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***JOHN THELWALL:***  
***HOW TO CHAMPION DEMOCRACY AGAINST REPRESSIVE REGIMES***  
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In May 2018, John Thelwall was honoured with an English Heritage blue plaque at 39-40 Bedford Place, London WC1. It was a well-deserved accolade to a valiant champion of democracy in repressive times. Yet the man identified as ‘political orator, writer and elocutionist’ has long been forgotten by mainstream history. And there’s the challenge. A community’s heritage is not just owned by the obvious power-brokers and ‘winners’ in their own eras. The fabric of the past is woven by everyone – including by those who championed radical changes but did not succeed.

John Thelwall (1764-1834) was one such visionary campaigner. He was a bold character, who threw himself energetically into everything he did. At various times, he was a published author, democracy campaigner, public orator,

political theorist, state prisoner on a charge of High Treason, small farmer in mid-Wales, novelist, poet, teacher of elocution, and political journalist. He was rarely despondent for long. Nonetheless, his main political quest was unsuccessful. The introduction of adult manhood suffrage was not achieved in Britain until well after his death. (And votes for women, mooted by a few visionaries in the 1790s, took even longer to realise).

While there is much of interest in all aspects of Thelwall's polymathic career, this discussion focuses upon his non-violent methods of championing democracy. It poses the question: how can dissidents, living under repressive regimes, press peaceably for changes to the entire system? (Unleashing a bloody revolution is not something that can be done to order – and anyway often proves counter-productive). The answers have ramifications for radical dissent in all eras of history. For example, that was the challenge faced by Nelson Mandela (1918-2013), when seeking to end Apartheid in South Africa. In his case, he eventually won and became a household name. But not all dissidents succeed.

An obvious first move for radicals is to find others to campaign with them. That's how John Thelwall began. He was not the founder of the London Corresponding Society in 1794 but, as an unsettled, middling-status young Londoner with radical views, he was soon drawn to participate. The LCS was organised to campaign for the adult male franchise. It drew support from middling tradesmen, respectable artisans, and radical professionals like Thelwall, who had some legal training. The LCS founder and secretary was Thomas Hardy (1752-1832), a boot-and shoe-maker. He and Thelwall became life-long friends and allies.

Yet the LCS struggled to recruit mass support, even though it was linked with a network of similar reform groups across Britain. Most ordinary people in the 1790s were too preoccupied with problems associated with warfare and

soaring food prices to be stirred to regular campaigning. It was true that, in a few large constituencies like Westminster and Norwich, the freeman franchise included voters from among the lower orders. They participated regularly, constituting a proto-democratic phalanx. Yet their roles seemed exceptional. It was simultaneously the era of the rotten boroughs, when many seats were controlled by oligarchic patrons. The government thus had strong support in parliament, which claimed to represent ‘the people’, albeit without a democratic franchise (as do various non-democratic regimes today). It was hard to generate sufficient external pressure to achieve reform. Nonetheless, the LCS was generating sufficient momentum to alarm the government, which sent spies to infiltrate and report on its meetings.

Thelwall quickly emerged as a leading orator and recruiter. His vitality, strong voice, and histrionic gifts allowed him to communicate effectively at outdoor meetings, where (of course) there was no sound amplification. No direct records survive of stump speeches from the era before sound-recording. But it’s clear that passionate, free-flowing oratory can be intensely compelling. That’s how, in the twentieth-century USA, a non-elected political outsider like Martin Luther King (1929-68) achieved his lasting impact. Not only can a great speech put into words what many people are thinking but it can also, by sheer eloquence, lift a cause onto a new plane of inspiration and hope.

Having heard John Thelwall lecturing in Norwich in 1796, one critical listener (a young lawyer) admired his arguments but complained about his delivery: ‘He raves like a mad Methodist Parson’. Thelwall seemed too noisy, too histrionic. Nonetheless, the comparison with the first Methodist preachers was revealing. The eighteenth-century emergence of this religious movement, initially within Anglicanism and then as a separate Dissenting Church, owed much to the influence of outdoors preaching by Wesley, Whitefield and a string of field ministers in their wake. But Thelwall did not have a public platform for

long. Nor was he able to recruit a phalanx of fellow orators. In 1795 the government under William Pitt the Younger banned large open-air protest meetings, under the Seditious Meetings Act.

What can an orator do, when deprived of his mass pulpit? John Thelwall took to travelling the country to give historical lectures, which lightly disguised his calls for reform. He also took up his pen. Books lacked the immediacy of oratory but reached potentially a much wider audience, especially as Britain's literacy rates by 1800 were historically high and still rising. In this context, one mighty trumpet-blast for reform came from Thomas Paine (1737-1809). His *Rights of Man* (1791) encapsulated its message in its terse title.

Joining the fray, John Thelwall revealed himself as a feisty political journalist. His most important manifesto was his *Rights of Nature* (1796), echoing the language of Paine. Thelwall argued that people's rights were innate, not for governments to control. What's more, all individuals should be freed from extreme want and given access to education. In the long run, he decided too that socio-economic change would change British politics. Thus Thelwall was confident that democracy would one day succeed:

Whatever presses men together, therefore [e.g. into towns or factories], though it may generate some vices, is favourable to the diffusion of knowledge, and ultimately promotive of human liberty. Hence every large workshop and manufactory is a sort of political society, which no act of parliament can silence, and no magistrate disperse.

It was well for him that Thelwall was an indomitable optimist. Another way for radicals to 'bear witness' is by enduring imprisonment for their views. He did not seek that outcome. Yet in 1794 he found himself, with a number of fellow radicals including Thomas Hardy, in prison on a charge of High Treason. If found guilty, the gruesome penalty was death by hanging, drawing and quartering. Nonetheless, Thelwall remained characteristically defiant. That tone

pervaded his *Poems Written in Close Confinement in the Tower and Newgate*, published in the following year.

Already, when first called before the Privy Council for cross-examination (with Prime Minister Pitt in attendance, no less), John Thelwall refused to be intimidated. The clerk's transcript of his interrogation reads almost comically, had the matter not been so serious. Thelwall confirmed his name and its spelling. But he then refused to answer any questions. And, as the Prime Minister Pitt spluttered '*What is it? What is it? What?*' Thelwall turned his back on the collected Privy Councillors and studied a picture on the wall.

A sensational outcome then followed, when the Treason Trials came to court. In November 1794, the first case ended with the acquittal of Thomas Hardy. There were popular celebrations in London. Pitt's government decided to change tack, by clamping down on mass meetings instead. So Thelwall's time in gaol, awaiting trial, was brief. Nonetheless, it indicated one way by which dissidents can 'bear witness'. Enduring harsh imprisonment without flinching takes stoicism and courage. But, if that experience is known to the wider world, it is a potent way of flying the flag for an alternative vision. (For that reason, the harshest tyrannies keep their political prisoners in secret.)

One of the twentieth-century's most famous prison testaments was that of Nelson Mandela, who was detained by the South African authorities from 1963-90. During those long years, he won an eventually accelerating tide of domestic and international support. Just over four years after his release, Mandela became the first President of a new South African democracy.

On the other hand, prison testament does not always succeed. In China, the democracy campaigner Liu Xiaobo (1955-2017) was arrested on charges of subversion in 2009 and remained in custody until his death. His gaining of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010 did not soften official attitudes. Nonetheless, Liu

Xiaobo continued indefatigably to publish from prison. And he defined his oppositional stance nobly: ‘The greatness of non-violent resistance is that, even when man is faced with tyranny, and the resulting suffering, he responds to hate with love, to prejudice with tolerance, to arrogance with humility, to humiliation with dignity, and to violence with reason’.

Confronted himself in 1797 with political failure, Thelwall tried a different tack. He withdrew to rural life, to live simply in search of cultural renewal. His fundamental views remained unchanged. Yet he realised that the cause needed long-term advocacy, not immediate action. He never sought a revolutionary uprising – and the bloody unfolding of the French Revolution had confirmed mainstream Britain in its condemnation of violent politics as too dangerous and too volatile – in short, simply too ‘French’.

Pragmatically, therefore, Thelwall purchased a small farm in a beautiful spot in mid-Wales and set up as a farmer. In this quest for ‘simplification’, Thelwall was influenced by his youthful friends, William Wordsworth and S.T. Coleridge. Unlike them, however, Thelwall not only lived in the countryside but between 1797 and 1800 farmed the land with his own hands. A townie with no agricultural training, he was assisted by his knowledgeable brother-in-law. ‘I dig – I cart dung & Ashes – I thresh in the Barn – I trench the meadows when the fertilizing rains are falling’, Thelwall explained, with a beginner’s enthusiasm, to his old ally Thomas Hardy in 1798. It was a great metamorphosis for the former political orator. Nonetheless, Thelwall continued to write, pouring out poems, plays, a novel, letters, and an autobiographical memoir.

Sadly for him, this project also foundered. The weather was constantly cold and wet, in what turned out to be three of the worst years of the eighteenth century from a farming point of view. And Thelwall’s literary output did not gain him the mass audience he ideally desired. He was a bracing writer and at

times a moving poet. However, he proved too much of an impatient activist to rise to the poetic heights of the meditative Wordsworth and Coleridge. To Thelwall's mortification, his volume entitled *Poems Chiefly Written in Retirement* (1801) was panned by literary critics; and its sales were poor. Thereafter, he became more cautious in what he published. But he still persevered – and there's no doubt that, had he lived in a much later era, he would have thrown himself enthusiastically into today's new social media.

Personally, Thelwall found that his country retreat turned sour. He was really a townee; and he had no Welsh roots. Thus his final words about his 'boorish' neighbours were some of the surliest that this generally cheerful man ever penned. He concluded that his 'experiment in uniting together the characters of the Farmer and the Poet' was 'ill-starred'. Nonetheless, Thelwall's retreat may be compared with other cases among defeated dissidents. Thus in Czechoslovakia after the failure of the Prague Spring in 1968, the liberal communist leader Alexander Dubček (1921-92) withdrew into obscurity. He lived near Bratislava and worked in the Forestry Service. Just over 20 years later, however, he was re-energised by Russia's weakening hold upon his country. At the start of the Velvet Revolution in 1989, Dubček appeared dramatically at the side of the new dissident leader Václav Havel, standing on a balcony overlooking Prague's Wenceslaus Square. The public applause was rapturous. And Dubček participated in the new democratic government, until his untimely death in 1992.

For John Thelwall, however, in very different circumstances, there was no second act in front-line radicalism. The democratic movement, weakening after 1795, was declared illegal in 1799 when the LCS was banned. Liberal supporters of reform, such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, became politically more conservative. They distanced themselves from Thelwall, with sniping

criticisms. (He remained silent in reply). And there was no international democratic movement to offer overseas support.

Instead, Thelwall put his head down and made a successful living as an elocutionist. He taught rhetoric and helped people with speech impediments: giving a voice to the silent. When in funds, he launched a new radical newspaper, *The Champion* (1818); and in the 1820s he lectured to working-class audiences in the new Mechanics' Institutes. Yet, even when the British democratic movement slowly revived, Thelwall did not do a Dubček and regain his old appeal. He seemed a figure from an earlier era – and even his old notoriety was fading. In fact, Thelwall lived to see the passing of the Great Reform Act in 1832. He wrote a jubilant letter to Hardy to celebrate. Yet full democracy, they both knew, was still to come.





Each dissident career has its own trajectory and context. Champions of non-violent change against repressive regimes have many options: from oratory and organisation to political journalism, prison testimony, a manifesto, tactical retreat, cultural politics, adult education, and sheer pertinacity. Boldly, doggedly, optimistically, John Thelwall tried them all.

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**Further reading:**

E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963; and many later edns) remains a classic. See also A. Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution* (1979); P.J. Corfield, 'Rhetoric, Radical Politics and Rainfall: John Thelwall in Breconshire, 1797-1800', *Brycheiniog*, 40 (2009), pp. 17-36, also posted on [www.penelopejcorfield.co.uk/Pdf14](http://www.penelopejcorfield.co.uk/Pdf14); and sympathetic literary appreciation in Judith Thompson, *John Thelwall in the Wordsworth Circle: The Silenced Partner* (2012).