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An English Dissenter

The Heavy Dancers

Edward Thompson, *Merlin* £5.50

The 'heavy dancers' of the title - politicians, media figures, chief constables and the like - are those who act out the rituals of the 20th century 'summoning up the ancient spirits of the tribe as they prepare us for the ultimate war'. The rhythm of the 'heavy dance' represses dissent, strait jackets political and philosophical discussion, and represents as normal the abnormal times in which we live. Ranged against this battery of repressive and ideological forces are the 'dissenters' - poets, intellectuals and people's movements. The balance is weighted against them, but any hope for humanity resides in them.

This powerful vision runs parallel to Thompson's other major preoccupation of the last 40 years: the need to bring Europe back together, to transcend the cold war, and to finally fulfil the aspirations of the anti-fascists of the Second World War.

These two linked themes - the healing of Europe, and the necessity of dissent - are present throughout the book. They are underpinned by the historical experience of a generation of the European Left - the smashing of the hopes of the victorious anti-fascists after 1945, the betrayal of the cold war, and disillusionment with the Soviet Union and the international communist movement.

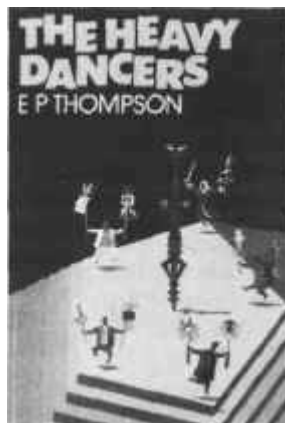
The slightly unwieldy collection of poems, essays and historical reminiscences at the end of the book is offered almost as a personal tour of Thompson's preoccupations. For example, his descriptions of his war experiences give insight into his rejection of the kind of peace that followed. This open invitation into a mind is unusual, and makes the book a very honest one. But it also underlines the way in which Thompson involves his personal history and his definition of himself, into his political and conceptual approach. Whilst we all do this to some extent, Thompson's preoccupations have led him into making misjudgements about the nature of the cold war, and the type of peace movement needed to combat it.

For example, his heavy emphasis on the notion of dissent from orthodoxy, whilst an understandable reaction to the dogmatism of the world communist movement in much of its history, leads him into neglect of the class context within which the

orthodoxy exists. And he is too much concerned to locate the nuclear disarmament movement within a framework of a people's movement to break down East West barriers. Thus for him, a mobilisation in response to the threat of nuclear annihilation is insufficient: the movement must also take on board a specific analysis of East West relations.

Thompson argues that the historical origins of the cold war are now less important than its consequences. Thus the Soviet Union is now equally responsible for the cold war; its repression of dissidents and its pursuance of nuclear 'balance' are now, in themselves, causes of the cold war; the cold war, in Europe, is now 'about itself'.

In this analysis Thompson gives little weight to the differences between the Warsaw Pact and NATO. He is more interested in building an alliance of dissenters than in looking for possible breaks in the armament process on the Soviet side. But in fact the Soviet conception of 'nuclear balance' is very different from NATO's strategy of developing nuclear superiority and first strike capacity. Soviet nuclear strategy has always been based on the defensive notion of having sufficient nuclear weapons to deter any attack. Hence Soviet deployment of SS20s, and their development of cruise missiles and the neutron bomb is contrary to their stated nuclear policy since all these weapons are part of a strategy of tactical nuclear war rather than deterrent strategy. This means that the Soviet Union is capable of maintaining its defensive deterrent posture, while at the same time refusing to participate in the current escalation of nuclear weaponry. In other words, the historical causes of the cold war are important, since they point to possibilities for a break in the nuclear arms race on the Soviet side.



Such a breakthrough is unlikely at the moment. This is largely because the Soviet Union, for historical reasons, places great emphasis on its ability to defeat political and military hostility through military means. Dissenters in the West have yet to succeed in preventing an attack on the Soviet Union. Thompson suggests that Western peace movements are a sign of a thaw within NATO, and calls for reciprocation by the Soviet Union. But this is to overestimate the Western peace movements, and to misunderstand Soviet motivation. If we are to persuade the Soviet Union that a political solution to the arms race is now a historical necessity, we need to foster a spirit of dialogue in which Western dissenters, rather than making angry demands, try to understand why the Soviet Union has adopted its current position.

The second part of Thompson's argument is that Soviet repression of dissidents is a major cause of the cold war. Hence campaigning on their behalf is essential. Undoubtedly repression does give some legitimacy to Western propaganda. But it is mistaken to place too much emphasis on this factor. Although the 'free world's' crusade against communism has a strong ideological component, US foreign policy is primarily based on its need to maintain markets and to control resources. Human rights violations are cited whenever the United States intervenes into the affairs of another country.

Thompson himself argues that we choose to campaign for specific human rights in particular countries as a matter of political priority rather than as a moral imperative. That is why he chooses to focus on Eastern Europe rather than elsewhere. It is important for socialists to make clear their commitment to a democratic and pluralist socialism, but it is wrong to see this question as lying at the heart of the cold war, or to argue that campaigning for human rights in the Warsaw Pact countries is a central priority for the European peace movement.

Thompson goes so far as to say that events in Poland, and the deployment of SS20s, are the reason for the failure of the Western peace movements. This position makes a serious examination of weaknesses on our own side unnecessary. It is also a mirror image of the pro-Soviet lobby's assertion that there will be no disarmament until we have dealt with the causes of the cold war, that is until we have destroyed the myth of the Soviet threat. Both views

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deny the possibility of a successful peace movement in the West based on popular opposition to nuclear weapons; and both views place little emphasis on the need, or possibility, for changes in Soviet nuclear policy.

Thompson's analysis leads him to argue for a European wide peace movement linking dissenters East and West. The 'foreign policy' of such a movement would be the dissolution of the blocs. I would counterpose to this a strategy based on building autonomous popular movements against nuclear weapons in each NATO country. The 'diplomacy' of these movements should be geared towards dialogue with the Warsaw Pact countries, seeking a break in the arms race from their side.

Thompson largely overlooks, in his polemic against orthodoxy in East and West, the serious problems facing the peace movement in this country. We have failed to win any unilateral nuclear disarmament measures in this country because the Left has not succeeded in defeating Thatcherism. The growth of a mass movement for disarmament has taken place without a similar renewal within the forces of the Left. Many of Thompson's positions - his rejection of the 'ritualised and long inert categories of 'Communism' and of 'Social Democracy', his vision of a new internationalist constituency, the value he places on the power of poetry, his reclamation of a people's tradition within Britain - are in the direction of the kind of

renewal that is needed. The peace movement will not succeed without the resurrection of a popular democratic consciousness in Britain; and it has an important part to play in the creation of such a resurrection. An important part of this reconstruction is self criticism about our own Stalinist traditions, social democratic and communist - dogmatism, orthodoxy and the maintenance of power groups are not exclusive to the Soviet tradition.

Only when we have created a movement capable of defeating Thatcherism will we be able to afford the luxury of turning our attention to fomenting dissent in other countries.

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