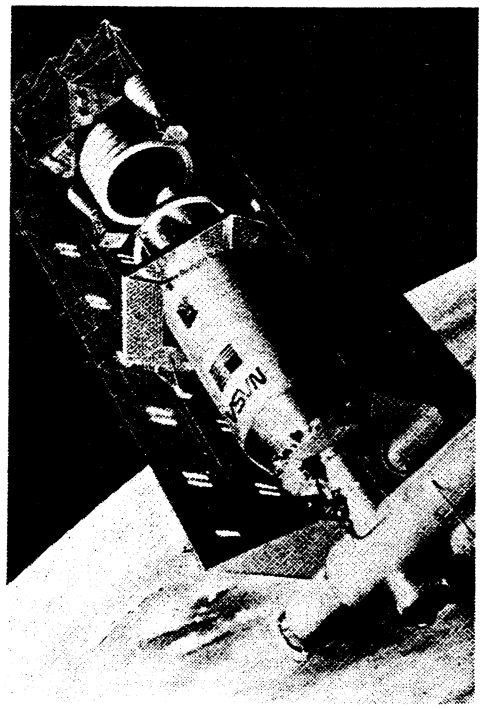
Elegy for E.P. Thompson

How could anyone accuse E.P. Thompson of ignoring the working class and its struggle in the analysis of anything central to the development of international capitalism? Of all writers on the Left, Thompson probably has done the most to teach us that capital in its attempt to form an industrial proletariat confronted the determined resistance of a work force which saw itself as coerced and exploited by a property-controlling employer class. His books and articles have shown us that the central institutions and practices of developing capitalism, from the organization of production in factories to the rituals of 'criminal' 'justice,' must be understood as responses to this resistance, as societal mechanisms for turning unwilling labor power into disciplined, quiescent producers of surplus value. It is Thompson and the young historians he has trained who have shown us how to revise the history of the 18th and 19th centuries to place the development and struggles of the working class at the center of the story, where they belong.

We are therefore surprised to find that Thompson's analysis of one of the most important institutional complexes in twentieth century capitalism -- the nuclear war industry -- utterly ignores the fundamental part played by war policy and its enormous economic base in organizing the expropriation and accumulation of surplus value. After proving to us that so many of the practices of early capitalist society served the accumulation process by effecting the organization of labor, Thompson seems to forget that capitalism's raison d'etre has not changed in two hundred years -- any more than its principal obstacle has ceased to be the organization of us.

Thompson's most cogent accounts of the nuclear war establishment appear in his "Notes on Exterminism" (New Left Review, Spring/Summer 1980) and in a book just published, Beyond the Cold War (Pantheon, 1982). In both places he presents the war establishments of the NATO countries -- the US especially -- and the USSR as self-generating, self-sustaining complexes of belief, ideology, economic institution, and social practice. These practices and the larger belief systems they have spawned in their respective societies are 'exterminist,' in Thompson's splendid bit of jargon, because they inevitably push these societies toward the nuclear confrontation(s) which will result in 'the extermination of multitudes, indeed, of us all. Thompson recognizes, of course, that the effects of war policy permeate capitalist society, affecting profoundly the values and political practices of the western democracies, and even more profoundly, their economies, given the massive expenditures required to support nuclear armaments. He thus introduces his category of 'exterminism' as 'something less than (a) social formation, and something a good deal more than (a) cultural or ideological attribute' in order to make the important point that the war establishment is a matter of institutions with strong economic foundations -- a matter of fully developed social systems -- and not just a lot of ideas in the minds of generals and right-wing politicians.

What Thompson does not do is to ask the fundamental question which any marxist social analysis must always ask, viz., what function do these institutions and practices fulfill in furthering the larger aims of a capitalist society -- how do they advance the process of accumulation? what part do they play in sustaining/reconstructing current modes of production? how are they instuments for the organization and control of labor power? The closest he comes to dealing with these questions is a brief reference to 'the competitive drive of arms manufacturers' as one of the several factors sustaining nuclear arms development in the west; and he cites with qualified approval the view that the defense industries are and are intended by government policy to be 'the leading sector' of the economy, responsible for major innovations in technology, hence productivity, and charged with leading the economy out of its recurrent recessions via the massive



appropriations it absorbs and transforms. But these economic functions of defense policy are cited as items on a list of many apparently equal, in Thompson's eyes, explanatory considerations. No special importance, let alone priority, is assigned to class, as opposed, e.g., to symbolic or ideological functions of the war establishment.

This rejection of traditional marxist categories seems particularly odd since Thompson is brilliantly effective in demonstrating the irrationality of

of nuclear 'defense' strategy as a military strategy and of nuclear arms as an instrument of international politics. He argues effectively for the bankruptcy of the older 'deterrence' theory and for the manifest absurdity of current NATO claims that the new generation of weapons (Pershings, cruise missles, neutron bombs) permit confinement of a nuclear exchange to a limited an manageable area --all of Western Europe, for example -- and so provide a useable military and diplomatic option. He argues this case so effectively that we are left wondering why admittedly very "smart" people have for years operated a belief system and institutional set-up which, in terms of ordinary means-ends rationality, plainly is insane.

Thompson's explanation is that a series of factors largely internal to the process of producing weapons and weapons policy join together to create a powerful 'inertial thrust' in the direction of ever larger war-making establishments. The point of his 'inertia' metaphor is to stress that weapons development and war-strategy are self-sustaining and self-generating, not dependent for their continued existence and growth on their ability to satisfy societal needs or functions other than those of 'defense'. Thus nuclear armaments and their elaborate delivery systems are constantly renewed and reconstructed because of enormous internal pressures exerted by generals and the weapons technologists themselves; new strategies like that of 'theater nuclear war' are generated because frustrated and impatient militarists demand new game plans to utilize the superior power of their new technologies; militarists and arms manufacturers interlock with

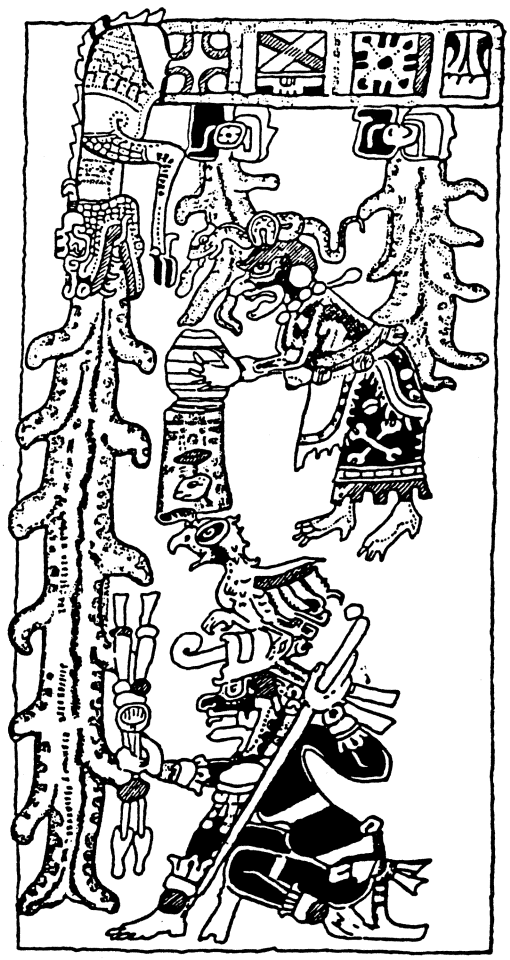
government bureaucracies and become skillful in spreading their ideology through news media and in the organs of state; a large state security and policing apparatus grows up around them, ostensibly to protect against the Soviet enemy, but also to enhance the control of information and inhibit opposition, thereby enabling the formation and dissemination, unchallenged, of a supportive ideology. This 'inertial thrust' has brought us to the point where, in Thompson's excellent formulation, '... the USA and the USSR do not have military-industrial complexes: they are such complexes." Militarism is founded in a circumscribed institutional base -- the military, arms manufacturers, civilian defense bureaucracy, state security apparatus, the scientific establishment of weapons research -- but its influence extends into all areas of social life,to such an extent that this now powerful 'social system,' as Thompson rightly call it, is able to stamp its priorities on the society as a whole, determining the direction of economic growth, moulding the entire culture.

This explanation must be taken seriously because it makes it very clear that the policy of nuclear war expresses deep structural characteristics of the society and economy, and so cannot be taken simply as the outcome of machinations by a clique of generals, politicians and industrialists. No conspiracy theory of the cold war can do justice to this fact that 'defense' now designates an entire social system, with a social system's capacity to sustain and perpetuate itself.

The merit of Thompson's inertial metaphor is the graphic fashion in which it makes this point. Yet the image he creates for us goes fundamentally wrong. For it is, in effect, the image of a gigantic cancer, rapidly taking over the host body, but deriving its impulse to growth entirely from within itself. Like a cancer, the defense apparatus fulfills no constructive functions for the larger body. Its existence and rapid growth are indeed irrational, as Thompson stresses repeatedly, but the irrationality is an artifact of his analysis, due to the fact that he assigns it no central role in furthering the fundamental objectives of a capitalist society.

The enormity of Thompson's failure is most evident in his assertion that 'exterminism does not (call into being its own antagonist). Exterminism simply confronts itself. It does not exploit a victim: it confronts an equal (viz., the exterminist social systems of the Soviet Bloc).' The claim is explicit: Exterminist social systems of war are not to be understood as instruments of class oppression or as factors in class struggle: 'Class struggle continues in many forms, across the globe. But exterminism itself is not a "class issue": it is a human issue.' And the movement against nuclear war is not a program of resistance for the working class against its rulers; it is 'the defense of civilization, the defense of the ecosphere -- the human ecological imperative.'

As always in Thompson's writing, there is an important element of truth here: If 'working class' is defined narrowly, after the fashion of classical marxism, then exterminism is not merely an instrument of working class oppression, since all who live and breathe and labor are oppressed by it, In the Midnight Notes, however, 'working class' has always been defined broadly, to include all who contribute directly, through labor waged and unwaged, to the production of value to be expropri-



17 Page from the Codex Dresdensis *showing the destruction of the world by water from the mouth of a sky dragon*

ated and accumulated by a ruling class which controls for its own advantage the means of production. Thompson's politically sanitary formulation wholly obscures this essential fact: the social systems of exterminism, like all enduring social systems in a capitalist society, exist and develop because they are effective instruments in the organization of the society for maximal-

ly efficient (per the judgement of its rule) pursuit of the expropriation and accumulation of surplus value, given the modes of production available in the current phase of capitalism's history (modes of production now undergoing radical change: itself a central factor in the evolution of war policy). The policies and programs of these social systems are as irrational as Thompson thinks, in their own advertised terms, as military and diplomatic instruments for preserving "Western Society." But it does not follow that they are irrational or that the rulers who continue to operate them are fools and madmen. For again, their function is to facilitate the repression, development, organization of labor power, waged and unwaged. The 'defense' they are principally charged with is the defense of an exploitative social and economic system against ourselves, and they are rational as long as they hold the promise of carrying out this defensive function effectively. We in turn defend 'the ecosphere' against extermism by demonstrating that no such strategy for the exploitation of our labor will be tolerated.

Thompson himself points to one way this deeper 'defensive' function is fulfilled when he describes '...the danger that the weapons states will themselves become terrorist, and turn their terror against their own peoples.' His description of the Official Secrets Act and its administration by Thatcher's government, considered together with anti-'terrorist' and 'conspiracy' provisions in current attempts to reform the criminal codes in this country -- not to mention the Reagan administration's efforts to expand the brief of the CIA and FBI to include 'domestic intelligence' -- make it clear that the 'danger' is now being realized. The familiar program is to use the supposed imperatives of 'national security' to justify the imposition of social discipline by state police forces; the supposed danger of instant annihilation by Soviet missiles being cited to terrorize populations into accepting as legitimate the authority of rulers who attempt to suppress political dissent and resistance to work, whatever its form, in the name of 'keeping our borders safe.' A clear example of this is the Italian state's need to repress and criminalize all autonomous social movements in order to create a 'safe environment' for the installation of Cruise missiles, so that 'nuclear defense' neatly dovetails into the 'struggle against criminals and terrorists.' But as Thompson has taught us in his vivid descriptions of resistance to the exploitation of industrializing England, social discipline is labor discipline, and the first object of 'social order' is a tame workforce. The voices to be suppressed in the name of national 'security' are first of all those calling for abolition of exploitative institutions, redistribution of wealth, 'more money/ less work' -- and this most definately is a 'class issue.'

A second function of the social systems of war is to provide an unchallengeable basis for absorbing that same wealth, money and work to the point of making all workers totally dependent on their paychecks for survival -- the surest way of all to achieve 'labor discipline.' The threat of nuclear war, which the policies of our political leaders ensure will remain very real and salient, is used to render unquestionable and irresistable all expenditures, however large, made in the name of 'defense. The point of the policy of cold war is to make military expenditures appear as necessary and as matter of course as every family's expenditures on electricity, food, heat and shelter. Reagan's latest TV speech about the alleged crumbling of the anti-Soviet defenses is an excellent example of this P.R. program of frightening the US population into accepting his decimation of 'social programs.' His object is to absorb so much of the society's surplus that only a pittance is left for the programs which sustain workers independently of the wage -- and to do so, moreover, in the name of 'higher ends' which no one will challenge because to do so is to invite nuclear holocaust. Reagan has made the strategy crudely obvious by combining huge increases in weapons budgets with huge cuts in non-military spending. This too is a 'class issue': GM stockholders do not lose welfare or unemployment checks to pay for Pershing II missiles and B-1 bombers.

This list can go on much further, but it will be enough to cite one more function of the policy of nuclear war, easily overlooked because in a way it is the most fundamental of all. The industries producing nuclear weapons and their enormously sophisticated and expensive delivery systems are extremely efficient accumulators of surplus value produced elsewhere in the economy, given that their one client is the state and their payment is comprised of tax money. In this, defense industries are like the energy industries: they are high technology, capital-intensive industries, with relatively small labor forces (and these comprised largely of 'skilled' labor), hence are little subject to the depradations of dissatisfied workers. And their profits are enormous, again because of their special relationship to the state. They are, in effect, conduits through which the state transfers huge quantities of surplus value produced in other sectors of the economy into the hands of holding companies, multinational corporations, and banks which control and finance weapons development and production. Like the electric bill and the gas bill, everyone has to pay up, whatever the cost, so that raising the rates provides a sure way of extracting value from throughout the society. This is why the movement against nuclear war upsets Reagan's people so throughly. It is a direct attack on one of the most efficient instruments of accumulation post-war capitalism has yet been able to devise.