

The Lost Causes of E. P. Thompson

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PERHAPS THE LEAST INTERROGATED word in the title of Thompson's classic, *The Making of the English Working Class*, is "English." Thompson acknowledged that he did not aspire to speak for the Scottish and the Welsh elements among the labouring poor, as their cultural traditions were different enough for him to be "cautious" about "generalizing beyond English experiences." But at the same time his "English experiences" included that of the Irish in England: "I have considered the Irish, not in Ireland, but as immigrants to England."¹ The problem of how a national identity writes itself into historical texts remains somewhat buried in this great book by a great historian who remained all his life an engaged and critical student of "the peculiarities of the English." But if Englishness as such was something Thompson took as a given, the differences of all that was not "English" remained an integral, if muted, part of his analytical framework. Otherwise it is hard to explain why this book that inveighed against the use of sociological models in history, became such an inspiring model for others to follow.

The name that Thompson gave in *The Making* to this opening towards historical difference was "culture." One of the most fervent passages in the book read: "The making of the working class is a fact of political and cultural, as much as of economic, history. It was not the spontaneous generation of the factory system. Nor should we think of an external force – the 'industrial revolution' – working upon some nondescript undifferentiated raw material of humanity and turning it out at the other end as 'fresh race of beings'. The ... Industrial Revolution [was] imposed, not upon a raw material, but upon the free-born Englishman – and the free-born Englishman as Paine had left him or as the Methodist had moulded him. The factory hand or stockinger was also the inheritor of Bunyan, of remembered village rights, of notions of equality before the law, of craft traditions." And then came his pithy and powerful dictum: "The working class made itself as much as it was made." (213)

It was Thompson's insistence on very particular cultural traditions of the English working people – the idea of the "free-born Englishman" or of equality before the law, for instance – that encouraged me once to ask: What would happen in the histories of men and women who filled the ranks of the industrial working classes in a country like India but whose cultural heritage was significantly different from that of their counter-parts in England? Was there a Marxist rule of historical providence that guaranteed that even these people would, whatever their historical differences with the English, inevitably find

1. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, England 1968), 14. All future references to this Penguin edition of Thompson's book will be provided in page numbers in parentheses in the text.

themselves on the high road to class-consciousness and socialism? In what way could their differences frustrate and make ambiguous the universal sociological schema of Marxism?

These questions sometimes led to admiring but critical readings of *The Making*. However, it really was Thompson's original unease about universalistic and schematic variants of Marxist sociology that gave some of us in India – I mean myself and my colleagues in the Indian project of *Subaltern Studies* – the spiritual and intellectual courage we needed to stage a full-blooded rebellion against what we saw as stultifying aspects of much that passed in India as Marxist history. But that is a different story. What I want to do in this brief tribute to someone I consider one of the greatest historians of the twentieth century is to read again Thompson's Preface to the first edition of *The Making* with an eye on the unease that I have already mentioned. The unease I speak of was writ large on the entire body of this preface.

One can only note with a sense of irony today that Thompson was actually unhappy with the title of what turned out to be his most successful book. Yet few titles have been as popular in academic historiography of the twentieth century: which other title has been more copied, echoed, emulated, and remembered than *The Making*? In the 1970s and 80s scores of historians wrote up accounts of the "making" of the working classes in their respective countries, their very use of the word "making" signaling a shared understanding of the process of class formation in industrial or industrializing societies. But, looking back, one can see that Thompson's discomfiture over the title of his book – a title he also considered necessary, hence the discomfort – arose from some deeply fundamental aspects of the intellectual project he undertook in *The Making*.

"This book has a clumsy title," is how Thompson opened his 1963 Preface to the book. Perhaps, the powerful writer of English prose that he was, he did not like the use of the gerund, *Making*, in the title – remember that this was long before gerunds became fashionable for use in book-titles – and therefore proceeded to give an immediate justification for his use of it: "*Making*, because it is a study of an active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning." Thompson's understanding of "agency" was both intriguing and inspiring: "The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making." It was present, that is, long before one could call it an "it," that is to say, it was for a long time an identity caught in the process of becoming itself. (9) Was this a teleological statement? Would it be fair to say that only a historian who could see the process backwards could say this? Thompson did not explore these questions. But he surely gave the idea of agency not only a long life but a long reach as well.

The one other word in the title that Thompson hastened to interpret to aid his reader from the very beginning was – not surprisingly – "class." But what he highlighted in his remarks on class was already hinted at in the word "making" – class as a process and not a product or state, and surely not just

a category in the analyst's head. "By class," he wrote, "I understand a historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness. ... I do not see class as a 'structure', nor even as a 'category', but as something which in fact happens ... in human relationships." By insisting that class entailed "the notion of a historical relationship," he continued a polemic with the discipline of sociology.

Thompson was trying to walk a fine line between sociological-universal models of the structure of capitalist society that do not know what to do with historical differences between various societies – "these cultural 'lags' and distortions [from the assumed universal structure] are a nuisance" for such models – and Thompson's own, historian's training and tendency to attend to the specificities of particular times and places. Thompson would grant it as a generalization that "the class experience" was something that was "largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born – or enter involuntarily," but the "methodological preoccupations of certain sociologists" – he mentioned N. J. Smelser, "a colleague of Professor Talcott Parsons," and R. Dahrendorf as two targets of his criticism – gave us an insufficient tool for its study. For class was "not a thing," "[i]t does not exist, either to have an ideal interest or consciousness, or to lie as a patient on the Adjustor's table." A pre-conceived category of class cannot "give us a pure specimen of class" for the "relationship must be embodied in real people and in a real context." (Here, again, the word "real" has very different meanings in the two uses made of it in this sentence, – "real" people empirically exist, but "real" contexts are constructed by historians – but we will pass over the problem.) "I am convinced," wrote Thompson, "that we cannot understand class unless we see it as a social and cultural formation, arising from processes which can only be studied as they work themselves out over a considerable historical period." (9–12)

An important part of being a member of a class was the awareness of such membership, and this awareness for Thompson was inevitably a historical phenomenon, in the production of which Thompson, as we know, assigned "culture" a very important role. Class experiences may have been "largely determined" by the very fact of being a part of "productive relations," but class-consciousness was another matter altogether. "Class-consciousness," said Thompson, "is the way in which these [class] experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, and institutional forms. If the experience appears as determined, class-consciousness does not. We can see a *logic* in the responses of similar occupational groups undergoing similar experiences, but we cannot predicate any *law*. Consciousness of class arises in the same way in different times and places, but never in just the same way." (10)

This is the historian in Thompson making room for (cultural/historical) differences and refusing to reduce such differences to some underlying uniformity (such as what we hear these days: difference itself is a product of capital). No laws, but a logic; consciousness arising "in the same way in different places"

but never in “just the same way” – one can read these expressions as signaling Thompson’s intellectual struggle over how to define the relationship between the universal and the particular in a Marxist historical understanding of labour formation in capitalist-industrial societies, his attention focused especially on the problem of how workers processed their experience of capitalist work to become conscious members of the working class one day. Thompson never resolved this question. Even the word “experience” – a word that almost became a code word for Thompsonesque interventions in the field of social history – has an undecided status in *The Making*. His indecision about the philosophical import of the word stemmed from the way that he both conceded ground to a Marxist and universalistic sociology and yet fought hard to wrest back from it a zone of uncertainty and indeterminacy in order to give his historical and human characters a degree of freedom to act. “Class experience” as such thus seems to have a universal quality in Thompson’s understanding – “it is largely determined by “productive relations” that he assumed to be the same across different histories, but “class consciousness,” he insisted, was different. For “class consciousness,” as we have seen before, was the question of how these quasi-universal raw materials of class-experience “are handled in cultural terms” that presumably varied from one part of the world to another. At the same time, however, Thompson acknowledged empirical differences between different experiences, either between groups or individuals. If we stopped history “at a given point,” say at the question of “how the individual” got to the “social role” of being a labourer in a factory, then, said Thompson, there would be “no classes but simply a multitude of individuals with a multitude of experiences.” (11)

But once inside the system, these diverse individuals, in Thompson’s exposition, developed a different level of what may be called an experience-in-common: “class experience” determined “largely ... by the productive relations.” Some questions still remained: Did capitalism always produce a relative uniformity of “class experience” across cultures? If so, then what would be the status of the word “experience” when Thompson spoke of the experiences – not of individuals, nor of a total collectivity, but of groups such as “the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the ‘obsolete’ hand-loom weaver, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott” that he so famously wanted to rescue “from the enormous condescension of posterity?” “Their aspirations,” claimed Thompson, “were valid in terms of their own experiences.” (13) So would the argument be that while artisanal groups retained distinct group experiences in the early years of industrialization, capital would eventually grind them all into a single uniform entity, i.e. class-experience? And yet the question of class-consciousness would remain open to the various possibilities of history?

Thompson’s intellectual struggles around the question of agency and self-making, then, were struggles to locate a level of analysis where he could create and preserve space for historical difference, while granting capitalist

structures of relations – and its corresponding academic discipline, sociology – the capacity to introduce uniformity even at the level of collective “experience,” the experience of class, or what Thompson called “the class experience.” It was precisely in the assumed gap between class-experience and class-consciousness that Thompson made room for “culture” (such as the tradition of the “free-born Englishman”) that processed class-experience in different ways in different historical contexts. Hence his mention of a similar logic, but no law, of the “same way” but “not just the same way,” and so on. The presumed space between logic and law was the space in Thompson’s schema (he would not have liked this word!) for historical and cultural differences. Histories of working-class class-consciousness in different countries would be similar but not quite. This is why, in the only gesture he made towards non-Western histories in his *magnum opus*, Thompson would grant that the history of English industrialization in some ways foreshadowed the industrial histories of the non-Western countries – “the greater part of the world today is still undergoing problems of industrialization, and the formation of democratic institutions, analogous in many ways to our own experience during the Industrial Revolution” – yet ground a politics of hope in cultural differences. (13) Thompson’s political hope rested simultaneously on this premise of similarity – and hence on a modified notion of stadial histories (that the history of the English Industrial Revolution would be rehearsed later in however fragmentary forms in the histories of latecomers to the game of industrialization) – *and* on the assumption that the success of capitalism in the West (and the authoritarianism of the Soviet system) signified a only a temporary defeat of the socialist alternative that might still be made up for in the Third World: “Causes which were lost in England might, in Asia or Africa, still be won.” (13)

Thompson’s account of class-consciousness in England was thus a story of lost causes, but causes that still gave rise to passion. The ringing prose of the last two pages of *The Making* allows us to see how Thompson’s unease with any rigid strictures of sociology made him open towards the histories of the working people in areas beyond the West: Asia and Africa. Looking at the political landscape of the England of his day, Thompson counted himself among “the losers,” i.e. among people for whom the very defeat of the spirit of opposition with which both “the Romantics and the Radical craftsmen” of the early nineteenth century greeted “the annunciation of Acquisitive Man” constituted a legacy. In his poignant words, “In the failure of the two traditions to come to a point of junction, something was lost. How much we cannot be sure, for we are among the losers.” (915) This is also why he looked to the politics of the working people of Asia and Africa – regions still caught in the throes of decolonization in the 1950s and 60s – where causes lost in England might still be won. He grounded this hope in his theory of history, where he created a zone of human activity, will, and consciousness – in sum, politics – that, thanks to historical differences, could never be reduced to any sociological laws of capital. Today’s China or India, or upcoming African nations

for that matter, may not appear to justify this hope. But because Thompson was never afraid of “whistling into a typhoon” and understood politics as the capacity to transcend, in imagination and action, the constraints of a capitalist world that many pragmatically would consider “real”, his hope cannot be refuted by empirical evidence alone. This is why, for all the criticisms that can be made of it, *The Making* remains a magnificent and majestic tribute to human political will and imagination, the sheer capacity of the oppressed to struggle, however inchoately and inconclusively, for imagined and better alternatives to the present.