



The Poverty of Theory

E.P. Thompson

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Dorothy Thompson writes in her introduction: 'This essay is a rarity among Edward's published work. Although he was throughout his life interested in the philosophy of history and in various theoretical formulations, he concerned himself with these mainly in private reading and private discussion. Why then did he write this essay? He had read the works of Louis Althusser and found very little in them to affect his work. When Althusser appeared on the scene he made little impact on practising historians. For some reason however, he suddenly became a major force among graduate students and some young historians and literary scholars. Most historians would have been prepared to wait for the new influence to demonstrate its validity in the production of innovative work in history; not only did this not happen, but Althusser's followers - even some of the historians among them - began to declare that history was a non-discipline and that its study was of no value. It was the influence that Althusser's writings were having on scholarship that made Edward take on the uncongenial task of putting the case for history against his closed system.'

The result is a major critique of Althusserian Marxism, or 'theoretical practice', entering closely into questions of epistemology and of the theory and practice of the historian. Around this detailed polemic, Thompson develops a constructive view of an alternative, socialist tradition, empirical and self-critical in method, and fully open to the creative practice evidenced by history - a tradition sharply opposed to much that now passes as 'Marxism'. In converging shafts of close analysis and Swiftian irony, the author defoliates Althusser's arcane, rationalist rhetoric and reinstates 'historicism', 'empiricism', 'moralism' and 'socialist humanism' in a different Marxist inheritance.

The title of this essay echoes *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx's annihilating attack on Proudhon, which, like Engels' *Anti-Duhring*, is a work read long after its subject has been consigned to oblivion.

The Poverty of Theory Details

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Alex says

This started out pretty good when it was about Althusser being an idealist and the importance of having an understanding of history outside of static categories and all that. I was much less impressed by most of the second half which was a much less interesting and much less well organized anti-Stalinism invective

Adam says

I'll start with this:

Dorothy Thompson writes in her introduction: "This essay is a rarity among Edward's published work. Although he was throughout his life interested in the philosophy of history and in various theoretical formulations, he concerned himself with these mainly in private reading and private discussion. Why then did he write this essay? He had read the works of Louis Althusser and found very little in them to affect his work. When Althusser appeared on the scene he made little impact on practising historians. For some reason however, he suddenly became a major force among graduate students and some young historians and literary scholars. Most historians would have been prepared to wait for the new influence to demonstrate its validity in the production of innovative work in history; not only did this not happen, but Althusser's followers - even some of the historians among them - began to declare that history was a non-discipline and that its study was of no value. It was the influence that Althusser's writings were having on scholarship that made Edward take on the uncongenial task of putting the case for history against his closed system.'

"The result is a major critique of Althusserian Marxism, or 'theoretical practice', entering closely into questions of epistemology and of the theory and practice of the historian. Around this detailed polemic, Thompson develops a constructive view of an alternative, socialist tradition, empirical and self-critical in method, and fully open to the creative practice evidenced by history - a tradition sharply opposed to much that now passes as 'Marxism'. In converging shafts of close analysis and Swiftian irony, the author defoliates Althusser's arcane, rationalist rhetoric and reinstates 'historicism', 'empiricism', 'moralism' and 'socialist humanism' in a different Marxist inheritance."

This essay is the best single cure for what I might call 'theoritis' I know. It's easy for smart young people flexing their intellectual muscles to get caught up in a theoretical system that seems to have enormous explanatory power: deconstruction, for instance, or Vienna-school free-market economics--and then be blinded by it. So even though Louis Althusser went psychotic and murdered his wife, and his deterministic, schematic, ahistorical version of Marxism is largely and deservedly forgotten except among aging European cultural studies professors. But Thompson's critique is worth reading not only for its thoroughness but for his vision of the individual in society responding to "determining pressures" yet remaining a historical subject. This essay actually generated my longest poem, "The Snarling Gift," a science-fiction narrative whose central character is an adaptation of Thompson's hypothetical working-class woman.

Besides this magisterial essay, the book also includes Thompson's superb response to "natopolitan" political retrenchment on the post-WW2 left, "Outside the Whale," which is centered on close readings of W.H. Auden's revisions of two of his most famous poems, "Spain 1937" and "September 1, 1939." They don't make 'em like Thomson any more.

Muhammad Ahmad says

Unusually for a Marxist, Thompson is a fine prose writer. But like all Marxists, is unable to compress. I was mainly interested in reading his exchange with Leszek Kolakowski. The letter has some interesting points but they frequently lose vitality due to the endless digressions. By comparison, Kolakowski's reply, with its muscular prose and subtle irony, is a model of concision and clarity.

Dan O'Meara says

E.P. Thompson was one of the greatest English historians of the 20th Century, a great humanist and a man who revolutionised our understanding of the development of British society and politics. This, his bitter polemic against "French" structural marxism had a huge impact on the anglophone left at the end of the 1970s. However he gets vastly carried away by his own rhetoric - which has more than a touch of English francophobia - and ends up throwing out the bathwater, baby, and setting fire to the bathroom. A little more "English" moderation would have been in order.

Andrew says

Thompson would probably be flattered if I compared The Poverty of Theory to Marx's German Ideology, and while I don't mean that as a compliment, I don't mean it as an insult either. Much as Marx took aim at the Hegelians of his day who favored abstract systems over reality, Thompson takes on the then-titan of Western Marxism, Louis Althusser (whose star has faded somewhat, 'specially since he strangled his wife, but who retains a certain popularity in certain lit-theory circles), who gave far more of a shit about structuralism than about the condition of the workers. Marx goes on too long, as does Thompson. As a 50-page essay, this would have been a banger.

ehk2 says

scheisse, un-theoretical shit

Peter Harrison says

The first essay here is a superbly vicious polemic against Althusser and structuralist Marxism in general. A strong antidote to having recently finished Reading Capital. Thompson does a wonderful job of picking apart Althusser's arguments and countering them, and I thoroughly enjoyed his style.

The remainder of the book presents other essays in the same vein which feel more dated as they cover the turmoil in the British left around the end of stalinism and the New Left. They are mostly of historical interest now I suspect, but an enjoyable read nonetheless.

I might struggle a little with Thompson's approach to morality, but his focus on the humanism in Marx chimes strongly with me and is a good antidote to any temptation structuralism presents.

Wes Pue says

A bit dated but well worth reading

Alfredo Bojórquez says

Apasionante debate entre EP Thompson y Althusser que a su vez retoma el título del de Proudhon y Marx. Este ensayo es de mucha lucidez para quienes nos interesa la academia y el quehacer intelectual como un bastión de lucha social y compromiso político serio. Me parece que el capítulo del elitismo althusseriano prácticamente podría sustituir al francés con cualquier otro post-estructuralista y quedaría bien frente a la aristocracia intelectual en la que México y Latinoamérica están sumergidas actualmente con la sobredosis de Foucault, Derrida, Bajtin, el estructuralismo, el constructivismo social y la semiótica.

ehk2 says

çeviri güzel. Ancak, as?l yazar?n a?z?ndan köpüklü salyalar ak?yor. Belagat ve küfür, teorinin yerini tutmuyor.

R says

Poorly written, rambling and disorganised. Thompson misunderstands Althusserian terms ('historicism', 'humanism'), and Thompson is often in agreement with Althusser without realising it; making this an unnecessarily charged account. This text seems to be the origin for many myths about Althusser. It neither illuminates Althusser's thought nor does it provide an effective critique. Not a credit to its author.

tom bomp says

Note to myself:

around page 88 he talks about how the grundissre has a more idealist conception of history related to its acceptance of the category of political economy and its presentation of capitalism as the idea taking over society without historical movement. The teleological view of history is presented as idealist. It contrasts with his own views of history. I guess what I find interesting is how to separate the idealism and materialism - if consciousness affects the "material" (being as it is part of the material) then it's not always obvious what the idealist part is. If we attribute actions to "capitalism" are we denying that this idea can only work via the actions of human beings. I was thinking about this w/r/t some post structuralist stuff I've seen, which goes completely into attributing all actions to "power" or w/e which basically seems a stand-in for structures or "ideology" and it seems highly idealistic by denying any human action, which of course conflicts with actual

experience. the tough thing is being careful when talking about capitalism not to present it as completely autonomous, with capitalism in the material simply being the acting out of the logic of capitalism the idea

I dunno this is 100% incoherent but I wanted to note it down so I remember to go back and re-read this bit.

p119 - he leads up to something that he suggests is a good way of reconciling human agency with structural determinants and then just leaves it there just when you expect him to describe it. Ironically one of his criticisms of Althusser is that he does the same. Which is sort of my frustration with this book - like so far it's had quite a lot of interesting spots but it never really develops them into a really coherent description of his ideas on historical materialism while the quotes from Althusser are often spotty so it doesn't offer a good critique of Althusser either (although it gives some good ideas) and I can't shake the feeling that a lot of his criticism is only vaguely accurate because we don't get a good look at Althusser's ideas. It's also sometimes tough going and I think ironically this is due to the same sort of thing he criticises Marx for - he tries to criticise Althusser within his own sort of terms and gets entangled.

That's not to say I regret reading this book or anything, it's just got a lot of problems, (and I feel Thompson would probably agree on this) mostly due to it trying to be a critique and polemic and explanation of his views on historical materialism. It's tough to fit everything together and give them all their dues. It also solidifies my feelings that most critiques are better using that as a jumping off point and then being 90% just their own views because it avoids the problem of presenting views that are boring to read about and muddled.

p126: i'm pausing this here because it's completely unbearable. Thompson's writing is sometimes a little confusing but I get what he's driving at and it's about things that are tough to explain and that I don't have experience in. Althusser's writing... it's like trudging through tar. Thompson has started quoting him at length and it's like i've read 20 paragraphs all saying "everything is connected" in the most obnoxious, baffling way possible. I can't deal with it. Maybe I'll come back to it when I understand Althusser a bit more. I'll try and read other stuff Thompson has written (his shorter essays and which come with the Monthly Review printing seem really interesting) but for now I'm pausing this.
