

Special Issue: E.P. Thompson after Fifty Years

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E. P. Thompson, Politics and History: Writing Social History Fifty Years after *The Making of the English Working Class*

Abstract

These four articles revisit crucial concepts in the work of E.P. Thompson and the debates that follow him. Each looks forward to contemporary and future scholarship, and the real and potential relationship between historiography and social movements on the left. They reopen debates on moral economy, disputing how much of the working-class past is usable in the present. Particularly given the transformed nature of the state since the period of social transition in early modern England, this question seems urgent: can (arguably) backward-looking claims of traditional rights continue to serve to guide working-class resistance movements, given that they must invoke the powers of the modern state? Can ideas of class drawn from a period in which men were understood as workers and citizens, and women were not, be made useful in a different moment? Are there class formations possible under capitalism other than the bourgeois-proletarian antagonism to which we are accustomed? Do these challenges require a thorough rethinking of the relationship between such basic categories as law and political economy, class and gender? More recent social movements—indigenous, anticolonial, antiracist, feminist, and anti-war—might not have been recognized or countenanced by Thompson as “working class,” but might they be useful in conversation with the Thompsonian legacy of class analysis? Together, these papers push the boundaries of our inheritance from Thompson, and suggest ways in which new social and political contexts—new states, new movements, and a drastically changed global economy—can reanimate the political force of Thompson’s work.

When E. P. Thompson published *The Making of the English Working Class* in 1963, the book had evolved from fairly rote assignment for an undergraduate textbook on the British labor movement into what Eric Hobsbawm described as an “erupting historical volcano of 848 pages.”¹ Surely, *The Making* has proved to be a work of geological proportions, opening an expansive interpretative terrain on which labor, social, gender, and cultural history have developed in the past fifty years. As both an inspiration and foil for critique, *The Making* has retained a central place in historiographical debates and the development of social history.

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When we organized “The Global E. P. Thompson” conference through Harvard’s Program on the Study of Capitalism in October, 2013, we hoped to both survey this landscape across the world and to explore the continuing relevance of Thompson’s ideas and arguments for present research. Additionally, we wanted to reexamine and amplify central themes in Thompson’s work—class formation, exploitation, and the experiences, political traditions, and agency of working class people—and to insert them into the rapidly expanding “new” history of capitalism.² If this newly demarcated subfield is to have any interpretive or political vitality, it must draw in and develop the strengths of social and labor history, a tradition fundamentally formed by Thompson’s *The Making*.

Thompson seems an unlikely character to play such a defining role in the development of academic history in general, and the subfields of social and labor history in particular. He was never fully within the profession, and only briefly held formal academic posts. His commitments and sensibilities were forged in the great struggles of the Popular Front era, when he joined the Communist Party of Great Britain and participated actively in the Party Writers Group, as a poet first of all, before also joining the Historians Group, where he worked with Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, John Saville and many others. Thompson’s first book on the English romantic and revolutionary William Morris was written within this context, and reflected the Historians Group collective efforts to “seek out a popular revolutionary tradition,” as well as Thompson’s peculiar sensitivity for the cultural, creative, and artistic dimensions of the socialist struggle. Thompson left the Communist Party in 1956 after Khrushchev’s secret speech and the Soviet invasion of Hungary; he later revised his book on William Morris to rid it of “Stalinist pieties.” He would write that he “commenced to reason” in this year, and in the late fifties and early sixties Thompson was an active participant in the British New Left, writing extensively for *The New Reasoner*, and exploring and defending in these political writings a commitment to socialist humanism. His vision of socialist humanism was a critique of both the crude Stalinist materialism, as well as the mainstream Labour Party economism of the 1950s, which suggested that the increasing affluence of the British working class impoverished the possibility of class politics and socialist transformation.³

Honed in the political debates of the British New Left, this double-edged critique would be fully elaborated in *The Making*. With a sweeping narrative arc that brought to life the aspirations, struggles, and ideas of artisan radicals, English Jacobins, Luddite machine breakers, and early trade unionists, Thompson assaulted determinist base-superstructure models in which the rise of industry and the factory mechanically and necessarily “produced” the working class. In *The Making*, on the other hand, class was a social, cultural, and historical process, a contingent and above all political happening. At the same time, Thompson fiercely rejected the functionalist economism of modernization theorists, who celebrated the gradual and peaceful growth of British capitalist democracy. Thompson aimed to rescue early working-class protest movements “from the enormous condescension of posterity,” to show how workers’ struggles and aspirations arose out of the context of their own times and engaged the dramatic economic and political transformations they faced—often with significant impact. Against complacent visions of progress that were deeply embedded both in some strands of Marxism and modernization theory, *The Making* demonstrates that it was through desperate and uneven struggles that the masses managed to gradually

seize and defend political, civic and juridical rights from a grasping and violent elite. This vision of class formation and social struggle resonated widely beyond the bounds of the north of England, the place where Thompson focused most of his research. Indeed, it had a tremendous impact on the historiography of such distant places as South Africa and Argentina, Japan and Turkey.⁴

In the United States as well, the arrival of *The Making* marked an important turning point, influencing an entire generation of historians. Herbert Gutman's work on culture and working class communities in the nineteenth century drew inspiration from Thompson with particular enthusiasm, and David Montgomery (after collaborating with Thompson in establishing the Centre for Social History at Warwick), produced one of the most important books in the labor history of the United States, a detailed and unrelentingly political study of the labor process on the shop-floor.⁵ But the influence and inspiration of *The Making* went far beyond this, and it would be impossible to adequately catalog its extent in the space available here.⁶ Despite working on different regions, time periods, and social formations, it was a shared sense of participation in a tradition inspired by Thompson that brought the organizers of the "Global E. P. Thompson" conference together, and this inspired us to bring together the papers that will follow.⁷

For this issue we have collected four of the conference's articles. They convey the creativity, breadth, and vitality of work that both draws inspiration from Thompson's work and moves beyond it. *The Making* has been widely and justly critiqued for its many failures, foremost among them the absence of an analysis of gender within clearly patriarchal forms of culture and politics, the invisibility of the British empire in general and slavery in particular, and a fairly schematic and reductionist conception of the state and the British elite.⁸ Yet these shortcomings should not detract from the fact that even fifty years after its publication *The Making* is still a font of inspiration. At the "Global E. P. Thompson" conference, more than twenty authors examined *The Making's* crucial concepts and traced the ensuing debates.

In the following articles the authors revisit crucial concepts in the work of E.P. Thompson and the debates that follow him. Each looks forward to contemporary and future scholarship, and the real and potential relationship between historiography and social movements on the left. Each intersects with major questions left open by the work of E.P. Thompson and the scholarly disputes that followed in the wake of *The Making*. These articles reopen debates on moral economy, disputing how much of the working-class past is usable in the present. Particularly given the transformed nature of the state since the period of social transition in early modern England, this question seems urgent: can (arguably) backward-looking claims of traditional rights continue to serve to guide working-class resistance movements, given that they must invoke the powers of the modern state? Can ideas of class drawn from a period in which men were understood as workers and citizens, and women were not, be made useful in a different moment? Are there class formations possible under capitalism other than the bourgeois-proletarian antagonism to which we are accustomed? Do these challenges require a thorough rethinking of the relationship between such basic categories as law and political economy, class and gender? A full assessment of the limits and possibilities of Thompsonian history depends on grappling with the questions raised in what follows, among many others. Together, these articles push the boundaries of Thompson's work, and suggest ways in which the analysis

of new social and political contexts—new states, new movements, and a drastically changed global economy—can reanimate the political force of *The Making*.

In some parts of the world, and especially in the United States, the watchword of Thompsonian scholarship, “agency,” was so prolific in the social history of the 1960s and 1970s exactly because the frustrated desire for a political agent had become so profound amidst the postwar defeat of the left. This connection—between working class agency and subsequent defeat in one age and another—needs no symptomatic reading to unearth; Thompson made it explicit. “The greater part of the world today is still undergoing problems of industrialization, and of the formation of democratic institutions, analogous in many ways to our own experience during the Industrial Revolution. Causes which were lost in England might, in Asia or Africa, yet be won.” As this hope for a second round of working-class struggles in newly industrializing parts of the world suggests, Thompson’s work bore the mark of the modernization theorists he aimed to critique. The fundamental claim of Thompson’s work was that the process of industrialization and proletarianization presented a political opportunity to the working class, which it had indeed tried to seize, assuming a modern class-conscious form and altering the shape of its society even in defeat. Traces clearly remained here of a view of progressive historical stages, despite Thompson’s attempt to rid himself of such a cast of mind. It was at this point that much of the criticism of Thompsonian social history diverged from the main stream he had set in motion. For the attempt to rid history of a mechanistic understanding of class formation, critics claimed, he seemed to retain a fairly predictable view of who might speak for the working class, of the politics through which the working class might yet make itself heard, and of the circumstances under which it might do so.

The papers in this collection, therefore, emerge from the points in the social history tradition obscured by the lingering traces of a more orthodox (or, perhaps, liberal) view of modernization and class formation. In a sense, they round out Thompson’s project, for he was limited by his own historical subjectivity in his ability to view working-class political agency as non-mechanistically as he wished. In the articles which follow we see the operation of Thompsonian class formation as a process extending beyond the contest between new proletarians with long memories on the one hand, and the emergent bourgeoisie on the other. Institutional grounds of struggle appear here beyond the young liberal state of Thompson’s writing: states whose concessions to popular demands had little to do with traditional norms, and states where liberal traditions have worn away in favor of renewed coercive mechanisms. In these articles we see political subjects appear who would be unrecognizable within the bounds of the class conflicts of early industrial England: politically decisive middle classes, and left-wing movements animated by gender and geopolitics.

The promise of these studies is not only in the specific cases they describe, but in how they allow critical reflection on Thompson himself and his broader legacy. He once wrote that the working and ruling classes in capitalism have no particularly necessary form of appearance; we ought not allow their shape in the time of Marx’s writing to freeze in our minds as the only possible formation of classes in capitalist society. “Class, as it eventuated within nineteenth-century industrial capitalist societies, and as it then left its imprint upon the heuristic category of class, has in fact no claim to universality. Class in that sense is no more than a special case of the historical formations which arise out of class struggle.”⁹

Similarly, a historiography inspired by Thompson and concerned with class formation and conflict cannot be fixed in the moments that gave it initial fuel—whether the early nineteenth century or the age of the Popular Front. The crucial move in Thompsonian social history was to understand that classes, in conflict, were constantly reconstituting themselves in the multiple arenas of politics and law, culture and daily life, and economy and production. It is by recognizing the further processes of reconstitution that have occurred across the twentieth century, and the inevitability of this process, that we see the spirit that is still living and moving within the tradition of social history.

Endnotes

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1. Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth Century Life* (New York: Pantheon, 2003), 214.
2. See the recent interchange, Sven Beckert et al., "The History of Capitalism," *Journal of American History* 101:2 (2014), 503–536.
3. Madeleine Davis, "Edward Thompson's Ethics and Activism 1956-1963: Reflections on the Political Formation of *The Making of the English Working Class*," *Contemporary British History* 28:4 (2014).
4. Papers tracing the reception of Thompson in a global context presented at the "Global E. P. Thompson" conference included Jonathan Hyslop, "The Practice and Politics of Thompsonian Social History in South Africa, from the 1970s to the Present," Y. Doğan Çetinkaya, "E. P. Thompson in the 'Orient': His Belated Impact on Young Scholars of Turkey during the 1990's," Lucas Martín Poy Piñeiro, "The Making of Labor History: Tracing the Influence of E. P. Thompson in Argentina," and Hideo Ichihashi, "E. P. Thompson and Japanese Left Wing Intellectuals: Why Wasn't His Major Work Translated for 40 Years?"
5. David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (New York, 1980). The work of Herbert Gutman also marks a crucial influence of Thompson on American historiography. See in particular his *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York, 1976).
6. For only a brief sense of the geographical and thematic range of Thompson's influence, see John Womack, Jr., *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (New York, 1970); Richard Sandbrook and Robin Cohen, eds., *The Development of an African Working Class: Studies in Class Formation and Action* (Toronto, 1975); James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven, 1976); Joan W. Scott, *The Glassworkers of Carmaux: French Craftsmen and Political Action in a Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge, MA, 1980); Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class* (New York, 1984); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (Urbana, IL, 1987); Rajnarayan Chandravarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940* (Cambridge, 1994); Emilia Viotta da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (New York, 1994).
7. Andrew Gordon, *The Evolution of Labor Relations in Japan: Heavy Industry, 1853–1955* (Cambridge, MA, 1988); Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Rise of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850–1896* (New York, 2001); Rudi Batzell, "Free Labour,

Capitalism, and the Anti-Slavery Origins of Chinese Exclusion in California in the 1870s," *Past and Present* 225:1 (2014), 143–186.

8. For an overview of criticisms of Thompson, see Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, *The Future of Class in History: What's Left of the Social?* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2007). Other major critics have included Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism* (London: Verso, 1980); Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, 1983); Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working-Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1984); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890–1940* (Princeton, 1989); Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17:4 (1991), 773–797; William Sewell, "Toward a Post-Materialist Rhetoric for Labor History," in Lenard R. Berlanstein, ed., *Rethinking Labor History: Essays on Discourse and Class Analysis* (Urbana, IL, 1993), 15–38; Fredrick Cooper, "Work, Class, and Empire: An African Historian's Retrospective on E.P. Thompson," *Social History* 20:2 (1995), 235–241; Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley, 1995); Robert Gregg, "Class, Culture, and Empire: E.P. Thompson and the Making of Social History," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 11.4 (1998), 419–460; Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (Chicago, 1987).

9. E.P. Thompson, "Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?" *Social History* 3 (1978), 150.