

Institution: University of Sheffield
Unit of Assessment: 28A - Modern Languages and Linguistics: Languages and Culture
Title of case study: Changing public opinion on atheism and Marxism through the work of Ernst Bloch and the Frankfurt School
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Research undertaken by Dr Peter Thompson at the University of Sheffield into the role of religion in society, and specifically focusing on atheism, Marxism, Ernst Bloch and the Frankfurt School, has led to new public interest in an atheist philosophy which goes beyond the “new atheist” paradigm. The work has attracted national media interest, and as a result of this, Thompson has become a regular contributor for <i>The Guardian</i>, with 34 columns in the ‘Comment is Free’ section on religious and philosophical matters, all derived directly from his recent research into atheism, attracting 9-10,000 comments which have been read by at least 75,000 individuals. Indicative of Thompson’s work are comments such as “<i>Thank-you [...] for introducing an ordinary, non-academic person like myself, to interesting concepts like 'reification' [...]. I will have to read your whole series of articles now. Although philosophy appears, to someone like me, to be complex and remote, you have managed to explain the concepts of the Frankfurt School in such a lucid and engaging way that I will now have to read more on this subject.</i>” (13 May 2013). Developing his research on Bloch and religion has also led to Thompson co-editing a book with Slavoj Žižek, whose role as a public intellectual further strengthens the reach of Thompson’s own research. Related to this work are further articles by Thompson in the <i>Church Times</i>, and a BBC Radio 3 documentary on atheist playwright Georg Büchner written and presented by Thompson (listening figure 100,000).</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Since coming to Sheffield in 1990, Prof. Peter Thompson has been researching post-war German politics and history, concentrating on the history of the workers’ movement and the Left. His research on east German opposition to the ruling Communist Party [R3] eventually combined with his long-standing interest in the history of ideas [R6] and the philosophy of religion led him to start working on the impact of the German Marxist philosopher of religion, Ernst Bloch [R1, R2, R4, R5]. Thompson’s key research findings to date include new insights into the role of atheism in the modern world. His research led him to work across disciplinary boundaries with scholars in divinity and theology at the University of Oxford, including the Very Revd Dr Jane Shaw who then invited Thompson to contribute to <i>The Guardian</i>, initially via a Face-to-Faith column in 2007, which led to further commissions. This sparked a cycle of research and public engagement, which included Thompson’s decision to establish the <i>Centre for Ernst Bloch Studies</i> at the University of Sheffield in 2007, which has become the leading centre outside Germany and attracts enquiries for information and requests for collaboration on Bloch studies from all parts of the world.</p> <p>To consolidate his research in these areas, Thompson was awarded a three-year £86,000 British Academy Research Development Award (BARDA) in 2008 on ‘Ernst Bloch and the Return of Religion’ which enabled him to build up substantial international contacts in modern German philosophy and Bloch studies. Since 2008, Thompson has given 20 academic papers on Ernst Bloch and related matters in Britain, Germany and the United States, and published 18 book chapters and articles in top-rated British, German and US publications. Thompson also provided an 11,000-word introduction to Ernst Bloch’s <i>Atheism in Christianity</i>, a republication in 2009 by Verso (NY and London) of a 1974 translation of <i>Atheismus im Christentum</i> [R2]. Under the auspices of the BARDA grant, Thompson organised two workshop/conferences in Sheffield in 2009 and 2010 related to Ernst Bloch and religion, which led to a collaborative book project with Slavoj Žižek [R1]. Several of the authors included gave papers at these conferences. This book contains 13 chapters by international Bloch experts and includes an introduction and a further chapter by Thompson as well as a foreword by Žižek. Žižek was previously largely unaware of the significance of Bloch’s work until his encounter with Thompson’s research, writing in the foreword that: “[Bloch] is one of the rare figures apropos of which we can say: fundamentally, with regard to</p>

what really matters, he was right, he remains our contemporary, he maybe belongs even more to our time than to his own."

More broadly, Thompson's research on the Frankfurt School, and specifically on Marx and Marxist philosophy [R6], has led to the publication of a series of eight articles for *The Guardian* in 2011 framed under the question 'Does Marx Still Matter?', subsequently republished as a discrete publication as a *Guardian Short* Kindle Book in 2013.

3. References to the research

- R1. Peter Thompson and Slavoj Žižek (eds) *The Privatization of Hope: Ernst Bloch and the Future of Utopia* Durham: Duke UP, Autumn 2013. This includes an introduction by Thompson, a foreword by Žižek as well as a further chapter by Thompson. Žižek is one of the foremost philosophers in the world today and Duke one of the top academic publishers. There have already been requests for translation rights before publication.
- R2. 'Ernst Bloch and the Quantum Mechanics of Hope'. *Introduction to a new edition of Ernst Bloch's Atheism in Christianity*, London and New York: Verso, 2009, pp. ix-xxx. ISBN 978-1-84467-394-0. 11,000-word invited introduction to one of Bloch's standard texts.
- R3. *The Crisis of the German Left. The PDS, Stalinism and the Global Economy*, Oxford and New York: Berghahn, 2005. ISBN 1-57181-543-0. The only book available on the ex-communist party written from a radical standpoint. 'Thompson's study presents a unique perspective on the PDS. [...] His take on the PDS and the history of the German left gives historians and political scientists a fresh perspective on these topics' (*German Studies Review* – No 1 rated international journal on German history and politics).
- R4. 'Bloch, Badiou, St Paul and the Ontology of Not Yet', in *New German Critique* 118, Summer 2013, pp 31-52. *New German Critique* is ranked as the No 2 international journal in German studies with a rejection rate of around 85%.
- R5. 'Der Mensch als Gattungswesen. Ernst Bloch und die Metaphysik der Offenheit', in *Metaphysik der Hoffnung: Ernst Bloch als Denker des Humanum*, edited by Susanne Hermann-Sinai and Henning Tegtmeier, Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2012, pp. 124-136. ISBN 978-3865836984. Again, a significant international publication with a publisher comparable to OUP
- R6. 'Progress, Reason and the End of History', in: *History of European Ideas* Vol. 18/3, 1994, 361-371, ISSN 0191-6599. At that time one of the top rated journal of international humanities

4. Details of the impact

As a direct result of Thompson's research on Bloch, Marxism and the Frankfurt School, he has become a regular media commentator on religious affairs from an atheist perspective. This started in 2007 with a 'Face to faith' column in *The Guardian* and then led to Thompson being commissioned to write an ongoing series of columns in that paper from 2009, with some 34 columns by July 2013 [S1]. These include two specialist 8-column series, the first on 'Karl Marx' (2011), and the second on 'The Frankfurt School' (2013). Following his initial *Guardian* contributions, Thompson was also invited to write a long article (3,000 words) for the *Church Times* which was published on Christmas Day 2010. These national press contributions have significantly heightened public engagement with atheism [S5], as is evidenced by the c.10,000 comments on Thompson's columns. To date, Thompson's *Guardian* columns [S1] have been read by at least 75,000 individual users; given the extent of the readership, it is difficult to define the exact type of beneficiary of Thompson's work on atheism, but they include international audiences [S6], with a particularly active US and Spanish cohort of readers contributing to the comments section. The international reach is also evidenced by the translation of Thompson's Marx series into Turkish [S2], and the republication of the columns on a Basque blogsite [S3], for example. Thompson's work has reached all age ranges from students to retired school-teachers, many of whom have

Impact case study (REF3b)

sent personal emails to Thompson, who responds both to private emails and to reader comments on the *Guardian* online forums, thereby actively engaging in public debate.

The major impact thus generated from Thompson's research has been on public debate about the nature of the relationship between atheism and religion from a Blochian standpoint which goes beyond the sterility of "New Atheism" and takes full cognisance of the importance of religious belief as a part of the human condition rather than seeing it as a delusion. This means that for an atheist like Bloch, taking religion seriously can more easily change public opinion on the topic of atheism. This is done via a range of modes of public and media engagement, both in print and online journalism and through podcasts/publications of public talks and national radio broadcasts.

From public talks to online journalism

For example in August 2009, Thompson was invited to contribute to a non-academic public art conference in Amsterdam, to discuss the role of Bloch's concept of a "concrete utopia" in artistic and cultural urbanism. The audience of 250 for this event was made up largely of city planners and cultural workers and Thompson's talk has been published subsequently in Jeanne van Heeswijk's artbook *The Blue House* (2013) [S4]. Similarly, in November 2009, and issuing from the Verso introduction [R2], Thompson was invited to give a paper on Bloch, Brecht and Benjamin at the public launch of the book *Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht: Story of a Friendship* by Erdmut Wizisla, the director of the Brecht and Benjamin archives in Berlin, at Birkbeck University of London (subsequently podcast online via Backdoor Broadcasting). The informal public response to this subsequently led Thompson to publish again on Benjamin, this time in relation to Bloch, in his 2013 *Guardian* column on the Frankfurt School. A reader comment from 29 April 2013 states that: "*I have learned a lot from this series [...]. The most important thing for me has been reading Benjamin and Bloch. [...]. Bloch opened up a really new line of approach to Marxist analysis*", demonstrating how Thompson's research and impact activities have informed the public about a key avenue of philosophical thought which influences their outlook.

From online journalism to national radio broadcast

Similarly, on the basis of Thompson's work on atheism, Marx, faith and authority in *The Guardian*, the BBC commissioned a 45-min Sunday feature for Radio 3 on the first German atheist playwright, Georg Büchner, which was broadcast in February and August 2011. Thompson wrote and presented the documentary, for which the listening figure was 100,000 on each occasion, demonstrating how Thompson's research has fed into a wider public debate about the cultural outputs which emerged from this philosophical school of thought [S7]. The invitation by the BBC to write the Büchner documentary happened alongside the invitation from *The Guardian* to write the Marx column series in 2011; a similar link-up with the BBC for a radio series based on the Frankfurt School columns is also underway.

Specifically, it is as a result of Thompson's interventions that Bloch is once again being recognised by scholars, independent philosophers and members of the public alike, as a thinker who has much to contribute to the debate on atheism and religion in the modern world [S8]. For example, an anonymous comment from a member of the public on Thompson's *Guardian* column stated the following: "*I wonder if the attraction of this extraordinary philosophy [of the Frankfurt School] has anything to do with the collapse of religious faith. [...] I have long wanted to study the theories and motivations of the Frankfurt school. [...] This has been a good introduction.*" [S1] (25 March 2013).

Besides his work derived specifically from Blochian thought, Thompson has also written more broadly on commemorations of the war for *The Guardian* (e.g. for Remembrance Sunday 2012) and in November 2012 he also took part as a speaker in a Sheffield Salon event on the Second World War attended by over 70 members of the public. As is evidenced, Thompson's impact activities thus range from one-off events, to long-term collaborations (e.g. with *The Guardian*), and have become an integral part of Thompson's research cycle since at least 2007.

Impact case study (REF3b)**5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

- S1. Thompson's Guardian articles and the extensive comments they generate can be found here: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/peter-thompson>
- S2. The Turkish translation is at: <http://www.yenidenatilim.com/?&Bid=806903>
- S3. The Basque edition is at: <http://basque.criticalstew.org/?p=6083#sthash.9snqml63.dpbs>
- S4. For Jeanne van Heeswijk's *The Blue House* (2013), see: http://www.thegreenbox.net/sites/default/files/TGB-Vorschau_201213_web.pdf and <http://www.artandeducation.net/announcement/the-blue-house-presents-international-symposium-open-call/>
- S5. The Religious Editor at *The Guardian* can corroborate the readership and number of comments/debate generated by Thompson's columns.
- S6. The European Editor of *The Guardian* can provide evidence of the reach of Thompson's columns.
- S7. A Producer at *BBC Radio 3* can corroborate audience figures for Thompson's documentary on Büchner's atheism.
- S8. Email from Dr Joachim Whaley, Cambridge University (personal email to Thompson) confirms how Thompson's column has contributed to his teaching curriculum.