

Looking Back and Ahead

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THE 1963 PUBLICATION OF E.P. THOMPSON'S *The Making of the English Working Class* constituted a major event in social science and historical scholarship. By placing class struggle squarely at the center of social development, Thompson effectively undermined the underlying economism of modernization theory and reigning interpretations of the industrial revolution – cotton mill = new industrial society – in one fell swoop. Writing at a moment of welfare state expansion and relative labour peace, his emphasis on the moral economy of the working class generated enormous excitement in writing history “from below,” resulting in important reinterpretations of slave resistance, the role of peasantries in twentieth-century anti-colonial and national liberation struggles, the centrality of women in all such social movements, and the conditions in which solidarities across class, gender, racial, and ethnic lines may coalesce or fragment. No mean feat in the usually staid world of academia.

For my generation of anthropologists embarking on graduate training during the 1980s – the tumultuous first decade of the neoliberal political reign – *The Making* remained a seminal text, but received a more divided reception. Some celebrated it as an inaugural text of the cultural turn, which early on privileged populist cultural politics over class struggle.¹ The political economists among us, myself included, were rather more skeptical of certain aspects of Thompson's national and cultural emphases, even as we celebrated his intense focus on historical struggle. It was the *unmaking* of national working classes and the intensifying globalization of labour processes that demanded our attention. Many of us thus turned to alternative world-historical anthropologies, especially those created by Eric R. Wolf, Sidney W. Mintz, and Cedric J. Robinson² in the first half of that decade. In our search for usable histories that helped make sense of the mounting worldwide assault on labour, we found the quite different historical foci and analyses of such authors linked by a common thread. *Europe and the People Without History*, *Sweetness and Power*, and *Black Marxism* seemed congruent in a common theoretical conclusion that spatially distinct and differently classified labouring populations were the conjoined products of global processes of uneven proletarianization.

This collective conclusion raised a couple of fundamental questions, which continue to generate discussion some three decades on. What were the

1. This was, of course, before class and capitalism were banished from postmodern/post-colonial theory as foundational Western concepts, which, it is argued, serve only to erase the cultures and struggles of colonial and ex-colonial peoples from history.

2. Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and The People Without History* (Berkeley 1982); Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York 1985); Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London 1983).

implications of their emphasis on the globalized “making” of distinct but interconnected labouring populations for our understanding of local and national working classes? Could we create parallel maps of labour’s political relations, imaginations, and possibilities across geographic space and social categories? I, along with many others of my generational cohort, found these questions compelling. They did not, however, mark the end of my engagement with *The Making*, but served to frame what I still consider to be an essential encounter with Thompson’s classic text.

Posing the first question was an important step in contextualizing national class formations within wider spatial fields. From this vantage point, the making of the English working class could not be separated as a distinct phenomenon from, at the very least, the inequalities produced and operating within the interconnected spaces of the British Empire. This was Robinson’s explicit rejoinder to Thompson, but implicit in both Wolf’s and Mintz’s accounts, as well. In this view, Thompson’s trilogy of community, class-consciousness, and class formation seems rather problematic. It’s easy enough to see how redrawing the external boundaries of community or expanding the geography of class-consciousness could radically alter our understanding of English working-class politics in early nineteenth-century England. To what extent, for example, did the slave rebellions within the British Empire or the transatlantic abolitionist movement influence English working-class consciousness? It is well known that the powerful abolitionist voices of Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass found a wide audience among working-class radicals during the period covered in *The Making*. But they were only the most well known of the Black mariners and dock workers who steadily made their way to London, which already served as the most important hub of the Black Atlantic. What kind of impact did these articulate proponents of universalism from below have on English working-class consciousness?

From a slightly different perspective, we could ask if Thompson was merely reiterating the prejudice of English artisans and skilled labourers when he made the distinction between their “sophisticated political Radicalism” and the Irish’s “more primitive and excitable revolutionism.” To what extent did the tradition of the “Free-Born Englishman,” shaping artisans’ emerging nationalism and class-consciousness, influence the gender and racial boundaries of the English working-class community? Thompson, as the preeminent social historian of our time, did not ignore these questions. Still, it is rather telling that the persistent rebellions, radical consciousness, and organizational initiatives of Irish common labour that he documents, for example, barely figure in his expansive concluding chapter on class-consciousness.

Omissions such as these seem to confirm William Roseberry’s conclusion that Thompson’s strong emphasis on community precluded an adequate understanding of the multifaceted social, political, and economic effects of

uneven proletarianization.³ And while this remains a valid criticism, I think it would be a mistake to jettison the concept of community from class analyses. As I have previously argued, community is profitably seen as a *claim* advanced to solidify and structure highly disparate processes within a particular field of power;⁴ the British Empire is a particularly appropriate example here. Claims to community are almost always tied to wider sources of political, moral, and organizational power. It is in the connections between and within these relational fields that we can still find an adequate focus for class analyses, not in some predetermined, bounded territorial or moral unit. An emphasis on community as *claim* opens up the field of analysis at once to forms of labour solidarity across geographic space and social categories as well as to forms of racial, national, and gender prejudices and exclusions. It would allow us, in other words, to better understand the alternately hindered and welcomed contributions of enslaved, escaped, and emancipated Black mariners and dockworkers from around the Atlantic; immigrant Irish common labourers; and women seamstresses, card-room hands, and labourers to the uneven making of the “English” working class and its consciousness.

If Thompson ultimately drew the boundaries of the “English” working-class community too narrowly, his strictures on essentialism in class analysis remain especially trenchant and timely a half-century after they were first lodged. As he famously remarked in the opening paragraph of *The Making*: “The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making.” Thompson here focused attention on the experiences and historical relationships of working people as they began to make sense of their shared conditions and develop (or not) a shared identity. It is his emphasis on the making rather than the always already accomplished structure of class that I think remains especially resonant for ongoing efforts to create maps of labour’s political relations, imaginations, and possibilities across space and categories, both in the past and the present.

Thompson’s emphasis on the self-making of the English working class could, in fact, apply equally to the transatlantic proletariat of the period. Here again the transoceanic travels of Equiano and Douglass are highly suggestive. They may have been among the best-known proponents of emancipation and universal rights within the expansive social field of the Atlantic during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but they were not alone. Each was joined by the disparate efforts of field labourers, factory hands, slaves, peasants, washer-women, seamstresses, tailors, printers, and sailors who drew

3. William Roseberry, “The Construction of Natural Economy,” in Roseberry, *Anthropologies and Histories: Essays in culture, history, and political economy* (New Brunswick 1989), 197–232.

4. August Carbonella, “Beyond the Limits of the Visible World: Remapping Historical Anthropology,” in Don Kalb & Herman Tak, eds. *Critical Junctions: Anthropology and History Beyond the Cultural Turn* (Oxford 2005), 88–108.

upon the promises of the Enlightenment to claim rights and freedoms on behalf of a common humanity. This self-making of a transatlantic proletariat reflected the territory-crossing forms of labour cooperation and inventiveness, social networks, and circulation of ideas among its heterodox labouring populations. An emphasis on emancipation, human rights, and universalism sustained the Atlantic proletariat's structures of feeling and political imaginations beyond national and cultural limits.

While Linebaugh and Rediker⁵ argue that the transatlantic proletariat's ethos of cooperation and solidarity was fracturing by 1835 into separate movements for labour rights, abolition of slavery, and gender equality, its unmaking was a protracted process that lasted till the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Moreover, its fragmentation was not a foregone conclusion. Slavery, factory exploitation, women's oppression, and colonial expansion were hotly contested across the still porous political space of the Atlantic throughout the nineteenth century. From this perspective, emergent nineteenth century national working classes existed not in isolation, but in tandem with the transatlantic proletariat, whose transoceanic issue networks and universalist sentiments continued to inform and sustain national dialogue and debate on the rights of all labour.

At present, when the global political context is ever more oppressive, it is heartening to see the emergence again of new forms of grassroots universalism, and the enlarged sense of possibility that emanates from it, erupting from public squares around the world. And it is more than a little satisfying to be able to turn to *The Making* to rediscover Thomas Paine as the originator of the 99 per cent vs. 1 per cent equation that the Occupy Movement uses to redraw class maps, stake claims to community, and demand rights, freedom, and justice. I am sure Thompson would have smiled to see that these traditions of struggle have not been lost to "the enormous condescension of history."

5. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, and Commoners in the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston 2000).