different future for our humanity there are few guarantees of success.

### **E.P.Thompson, Cultural Marxism and Poetics**

E.P. Thompson was a founder member of the British New Left who made his break from the Communist Party after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. Like many of the members of the New Left which included key post-war intellectuals such as Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams, Thompson (2014b) saw within the Hungarian revolution the attempt to construct a genuinely popular democracy that challenged the authoritarian politics of Stalinism. The New Left more broadly needs to be understood as a group of intellectuals who sought to develop a political and cultural space between the existing social democracy and the authoritarian failings of state socialism (Stevenson 1995, Kenny 1995). This intellectual and political movement displayed a renewed interest in popular culture and other social movements not

necessarily based around class such as feminism, the peace movement, black politics and youth culture. For Thompson (2014c) while the New Left was rooted in the labour movement it was a rebellion against the hierarchically organised affluent society of the 1950s and 1960s. Especially significant was the rejection of the 'economism' of the mainstream political parties and of certain versions of Marxism. Most crucially perhaps was the view that the New Left was a place of ideas and cultural discussion rather than an organised attempt to gain state power. This opened up many avenues of critique beyond questions related to the usual contours of citizenship of social, political and civil rights. There was then a sense amongst many writers of this period that a number of counter-cultural movements from feminism to the beats and from anti-nuclear activists to trade unions were beginning to ask questions about 'the drive for "normality" and security' within post-war society' (Thompson 2014c:121). However Thompson's (2014c) argued that capitalistic domination was primarily grounded within a society structured upon the private ownership of the means of production and the profit motive that gave the class structure a centrality that could never be fully tamed by social democracy. This did not of course mean that important and historical advances had not been won, but that more substantial ideas of equality could not be satisfied within a competitive and unequal capitalist dominated society. This then is less the 'big bang' theory of civic conflict that Alexander (2006:550) understands as underlining Marxist approaches where a multiplicity of antagonisms are swept away by a revolution, but more an understanding that a critical account of capitalism should provide the backdrop to any genuinely critical analysis. Along with Thompson, other cultural critics sympathetic to libertarian socialism like Colin Ward (1996) and James C.Scott (2012) suggest that more emancipatory ideas depends upon a complex view of culture where other human possibilities lie dormant within oppressive human societies. As Thompson's (2014a) critique of Stalinism testifies a central question we should ask of any set of institutional arrangements is how open is it to human agency and alternative moralities. In this respect, hierarchical relationships, conformity and the closing down of dissent are incompatible with more authentic versions of democracy.

During the 1980s, E.P. Thompson temporarily gave up the practice of being a historian and devoted himself to political writing against the Cold War and peace activism. During this period Thompson attended a conference at the New School in New York which included fellow Marxist historians like Eric Hobsbawm and Perry Anderson. This conference takes place after the considerable intellectual controversy that emerged in the wake of Thompson's (1978) critique of Althusserian structuralism and Perry Anderson's (1980) book length contribution to the argument. It is often thought that during this period that Thompson (1985) became less interested in Marxism as a tradition of critique given that he spent much of his time criticising the politics of the Cold War which he did not think was centrally about capitalism and class (Hamilton 2004). However within the conference address Thompson (1994a) reconfirms his distance from Marxism as a stand-alone theory and reaffirms his interest within a moral critique of capitalism that comes from the Romantic period. Thompson then had little time for 'abstract' arguments about base and superstructure, ideology and questions of agency although as we shall see they were all questions he sought to address within specific historical contexts. More to the point was an intense dislike of structuralism and positivism which he felt was susceptible to authoritarian thinking that took little account of human needs and experience. Marxism in Thompson's (1994a:361) hands was less a system of thinking but more a general commitment to historical materialism which meant less a concern with historical 'progress' towards a preconceived end point, but more 'the sense that ideas and values are situated in a material context, and material needs are situated in the context of norms and expectations'. What mattered in this respect was how the historical actors themselves understood questions of human need. This could be understood in capitalist and acquisitive terms as the need for wealth, power and control, but equally needs to be understood more broadly through questions of culture and identity. In other words, if capitalism is to be resisted then it requires a moral critique that is produced by intellectuals and social movements outside of the ruling circles of elites.

Especially significant in this respect is the figure of William Morris. Morris had been the subject of Thompson's (1955) first major publication and whose guiding influence was never far from the surface in his later writing. Here Thompson

is mostly concerned to link Morris to a revolutionary tradition that had often been erased by those who simply saw him as an artist, and to reaffirm the value of utopian ideas and a moral critique of capitalism as opposed to so called 'scientific' Marxism. While this volume was written before Thompson's break with Stalinism his discontent with the instrumentalism of certain traditions of Marxist thought were already evident. Morris for Thompson (1976,1994b, 2014d) was important because of the moral critique that rejected the utilitarian nature of private ownership, profit and economic calculation. Morris more than anyone else (although Thompson also produced books and essays on Blake, Wordsworth) personified the way that a poetic and utopian critique could undermine the very logic of capitalism. The 'complacent philistinism' required by homo-economus met its match in Morris rather than Marx (Thompson 1994b:70). This was partly because of the image of the future communist community that was projected by Morris. For example, this is evident Morris's (1994) attempt to imagine the factory of the future where children worked alongside their parents making craft objects, and where a coercive institution had been transformed into a place of art, play and learning. For Thompson (2014c:257) 'this logic demanded that the ethic of atomised, acquisitive society be opposed by the ethic of community. As between these two there could be no shadow of a compromise'. Morris had made a major contribution to Marxist thinking due to his ability to place moral questions at the centre of the argument rather than at the periphery. The future possible communist community offered a critique of the atomised present and did so in such a way that helped inspire a new generation of socialist activists and thinkers.

Thompson best describes the broader impact of Morris through his ability to inspire other socialists of the time or later generations. Morris was especially significant in this respect in helping to inform Thompson's (2014a) own understandings of socialist humanism. Thompson developed his ideas on socialist humanism after he left the Communist Party in order to distance himself from Stalinism. For Thompson the problems with Marxism could not only be attributed to the historical conditions within which the Russian revolution took root. In this respect, Thompson offers a libertarian critique of Marxism sharing a good deal with anarchist critiques that complained of the overly centralised, top down and

authoritarian nature of the revolution of 1917 (Bookchin 1968). Marxism in this setting had become a 'partisan ideology' that sought to calculate the gains and aims of the revolution in productivist and utilitarian terms. Further ordinary citizens were denied agency and the capacity to make moral choices by a controlling party system. This was especially evident in the ways in which art and culture was understood less as a place of moral critique, but more mechanistically as a means through which to pursue the aims of the revolution (Thompson 2014a:67). Within Thompson's understanding of socialism culture is an important place of debate and critique, but equally the revolutionary needs to learn from more local ties and associations built by trade unionists and others. The so-called 'retreat from humanism' evident in the 1960s could also be located within a number of intellectuals who had given up the socialist cause altogether. If Thompson was scathing about authoritarian traditions within Marxism then equally of concern were more existential currents that simply rebelled against the prevailing mass society (Thompson 2014e). The advances of social democracy and the arrival of the affluent society and the welfare state threatened to quell the need to find an end to capitalism. Here the danger was not merely with a sense of socialism delayed, but with a capitalist ethos taking root within the population more generally. Thompson (2014f: 113) described this as 'the acquisitive ethos and the politics of glossiness' that was undermining the utopian struggle for a society of equals. If the quest for a more libertarian society can never be finally destroyed there remain historical periods of opportunity and defeat.

For Thompson (2014f, 2014g) the British society of the 1960s was an intellectual source of opportunity and frustration. The development of New Left circles outside of mainstream politics had provided new spaces for critical discussion and political activism and yet the dominant consumer society and social democratic politics meant that the main antagonism between a hierarchical capitalist society and the utopian possibility of a society of equals was being more easily accommodated than it might have been. A politics of the common good during this period required the spread of a socialist culture, direct action, the defence and enlargement of the public sector and the re-emergence of 'the long and tenacious revolutionary tradition of the British commoner' (Thompson 2014g:159).

Thompson's (1980) seminal work on the struggles of the English working class brought to the fore the extent to which traditions of struggle rarely if ever arrive in the pristine state assumed by many Marxist intellectuals. What Thompson referred to as 'the free born Englishman' was an amalgamation of the direct experience of industrialism, inherited legal freedoms, religion and the writing of Thomas Paine. All of these elements had combined to produce a new form of radical class consciousness between 1790 and 1830. While I want to return to these debates later it was his appreciation of the agency of working class people during periods of intense class struggle that continued to provide Thompson with a sense of hope. The sources for this struggle emerged as much from direct experience as it did from other cultural sources that rebelled against the authoritarian imposition of capitalistic social relations and moral values. This was also evident in an important essay written by Thompson on the poet Tom Maguire. Maguire was a working class socialist poet who helped form the Independent Labour Party of the 1880s. Maguire had been inspired by William Morris and the struggle for an eight hour day, but also got caught up in the need to secure working class people parliamentary representation given the failure of the trade unions to halt the decline of wages. If the main aim of the movement was the legal regulation of industry, Maguire himself was inspired by a poetic understanding of the socialist community yet to come where the poor would be treated 'as I would my own father, mother, sister, or brother' (Thompson 2014 b:272).

Thompson's own identity as a poet and commitment to the politics of the labour movement would have meant that he saw much of himself within Maguire. As Scott Hamilton (2008) argues Thompson had a preference for Romantic rather than Modernist poets in his teaching and writing. This is undoubtedly due to a certain decadence that Thompson associated with modernism that was also (in more qualified terms) supported by his fellow New Left author Raymond Williams (1980). Within the Romanticism of figures such as Morris and Blake, Thompson discovers the possibility of bolder and more self-confident visions of the future of humanity. This can of course all be traced back to Morris but also connects to his own poetic practice. Thompson's (1999) own published poems not only engage in critique but offer utopian hope as well.



Thompson's (1994c) critical reflections on the nature of poetry led him to reject the bureaucratic approaches to politics preferred by Stalinism and social democracy. The poetic dimension is at war with 'the modernised and managed circuit of conditioned need' that is at the heart of capitalist instrumentality (Thompson 1994c:332). Instead poetry should become the 'path-finder for intellectual culture' and shares with the labour movement 'a bloodyminded defensiveness against the management of money' for more humane values (Thompson 1994c:337). Poetry is needed Thompson suggests to guard citizens against an insensitivity that can be found in celebrations of violence that were submerged with some elements of the 1960s counter-culture and attempts to reduce the culturally complex lives of the people to the abstractions loved by authoritarians, Leninists and economists. Poetry is charged with a special importance due to its ability to ask complex moral questions, but to do so in such a way that does not become prey to violence or instrumentalism. A poetic dimension then is urgently required by all decent forms of struggle for a better future for humanity should we become prey to the twin forces of instrumentality and hierarchy both of which seek to impose 'solutions' from above.

### **The Communism of the Commons**

E.P.Thompson then continued to hold to a moral critique of capitalism that had poetic foundations, rather than those of scientific abstraction, that was connected a politics of the commons. As fellow historian Peter Linebaugh (2014) argues Thompson offered a politics of the commoner. Capitalism through acts of enclosure, property rights, privatisation and hierarchical control from above imposed upon the commoners a world within which they owned and controlled very little. In this respect, the radical hope inspired by Thompson (like Morris) was that capitalism defined the period between the old and the emergence of the new commons. The principles of the commons can be found in the need to share and collectively own and control common spaces and resources. Returning to Thompson's (1977,1980) histories of the eighteenth century these complex works can be read in terms of the idea of the commons. The original enclosure acts are described by Thompson

(1980:237) as acts of 'class robbery'. It was then the so called responsible landowner who sought to remove the commoners from their land. Equally the notorious 'black acts' sought to defend private property against the practice of poaching were an expression of class power should the lower orders get used to the idea that the dominant classes were not willing to stamp out insurrection and the challenge to its right to rule. Capitalism in the eighteenth century began with the enclosure of the commons and the relegation of men and women to the status of wage labourers. Similarly William Morris (1973:241) discussed a possible future for humanity based upon the idea of the common wealth which would include the abundance of nature and human creativity and skill all of which is exploited by the unequal relations of capital. This common wealth can also be found in genuinely public institutions such as schools, libraries, museums and parks all which contribute to the public life of the commoner. The socialism of the commons is the attempt to live 'a dignified and generous life' rather than a capitalist life based upon instrumentality, war and competition (Morris 1973:136). In place of a life of wage slavery Morris's poetic vision offered a life of abundance, sharing and the pursuit of craft rather than machine production. However both Morris (1973:212) and Thompson hesitated before anarchism largely out of the need for legal forms of authority to settle disputes fairly. For Thompson (1977:267) the creation of equality before the law is an achievement of 'universal value'. While these features were to become prominent in Thompson's (1980) writing during the 1980s suffice to say that Thompson also saw the rule of law as being part of the commons. This was because it was based upon principles other than naked class power, and because it could be used to constrain the class power of the ruling class. If the commons of the future was to be built upon the idea of the equal value of all citizens then the law would need to play a part.

This offers a different Marxist tradition to the more authoritarian set of understandings that emerged with Althusser and other areas of Marxist practice. Especially significant was Althusser's (1984) critique of humanist Marxism and the analytic distinctions made between science and ideology. While Thompson's debate with Althusser has been extensively discussed elsewhere it is enough to note that the rejection of humanist understandings of history, experience, agency and utopia

were enough for to produce a polemical and often humorous critique (Stevenson 1995). Thompson (1978a:333) at one point likens Althusser and his followers to 'the daleks' because they are 'confronted by 'men': 'Exterminate!'. Within a slightly more sympathetic context Thompson's (1978b) disagreement with fellow historians Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn raises similar questions. Against the historical thesis that argued that the failure to produce a revolution in the English setting had produced anything other than a reformist ideology. For Nairn and Anderson the inability to produce a mature form of Marxist theory had left the labour movement at the mercy of corporatist culture. Thompson in his reply seeks to point to the on-going nature of the class struggle within English society, while acknowledging the considerable gains won by social democracy. Against the idea that the English working-class had simply been 'incorporated' into capitalism Thompson reminded his fellow historians of how capitalism was reproduced less through consensus, but an ongoing cultural struggle to contain radical histories of struggle and sacrifice. This had been produced not by intellectuals like Nairn and Anderson who maintained a lofty distance from the class struggle, but by the agency of the people and social movements from below.

Thompson's (1985:273) own poetic version of socialist humanism was described by C.Wright Mills as a 'marxism of the heart'. Rather than retreat into academia and the world of endless theoretical abstraction what was important was to provide a meeting place between the ordinary lives of common people and Marxist ideas related to class struggle, ideology and base and superstructure. This was the very dialogue that Thompson felt that Althusser had jettisoned in his rejection of the inevitably uncertain and interpretative accounts of history offered by Marxist historians. The historian's craft (like that of the cultural sociologist) should be understood less as a science producing definite knowledge but the temporally located ability to dialogue between different areas of enquiry and practice. The usefulness of concepts depends upon their ability to ask new questions about the past, carefully interpret sources, and to flexibly use theoretical concerns without retreating into more dogmatic forms of argument. Notably many of these points seemed to be lost in some of the arguments that went on around structuralism. Neither the usually careful analysis of critics such as Stuart Hall (1981) or Richard

Johnson (1981) seemed to appreciate that Thompson was not rejecting concepts, but more was concerned with how carefully they were being used. Indeed Thompson (1980) in his reply interrogates the idea of 'culturalism' within which Johnson had placed Thompson along with Hoggart and Williams. Stuart Hall (1982) later described Thompson as a culturalist for emphasising experience rather than culturally structured experience. As Thompson maintained not only were there major differences between so-called culturalist authors (Hoggart was actively hostile to Marxism) but that the historical materialism represented by Thompson was concerned with the dialectic between institutions, experience and culture in the 'making' of history. More to the point Thompson (1980:402) reminded his audience that while the New Left were sinking into a form of theoretical abstraction they had little to say about how both state socialism and capitalism were increasingly built upon regimes that were 'profoundly authoritarian and hostile to libertarian values'. The so called 'marxism of the heart' needed to concern itself not only with the struggles of the people, but its poetic and inevitably contradictory nature. Marxism had provided an important guide in this respect as it both respected the centrality of the class struggle and the need to move beyond capitalism, but should do so in such a way that did not prevent others from asking different questions. However there continues to be other scholars who have argued that Thompson's blindness to questions of cultural difference limits his argument (Gilroy 1987, Swindells and Jardine 1990). The commons of Morris and Thompson then stands accused of being backward looking and largely inappropriate for increasingly complex cosmopolitan present. However while there is no simple return to Thompson's writing in this respect some of these criticism are overstated. More recently Hardt and Negri (2005:213) have sought to revive a notion of the commons that is more multi-accented, but that ultimately rests upon the need for a global working class to defend and expand a notion of the commons. Hardt and Negri (2009) argue that groups (while recognising their differences) across global civil society could find a common platform through claims that all humanity should enjoy the material means to a dignified life, access to education (and therefore the possibility in acting as a citizen) and open access to the common wealth of knowledge. Of course the global

ruling elite has no intention of meeting these demands preferring to legitimate free market capitalism through ideas of competition, economic growth and philanthropy.

Thompson (1978c) was well aware that in the increasingly structuralist dominated 1960s that his own brand of humanistic Marxism looked outdated. Thompson (1978c:109) recognised his isolation from the intellectual currency of his time when he wrote that 'I remain on the ground like one of the last great bustards, waiting the extinction of my species on the diminishing soil of an eroding idiom, craning my neck into the air, flapping my paltry wings. All around me my younger featured cousins are managing mutations; they are turning into little eagles, and whirr! with a rush of wind they are off to Paris, to Rome, to California' (Thompson 1978c:109). If for Thompson (1978c:119) the 'Marxist tradition has inclined too few poets' it had produced too many 'engineers' who sought to instruct the people as if it were a well-oiled piece of machinery. Despite the failures of socialist intellectuals the major blockage encountered by the revolutionary tradition was the version of socialism presented by actually existing socialist societies (Thompson 1978c:169). Within this setting Thompson continued to take a good deal of intellectual and emotional sustenance from the on-going capacity of working people to organise themselves collectively while this was threatened by the development by capitalist ideologies such as consumerism. It was then the untidy struggle for a common life built upon equality and decency that provide the source for scepticism about ideas that either argued for the need of a group of ideologically pure intellectuals directing everything from above or that the English were innately conservative without their own complex histories of radical revolt and rebellion.

Notably the idea of the commons has re-emerged in the alter-globalisation movement. Klein (2001) and Harvey (2012) both defend the idea of the commons against neoliberal globalisation that aims to privatise public resources, subject them to hierarchical control from above and enclose them from the use of the public. The revitalisation of the idea of the commons has meant there is now a global movement against the enclosures of capital. Thompson of course would have been very quick to point out the flaw in any purist politics that did not seek (where prudent) support beyond a radical enclave. This is important as many within the labour movement saw the Occupy movement and movements in support of the commons as anti-

democratic the extent to which it relies upon direct forms of action. However as a long term critic of social democratic parties Thompson would have both despaired at as well as recognised the drift by the Labour Party into a managerial style politics (Faucher-King, F. and Le Gale 2000, Finlayson 2003). This would not have been met with the usual round of calls of class betrayal (as Thompson had little faith in the Labour Party anyway) but he would undoubtedly have been excited by the explosion of the social movements of the commons. However in the European setting within Britain, Greece and Spain more recently there is a growing sense of a more radical strain of this tradition beginning to emerge.

Building upon the New Left of the 1960s the alter-globalisation movement has sought to develop a genuinely non-hierarchical struggle for a global commons. This has involved struggles against global sweat shops, militarism, global poverty and climate change. During the 1980s Thompson had campaigned for a more humane and less violent and destructive global order. While Thompson (1985) was concerned that the destructive logic of the nuclear arms race was undermining the prospects for peace, human rights and democracy he sought to argue for a different kind of global commons more fully attuned to the human needs of a global humanity. This could only emerge through an international effort that prevented powerful nation-states from rearming and stealing resources that were desperately needed by education and welfare systems and the Third World. Indeed Thompson identified that amongst the dissident movements in the East and the peace movements in the West there emerged the possibility of a new kind of global society. Thompson's utopian hopes of this period of course have proved to be wildly optimistic given that the collapse of the Cold War was directly preceded by the retreat of the 'left hemisphere' (Keucheyan 2013). However Thompson had previously detected in the 1980s the slow drift into the authoritarian societies of the present considerably hastened by the security threats in a post-9/11 world. If the democratic commons is assaulted by neoliberalism then it is equally threatened by the paranoid state in terms of its ability to limit the expression of democracy and movements from below.

## The Poetics of the Commons

Thompson would have recognised the considerable moral and political opportunities to develop a renewed socialist and democratic culture within the cracks of the present. Thompson's English cosmopolitanism would also have fed into attempts to resist the politics of enclosure both globally as well as closer to home in attempts to down grade the public forms of provision found through the welfare state, NHS and comprehensive schools. Freedom for Thompson was always to be won in the collective struggle for a world we share in common with others.

Thompson's (1999:80) poem 'My Study' captures this sentiment when he writes:

'King of my freedom here, with every prop  
A poet needs – the small hours of the night,  
A harvest moon above an English copse...'

The commons was also evident in the preindustrial collective customs of the people. Thompson (1991:9) argues that despite the pretensions of those who dismiss nostalgia as a form of regressive politics the English commoner exhibits 'a rebellious traditional culture'. In other words, it is custom more often than not that provides the break on the imposition of enclosure, privatisation and the disciplinary work regimes of capitalism. After all it was during the eighteenth century when the 'bread nexus' became replaced by 'cash nexus' (Thompson 1991:189). Thompson (1991:9) argues that the English have access to a 'plebian culture' that is 'rebellious, but rebellious in defence of custom'. In this respect, the rebellions of the people are unlikely by themselves (unless aided by the utopian visions of intellectuals and poets) to produce a socialist culture as they are more likely to 'turn back to the paternalist regulations of a more authoritarian society' (Thompson 1991:10). In this while we can-not return to the pre-capitalist commons, it does at least remind us of a time when human-beings experienced different needs from those imposed upon them by the capitalistic market. It was the idea of traditional rights that sparked eighteenth century bread riots and will in the age of austerity seek to resist the politics of enclosure evident within fracking, making the poor work for benefits and the erosion of a culture of welfare rights. However a renewal of socialism will require the language of poetry where new needs could be imagined and fought for in the

context of the present. In other words, the Romantic critique of positivism and instrumental rationality needs to become a feature of our time. This is evident in Thompson's (1993) writing on Blake where he seeks to historically locate him within a radical non-conformist religious tradition that included Quakerism and other radical sects. Perhaps typically of Thompson he uncovers a previously little known sect he calls the 'Muggletonian Marxists' who were 'not among history's winners' (Thompson 1993:90). The radicalness of this group came through an attack on the idea of reason which had become linked to a defence of the materialism of the eighteenth century. The Muggletonian's were so because they made space for spiritual wonder and the poetic imagination thereby critiquing capitalist rationality. Of course Thompson is here walking upon a well-trodden road that leads on to William Morris.

In perhaps Thompson's (1976) most important essay on Morris he defends his original argument concerning his heroes commitment to communism. Thompson continues to argue despite his many detractor's that Romantic ideas are necessary for radical politics. This is partly due to the critique of utilitarian ideas that Thompson argues underpins the capitalism of the Victorian and the present period, but also because of their utopian quality. Morris is such a significant figure for Marxism because of the way he reveals the emptiness of so called scientific socialism. Further as Ruth Kinna (2000:125) argues Morris also represented a critique of Fabian ideas given his stress on the inequalities of capitalism that disabled the equal development of the self and the wastefulness and ugliness of capitalism that could not be reformed by more careful forms of distribution and welfare. The idea that Thompson is struggling against is that there was no more need for utopia's as Marxism and democratic socialism had become entirely rational doctrines. Clearly Thompson also had Althusserian Marxism in mind but his views could equally apply to so-called rational choice Marxism (Callinicos 1989). For Thompson spiritual revolutionaries like Morris were less created by material need but the ability to imagine an emancipated world beyond the present. In Thompson's (1976:97) terms it is the 'open, speculative quality' of Morris's imagination that is significant. What Thompson (1976: 97) refers to as 'moral education' is literally the encouragement to dream of a different and better world. These propositions come close to psychoanalysis in ideas



of free association aiming to break with the way in which the world is currently constituted. Jacqueline Rose (2014:57) comments that for the revolutionary as well as those in therapy that 'the world must be allowed to fall apart in order – perhaps – for it to recover itself'. Dreaming is undertaken not to escape from a depressing world, but so that other less instrumental possibilities in terms of how we currently live may begin to emerge. Marxism to this extent is both a critical form of analysis and the carrier of utopian hope for a better world inviting us to dream beyond the present.

In this respect, Thompson's (1980) own writing took a darker turn through the 1970s as he begins to describe the erosion of civil liberties and the emergence of an increasingly authoritarian state. The arrival of business ethics in the university, the erosion of trial by jury, the use of internment in Northern Ireland, the emergence of the secret state to monitor dissidents and of course the arrival of a new wave of nuclear weapons all point to a growing awareness of the progressive erosion of freedom and democracy. Of course Thompson's political spirits were revived during the 1980s due to the development of a genuinely mass movement against the Cold war. The nuclear arms race he described through the destructive logic of 'Exterminism' was pushing global society ever closer to ecological devastation. Thompson (1985) felt that the democratic sentiments of the people had finally woken up in resisting this logic. The human and ecological commons as it is today was threatened by an elite dominated political logic that used militarism as a means to close down more humanistic alternatives.

In more contemporary times the utopian tradition as I have indicated is mostly clearly evident in much of the writing associated with the alter-globalisation movement. In these terms, John Holloway (2002, 2010) argues that change ultimately emerges not through the state or political parties, but through an angry and indignant refusal. The global revolt against the rule of capital comes less out of the need to take power, but more out of the need to build more reciprocal and less exploitative human relationships. Holloway describes this less as revolt to gain power, but against the idea of hierarchical control from above. This is not simply a struggle for the working-class but for all oppressed groups in society whose humanity is denied by capitalism. In terms of the commons this becomes a struggle

for non-commodified places where we can become autonomous and begin the practice of living in ways that are less competitive and hierarchical. Similarly Hardt and Negri (2012:11-12) argue that 'society has become a factory, or rather, capitalist production has spread such that the labour power of the entire society tends to be subordinate to capitalist control'. The struggle for the commons in this respect is as much about the privatisation of capital as it is the state's attempts to subject life to intrusive surveillance and control from above. However, as I have indicated, the struggle for the commons is also a matter of culture. Here we might investigate the work of fellow English libertarian socialist Colin Ward (1998, 1990) who was similarly concerned to explore the enclosure of the commons, but in a more specifically urban context. Especially significant for Ward was the creativity that found expression within children's play and more co-operative social movements that did not depend upon bureaucratic hierarchies. Similarly Georg McKay (1996) argues that a humanistic DIY ethics links the radical anti-road protests of the 1990s along with punk, rave culture and a wave of free festivals and alternative gatherings since the 1960s. More recently Amy Spencer (2008) has traced DIY culture from the radical 1960s to e-zines and the creativity of alternative blog sites in the English context. All of these features are important to a culture of the commons suggesting it is not simply a matter of defending what we have, but of inventing non-profit and community based oppositional values in the face of capitalism. These features are all suggestive that alternative political futures are nearly always buried within the confines of the present.

### **Cultural Marxism and the Future**

The critical legacy of E.P.Thompson points towards an anti-capitalist and humanist politics. This suggests a different move to that taken by much current cultural sociology. Instead of an argument whereby the consumer capitalism of the present is normalised cultural activities and humanistic expressions can be understood as giving expression to alternative values. Such features inevitably link questions of culture to the prospect of more democratic forms of expression yet to find a fuller expression. If many social movements seek to resist acts of enclosure and

dispossession on the part of capital then cultural struggles seek to defend common resources while giving voice to resistant sensibilities. The development of the corporate university, strategies of privatisation and the attempt to normalise the life of the consumer are all reason enough to suggest that the Marxist tradition continues to have much to contribute to cultural questions. Thompson (1979:21) argues that the Marxist tradition within the English context remains connected to the libertarian tradition of struggle leading back through William Morris to Chartism and the Diggers and Levellers. This is suggestive of a less Marxism reified but more capable of being transformed by the context of struggle. The main barrier to this process remains the imposition of neoliberal capitalism and the attempt to offer deeply restrictive understandings of freedom and democracy. The challenge for cultural sociologists in a world after the market crash of 2008 is to reinvestigate both resistance to rule from above and how common forms of struggle seek to articulate more democratic futures. However if this is to be achieved it will only be possible if we link our analysis of culture to an analysis which explores the power of capitalism to impose its understandings upon institutions and civil society.

Commenting on the writing of Raymond Williams in the 1960s, Thompson (2014i:2012) sought to draw attention to the need to distinguish between culture and that which is 'not culture' or the economic sphere. Further that critical analysis needed to emphasise how different moralities and ways of life were drawn into conflict within a capitalist and hierarchically organised society. While cultural sociology should remain the meeting place of a plurality of traditions, Thompson (2014i:188) points to a required change of 'tone'. If Thompson (2014i:188) shared a great deal with Raymond Williams he was deeply concerned with an overly academic mode of address that had become distant from the central fault line that exists between capitalism and more authentic forms of democracy that emerge from below. Similarly Beverley Skeggs (2004) points to how modes of research can (perhaps unintentionally) end up removing cultural categories and thereby reinforcing dominant modes of perception. The displacement of critical questions concerning questions of capitalism and class within much recent cultural theory makes this a moot point. Further Thompson's humanism is also a means of avoiding more reductive theoretical strands that over-state the extent to which the

population has been absorbed into capitalism or dominant institutions (Fisher 2009). These dimensions are poorly appreciated by a cultural sociology that is unable to take account of the capitalist class structure which in the age of super rich remains 'the joker in the pack of civilisation' (Eagleton 2011:167). After the collapse of the Berlin Wall it seemed that Marxism as a political and cultural theory had been overtaken by history. Accusations of reductionism and totalitarianism became the common fare of the liberal academy. However with the emergence of more radical social movements after the banking crisis suggest there is a need to readdress Marxism (Merrifield 2011). More generally 'humanistic' forms of Marxism continue to have a great deal to offer within debates that either try to ignore the destructive effects of the economic system or overly pessimistically assume that citizens are controlled by larger systems and structures. A cultural sociology directly inspired by E.P.Thompson would more carefully investigate the impact of capitalist enclosure on the lives and experiences of ordinary citizens. Further the analysis would search for alternative values and evidence of refusal not just as evidence of resistance, but as poetic utopian expressions as to how we might live differently. This is reason enough to assume that cultural sociology will continue to need 'bustards' like E.P.Thompson who argue for the need for more authentic forms of democracy in a world increasingly controlled by capitalism and the neo-liberal state.

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