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Exploitation: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis?

James Epstein

HERE WE ARE, ONCE AGAIN, thinking about *The Making of the English Working Class*. It brings to mind the Beatles' lyric, "Let's all get up and dance to a song that was a hit before your Mother was born." Certainly, for my generation of left-leaning historians these musings could get pretty nostalgic. But what, beyond a trip down social history's memory lane, compels us to return to Thompson's classic? Of course, there are many reasons to think seriously about a book that influenced a generation of readers. But when does such a work slip across a line that separates the present from the past? If one now reads Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*, Régis Debray's *Revolution in the Revolution?*, R. D. Laing's *The Divided Self*, or perhaps Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, most probably it is to learn about the by-gone Sixties. *The Making*, as it became known, can and should be read as a product of its day, as a political intervention, and above all as a book that inspired the wave of "history from below." But Thompson's book is also more.

Elsewhere I have suggested what might be gained by revisiting an earlier concept of "culture" associated with Thompson and Raymond Williams as historians moved "beyond" the cultural or linguistic turn.¹ As for language, one is still struck by Thompson's imaginative understanding. In writing about religious "imagery," he commented: "when we speak of 'imagery' we mean much more than the figures of speech in which ulterior motives are 'clothed'. The imagery is itself evidence of powerful subjective motivations, fully as 'real' as the objective, fully as effective ... in their historical agency. It is a sign of how men felt and hoped, loved and hated, and of how they preserved certain values in the very texture of their language."² In a lecture marking the thirtieth anniversary of the book's publication, Carolyn Steedman quoted this same passage to illustrate the sort of attention historians needed to pay "to the materiality of the written word" in order to think about "other knowledges, other consciousnesses, in the making of the English working class."³ On re-reading the book one comes across such passages that have not fully registered before; *The Making* retains a capacity to surprise the reader with a fresh invitation to reflection.

If asked to choose one might argue that the book's key chapter and driving concept is that of exploitation, seen as inseparable from class. Chapter six,

1. James Epstein, *In Practice: Studies in the Language and Practice of Popular Politics in Modern Britain* (Stanford 2003).

2. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London 1963), 49. Future citations of this Gollancz edition of *The Making* will appear in the text, with page numbers bracketed.

3. Carolyn Steedman, "The Price of Experience: Women and the Making of the English Working Class," *Radical History Review*, 59 (Spring 1994), 115–116.

entitled simply "Exploitation," opens Part Two of *The Making*, "The Curse of Adam," consisting of a series of chapters that address the experience of work and community during England's industrial revolution. A short chapter in a long book, "Exploitation" includes some of the book's more striking passages; for example, the work's central proposition, "Nevertheless, when every caution has been made the outstanding fact of the period between 1790 and 1830 is the formation of the 'working class'" – revealed first in terms of "class consciousness," or a feeling of identity among diverse groups of workers, and second, in the growth of "corresponding forms of political and industrial organization." (194) Over these decades, there developed deeply rooted working-class institutions, intellectual traditions, community-patterns, and what Thompson termed "a working-class structure of feeling" (a construction adopted from Williams). The next paragraph concludes with a classic assertion of agency: "The working class made itself as much as it was made." (194) Thompson throws down the gauntlet, challenging both the empiricism of economic history and the mechanistic orthodoxy of post-war Marxism. It was the felt experience of "economic exploitation and of political oppression" out of which workers mobilized a movement opposed to the reactionary state apparatus and the new industrial order. The "transparency of the process of exploitation" served to unite workers across diverse regions and forms of employment. Thompson brilliantly elucidates a process whereby the diversity of working-class experience assumed a recognizable coherence, generating common feelings of "unfreedom" and intensified exploitation.

For Marx exploitation derived from the process of capitalist production in which surplus labour and surplus value were extracted from living labour. As Thompson writes, "the exploitative relationship is more than the sum of grievances and mutual antagonism." The relationship takes "distinct forms in differing historical contexts, forms which are related to corresponding forms of ownership and State power." He goes on to describe "the classic exploitative relationship" of the industrial era as "depersonalized," characterized by the severing of the "obligations of mutuality ... There is no whisper of the 'just' price, or of a wage justified in relation to social or moral sanctions." (203) The sole object is "the expropriation of the maximum surplus value from labour." This is how Marx understood the social relations of capitalist production. In fact, Thompson qualifies these stark abstractions by commenting that no industrial enterprise could actually function on such a philosophy. This mode of capitalist exploitation is then best viewed as a historical tendency.

While Thompson argued that workers suffered an intensification of exploitation, he viewed the encroachments on the customary controls over work practices, the erosion of the notion of the "just wage," and loss of artisanal independence within a broad cultural and political context. The book's wide-ranging and nuanced account of how resistance to capitalist exploitation and the popular impulse for equality and democracy were transformed into radical mobilization remains its great achievement. It is easy now to spot the absences.

Certain key forms of exploitation and subjective identity are excluded. By the late 1970s and 1980s, feminists and historians of women argued that Thompson's concept of class was a gendered construct; despite the appearance of women in its pages, the book was ultimately "a story about men." One might further observe that chattel slavery, the most exploitative relationship of the era, does not figure in Thompson's account; neither the antislavery movement nor the relationship between British slavery, capitalism, and industrialization are explored. The French Revolution is crucial to Thompson's story but the Haitian Revolution passes without mention. These are not simply blind spots, but arise from the way in which Thompson conceived exploitation as a category of historical analysis. Thus forms of exploitation unincorporated within popular radicalism's terms of reference, those not "felt" or "experienced" (felt and experienced by whom is the question) fall outside Thompson's own line of vision.

At the heart of chapter six, Thompson reproduces the lengthy address of "A Journeyman Cotton Spinner;" this is a signature move using the address to describe parts of "the exploitative process as they appeared to one remarkable cotton operative in 1818." (199–202) Working people are allowed to speak for themselves; indeed, their analysis is privileged over that of historians. What matters is the itemization of grievances "felt by working people as to changes in the character of capitalist exploitation." It is, indeed, a remarkable document, distinguished by its articulate address, cogency, and tone of class resentment. Interestingly, and not untypically, the cotton spinner compares the plight of "the English spinner slave ... locked up in factories eight stories high," bondmen "till the ponderous engine stops," to the condition of the "negro slave in the West Indies" who at least has an occasional breeze to fan him, as well as his own "space of ground, and time allowed to cultivate it." (201) Thompson does not comment on this comparison, but the common rhetorical strategy of contrasting the exploitation suffered by factory hands with that of plantation slaves deserves attention. It represents a connection drawn in radical discourse between two regimes of exploitation, involving a complex mix of ambivalent values and sentiments.

In the first instance, the status of the "free-born" Englishman was secured against the figure of the slave. If Britons "never shall be slaves," what about British slaves themselves? William Cobbett, described by Thompson as "the 'free-born Englishman' incarnate" and credited with having created radicalism's intellectual culture, repeatedly denounced the "negrophile" hypocrisy of British abolitionism. It is difficult to assess the extent to which Cobbett's readers shared his pronounced racism, but for many leading radicals the hypocrisy of abolitionists was to view slavery as a form of exploitation that eclipsed the suffering of Britain's labouring poor. For abolitionism slavery was a singular form of inhumanity, an anomaly within a moral universe based on individual freedom. But as Thompson never allows us to forget, during these

decades the meanings of “freedom” and “independence” were contested with unprecedented vehemence.

When emancipation came in 1833, passed into law by the same parliament that imposed penal sanctions on “idleness” through the provisions of the reformed Poor Law, it sharpened working-class resentment. The £20 million compensation paid to West Indian proprietors more than rankled. James Bronterre O’Brien, the most sophisticated radical writer of the day, argued that a just parliament would begin by “abolishing domestic slavery” and protecting children from working in factories. As for the former slaves, having been previously “free from the deadly effects of competing with each other as labourers,” he predicted they would soon become like British workers subject to the “tyranny of capital.”⁴

In the wake of emancipation, formerly enslaved people resisted the freedom of wage labour, confirming anti-abolitionist views of their imperviousness to capitalist incentives. Yet it was not an aversion to non-coerced labour per se that freed persons exhibited, but rather a desire to labour for themselves. What both planters and abolitionists failed to credit was that Afro-Caribbeans cherished their own notion of free or independent labour, one based on the self-sufficiency of the small producer. Aspirations to become free peasants underpinned the full-scale risings of enslaved people in the period between the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and emancipation. At the end of 1831, an insurrection of between 20,000 and 30,000 slaves in Jamaica left a landscape of burnt sugar factories and devastated cane fields. A year earlier dependent agricultural labourers destroyed threshing machines and burnt hayricks as the “Swing” riots swept England’s agricultural districts. Thompson comments that rural England’s “last labourers’ revolt” “was met [by government] with the same sense of outrage as a rising of the ‘blacks’.” (226) The comparison is apt, but not pursued.

The twin experiences of exploitation, those of British workers and West Indian slaves, were profoundly different. Nonetheless, the desire that field labourers, artisans, weavers, factory hands, and others exhibited for a measure of independence and autonomy over their lives and labour was shared not only among themselves but at an ocean’s distance with former slaves who shunned plantation labour in favour of small-scale farming. The resistance to wage labour encouraged planters to import large numbers of indentured workers from Asia, introducing a new form of deep bondage to the West Indies. This is not a global trail that Thompson followed for obvious reasons; however, his handling of the concept of exploitation is certainly worth re-exploring as historians take the imperial or global turn.

Thompson believed historical logic to be subject to phenomena which are always in movement, “which evince ... contradictory manifestations, whose

4. *Poor Man’s Guardian*, 15 June 1833, 189–190.

particular evidences can only find definition from particular contexts.” As he wrote: “History knows no regular verbs.”⁵ Thus mediation between general categories – such as class or paternalism – and particular historical instances demand cautious handling. When Thompson wrote about “the moral economy” it was with reference to the eighteenth-century English crowd and specific norms governing the marketing of grain. *The Making* is about the “English” working class because, as he explains, the Scottish, Welsh, and Irish experiences were distinct enough to preclude generalizing beyond England. Yet this hardly prevented historians from adapting his approach to other societies, themes, and periods, influenced by his ability to embed theory within the historical texture of his work. The sheer scale of *The Making*, however inspirational, is more difficult to contemplate within today’s academy – but then Thompson’s relationship to the academy was mainly as an outsider.

The Making is an epic of origins. While the English working class was not simply made by the 1830s – it was of course subject to major changes in its composition and political outlook – in the late 1950s and early 1960s the labour movement remained a dominant presence within a welfare state and society divided along class lines. Merely a decade and a half after the publication of *The Making*, Eric Hobsbawm wrote his prescient essay, “The Forward March of Labour Halted?” In fact, the vision of an implied social trajectory was an optical illusion. In the 1960s, there were already signs that the “traditional” working-class culture identified in the work of Thompson, Williams, and Richard Hoggart was on the wane, although only a clairvoyant could have predicted the advent of Thatcherism. We live now in a post-working-class era. Industrial labour has given way to the increased dominance of labour engaged in the production of knowledge, information, entertainment, “affective” service, etc. Post-modern identities are fractured and our social imaginary is one of surfaces. It is a transformed world of capitalist dominion characterized by global integration and the exploitation of the many by the few. The possibilities for generating as well as sustaining movements for democracy out of a shared experience of exploitation remain to be seen. The “Occupy” movement, Tahrir Square, Taksim Square, and recent waves of resistance summoned in the street and projected globally illuminate a new idealism seeking justice and democratic change. But can the “myriads of eternity” (Thompson quoting Blake) join forces to become “more than the sum of grievances” they share? To conclude, one should note the utopian impulse that runs through Thompson’s work, his recognition of the importance of longings for that which is “not yet,” and for what he referred to elsewhere as “the unprecribed initiatives of everyday men and women who, in some part of themselves, are also alienated and utopian by turns.”⁶

5. “The Poverty of Theory: or an Orrery of Errors,” in E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London 1978), 230, 238.

6. E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London 1977), 807.