Faith, flag and the ‘first’ New Left: E. P. Thompson and the politics of ‘one nation’

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The New Left has made a rather unexpected comeback in current political discourse, catching the interest of figures associated with Ed Miliband’s leadership of the Labour Party, notably the Chair of its Policy Review, Jon Cruddas, and his collaborator Jonathan Rutherford (1). For those involved in the New Left, especially its early phase when it was a movement of people as well as ideas, this sudden renewal of interest is probably a surprise (for accounts of the early years of the New Left see Linn, 1993; Kenny, 1995). For while the New Left was for forty years one of the major intellectual engines on the British left, since the 1990s it has all but disappeared from view, retreating behind the walls of its one surviving institution, the heavyweight journal *New Left Review* (*NLR*).

The main motivation for today’s interest is a search for intellectual roots on behalf of today’s communitarian and patriotic proponents of ‘One Nation Labour’. Cruddas has expressed his own solidarity with the ideas of the New Left ‘mark 1’, notably its attempt to recuperate English cultural traditions, and his alienation from the New Left ‘mark 2’, when, under the influence of Perry Anderson, the emphasis turned to the wholesale importation of continental Marxist theory into the supposedly conservative cultural backwaters of Britain.

One important question posed by this renewal of interest is whether such a ‘Cain and Abel’ picture of the New Left represents an accurate representation of what some see as a more singular and evolving current than the language of ‘first’ and ‘second’ New Lefts suggests (Davis, 2006). Another related question – which is the main issue I want to explore in this essay – is what the attempt to reclaim English traditions, which formed one of the key impulses within the early New Left, offers to those interested in fleshing out further the intellectual dimensions of a ‘One Nation’ approach. In order to do so, I consider the thinking of one of the iconic figures within the early New Left, whose work appears to fit best with the ‘New Left mark 1’ model – that of the historian, activist and intellectual Edward Thompson. I conclude that his work does indeed supply a valuable and stimulating guide for today’s progressive patriots, and explore the challenging insights he provided into the political character of progressive patriotism.

The ‘first’ New Left

The first phase of the New Left movement was home to a variety of contending impulses and ideas, some of which were decidedly wary of the radical patriotism advocated by figures associated with *The New Reasoner* (*NR*) journal in which Thompson was prominently involved after 1958 (Kenny, 1995). Literary critic and cultural theorist Raymond Williams, whose major work, *Culture and Society*, published in 1958, also fits with the
radical-patriotic template, subsequently renounced this kind of approach and moved towards a more Marxist-inflected mode of critical thinking. And Stuart Hall, another major figure from the early New Left, became a consistent critic of the imperial mindset and ethno-cultural residues that infused English national identity, and has remained sceptical about the prospects of reclaiming the national past for progressive ends (Hall, 2012).

The leading figure within this current whose work does appear most congruent with the image of the first New Left projected by Cruddas is the historian and activist Edward Thompson. His major intellectual dispute during the 1960s with the young intellectual and critic Perry Anderson, and his talented collaborator Tom Nairn, provides important evidence for the contention that a fundamental schism over the values of patriotism and the nation were indeed central to the different phases and factions of the New Left.

Below, I revisit the main issues at stake in that dispute. In particular, I explore the terms of Thompson’s rejoinder to the cosmopolitan Marxism proposed by Anderson and Nairn, and point to his emphasis on the left’s need to embrace lived experience and the democratic capacities of ordinary people. I also consider those facets of Thompson’s position which offer an interesting supplement to current forms of progressive patriotism. In particular I examine his highly political account of the nature of the struggle over the national past, which is in important respects quite different to the call of figures like Paul Kingsnorth (1999) for the re-discovery of an authentic and endangered English past. For Thompson, the national story needed to be re-fashioned as much as re-located.

The Thompson-Anderson dispute recalled

The major intellectual and political dispute that erupted between Thompson and Anderson was one of a number of prominent theoretical disagreements in which New Left thinkers were embroiled during the 1960s and 1970s. Yet this particular argument stood out both for the quality and clarity of the contributions it elicited on both sides, which gave expression to deeply embedded tendencies within intellectual life in general and socialist thinking in particular.

At one level, this was a disagreement about the nature of the New Left itself, and its most precious asset and visible presence – NLR. Thompson had been one of the two editors of the NR, which had provided a major gathering point for former Communists who had left the party in disgust after the Soviet invasion of 1956, as well as for Labour sympathisers in search of new ideas and inspiration. After months of often difficult negotiations, NR merged with a very different publication – the more metropolitan and theoretically orientated Universities and Left Review (ULR) – and NLR first appeared in 1960.

Although he was the obvious candidate for the position, Thompson opted not to become its inaugural editor. Instead, this role went to the talented (though inexperienced) Stuart Hall, then a doctoral student at Oxford University who had been integral to the work of the ULR. Thompson identified closely with the political mission of the new journal, which set out with considerable ambition to bridge the chasms that tended to bedevil socialist politics – between theory and practice, culture and politics, and parliamentary party and broader movement. And, though he was disappointed with what he deemed to be the lightweight content of some of its early issues, Thompson had committed a good deal to the New Left, and was convinced that it had a future as a political, not just intellectual venture.

But the new journal was plagued by the perennial nightmare of left periodicals lacking wealthy benefactors – the lack of a stable financial base. Anderson emerged as the journal’s potential saviour, a role that his own wealthy background enabled him to play.
Labour and the New Left  faith, flag and the ‘first’ New Left

What began as a delicate negotiation between him and the NLR Board ended in acrimony, with Thompson feeling that a coup of sorts had taken place, and most others seeing Anderson as the only choice available if the journal was to survive.

Anderson assumed the position of editor in 1962. Most of the Editorial Board left soon after, and were replaced with more sympathetic figures. The NLR was now launched on a very different course, based upon Anderson’s own interpretation of the peculiar path of British historical development and his unyielding sense of the intellectual deficiencies of the British left.

The arguments that figured in his public exchange with Thompson were in fact anticipated by disagreements that had been aired for some time on the journal’s Board, and which erupted acrimoniously at a two-day meeting it held in April 1963. Thompson launched his own intellectual ballistic missile, in the shape of a 15,000 word memorandum circulated to the NLR Board in advance of this key meeting (Hamilton, 2011, 102-5). No longer prepared to hold his tongue, he set out with a brutal clarity his objections to the theoretical focus that Anderson had instilled. His polemic provided the guts of the controversial and combative essay he later published in a different left periodical – ‘The peculiarities of the English’ – as NLR refused to publish his trenchant critique of its political and intellectual direction.

In this piece he set out a refutation of Anderson’s and Nairn’s controversial account of Britain’s historical development, and their sweeping dismissal of its labour movement and intellectual culture. The debate touched on some iconic topics, including the role and character of theory, and its relation with practice; how socialist ideas related to national cultures and traditions; and how the left should engage with a polity – Britain – which felt so conservative and un-modern.

Returning to these arguments now is to re-visit a completely different intellectual atmosphere, one where theoretically informed, but accessible, arguments carried a sense of significance that is almost unimaginable now. While Anderson’s brand of Marxism fell into abeyance in political terms after the 1970s, his confident expression of socialism in universalist terms, and his readiness to characterise those championing indigenous radicalism as, at best, backward-looking romantics, left an indelible imprint upon subsequent generations of socialist thought.

It was not until the 1990s that the idea that nationhood and patriotism might be important themes for progressives to engage with was taken seriously again. But even then, the dominant voices of liberal and socialist theory were cosmopolitan, not national, and Britain was largely written off by intellectuals and New Labour politicians as a brand that was desperately in need of a make-over (Berry and Kenny, 2013).

The Anderson/Nairn thesis

Anderson’s and Nairn’s famous historical interpretation of Britain’s blocked assent to modernity, and its creaking, pre-modern state system, reflected their considerable emphasis on the exceptional nature of its historical development. The class compromise that had been forged between a declining aristocracy and rising bourgeoisie had bequeathed an unusually insular and tradition-bound culture. Their additional characterisation of the supine and anti-intellectual nature of the labour movement in Britain, and their dismissal of the tepid reformism and ‘trade union consciousness’ manifested in the Labour Party, reflected their belief that the British left was uniquely hampered by the appearance in the early decades of the nineteenth century of a radical movement that pre-dated the arrival of Marxist theory from the continent. Intellectuals only
moved towards radical politics, and the fledgling labour movement, at the very end of the
nineteenth century, and those few thinkers who were influential upon the development and
thinking of the Labour Party were, they argued, pseudo-intellectuals who helped embed a
conservative reformism within the party (see Anderson, 1963; 1965; 1966; 1968; and Nairn,
1964a).

In an influential later analysis that built upon these foundations, Nairn proceeded to
diagnose the culture of ‘Labourism’ which had become the governing ethos of the party
(Nairn, 1964b; 1964c). This consisted of a set of values which rendered the Labour Party
unwilling to break from the culture associated with the routines and rituals of parliament,
and a tendency to focus on piecemeal issues while eschewing more radical ambitions. The
embedded nature of Labourism, he argued, meant that Labour failed to develop an alter-
native social philosophy to that associated with the dominant assumptions of the
economic and political systems of the day. Their argument carried strong echoes of the
critique developed by Ralph Miliband, father of Ed and David, and an important figure at
this time in the New Left, whose own often difficult relationship with Thompson has been
fully chronicled (Newman, 2002). It was a standard assumption of progressive intellectuals
in the 1960s and 1970s that Labour was so infused by the assumptions of the archaic
British state and its dominant classes that it was highly unlikely to act as the midwife for an
advance towards socialism (Miliband, 1961).

Professional historians have for the most part joined with Thompson in questioning
many of these thinkers’ particular arguments, and decrying their heavy reliance upon
modern France as the ‘norm’ against which British exceptionalism was critically gauged.
Anderson and Nairn stressed the unwillingness of the bourgeoisie to break with the aristo-
ocratic interest and lead the modernisation of British state and society as the defining
aspect of the British experience. The English capitalist class, they argued, was uniquely
conservative, and was mirrored by an intelligentsia that was unable to articulate a compre-
hensive critique of a society that was suspended between the ancien régime and a modern
industrial order.

This supine and parochial bourgeoisie induced similar characteristics, they argued, in
the working class and its culture. The lack of any major body of indigenous social thought
was reflected in the anti-intellectual prejudices that were embedded throughout the labour
movement. What Thompson and the early New Left praised as important instances of
anti-capitalist protest – including the romantic artists whom Thompson admired so greatly,
or the critics of industrialism praised by Raymond Williams in Culture and Society (1958) –
were, for Anderson and Nairn, symptoms of an ingrained conservatism which looked back
to a mythic past rather than seeking to construct an alternative socialist future.

In his subsequent work Nairn (1977) took this analysis further, arguing that the English
had fatefuly proved unable to imagine themselves as a nation, preferring to divest their
sovereignty to the arcane institutions and ethos of the state-form that was devised for the
internal and external empires which Britain governed. In place of a modern, democratic
sense of nationality there arose only pathological and reactionary manifestations of a
stalled English consciousness.

These ideas provided much of the intellectual framework for the later New Left’s
analysis of British politics. Anderson’s and Nairn’s highly critical account of the Labour
Party rested upon what one critic termed its ‘Olympian’ (Sedgwick, 1964) understanding of
the relationship between intellectuals and the everyday lives and ordinary experiences of
workers. Social theory, they argued, came from minds that were unencumbered by the
national-cultural traditions of the societies they put under the microscope. The changes
Anderson introduced to the NLR exemplified this vision, as it removed itself almost entirely
Labour and the New Left  faith, flag and the ‘first’ New Left

from any connection with political life, and disavowed what remained of the New Left as a social movement.

Thompson’s rehabilitation of the English tradition

This stance represented a major departure from the thinking of their New Left predecessors. Thompson and others involved with the NR had made clear their belief that the radical traditions of the labour movement, its collective sense of solidarity and reciprocity, and the rich ethos of self-reliance and democratic commitment upon which it was built, ought to be the left’s lodestar. Though somewhat split on the political question of what kind of relationship to the Labour Party the New Left ought to adopt, figures from this circle were for the most part engaged, critical, friends of the labour movement, not distant and unsparing rejectionists.

Thompson’s riposte to Anderson and Nairn, set out in his iconic essay ‘The peculiarities of the English’ (1965), represented the most developed reflection from within the ranks of the early New Left. He defended this current’s desire to re-connect with indigenous cultural traditions and the efforts it had made to challenge established ideas about the national past. He also lambasted the sweeping critique of the parochialism and conservatism of the labour movement put forward by Anderson and Nairn. The detached, bird’s eye view which their theoretical analysis promoted meant that they were unable to grasp the concrete and contingent nature of the traditions and struggles out of which Labour had emerged. Thompson noted too the lack of a considered sense of the balance of forces at work within their historical account. Any sense of politics as the ‘art of the possible’ was entirely absent within such thinking.

His objections were to surface once more in the course of his double-barrelled response to the ultra-rationalism at the heart of the structuralist philosophy peddled by the French Marxist theorist Louis Althusser in the 1970s (Thompson, 1978). His abstruse and decidedly anti-humanist thinking sparked considerable interest in left circles, appealing to those who, following Anderson’s lead, were attracted to theoretical projects that were the very mirror-image of English empiricism.

Thompson lamented the rationalist fallacy at the heart of these bodies of thinking, which claimed to be able to detect the laws of motion at work within history by adopting the vantage point of the detached observer, equipped with the apparatus and methodology supplied by a pseudo-scientific Marxism. In the memorandum he sent round the Board of NLR in 1963, he complained about the tendency of the new generation of Marxist intellectuals to write off the war of position that was quietly being waged on the domestic scene, and astutely noted the tendency of such figures to be seduced by the more dramatic and exciting developments happening across the Channel:

While we strain to catch the idioms of the Third World, of Paris, of Poland, of Milan, might there not be a growing discourse around us, pregnant with possibilities, not only for us but for other peoples? (Quoted in Elliott, 1998, 32)

The substantive basis for Thompson’s objections to such thinking was elaborated more fully and famously in the powerful ‘The poverty of theory’ (1978), in which he skewered Althusserian thinking and reprised his arguments against Anderson and Nairn. In this, one of his finest essays, he wrote as a self-confident and widely known intellectual who was not afraid to deride the latest instance in the British left’s inglorious history of falling for theoretical sophistry and the odd guru. Swiftian satire and savage wit intermingled with
heavyweight intellectual argument as he lambasted Althusser’s theoretical apparatus and attacked those, including the later New Left, who had taken seriously such amoral dogma. This was socialism turned into a kind of secular theology, the intellectual corollary, he argued, of a Stalinist approach to politics.

Just as importantly, Thompson elaborated his understanding of the significance of lived experience. He regarded this as both an intellectual and a moral category, which socialist thinking had to honour and engage, not dismiss as a site where ideological hegemony was inexorably secured. Ordinary people, he argued, were much more than the passive recipients of structurally rooted processes. It was the culturally mediated ways in which they made sense of the circumstances they faced, and their attempts to transcend these, as well as the traditions they called upon in order to do so, that needed to be at the heart of historical understanding and progressive thought.

And, as he demonstrated in the path-breaking work that he published in the early 1960s, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), and in an important set of later essays on the eighteenth century (which are collected in Thompson, 2009), in the English case it was often by invoking pre-modern forms of understanding, including myths, pieces of folklore and ideas about customary right, that ‘the people’ gradually became aware of their distinct interests and needs in relation to the ruling classes.

Elsewhere, Thompson justified and explored the importance to English radicals of a love of country. His was a patriotism that did not replicate or mimic that favoured by the political right, but actively sought to contest the ways in which ‘the patria’ was understood in the popular mind, and strove to inflect the political conclusions that people would derive from patriotic sentiments. That Thompson enjoyed such a high standing in socialist circles while advocating the importance of faith and flag, both of which were anathema to large parts of the left, says much about his skills and credibility as a historian and left-wing intellectual.

But, importantly, he was clear that the traditions and institutions that were passed down to the present did not deserve to be venerated merely because they were there, as Burkean logic suggested. Instead, Thompson argued, they mattered because of the sense of agency and meaning that ordinary people were able to derive from them. An appreciation of the cultural dimensions of political struggle, and of the inspirational role played by those who sometimes challenged the norms and morals of their various communities, arose from the kind of independently-minded, historical sensibility he promoted. Community, custom and tradition were blended, in his very English outlook, with the virtues of independence, rebelliousness and self-realisation. A sense of the importance of the ‘common life’ needs, in Thompsonian terms, to be balanced against a respect for the capacities and desire of ordinary people to gain control of their own circumstances and to devise forms of self-government.

In his eyes, therefore, the patriotism of the left was in a perpetual struggle with that which coursed through the conservative imagination. He disliked the Tory fetish for the core institutions of the British state, identifying strongly with the cause of political reform, which he located as a cornerstone of working-class radicalism, not, as has more recently become the view, as a disposable luxury that distracted from ‘real’ issues. Established traditions were to be actively engaged and continually remade and refined, not swallowed whole. Reclaiming English culture and customs for a progressive kind of politics therefore involved the combined exercise of countless individual wills and imaginations, and implied a willingness by radicals to tackle the inequalities of power, wealth and status which were fortified by conservative accounts of the nation.

There was a clear echo in all this of Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci’s concept of the ‘national popular’, and, at various points in his writing, he signalled his admiration for
Labour and the New Left  faith, flag and the ‘first’ New Left

Gramsci’s work. For both of them, the rich and diverse cultures of the nation provided the soil in which socialist attitudes might grow – though there was nothing automatic or inevitable about this process. The historical past, and the different interpretations to which it was subjected, were vital parts of the territory upon which the left needed to conduct its imaginative and cultural struggles.

For Thompson, the left was best placed when it combined a romantic appreciation of the values of community and everyday life with a post-Enlightenment commitment to the determination of ordinary people to develop their own capacities and, with them, collective forms of agency. Desire and reason were the driving forces that made a sense of commonality and agency blossom among those at the bottom of the pile. The working class, he famously argued, made itself as much as it was made.

What One Nation Labour can learn from Thompson

Although fifty years have now passed since the publication of his major work, The Making of the English Working Class, Thompson’s thinking continues to possess a considerable resonance. And this is especially true now that many on the left are once more recoiling from rationalistic and cosmopolitan forms of thinking – most recently associated with the New Labour years.

But, importantly, he supplemented this appreciation with an insistence that traditions and institutions were to be actively re-engaged and, if necessary, altered and challenged, not simply accepted and venerated. The correct alternative to the cosmopolitanism and rationalism which were abiding temptations of left intellectuals and policy thinkers was not, Thompson argued, a retreat to the imagined community of the pre-industrial village, but vigorous and inspiring efforts to re-tell the national story in ways that illuminated the contributions and struggles of ordinary men and women. He pointed towards a politics etched in the vernacular of hope, informed by a vision that was both radical and romantic in its inclinations.

The left needed to be weaned off its penchant for abstract, theoretical schemes, and reminded of the need to engage and understand the richness and complexity of the everyday lives of ordinary people. Anderson and Nairn were the latest in a long line of clever thinkers who, as Orwell had sharply noted, had come to view their own national culture as parochial and backward, while lauding that of other European states as inherently more impressive and progressive. This remains a salutary observation in a context where many current commentators see only pathology and chauvinism at the heart of the celebration of Englishness, while praising to the skies the nationalism of the Scots and the Welsh.

Jon Cruddas is right, therefore, to suppose that the thinking of parts of the early New Left ought to be recalled and engaged by today’s ‘One Nation’ thinkers. Re-considering Thompson’s writings and his New Left arguments, in particular, brings us into contact with some subtly different ways of reflecting upon contemporary debates about nationhood and the national past.

For Thompson showed above all how progressive patriotism was different in kind to forms of Englishness that were insular and isolationist in character. In his view, grounding progressive politics in the soil of the English patria was intimately connected to the idea of developing forms of solidarity and co-operation with allies and movements beyond England. Throughout his political life, Thompson prioritised the development of connections and the exchange of ideas with European radicals and socialists, including those labouring under the yoke of Soviet-style socialism (who were for the most part ignored or forgotten by Western socialists during the Cold War). He did so out of a sense of Britain as
a generous, confident and outward-looking country, whose peoples’ destiny was intimately connected to the fate of other parts of Europe.

These commitments were most movingly revealed in one of his lesser known works, a short account of his brother Frank Thompson’s death, fighting at the behest of the Special Operations Executive alongside Bulgarian partisans against the Germans during the Second World War (Thompson, 1997). This homage to his much admired elder sibling serves – as is true of so many of Thompson’s portraits of historical characters – as an exemplar. This was progressive patriotism in action – fully engaged with the struggles for freedom elsewhere, and confidently rooted in a pride in the English heritage.

Edward’s own formative experiences, including his role as a tank commander with British forces in the Second World War, and his leading role in the European anti-nuclear movement of the 1980s, also exemplified these deeply-held commitments. So, while he was unashamed about his love of England’s literary and cultural heritage, he was equally clear that English patriotism was at its best confident and outward-facing, not sour and insular. The England of his imagination was quite typically conservative in its cultural tastes, left-wing in its politics, and generously liberal in its approach to other cultures and peoples.

A second, striking lesson embodied in his work concerns his strong sense that the language and ethos of nationhood needed to be understood as deeply embroiled within political struggles, not as alternatives to the strategic dilemmas and conflicts that politics involves. In order to develop a radical politics that was true to England, the national past had to be respected, engaged, and actively re-interpreted. A sense of agency – of an imaginative and historical kind – was the hallmark of a progressive patriotism. And, in his mind, this was quite the opposite of a conservative veneration for the institutional conventions and norms of earlier eras.

A reconsideration now of the extraordinary body of historical writings and political essays that Thompson produced reveals how clear-minded he was in avoiding the false choice between grand theorising on the one hand, and a conservative vision of an insular and parochial England on the other. There have always been other, better positions for progressives to take. Thompson’s work, like that of George Orwell before him, represents a valuable reminder of the richness of the English socialist imagination, and the considerable resources this lineage has bequeathed for later progressive patriots.

E. P. Thompson’s unashamed love of country was interwoven with a strong commitment to England’s dissenting and democratic heritage, as well as an unerring commitment to the merits of a common humanity. Above all, he advanced a highly political sense of the different values and ideals that a politics rooted in nationhood could supply. The radical patria arose out of the dream of a better society in which the power and wealth of the social and economic elites were challenged, decentralised and redistributed. There was always more than one imagined nation in play within political life, and it was the duty of the left to persuade, inspire and organise so that its patriotic and progressive version would ultimately win the day.

What then might Thompson have made of ‘One Nation Labour’? I would guess that it would have left him interested but also on his guard. He would, I suspect, have been cheered that the language of patriotism was at the heart of Labour’s sense of mission, but concerned if this slogan signalled too great an accommodation with political forms of conservatism. It was only by vigorously contesting this territory, and finding meanings and inspiration within it for a transformative politics in the here-and-now, that Thompson thought that the left would win the hearts and minds of the English people.

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Labour and the New Left

faith, flag and the ‘first’ New Left

References


Note

1. These issues were considered at a conference on ‘The Labour Party and the British New Left’, held at Queen Mary, University of London, on 27 June 2012, at which both Cruddas and Rutherford were speakers. See also Cruddas (2012) and Jonathan Rutherford’s article in this issue of Renewal.