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Written
by
candlelight

E.P. THOMPSON

Sunday, 25th of May, 2008. In a charity shop a few weeks ago I picked up a copy of E.P. Thompson's collection of essays, 'Writing by Candlelight', published by Merlin Press in 1980. I read half of it this morning. Its title refers to the power cuts of the era in which the essays were written (1961-1980). Candles are nice, but wind-up torches are cheaper. A friend of mine has a pet conspiracy theory regarding how long this simple innovation may have been held back in order to maintain battery sales.

Laptop batteries are notoriously quick to drain, but the mains electricity is still on, even though, as I type, Radio 4 reports an oil worker's strike, the Times carries a front page on a 'summer of unrest' and the teaching unions were out yesterday. This is simultaneously frustrating and exciting because, as UCU secretary where I work, I was unable to raise more than two people to a meeting, out of a branch of around 30, neither of whom wished to strike, opting instead for a letter to senior management, expressing agreement with the aims of the strike. Well-under half of the branch members then signed this letter.

Wednesday, 23rd of July, 2008. Listening to Radio 4 between finishing the E.P. Thompson book and doing the washing up, it feels as though a world-shaking event has occurred somewhere, requiring the news to repeat itself, for filler articles to be aired until the main story is ready to be broadcast. An enormously lengthy article on land girls receiving badges from Gordon Brown for their war efforts, another one on the George Cross awarded to a soldier who survived throwing himself on a grenade in Afghanistan to shield his colleagues. Constant returns to the sentencing of husband and wife insurance fraudsters. A recession looms, but the real news never seems to arrive, only reinforcements of British patriotism and another pair of heads on poles at the gates of capitalism.

Much of the content of Thompson's book seemed to speak to the days I read it, but there are just as many differences. For instance, when Thompson discusses the expiry and reformation of leftists traditions, he does so prior to nearly thirty years of monetarist intervention, sell-offs and overt anti-union legislation. Yet he does seem to sense the era to come in 'The Segregation of Dissent' (1961) where he discusses the 'opportunity' policies the conservatives were then pushing:

'To say that our aim should be, not equality of opportunity within an acquisitive society, but, a society of equals; that we need, not more ladders, but, more generous patterns of community life; to say these things is simply to proclaim one's political irrelevance.' (Thompson, 1980: 3).

If it sounded irrelevant then, it sounds like naive utopianism now, even before tackling the subject of contemporary extremes, and only in the west, of non-domicile tax issues, of the English poverty gap. Just watch the television any evening, as the winner-takes-all-reality shows roll out. 'The problem with competitions', George Orwell quipped when reviewing F.A. Hayek's 'The Road To Serfdom', 'is that somebody wins them' (Orwell, 1970: 142).

Thompson works through the idea of a reified society in his essay 'Sir, Writing By Candlelight' (1970) which combs through disgruntled letters to The Times over recent powercuts. It is unstated, but he is giving a working example of Marx's 'commodity fetish':

'What other people do for us is mediated by inanimate objects: the switch, the water tap, the lavatory chain, the telephone receiver, the cheque through the post. That cheque is where the duties of the good bourgeois end.' (Thompson, 1980: 47)

We can perhaps add to this our contemporary amnesia of direct debit payments. If this relentless flow of supply should falter, service-users tend to say 'ought' a lot, to pontificate on the moral duties of suppliers to supply. There was much on the radio and in print recently regarding the recent strike action, about what 'they' - the teachers - are doing to 'our' young through 'their' irresponsible actions. Well, Thompson asks what the duty of 'outraged, Surrey' might be to any given community of workers. How might responsibility work in the direction of consumer to producer? In the 36 years since Thompson's essay was written, 'service' has been relocated in 'agreements' which reify the one-sidedness these angry epistolary narratives assume. As anyone who has worked in 'service' will know, sometimes the customer is an unreasonable idiot. And this before we even begin to address production in the east which is consumed in the west. 'A Special Case' (1972) discusses similarly blinkered attitudes to the inconveniences of strike action, which are couched in solipsism at best, or the media hysteria of invented stories about powerless kidney machines, their patients expiring melodramatically on hospital floors, illuminated by a single Florence Nightingale candle.

The miners were dubbed the 'special case', a group who could, grudgingly, perhaps be paid a little more. Thompson plays with this polemically:

'The "special case" turns out, after all, to be the general case of the working nation, it is never safe to assume that any of our history is altogether dead. It is more often lying there, as a form of stored cultural energy. The instant daily energy of the contingent dazzles us with its brightness. What passes on the daily screen is so distracting, the presence of the status quo is so palpable, that it is difficult to believe that any other form of energy exists. But this instant energy must be reproduced every moment as it is consumed; it can never be held in store. Let the power be cut off for a while, then we become aware of other and older reserves of energy glowing all around us, just as, when the street lights are dowsed, we become aware of the stars.' (Thompson, 1980: 75)

Writing in response to power cuts in New York, Lukacs' old assistant, Istvan Meszaros, suggested that the power supply should be switched off regularly, 'at least once a week [...] Surely the immense savings on all that unused electricity would more than cover the costs of a "large scale replanning of our cities"' (1971: 36). This perhaps frames our contemporary dilemma even more closely than Thompson did.

Thompson's book itself bears out his theory of stored cultural energy in the face of a stifling mainstream culture. The political void it is said young people now grow into isn't a void at all. This perceived 'neutral', 'apolitical', 'natural', 'objective' background to their experiences, as Slavoj Zizek wrote recently (2008) is actually the most dangerous - because invisible - realm of ideology. The violence of the reproduction of social relations is presented as 'stability'.

'It is the business of the servant class to serve. And it is the logic of this reified bourgeois world that their services are only noticed when they cease. It is only when the dustbins linger in the street, the unsorted post piles up - it is only when the power workers throw the switches and look out into a darkness of their own making - that the servants know suddenly the great unspoken fact about our society: their own daily power.' (Thompson, 1980: 48)

It is this which must be communicated to the young, along with a caveat regarding their own power, namely their responsibility to exercise it with restraint and style. If the wind-up torches must be taken out soon, let's hope they can reach far enough into the dark.

Bibliography & notes

Hayek (1946) *The Road To Serfdom*. London: Routledge. Reading Hayek, I realised that my aggressive entry into work like his was not exercised in regard to leftist writers. I wasn't entering into texts I lazily assumed to be by 'the good people' with anything like the same wariness or discipline. So, I will add 'reading on the right' to my endorsement of the re-reading of old Marxists.

Meszaros (1971) *The Necessity of Social Control*. London: Merlin. Elsewhere in this text for his Isaac Deutscher memorial lecture, Meszaros suggests that the 'credibility gap' to be into figured into any scientific electoral forecast 'exactly equals the distance between the front door and the back door of 10 Downing Street, in both space and time' (30). He contrasts Mr. Wilson's socialist posturing pre- and post-No.10 with his Seamen's Union communist hunt when inside. Again, we can perhaps find contemporary parallels here...

Orwell (1970) *Collected Essays Letters and Journalism 3*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Thompson (1980) *Writing by Candlelight*. London: Merlin Press.

Zizek (2008) *Violence*. London: Profile.