

Comrade Thompson and Saint Foucault

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Comrade Thompson and Saint Foucault

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THERE'S THIS STORY GOING AROUND; perhaps you've heard it. Long ago, there was a man named Edward Palmer Thompson who wrote a book called *The Making of the English Working Class*. His unorthodox assemblage of Marxist and Romantic concerns and his passionate advocacy of socialist humanism won him many followers. But despite the wide embrace of Thompsonian methods of practicing history, including the practice of thinking about practicing history, his politics marked him as a man stuck in the nineteenth century. Then came Foucault, who washed away the shallow traces of humanism and Marxism both with a single book before stunning the world with a series of provocative studies of the penitentiary, of sexuality, and of the will to know at the heart of the human sciences.

Like all stories told in our late capitalist world, this one has an audience, even if, as with all others, a portion of its audience is already bored with it. In the Canadian context, its circulation is likely most associated with Mariana Valverde, whose regional variant portrays Canadian historians as hesitant about, if not afraid of, capital-t Theory because of Thompsonian polemics, until a brave few took up the Foucauldian call in the 1990s.¹ Valverde translates a selective set of reading habits of an equally selective post-Fordist academic generation, fashioned according to the expansion and contraction of job markets, administrative changes in the measurement of cultural capital, and the transformation of the technological forms of knowledge-circulation, into a historicist account of stage-by-stage progress. It recommends (if not impels) Canadians to adopt a fully mediated reading strategy that keeps us at a careful distance from the original texts. We are to approach Thompson and Foucault only through an already existing national experience, a pre-digested canon of our very own.

The diminishing of experience entailed by this approach is truly unfortunate, given that *The Making* initially appeared during what were certainly interesting times. *Beyond a Boundary*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, *The Feminine Mystique*, *The Fire Next Time*, *One-Dimensional Man*, *The Raw and the Cooked*, *The American Way of Death*, *Understanding Media*, *The Virtues of Selfishness*, and the first edition of *Quotations from Chairman Mao*: surfacing in the midst of this greatness, that *The Making* received the audience it did should in retrospect be considered a significant feat.

1. Mariana Valverde, "Some Remarks on the Rise and Fall of Discourse Analysis," *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, 33 (May 2000), 59–78; "Introduction to the 2008 Edition," in Valverde, *The Age of Light, Soap and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885–1925* (Toronto 2008), 3–14.

For several years, I taught a seminar course on Thompson, Foucault, and their critics. After a reading of David Halperin's *Saint Foucault*, a brilliantly conceived act of Foucauldian criticism reminiscent of Foucault's polemical responses to Derrida, it struck me that the world was unlikely to ever see the equivalent of *Saint Thompson*, an equally Foucauldian account of the technologies of the self that made *The Making*. As I began to quickly work through the detail, I realized that I had scribbled biographical notes about Thompson and Foucault, creating a single chronology. Not antipodes but twins: this became my provisional argument. Eventually, I crafted a course that moved chronologically through their published works, stopping occasionally to jump forward in time and consider prominent examples of criticism. I cannot help but experience the move from Morris to madness to *The Making* to *The Birth* as a dizzying dialectic that opens up myriad possibilities in historical interpretation and in narrative form, even while closing off others. So too does the process of working through *Discipline and Punish*, *Whigs and Hunters*, and *The History of Sexuality*, as well as a handful of articles, especially "The Crime of Anonymity," and Foucault's lectures on historical knowledge and biopower. In terms of the biographical, the differences between these sets of readings underline the extent to which both men continually revised and discarded concepts and arguments of particular relevance to historical research. And this simple chronological reading demands recognition that both men cycled through the Apollonian and the Dionysian in ways that belie any straightforward narrative of conceptual progress. This realist method of accumulating knowledge thus comes with its own immanent critique, exposing proper names as inadequate containers for the methods and analysis that results from historically-oriented projects.²

Finally, such a method affords us the opportunity to reconnect with the energies still to be found in modernist forms of narrative experimentation. We can build our own Benjaminian bricolages, cutting and pasting together passages in order to foster serious discussion of why the Anarchistic-Romantic Foucault-Thompson is greatly preferable to the Reformist-Technocratic Thompson-Foucault. Or is it the other way around? Either way, there remain paths to freeing Thompson and *The Making* from the open air prison of scholarly contempt that contains his work (and his life, for that matter).

Typically, the final act in Thompson's story takes place in 1978, with the publication of "The Poverty of Theory: or An Orrery of Errors" and the 1979 History Workshop conference. The global cathexis invested in Thompson's polemical interventions of the end of the 1970s is nowadays much thinner on the ground. I imagine that academics under fifty years of age are now more likely to associate this period with Foucault's disastrous interventions in European discussions of the Iranian revolution than with Thompson's

2. Theodor Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," in *Prisms*, Trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Massachusetts 1967), 17–34.

musings on Althusserian theoretical practice, and I can't help but wonder if this is how it should be. While most criticisms focus on Foucault's willingness to set aside the political convictions expressed in his work on prisons, sexuality and popular justice in evaluating the Iranian revolutionary movement, equally troubling is the (related) assertion that this movement "constitutes a perfectly unified collective will."³ This position should at the very least give us pause.

"Shared and even consciousness": this phrase has become a common reference in much of the academic critique of Thompson since used by Sally Alexander in her 1984 article, "Women, Class and Sexual Differences in the 1830s and 1840s."⁴ Since the pioneering work of Joan Scott, historians have acculturated themselves to the belief that Foucault opened up a path leading away from monolithic representations of class consciousness or any other formation. Yet, nothing in the Foucauldian toolkit circa 1978 prevented him from seeing in Iran a uniform social movement constructed wholly outside of state administrative machinery and wholly without any concept of leadership, let alone leaders. And while his use of "will" rather than consciousness speaks to a postmodern conception of the subject, a "shared and even will" is hardly an improvement. At a time when Thompson found he could no longer believe in a singular "Marxist tradition," let alone a singular Left, Foucault offered a portrait of a revolutionary movement more monolithic than anything Thompson ever committed to paper.

As in the original, "shared and even consciousness" is most often invoked as a critique of Thompson's gendered understanding of class. But while the general terms of the argument need be embraced – *The Making* contains a good deal of material on patriarchal social relations broadly conceived, but fails to make much of it – it remains difficult to find a "shared and even consciousness" in its pages. The final chapter, "Class Consciousness," brings together a host of disparate elements that were themselves fragmented. Even if we reduced this chapter's patchwork quilt to two elements, Cobbett and Owen, we'd still lack uniformity, since Thompson makes clear that he sees neither as possessing a "shared and even consciousness" of their own!

More to the point, critics of Thompsonian practice usually fail to move beyond Thompson as the practitioner. Nothing about Thompson's own failures negates the fact that we've had a full blown socialist feminist theorisation of the Thompsonian position for decades now: Raewyn Connell's *Gender and Power*. I don't mean to dismiss the substantial legacy of historical scholarship produced under the aegis of socialist feminism, but rather to draw attention

3. Foucault's writings and interviews have been collected in Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson, eds., *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (Chicago 2005). The quotation is from November 1978's "The Mythical Leader of the Iranian Revolt," at 221.

4. See *History Workshop* 17 (Spring 1984), 125–149, quote at 131.

to the specific genealogy of Connell's intellectual formation. Connell's critique of Althusserianism in its French and British varieties, including the influential works of "cultural studies" associated with the Birmingham School, unpacked and unmade the key assumptions of structuralism. In Connell's hands, both role theory and arguments about the reproduction of class relations were dispatched with much the same force and tone employed by Thompson. And like that of Thompson, much of Connell's analysis can be seen as a corrective to Foucault's reworking of structuralist terminology with the "dispositif" or apparatus. Consider the following, published in August 1979:

This 'doing' of class is impossible to formulate precisely as the 'reproduction' of a relationship. Bourdieu is half-way there with his characterisation of reproduced practice as 'invention within limits', an observation characteristically sharp and, within its own limits, completely justified. But it needs to be taken outside the world of the ethnographic present and the pre-existent power structure, back to the real world where the actions people improvise occur in real historical time, on such-and-such occasion in year *x* and place *y*. Historical time itself forbids an identity between the practice (and the structure being constructed by it) of the 6th August and that of the 5th. The point holds even for the most repetitive job in the most tightly-controlled cannery, where the boredom itself seems to prove reproduction theory true. Each day does not come out of the same mould, it comes out of the day before. And if nothing else has happened, another batch of fish is in the can, the balance-sheet totals of Amalgamated Octopuses have crept up again, everyone is a bit more experienced, the working class has had another strategic defeat, and the workers and their bosses are one day nearer to dying.

The 'reproduction of social relations' is a chimera. In all strictness, it never occurs; it cannot occur. We cannot treat social structure as something persisting in its identity behind the backs of mortal people, who are inserted into their places by a cosmic cannery called Reproduction. And it is senseless to try to rescue the concept by loosening 'identity' to 'similarity', pointing to the resemblance between today and yesterday, and supposing that the resemblance contains 'the essentials' being reproduced. We cannot rescue a scientific concept from its difficulties by making it *less* precise. Rather, we have to shift standpoint. The continuity, the persistence through time, with which theory is concerned, does not have the ontological structure of a *reproduced identity*, but that of an *intelligible succession*. It is not a relation of similarity between the structure today and the structure yesterday that is the point, but a relation of practice between them, the way one was produced out of the other.⁵

It is easy to imagine a Thompson who, whatever his flaws, would have given this a "fookin' amen." More difficult, but still possible, is to envision a Foucault who would have done the same. Consider Wendy Brown's controversial "The Impossibility of Women's Studies." In arguing for the value of Judith Butler's work, Brown asserts that "the very idea of a regulatory 'apparatus' appears as a kind of structuralist Althusserian hangover clouding the Foucauldian insight into the radical reach of subject production through regulatory discourse."⁶

5. R.W. Connell, "The Black Box of Habit on the Wings of History: Reflections on the Theory of Social Reproduction," in *Which Way is Up? Essays on Sex, Class and Culture* (Sydney 1983), 149. Emphases in original.

6. In Joan Wallach Scott, ed., *Women's Studies On The Edge* (Durham 2008), 17–38; quotation at 25.

There can be no apparatus, in this way of thinking, because regulation happens everywhere and involves everyone: the apparatus is all-encompassing. Nonetheless, we need not accept the argument that all subject formation is the consequence of regulatory discourse in order to recognize the value of grasping subjects as regulated and as participating in the regulation of others: this was a premise of *Whigs and Hunters*.

And just as Foucault expressed regret that he had not encountered the Frankfurt School at an earlier age, we do not have to work all that hard to imagine that Foucault's insights about subject-production might have arrived sooner had he not indulged the technocratic aspects of his character by spending so much time with structuralism first. Perhaps Brown's article signals that this world has changed enough to allow a new generation to approach the Thompsonian afresh, and to grasp the radical potential of his arguments against structuralism. Perhaps we will again witness Thompson's words being advanced in the struggle against the ruling orthodoxy, whatever that might then be.