

Class Formation, Politics, Structures of Feeling

Geoff Eley

Volume 72, Fall 2013

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1020751ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Eley, G. (2013). Class Formation, Politics, Structures of Feeling. *Labour / Le Travail*, 72, 213–218.

Class Formation, Politics, Structures of Feeling

Geoff Eley

ONCE HE MOVED INTO AN OLD FOLKS' HOME, my grandfather Edward Bloor, for most of his working life a skilled mould maker first in the Potteries then in South Derbyshire, kept very few belongings. Among them was his photographer's touch-up kit along with a set of photographic plates of the fire at Selby Abbey in 1906, the surviving trace of what had once been an earlier career, but mostly they comprised only a few prized books. Some of these were commemorative (like *King Albert's Book: A Tribute to the Belgian King and People from Representative Men and Women Throughout the World*, published in 1915), but were otherwise emblematic in one way or another. As I grew older, he began marking my birthdays with a gift from this collection, not usually with any explanation (I remember him as a brooding, surly old patriarch of very, very few words), but definitely freighted with meaning. One year my birthday present was John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (in the 1887 Hodder and Stoughton edition), which definitely needed no gloss. For anyone growing up Methodist in the 1950s the message was self-explanatory. Bunyan's allegory was all over my childhood, whether at Sunday school or at home, or for that matter on TV or in school. "He who would valiant be" rang out from morning assembly with great frequency, just as Pilgrim's successive trials were a ready source of metaphors for parents and teachers alike.

I'm not sure, at this distance, how I responded as a child to Pilgrim's journey. As a teenage intellectual impatient with institutional religion of all stripes, bridle against the cultures of parents and school, I had no intention of "laboring night and day" to get to the Wicket Gate and enter the Celestial City. All of that imagery had acquired unlikeable connotations, aptly captured in Lindsay Anderson's use of "To Be a Pilgrim" for one of the school chapel scenes in *if. . .* (1968). Yet on the other hand, those stories helped create an architecture of the imagination. As Philip Pullman reminds us, religious allegory lends itself to all sorts of compelling and enjoyable literary purposes, and if *The Golden Compass* speaks now to a very different sensibility, one modernist and secular as well as a readership more mature, then Bunyan's characters could vividly enrich a small child's imagination. When wrestling with this or that problem, I still wander that metaphorical landscape, the one I learned all those years ago, thinking with the Slough of Despond or Giant Despair, perhaps with the Delectable Mountains and the River of Death. How exactly our adult propensities for certain outlooks as against others, our receptiveness to particular bodies of thought, are laid down by early exposure to one set of cultural influences as opposed to another is a fascinating topic not just for [auto]biography, but for social history too.

In the same year I saw Lindsay Anderson's *if. . .* I was also reading Edward Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. I've written elsewhere in much detail about the impact of that great book, which appeared in paperback just as the political situation in Europe was exploding all around us. *The Making* was a remarkable mixture of historical recuperation, ebulliently oppositional grand narrative, and ethico-political crusade – in Eric Hobsbawm's words, an “erupting historical volcano of 848 pages,” or as Gwyn Williams called it, “less a book than one continuous challenge,” an impassioned incitement to think about familiar histories in new and troublesome ways.¹ The main focus of the book, the substance of its empirical research and the bulk of its length, reached from the 1790s to 1832. It was an epic account of a popular democracy forged from resistance to drastic social transformation under conditions of extreme political repression. While offering a social history of capitalist industrialization, it did so as an inspiring narrative of the political hopes of ordinary people, grounding the possibilities for democratic citizenship in the necessary popular struggles against violence, inequality, and dispossession.

Thompson's account of the social transformations of work was always encased in elaborately staged arguments about politics. If the book's central section laid out the dynamics and consequences of capitalist exploitation (“The Curse of Adam,” 258 pages), then its treatment of political radicalism from the early 1800s was even more imposing (“The Working-Class Presence,” 382 pages), making clear Thompson's belief (with Marx) that working-class formation was a process driven by politics. As notably, the book began with politics too. Opening with a brief nine-page vignette of the London Corresponding Society (LCS), it then equipped the latter with its genealogies, ranging back and forth through the eighteenth century to show how and where a set of vigorous democratic expectations had been implanted (“The Liberty Tree,” 168 pages). The longest of this first section's five chapters (“Planting the Liberty Tree,” 83 pages) returned to the LCS to develop a rich account of English Jacobinism and its suppression beneath the vindictive onslaught of the state's coercive response.

In Thompson's oppositional history, it was the uncovering of these suppressed popular democratic traditions that allowed the official story to be most effectively challenged. Against the placid and gradualist romance of parliamentary evolution could be set the turbulence of ordinary people demanding their rights. His book unearthed the existence of a diffuse but organized and articulate popular movement, one made revolutionary by the obduracy of government response. Forged in the radical democracy of the Jacobinism of the 1790s, then forced underground by repression, this continuity sustained itself as an “illegal tradition,” conjoined to the emergent militancies of the

1. See Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (London 2002), 214; Gwyn A. Williams, *Artisans and Sans-Culottes: Popular Movements in France and Britain during the French Revolution* (London 1968), 118.

new industrializing economy, before resurfacing in the new radicalisms of the 1810s and 1820s. In unfolding this account, Thompson built on the *oeuvre* of his fellow Marxist Christopher Hill, who during the same years was powerfully redefining the seventeenth-century Civil War as the English Revolution.

For me, still a novice in historiography while in full flight from Nonconformist religion, those early chapters were among the most revelatory. Remember, this was before Natalie Zemon Davis and Carlo Ginzburg, before Keith Thomas, and before social historians started turning to anthropology. Anyone interested in the social purposes of religion still relied on Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic* or R. H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*. Crucially, Thompson had come up through the Communist Party alongside Hill, with A. L. Morton's *Everlasting Gospel: A Study in the Sources of William Blake* (1958) as further guide. While Thompson was working on *The Making*, Hill was gathering his essays into *Puritanism and Revolution* (1958), publishing his textbook *A Century of Revolution* (1961), and preparing *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (1964), which explored the qualities of Puritanism as a complex and enabling social creed. In these terms, there was no reason to be surprised by Thompson's ground-laying second chapter on "Christian and Appolyon," where Bunyan's book was taken to seed the most oppositional, subversive, and demotically resilient strands of popular Dissent as those traditions made their way down the eighteenth century. In the running conversation of those Communist historians, from the forming of the CP Historians' Group in 1945–46 through their post-1956 dispersal, it was the complex interconnectedness of spheres that supplied the main purpose, in this case all of the ways in which seemingly obscure and arcane articles of spiritual belief might work as the elements of a political program. In the intellectual setting of the late 1950s and early 1960s, Hill's patient exegeses worked with the grain of Thompson's ambitions, suggesting how radical Dissent could mark out a ground of activity and belief into which the wider social, cultural, and political aspirations of the time might be condensed.

In Thompson's telling, *Pilgrim's Progress* mapped "the inner spiritual landscape of the poor man's Dissent – of the 'tailors, leather-sellers, soap-boilers, brewers, weavers and tinkers' who were among Baptist preachers – a landscape seeming all the more lurid, suffused with passionate energy and conflict, from the frustration of these passions in the outer world: Beelzebub's Castle, the giants Bloody-man, Maul, and Slay-Good, the Hill Difficulty, Doubting Castle, Vanity Fair, the Enchanted Ground; a way 'full of snares, pits, traps, and gins.' Here are Christian's aristocratic enemies – 'the Lord Carnal Delight, the Lord Luxurious, the Lord Desire of Vain Glory, my old Lord Lechery, Sir Having Greedy, with all the rest of our nobility.' And here is the Valley of Humiliation, in which Bunyan's readers were to be found: 'a Valley that nobody walks in, but those that love a Pilgrim's life.'² Thompson was careful to fill in the "obvious

2. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London 1963), 32. The quota-

negatives” and less appealing features of Bunyan’s imagery too – “the unction, the temporal submissiveness, the egocentric pursuit of personal salvation.” (34) He never neglected the quietest and consolatory aspects of Dissent, citing Methodism’s deradicalizing specter as he brought the chapter to a close.

This “world of the spirit – of righteousness and spiritual liberty” (32) was advanced as a respectful but insistent corrective against Eric Hobsbawm’s “secularist” reading of London Jacobinism and its nineteenth-century legacies.³ For Thompson, the emotional fervor and ethical conviction driving the popular radicalisms of the nineteenth century had a big part of their source in these earlier submerged traditions – that is, “the moral force of the Luddites, of Brandreth and young Bamford, of the Ten Hour Men, of Northern Chartists and I.L.P.” borne “by a special earnestness and vigor of moral concern.” (53–54) Thus “South and North, intellect and enthusiasm, the arguments of secularism and the rhetoric of love – the tension is perpetuated in the nineteenth century.” (54) This was his rationale for building the argument in this chapter around *Pilgrim’s Progress*: “it is above all in Bunyan that we find the slumbering Radicalism which was preserved through the eighteenth century and which breaks out again and again in the nineteenth. *Pilgrim’s Progress* is, with *Rights of Man*, one of the two foundational texts of the English working-class movement: Bunyan and Paine, with Cobbett and Owen, contributed most to the stock of ideas and attitudes which make up the raw material of the movement from 1790–1850. Many thousands of youths found in *Pilgrim’s Progress* their first adventure story, and would have agreed with Thomas Cooper, the Chartist, that this was their ‘book of books.’” (31)

This is one of the unwritten histories *The Making* might still inspire. One of Thompson’s stunning achievements in the book was to have excavated the revolutionary underground of the early 1800s – in the entire fourteenth chapter on “An Army of Redressers” (472–602), but especially its first two sections on “The Black Lamp” (472–84) and “The Opaque Society” (484–97) – which, despite all hostile caviling and qualification, still stands. Equivalent accounts of the dissenting networks of the eighteenth century would be valuable indeed. Of course, Thompson himself pushed back in time in his subsequent work, linking arms eventually with Christopher Hill, as each of them liked to joke. *Whigs and Hunters*, along with the collective effort gathered into *Albion’s Fatal Tree* (each 1975), used a social history of property crimes and the law to expose the bases of England’s early eighteenth-century political order. Likewise, the classic essays eventually assembled into *Customs in Common* (1993) explored

tions inside the quotation are from R. M. Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion* (1923), 418, as well as from Bunyan’s text itself. Henceforth all bracketed page references in the text are from the Gollancz edition of *The Making* cited above.

3. The reference is to another classic just published in the forecourt to *The Making*, namely Eric Hobsbawm’s *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Manchester 1959), 128.

the transformations of customary culture beneath the onslaught of a rapidly commercializing capitalism and its dynamics of penetration into the countryside. Some progress was also made toward recovering the obscured circulation and transmission of the legacies of the antinomian and millenarian sectarianism of the second half of the seventeenth century, notably in the *The World of the Muggletonians* published by Hill, Barry Reay, and William Lamont in 1983 which Thompson had inspired, and in Thompson's own magnificent *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law*, which appeared with his death in 1993.⁴ In *A Tinker and a Poor Man* (1988), Hill also tracked some of the bare lines of Bunyan's influence down through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries out into the wider world, across Europe through Poland to Russia and on via the Christian missions into China and the rebellion of the Taiping. "Next to the Bible," Hill observed, "perhaps the world's best-selling book is *The Pilgrim's Progress*, translated into over 200 languages, with especially wide sales in the Third World," an argument confirmed by Isabel Hofmeyr's recent account of its travels around Africa and the Caribbean.⁵

That brings me full circle back to my grandfather. How should we understand the longevity of Pilgrim and his progress? We know from a rich historiography – for example, David Vincent's two remarkable books on working-class literacy and Jonathan Rose's exhaustive tour of working people's intellectual universe, as well as Richard Altick's classic *The English Common Reader* (also published just before *The Making*, in 1957) – that Bunyan's resonance perdured down the nineteenth century.⁶ In those terms it made perfect sense that *Pilgrim's Progress* belonged in Edward Bloor's small library, just as his birthday present to a small boy was intended to carry things on, in a presumed continuity of understanding and imagination. Four decades ago Stephen Yeo made an eloquent case for the enabling vitality of that imaginative architecture at the very end of the nineteenth century.⁷ Raymond Williams (another

4. For Thompson's later contributions to the historiography of the submerged eighteenth-century undercurrents of radical popular Dissent, see especially William Lamont, "The Muggletonian Archive," in Hill, Reay, and Lamont, *The World of the Muggletonians* (London 1983), 1–5; Edward Thompson, "The Muggletonian Archive," in *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (New York 1993), 115–19; Thompson, "On the Rant," in Geoff Eley and William Hunt, eds., *Reviving the English Revolution: Reflections and Elaborations on the Work of Christopher Hill* (London 1987), 153–60.

5. Christopher Hill, *A Tinker and a Poor Man: John Bunyan and his Church, 1628–1688* (New York 1989), 375; Isabel Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of The Pilgrim's Progress* (Princeton 2004).

6. David Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge, and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working-Class Autobiography* (London 1981), and *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750–1914* (Cambridge 1989); Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven 2001); Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago 1957).

7. Stephen Yeo, "A New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883–1896," *History Workshop Journal*, 4 (Autumn 1977), 5–56.

of Thompson's writing contemporaries) called this memorably a particular "structure of feeling," giving us in the opening chapter of *The Country and the City* (1973) a brilliantly concise rendition of the shifting social and political coordinates of the sensibility concerned.⁸ Yet, between the 1920s and 1950s, as Christopher Hilliard's equally brilliant archaeology of working-class writing and intellect makes abundantly plain, it was already slipping away.⁹ Its traces might still be active (as my opening thoughts were meant to suggest), but with the "democratizing of writing" and all of the complex effects of a commercially founded popular culture, themselves integral to the twentieth-century transformations of capitalism, that particular aspect of the long nineteenth century gradually lost its reach. How to conceptualize the new structure of feeling of the first two thirds of the twentieth century as the working class became re-made, let alone the subsequent tragedies of its un-making, is the biggest of the questions that Thompson's book now allows us to pose.

8. "Country and City," Chapter 1 in Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York 1973), 1–8.

9. Christopher Hilliard, *To Exercise Our Talents: The Democratization of Writing in Britain* (Cambridge, MA 2006).