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Book review: 1956: John Saville, E.P. Thompson & The Reasoner

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**Paul Flowers and John McIlroy (eds), 1956: John Saville, E.P. Thompson & The Reasoner , London, Merlin Press, 2016, ISBN 978 0 85036 726 3 , £20**

1956 was a dramatic year in both the history of world and British communism for it saw Krushchev 'Secret Speech' reveal the iniquities of Stalin, the Soviet invasion of Hungary, and deep divisions develop within the Communist Party of Great Britain over the restrictive bonds of democratic centralism which stifled open debate within the party. These developments eventually led to a major split in the CPGB which saw the loss of more than 9,000 members and the emergence of the unaligned New Left - so often analysed in recent times by Stuart Hall ( *Life & Times*), Raphael Samuels (*Born Again Socialism*), and others – which focused around John Saville's the *New Reasoner*. The New Left never became an enduring organisation with a viable anti-Stalinist programme but rather a set of socialist organisations and Bryan Palmer has reflected that the *New Reasoner* was quoted by everyone though 'no one actually read it'. Important as this is, this book is not about the consequences of these debates in 1956 but about the events themselves, offering a salient collection of Party documents essentially to provide context to the three copies of *The Reasoner* printed in 1956, edited by the Marxist historians John Saville and E. P. Thompson. With a combined circulation of only around 3,000 copies the three issues of *The Reasoner* provided a platform to encapsulate the discussion of democratic centralism and democracy that convulsed the party in 1956 after the revelation of the 'crimes' of Stalin. These documents are accompanied by three powerfully argued and thought-provoking contextual essays by Paul Flowers and John McIlroy which reveal the seismic shock of De-Stalinisation in 1956, and a CPGB's state of denial, and the ideas of both Saville and Thompson.

John McIlroy's introductory essay on 'Communist Intellectuals and 1956: John Saville, Edward Thompson and *The Reasoner*' is iconoclastic in style shattering any illusion that the CPGB had a thriving intellectual and cultural life in the early 1950s. The fact is that there was little democratic debate within the Party which, despite Krushchev's 'Secret Speech' continued to suppress open debate. Those who reject Eurocommunism and Trotskyism, or Trotskyist activities, will not like these realities but even the skimpiest of perusals of the CPGB archives reveal this to be the case. Harry Pollitt famously stated 'Defending the Soviet Union gives you a headache?...if it gives you a headache take an aspirin.' The fact is that, under Pollitt's leadership and that of his successor John Gollan, the CPGB was simply not responding to the denunciation of Stalin, and the implication that Communism should be allowed to develop in different ways in different countries. The CPGB used democratic centralism to stifle debate and created a commission on Inner Party Democracy at the end of 1956 to try to dampen down criticism of the Soviet Union and the plurality of pathways in creating Marxist states. The Communist Party survived the challenges of 1956, and particularly the reaction to Soviet invasion of Hungary, but in 1968, having committed itself in 1967 to the idea that socialists in different countries could develop in their own ways, the invasion of Czechoslovakia put paid to the cult of the Soviet Union as many of the Party faithfuls condemned Soviet action.

To return to the events of 1956 though, by mid May 1956 Saville and Thompson were already facing disciplinary action from the Party for challenging democratic centralism before they published *The Reasoner*. Soon afterwards, Thompson was annoyed that his article 'Winter Wheat in Omsk' had been censored down from 1,700 words to 1,000 words by *World News and Views*, in its 30 June 1956 issue. The Executive Committee of the Party had objected to the fact that Thompson had inserted the statement that the Monolith was droning on in a dogmatic monotone 'without individual variation, without moral inflexion, without

native dialect'. His article nevertheless asked 'How often have we neglected our native socialist seed in favour of seed bred for Siberian conditions', suggested that we ought to be less concerned with Russian texts than British experiences, and demanding a more democratic climate of debate (pp. 111-114).

The EC of the Party considered itself advanced, discussing on the notion of 'Overcoming of the Cult of the Individual and its Consequences' and priding itself that 'Socialism in Britain was different from the Soviet Road'. This was not a view held by Saville and Thompson as they published their three issues of *The Reasoner* in July, September and November 1956, focusing upon the slowness of the CPGB leadership to challenge Stalin. Also at this moment Thompson asked, 'Why is the *Daily Worker* [the Party paper] the bleakest and least-inspired paper in Labour history?' In a letter to Bert Ramelson, the Yorkshire District Organiser, Thompson privately confided that his views the lack of self-criticism of the Party: 'All I can say is, thank God there is no chance of the EC ever having power in Britain, it would destroy in a month every liberty or thought, concern and expression, which it has taken the British people over 300 years to win.' Ramelson transmitted these views directly to the EC of the Party.

In the first issue of *The Reasoner*, Saville and Thompson explained that they were publishing outside the party newspapers and journals they explained that they were providing 'a new forum for the far-reaching discussions at present going on', were encouraging a fresh polemic over the British condition for the growth of Marxism, and challenging the Party 'grossly irrational and authoritarian attitudes intermingled with claims to a "scientific analysis' (pp. 136-137). They were openly and vigorously challenging the dogma of the Party. Having attended the EC in early September to explain their position, just after the second issue of *The Reasoner* appeared, they decided resign and carry on producing the journal. In November 1956, the third issue was produced and contained an article on 'The Smoke of

Budapest' which suggested that 'Stalinism had sown the seeds and the whirlwind was Hungary.' This article compared the Soviet invasion of Hungary with the cynical imperialism of Britain in Egypt. Shortly afterwards Saville and Thompson resigned from the Party, with significant support from party branches and individual Party members throughout Britain.

Flewers and McIlroy have done an immense service in gathering together the important documents of this vital moment in the history of the Communist Party and have published the three issues of *The Reasoner*, of which few copies survive. This rich seam of material is now readily available to all. However, the book ends with two essays. In one John McIlroy examines John Saville and his views on Stalinism. After shattering the illusion that the majority of academics resigned from the CPGB, McIlroy examines the life of Saville who did. It would appear that even in the 1930s Saville was alarmed at the unquestioning nature of the Party at the time of the Moscow Show Trials and that despite forming the basis of the New Left in the 1950s and 1960s he gradually drifted away from his Marxist roots, although he will always be seen as one of those who 'pushed forward the momentum generated by Krushchev's revelations' and encouraged polemical debate within British Marxism. In the second essay, Flewers in examining the life of Thompson sees him as a somewhat contradictory figure, who failed to analyse Stalinism and the role of the Soviet Union whilst accusing others of failing to do so, and distant from even those Trotskyists who supported him in *The Reasoner* debate. He argues that this may have been because he still retained vestiges of the Stalinist era and favoured the Popular Front of the mid -1930s rejecting the Trotskyist view that this was an abandonment of the revolutionary struggle.

This book is an important and a vital read to all those concerned with the history of Marxism in Britain. Undoubtedly, the essays, if not the documents, may well divide opinion. It may be challenged by those who feel that there was a democratic polemic developing within the CPGB in the early and mid-1950s. It may also be rejected by those or by those

who still believe that, despite its fault, Stalinism and the cult of the Soviet Union were essential to the success of Marxism and preferable to both the ideas of Trotsky and Trotskyist organisations. Nevertheless, this edited collection and its essays are a powerful reminder of the immense importance of Saville and Thompson in promoting a polemic to challenge Stalinism in the Communist Party of Great Britain. This book deserves to be widely read.

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