

Who now reads E.P. Thompson? Or, (Re)reading *The Making at UQAM*

Magda Fahrni

Volume 72, automne 2013

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1020756ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Fahrni, M. (2013). Who now reads E.P. Thompson? Or, (Re)reading *The Making at UQAM*. *Labour / Le Travail*, 72, 241–246.

Who now reads E.P. Thompson? Or, (Re)reading *The Making* at UQAM

Magda Fahrni

WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE of E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* after a half-century of scholarship and change? To ask this question is, in large part, to ask where the project of social history is today. Thompson's historical work, and *The Making*, in particular, was of course the cornerstone of a renewed working-class history, of history "from below" or "from the bottom up." And Thompson's reminder that class is relational, along with his insistence upon the importance of experience as the cradle of "the political and cultural expression of working-class consciousness," have profoundly shaped the writing of social history more generally over the past fifty years.¹

I first read parts of *The Making* in the early 1990s, as a Master's student in History at Queen's University in Kingston. I read the rest of it a couple of years later as a PhD student at York University in Toronto. Almost twenty years later, having recently reread the book in its entirety, I am struck by a number of things.

The first is the sheer pleasure of the read. Long, dense, detailed, even exhaustive, *The Making* is nonetheless a compelling story. Part of this is the pleasure that Thompson clearly takes in the telling detail, the poignant example, the anecdote full of significance. And the delight that he appears to take in language and words, reporting the existence of "colourful characters like Mudlarks, Scufflehunters, Bludgeon Men, Morocco Men, Flash Coachmen, Grubbers, Bear Baiters and Strolling Minstrels" (55) or anonymous letter-writers who signed their epistles "Mr. Pistol', 'Lady Ludd', 'Peter Plush', 'General Justice', 'Thomas Paine', 'A True Man', 'Eliza Ludd', 'No King', 'King Ludd', and 'Joe Firebrand', with such addresses as 'Robin Hoods Cave' and 'Sherwood Forest.'" (60In2) As Thompson remarks in his Bibliographical Note (833), he draws selectively on available manuscript sources. But he quotes them generously, providing readers with glimpses of the voices of a working class in the making. These quotations, the spelling often idiosyncratic, sometimes phonetic, are such that readers can almost hear these voices. I think, for instance, of the several-page-long quotation from "A Journeyman Cotton Spinner" (199–202), or the excerpts from anonymous threatening letters penned by Luddites: "I Ham going to inform you that there is Six Thousand men coming to you in Apral and then We Will go and Blow Parlement house up and Blow up all afour hus." (714, 715) These quotations do provide what Arlette Farge would

1. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York 1966 [1963]), 212. All page numbers refer to this edition.

describe, somewhat sceptically, as an “effet de réel.”² But Thompson uses them, not to add a patina of authenticity, but to prove a point, to show resistance, to suggest alternate explanations. He reminds us that such quotations from the sources are essential because “without such detail, it is possible for the eye to pass over the phrase, ‘the decline of the handloom weavers’, without any realisation of the scale of the tragedy that was enacted.” (290) And he quotes these manuscript sources with affection, with empathy, often with humour.

This is not, however, a naive quoting of ‘workers’ voices.’ Thompson is nothing if not appropriately cautious about his sources. This is the second thing that struck me in rereading *The Making* – I hadn’t remembered all of the methodological discussion of the pitfalls and potential of the manuscript sources.³ This is perhaps because I first read the book as a student, whereas I read it now as someone who teaches. Words, Thompson reminds us, must be “critically fumigated” (493) if they are to be useful for the historian. Often, of course, these methodological discussions serve to cast doubt upon previous interpretations, notably those belonging to what Thompson calls “the empiricist orthodoxy” (196), a reliance upon cost-of-living series and trade cycles; Thompson argues, convincingly, that “we cannot make an average of well-being.” (231). He reminds us of the partial and fragmentary nature of some of these accounts – but without concluding that they are meaningless. And, equally important, without concluding that they could mean anything – this is not a relativist vision of the making of the English working class. Thompson finds truth, in some form, in many of these manuscript sources.

The third thing that struck me in rereading *The Making* is the constant presence of the author in this book. Thompson inserts himself into this story, and if he occasionally writes with humility – whether before the daunting challenges that face the historian, or before the immense challenges that faced working people between the 1790s and the 1830s – he also writes with a clear mastery of the period, the sources, the literature, and the debates. This is a pioneering work, it goes without saying, but it is not a timid one. As readers, we are always aware that Thompson is there, accompanying us as we read – and his is generally a benevolent, thoughtful presence. The author’s presence is evident in the methodological discussions that crop up here and there and to which I refer above. It is evident, most explicitly, when he tells us how he feels, and, occasionally, allows himself to tell us how we ought to feel. An obvious example is the concluding line of the book: “We may thank them [turn-of-the-nineteenth-century working people] for these years of heroic culture.” Or when Thompson expresses indignation, or more accurately, outrage at child labour, insisting that “the exploitation of little children, on this scale and with this intensity, was one of the most shameful events in our history.” (349) Or

2. Arlette Farge, *Le goût de l'archive* (Paris 1989), 18.

3. My favourites are to be found on pages 55–56, 58, 102, 210, 213–214, 231, 265, 487, 492, 493, and 577.

when he bluntly describes early nineteenth-century Methodism as “religious terrorism.” (378) And this willingness to express anger, shock, or outrage is a useful reminder that, in the constant interplay between structure and agency, Thompson does not neglect the former. Of course, the humanist insistence upon agency is here, as reviewers over the past fifty years have noted. But Thompson also insists that exploitation (the title of the first chapter of the book’s second, and central, section on work) was at the core of the Industrial Revolution. In England, Thompson argues, the Industrial Revolution was cataclysmic, carried out with violence, “truly catastrophic,” in that it involved the “intensification of two intolerable forms of relationship: those of economic exploitation and of political oppression.” (198–199)

This leads me to my final belated realization, upon rereading *The Making*: namely, how much of this book is intellectual history, or, better, the history of ideas. Ideas are interrogated throughout the book, but especially in the first section, “The Liberty Tree,” on the intellectual roots of nineteenth-century working-class Radicalism, and on the importance of eighteenth-century political traditions and cultural thought for nineteenth-century mobilization. Burke, Paine, Volney, Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge appear and reappear throughout these pages. Upon rereading the book, I was struck by the looming presence of France – whether revolutionary or Napoleonic – just across the Channel, acting alternately as model or as warning. Thompson reminds us that the Industrial Revolution interacted with the political revolution that didn’t happen in England. The presence of ideas is of course what makes this a study of working-class culture, in which religion, formal politics, and a sense of “Englishness” play a key role. The symbolic is also important to this culture, and Thompson’s discussion of the symbolic dimensions of food – the potato, meat, beer, and tea – in Chapter 10 foreshadows such wonderful treatments of food as those of Ellen Ross in *Love and Toil*, but also so-called commodity histories such as those of sugar, cod, the potato, or the tomato.⁴

Rereading *The Making* now, fifty years after its initial publication, it is easy to see the influence that it subsequently had upon the early writing of Canadian working-class history.⁵ Much has been written about the evolution of social history since these important early works. Some have argued that the linguistic turn, the cultural turn, the emotional turn, and the new political history, in the emphasis that they give to representations, their decentering of class (or,

4. Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870–1918* (New York 1993), chapter 2, “‘There Is Meat Ye Know Not Of’: Feeding a Family”; for examples of commodity histories, see David Gentilcore, *Italy and the Potato: A History, 1550–2000* (London 2012); Gentilcore, *Pomodoro! A History of the Tomato in Italy* (New York 2010).

5. Similar choices of topics, but also the same excitement of discovery, are evident, for example, in Gregory S. Kealey’s and Bryan D. Palmer’s early work on industrializing Toronto and Hamilton and on working-class associations such as the Knights of Labor; in Michael Cross’s work on the Shiners’ War; and in Peter de Lottinville’s now-classic study of Joe Beef’s Montreal tavern.

at least, the preeminence that they give to other analytic categories), and their scepticism about the concept of experience (or, at least, about historians' ability to get at it), have taken us far away from Thompson's goals and methods.⁶ And yet, I would argue, Thompson's work has continued to exercise an influence, albeit somewhat diffuse, over the past fifty years. We could cite classic international examples from the 1980s, such as Sean Wilentz's *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1858* (1984) or, from the 1990s, Nicholas Rogers' *Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain* (1998), that deal with similar subject matter (class formation, crowds and riots, popular culture) and similar historical periods. But to these we could add more recent examples, published in the past decade, by a different generation of historians. Some of these younger historians define what they do as social history, others identify as practitioners of intellectual history, and still more as proponents of a new political history that defines politics broadly to include social movements, civil society, and popular culture, and that, like *The Making*, take ideas seriously. In one of my own fields, the history of Québec, examples include books as different from one another as Martin Petitclerc's "*Nous protégeons l'infortune.*" *Les origines populaires de l'économie sociale au Québec* (2007) and Michel Ducharme's *Le concept de liberté au Canada à l'époque des révolutions atlantiques* (2010). These are both prize-winning books by authors born in the early to mid-1970s, but the similarities essentially end there: the former is concerned with late nineteenth-century mutual aid societies, fraternalism, and working-class solidarity; the latter is an intellectual history of the idea of liberty in the last decades of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth. But both authors cite Thompson, and are clearly indebted to whole schools of thought that have grown up around, and out of, *The Making*. I think also of the work of another young Québec scholar, Dan Horner, on public space, authority, violence, and popular politics in nineteenth-century Montreal. Horner's work revisits and builds upon the work of Thompson and Rogers, as well as upon the work of Canadian scholars H. Clare Pentland and Ruth Bleasdale. At the same time, Horner is explicitly concerned with how gender worked in nineteenth-century Montreal to construct masculinity, and in this his work reflects the evolution of social history since the 1960s. Thompson, of course, has been criticized for his inattention to both gender and women.⁷

6. Representative titles include Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York 1988); Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley 1989); and most recently, Joan Wallach Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History* (Durham, NC 2011).

7. Dan Horner, "Shame upon you as men!": Contesting Authority in the Aftermath of Montreal's Gavazzi Riot," *Histoire sociale/social history*, 44 (May/mai 2011), 29–52; Horner, "Solemn Processions and Terrifying Violence: Spectacle, Authority, and Citizenship during the Lachine Canal Strike of 1843," *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 38 (2010), 36–47. For one attempt to rectify Thompson's inattention to gender, see Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley 1995).

My sense, though, is that if *The Making* is occasionally assigned in graduate seminars on social history, on British history, or on historiography more generally, most graduate students in History in Québec or Canada today have not actually read it. This does not mean that they do not know of Thompson, understand his importance to the field, realize that *The Making* is a founding text, or appreciate the contribution that it has made to the writing of history. Most of the graduate students with whom I'm in contact speak of history from below, or from the bottom up, approvingly, as of a worthwhile project that still needs to be carried out. And although I rarely teach courses on labour or working-class history *per se*, the books that students in my courses on women's history or family history or twentieth-century Québec or Canada more broadly, appreciate, are the ones that exude a humanist sensibility, that bring out the agency of ordinary people, the difficult situations in which they found themselves, the decisions that they made, sometimes reluctantly, and the moments when they resisted or mobilized. My undergraduate students love Denyse Baillargeon's *Ménagères au temps de la Crise* (1991), and are moved by the extracts from the interviews that Baillargeon conducted with working-class women struggling to make ends meet during the 1930s; my graduate students tend to appreciate, for example, Bruno Ramirez's *On the Move: French-Canadian and Italian Migrants in the North Atlantic Economy, 1861–1914* (1991) and Sean Mills's *The Empire Within: Postcolonial Thought and Political Activism in Sixties Montreal* (2010). Without necessarily having read Thompson or having a clear sense of the evolution of social history over the past half-century, they're actually quite invested in the project of social history. They want to read about daily life, about popular politics, and about collective mobilization. But they're not particularly romantic – they're sceptical, even wary, of a fetishization of agency and acutely aware of its limits and of the realities of power, including that exercised by the state.

Maybe these reactions are particular to my institution. The Université du Québec à Montréal's student body has always had a reputation for being especially militant. Not all of our students are, of course, and these divisions among students became particularly evident, and sharp, a year ago, during the several-month-long student strike. But still, a good number of them are mobilized in different ways: in party politics, antiglobalization movements, the union movement, the student movement, sovereignty movements, and organized feminism. So these are students who know militancy first-hand; their experience of politics is not simply academic. And I suspect that this leads them to appreciate historical accounts of mobilization and popular politics, with all of their attendant divisions, as well as accounts of their consequences, including violence, suppression and co-optation.

That said, for most of UQAM's students, England is a far-away place. Much further away than it was for me – an English-Canadian born in British Columbia to a mother born in Wales – when I first read Thompson. Indeed, for most students in Québec and Canada, England is probably less important

than it was a generation or two ago. Geopolitically, of course, England is no longer the player that it once was, and that it continued to be as recently as the 1980s. In the early days of the new social history, the English historiography was hugely important for North Americans – and perhaps especially so for Canadians, given the importance, then, of British immigration, traditions, and institutions in this country. My impression is that Canadians today are less likely to read works in British history than they once were, and more likely to turn for inspiration to new (critical) imperial histories, to entangled or transnational histories, to histories of the Atlantic world that include former European colonies, to nonwestern histories and to histories of the Global South.

The Making of the English Working Class was published ten years before the oil crisis, at the apex of postwar Fordism and most postwar welfare states. And it appeared towards the end of an era of bureaucratic complacency, the organization man, and Cold War consensus and conformity. Today, most of the welfare states built in the mid-twentieth century have been at least partially dismantled, and neoliberalism appears to be solidly anchored in North America and a good portion of Europe. But as we have seen over the past several years, it is not uncontested. In much of the West, political culture is characterized by a profound mistrust of the motives and integrity of political elites, and a disgust in the face of endemic corruption and collusion. Various collective movements – *les Indignés*, Occupy, the *Printemps érable*, Idle No More – have expressed the anger, frustration and determination of diverse groups of people marginalized by class, race, sex, and age. In occupying public space, these groups are demanding to be taken into account, are contesting the supremacy of the market, and are trying, through creative forms of popular politics, to influence the ways in which political decisions are made. In such a context, a reading – or rereading – of Thompson seems more timely, and necessary, than ever.



Edward Palmer
Thompson,
circa 1981, Wick
Episcopi