

The Privilege of History

Sean Cadigan

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IN 1963, VICTOR GOLLANCZ, the British leftist press, published E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. Most readers are likely more familiar with the revised edition published by Penguin's Pelican division in 1968¹, and those of my vintage are most likely to have the 1980 edition, with its new Preface. 1980 was the year in which I began undergraduate studies at Memorial University. Within a few years, Greg Kealey had arrived, bringing his enthusiasm for the social history associated with Thompson and the many other great historians of the left who were transforming our understanding of Anglo-American history. *The Making*, for students interested in social history, became immediately influential for a number of reasons. Thompson's prose, sparkling with clarity and vigour, made the book a pleasure to read. More important, the democratization and empowering implications of his emphasis on agency in class relations was a breath of fresh air to students otherwise exposed to stodgy, older forms of political and economic history. As well, the influence of Thompson was obviously coursing through the pages of the influential journals of social history, and we were proud that one of these, what was then called *Labour/Le Travailleur*, had found its home at Memorial.

On the 50th anniversary of the first edition of *The Making*, it is fitting to think about the many contributions of Thompson's text. It has inspired a huge volume of work, which has in turned resulted in an even greater volume of criticism. My purpose is not to try to comment on all of this, but rather to point out essential lessons I learned through my reading of Thompson. The elements of these lessons are embedded in the key concepts of the books' title: "making," "English," and "class." In bringing this together, Thompson advanced an argument for the privileged place of history in a politically engaged pursuit of knowledge.

The most important part of Thompson's title is "*class*," the working class in particular. It is difficult to imagine that anyone would be unfamiliar with Thompson's Marxist roots, but his emphasis on class may not be simply explained as an ideological preference. Rather, it was a choice required by the ubiquity of the experience of class. Common to every form of society has been the need to produce. What must be produced to ensure a particular society's reproduction over time varies considerably as did the social relations arising from access to the means of production. The obviousness of productive relations, however, was problematic because of the temptation to explain history deterministically as arising from particular structures of production. Thompson chose to emphasize the importance of the specific social

1. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth 1968), and all subsequent page references in the text are taken from this edition.

experiences of class relationships as “embodied in tradition, value-systems, ideas and institutional forms.” At the moment when people became aware of their common experiences in relation to those of others we could see the beginning of class consciousness. While historians could perhaps see a *logic* in how similar experiences could draw people together in a class relationship, this could not be determined as following “any law.” (10) The struggles of common experiences constituted the motor of history as people pushed against the inequalities and concomitant injustices of their relationships.

In 1963, Thompson chose to emphasize the “agency of working people, the degree to which they contributed by conscious efforts to the making of history” (13) as the defining element of a historical dynamic. Consideration of the agency of working people revealed that the actions of the powerful and the privileged were less causes of change and more consequences of the struggles of the exploited. In the specific case of England, in the period from the 1790s through the 1830s, craftspeople and artisans drew on deep-rooted notions of the rights of freeborn Englishmen and their entitlement to popular forms of justice to resist the more exploitative and regimented forms of production associated with the Industrial Revolution. The French revolutionary era fostered newer radical ideas. At the same time, the bourgeoisie and the gentry played on the ideology of loyalty and the instruments of the wartime state to intensify the suppression of opposition already under way through policing of such developments as the Luddite resistance to the transformation of rural weaving. While the state could be repressive, the bourgeois responses to working-class consciousness were more subtle and cultural, with Methodism being a case in point. While artisans turned to dissenting religion as part of a broader opposition to industrial-capitalist development, Methodism was also open to the prophets and practitioners of its work discipline. Despite such opposition, working-class consciousness had become, by 1830, a permanent, if not dominant, part of English life.

The contradictory processes of dissent and discipline that are so evident in Thompson’s treatment of Methodism are one example of the rich historical texturing that arose from his emphasis on the historical process of unfolding experience. It is impossible not to appreciate the celebratory tone of Thompson’s discovery of the richness of the developing working class; it rings clear in one of his most famous passages: “I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the “obsolete” hand-loom weaver, the “utopian” artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity.” (13)

However, any serious reading of *The Making* reveals that Thompson was never guilty of studying only working people. The book is as much a treatment of the persistence of the gentry and the bourgeoisie in resistance to the new consciousness of class, the hegemonic process of which became a more direct object of enquiry in his later work, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* (1975). Thompson did not engage in “neglect or outright denial

of bourgeois class agency," a criticism occasionally offered by later scholars.² During the 1950s and early 1960s, what passed for English social history was redolent with the elitist parliamentary prosopographies of Lewis Namier. Thompson could hardly have advanced the importance of working-class agency by offering alternative studies of the emerging English bourgeoisie. Further, Thompson did not argue that the working class had appeared in full form by 1830; the working class was not made, but rather had become recognizable in its own making at the outset of a process that Thompson had originally planned to study as being at work from the 1790s through the early 1920s.

"*Making*," as is pointed out in the famous "Preface" to Thompson's book, is critically important in understanding class. Class could not be perceived except through the historical observation of long processes of unfolding relationships. Time and again, Thompson emphasizes that classes do not and did not exist as things, except in the historical act of imagination. The articulation of historical interpretation was always a risky business, because it demands that we treat class momentarily as if "it" actually was, when in fact, at any given point, "there are no classes but simply a multitude of individuals with a multitude of experiences." The only way historians are able to interpret class is by researching people's behaviour and thoughts over very long periods, observing the "patterns in their relationships, their ideas, and their institutions." In such observations, historians had to be conscious that they did not define class, but rather that class was "defined by men³ as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition." (10)

"*English*" was the element that made possible the long process of observation. Local context and the specificity of historical experience were important to Thompson. In part, Thompson embraced a national framework for historical enquiry because of his emphasis on the cultural dynamics of social relations. He apologized to those interested in the Scottish or Welsh experience of class, stating that he had "neglected these histories, not out of chauvinism, but out of respect. It is because class is a cultural as much as an economic formation that I have been cautious as to generalizing beyond English experience." (13-14) Thompson did not hesitate to consider ethnicity, but did so in the context of trying to understand the peoples enmeshed in the class relationships unfolding in the English case, including the Irish working in English industries.

A superficial reading of Thompson's work might suggest a nationalist chauvinism, and such a prejudice seemed to colour Thompson's later depiction

2. For example, see Theodore Koditschek, *Class Formation and Urban Industrial Society: Bradford, 1750-1850* (Cambridge 1990), 11.

3. There is no doubt that the language used by Thompson carried heavily gendered assumptions, for which he has been amply criticized. See, among other commentaries, Joan Scott, "Women in *The Making of the English Working Class*," in Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York 1988), 68-90.

of the influence of French structuralism on British Marxism as a plague of locusts descending on the English countryside to strip bare “every green blade of human aspiration.”⁴ One of Thompson’s critics, the British sociologist Paul Hirst, dismissed Thompson’s locust imagery as an example of his “metaphorics of xenophobia.” However, the key to understanding Thompson’s intent is his use of the word “respect” in defending his national approach to the study of class. Perhaps more than anything else, Thompson’s work was a reaction against the impositions and inhumanity of structuralist theories of Marxism, most of which he dismissed as Stalinism. *The Making* rests on the contention that there were no laws or patterns of class development flowing outside of the complex currents of history. The best we might hope for was to glimpse aspects of class relationships through a dialectical interrogation of interpretation and evidence in very specific cases, always being sensitive to the proposition that “consciousness of class arises in the same way in different times and places, but never in just the same way.” (10)

Hirst argued that Thompson’s embrace of a mythic national British culture was an *a priori* contradiction of the working-class historian’s insistence on the privileged place of evidence in historical interpretation – what Hirst called “the classic historian’s prioritisation of documents.”⁵ This is too modest a dismissal. Thompson was not prioritizing documents, but rather privileging the discipline of history in testing the adequacy of theories of class derived from other contexts. For Thompson, the answer to the classic Marxist question of what is to be done about the inequalities and injustices of class must always be a historical one. Any attempt to divine a way forward in one particular context through ideas derived from other contexts was an imposition of will rather than history, and out of such impositions the potential for authoritarianism always existed. The duty of the discipline of history, Thompson later explained, was to resist the reduction of human experience to “static, a-historical” categories by returning to Marx’s “one supreme methodological priority ... to destroy unhistorical theory-mongering of this kind.”⁶ Although hinting that Thompson had allowed chauvinism rather than evidence to drive his interpretations, Hirst’s main argument was that Thompson was epistemologically impoverished by underestimating the extent to which his particular historical materialist understanding of history was derived from a theoretical understanding of the process of history itself.

There are two ways to respond to this proposition. The first is that, while Thompson offered a theory of how history should work as a discipline, he did so by reaction to an evidentially obvious and immediate example of the

4. E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York 1978), 166–7.

5. Paul Q. Hirst, “The Necessity of Theory – A Critique of E. P. Thompson’s *The Poverty of Theory*,” in Hirst, *Marxism and Historical Writing* (London and New York 1985), 59, 79.

6. Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, 46.

problem of the imposition of a unitary structural theory on complex and differentiated societies: the Stalinist regimes of the 1950s and early 1960s.

The second, and more important, is that Thompson was very conscious of his own theory of historical methodology, calling it one of "provisional and approximate knowledge." Every act of interpretation was partially a theoretical exercise, but properly restrained by a commitment to understanding that all such interpretations were tentative hypotheses that must be continually subject to evidence-based interrogation. Thompson was not rejecting the importance of theoretical work; he was accepting that theoretical insight rested on approximates of history. Such approximations had to be provisional and contingent upon further investigation.⁷ Historical knowledge existed not to oppose theory, but to make it relevant to local contexts within the creative tension of a dialectical process; it was the historical investigation of the English working class that would reveal whether or not particular Marxist theories, especially those derived from other national contexts, might be suitable for understanding what was to be done in the English case. Thompson's emphasis on the privileged position of history as a discipline based on the dialectic between theory and evidence may not be dismissed as a "conflation of theory with history."⁸

The later polemical exchanges Thompson participated in made it seem as if he was making demands of philosophers and sociologists alone. However, *The Making* demanded more of historians. In its pages, Thompson challenged historians to transcend descriptive empiricism in their efforts to understand the highly subjective nature of experience; he regarded the failure of "historical imagination" characteristic of much academic history as "daunting." (932) Thompson drew his evidence from government records, archival manuscript collections, and the newspapers of the day, and he developed a systematic approach for using these sources. He later described six essential features in interrogating evidence: establishing the credentials of a source (what it was, who produced it at what time and place, and for what purpose); what values might be borne by the source's nature; examining whether our analytical procedures limited our ideological intrusions on apparently randomly generated sources such as censuses; respecting the linear chronologies by which sources were generated; laterally linking sources to others developing at the same time; and considering whether the evidence potentially supported a more structural argument.⁹ The obligation of historians was not only to constantly revisit the theoretical propositions of their work by further historical research, but by debate with each other. In *The Making*, Thompson openly advocated a polemical history in which vigorous debates about the meaning of evidence rather

7. Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, 46–7.

8. Koditschek, *Class Formation*, 7.

9. Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*.

than about ideological preferences served as the crucible in which better understandings of our histories and possible futures might be forged.

The essential message of *The Making* was that a deep understanding of the past was necessary to chart a future course for society. Thompson clearly felt that such an understanding would reveal the central role of class relations as the driving force of history. His mistrust of the latent authoritarianism embedded in structural theoretical work meant that Thompson was not inclined towards the sweeping syntheses of the history of capitalism that other historians, most notably Eric Hobsbawm, produced. Thompson's later work, most notably the *Poverty of Theory*, revealed that he was conscious of the importance of theory, but only in constant engagement with research about the past. He would have had little patience with sophistries about the irony of offering a theory about the relationship between theory and evidence. For Thompson, engagement was argument. The important lesson I learned from *The Making of the English Working Class* was that history was not simply important – it was indispensable to building a better tomorrow.

