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E.P. Thompson's *Capital: Political Economy in The Making*

Michael Merrill

THE MAKING OF THE ENGLISH WORKING CLASS was not written by an historian. In 1963 its author, E.P. Thompson, was a writer and political activist, who worked as a Tutor in English for the Extra Mural Studies Department at the University of Leeds. His first book had been a spirited political biography of William Morris; his second an edited collection of essays gathered in the wake of Khrushchev's 1956 denunciation of Stalin at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), which was soon followed by the British incursion into the Suez and the Soviet invasion of Hungary. As an activist, Thompson played a key role in the creation of the New Left. He co-edited with John Saville the *Reasoner*, a mimeographed journal of dissent within the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), which became the *New Reasoner* after he and Saville left the party rather than obey a directive to suspend publication; and he was a local organizer of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), which mobilized hundreds of thousands of people in Great Britain to call for an end to both nuclear testing and nuclear weapons. Thompson and his New Left comrades wanted to create a viable alternative, on the one hand, to the CPGB, which was almost solely identified in the public mind with defending the national interests of the USSR, whatever the impact of such defense on the interests of workers elsewhere; and, on the other, to the British Labour Party, which devoted itself far too slavishly in the opinion of Thompson and his comrades to defending the national interest of the United States and its NATO front. He wrote *The Making of the English Working Class* as a contribution to this creation, a witness to the possibility of a different kind of politics and a different kind of world.

Things did not turn out the way Thompson had hoped, though that is not a story I will tell here. My goal here is simply to help honor *The Making of the English Working Class* and its author, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of its publication, by emphasizing the book's importance not only as a work of history but also as a political, and even a theoretical, tract for our time. I want especially to underscore the ways in which *The Making* was not just a product of the New Left but also a strategic intervention within it. It was addressed primarily to a broad audience of activists and working-class students rather than historians; and it was intended more to change the way history was made than to change the way it was written. Moreover, Thompson did not write with just an English audience in mind, or with just the past in view: the working class for him was global, and he was as concerned with its prospects as with its formation. He sought to show the world, including those parts of it to which his students belonged, as well as his comrades on the Left and the many people

with whom he worked in campaigns for peace and other forms of social protection, that the history of earlier struggles provided imaginative resources to assist their common efforts to make the world a better place.

The Making is not just a history, then, at least not in any conventional sense. It is a work of political and social conviction, which is *also* a history. Anyone familiar with the book remembers Thompson's famous desire to "rescue the poor stockinger ... from the enormous condescension of posterity."¹ The sentiments that follow deserve to be equally familiar:

Our only criterion of judgment should not be whether or not a man's actions are justified in the light of subsequent evolution [in other words, in the light of history]. After all, we are not at the end of social evolution [i.e., history (!)] ourselves. In some of the lost causes of the people of the [English] Industrial Revolution we may discover insights into social evils which we have yet to cure. Moreover, the greater part of the world today is still undergoing problems of industrialization, and of the formation of democratic institutions, analogous in many ways to our own experience during [our] Industrial Revolution. Causes which were lost in England might, in Asia or Africa, yet be won.

At the same time, of course, *The Making of the English Working Class* is not just a political tract. It may have been written with exceptional energy and engagement, as the above excerpt testifies. But every page also evidences a prodigious amount of solid research, and is informed by a sophisticated theoretical framework, which Thompson elaborated upon in his justly famous preface and on other occasions. In my 1976 interview with him, for example, Thompson returned again and again to his *theoretical* as well as to *historical* practice, and what he had to say there still merits close attention.² He did not want *The Making* thought the product of conventionally academic intentions, important as they might be. He wanted it understood as a challenge to politically active people everywhere, and especially to Marxists and communists, with whom he had no hesitation in associating himself. Indeed, *The Making* was the product of a specifically Marxist imagination. Thompson was particularly keen that his Marxist comrades come to think about society and social problems differently, in a less abstract, more empirically-informed way. That they may have learned their particular mode of abstraction, and their preference for the theoretic over the empiric, from Marx himself did not deter him in the least! Thompson did not hesitate to suggest that he thought the movement would be better off if it were a bit more Darwinian and a bit less Marxian.

Not that Thompson wanted to give up on Marx altogether. On the contrary, he greatly respected Marx's contributions to the continuing effort to imagine and to construct a better society. But he urged on his comrades and on the movement a different, more historical approach, both for intellectual

1. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth 1968), 6. Subsequent references in the text (e.g., M:6).

2. MARHO, ed., *Visions of History: Interviews* (New York 1983), 3–26. Subsequent page references are in the text (e.g., V:3–26).

and for specifically political reasons. He had come to believe that the characteristic intellectuality of the Marxist tradition was so closed-minded, even hermetically-sealed, against empirical controls and dissenting views that it led directly, in ways he not only could specify but also had experienced, to "Stalinism:" to the dictatorship of the proletariat in the form of a proletarian dictator. Thompson offered *The Making* as an example of what a different approach might yield; and he spent much of his life, as well as his considerable energies, trying to bring the movement back – or arguably to – this different, truly democratic, we might even say, scientific way of working.

It is in this spirit that *The Making* needs to be read. The book arose, according to Thompson, "from a two-sided polemic" against, on the one side, "the extremely firm, intellectually well-based discipline of economic history ... from Adam Smith and the orthodox political economists through to the present day," which had been "contaminated with capitalist ideology" (V:6); and, on the other, against various "abbreviated economistic notations of Marxism," which had "the very simplified notion" that "the creation of the working class was ... a determined process:" so many peasants arriving from the countryside processed "into so many yards of class-conscious proletarians." Thompson declared himself concerned instead to show that class formation was not a mechanical stamping out of properly constituted proles. "[N]ew experiences in social being" did not just happen *to* people; they were "handled" *by* them in "cultural ways," with "existing plebeian consciousness [being] refracted by new experiences," which gave rise "to a transformed consciousness." (V:7)

The lessons of *The Making*, in Thompson's view, were applicable to the present as well as to the past. An "immense amount of existing historiography," he insisted, "has seen society within the expectations, the self-image, the apologetics, of a ruling class." It has been "the propaganda of the victors." Against this trend, he sought "to recover an alternative history," which "often involves a polemic against an established ideology." (V:8) Very importantly, however, he also sought to accomplish this recovery in ways that guarded against the temptation to become an apologist oneself. He reported being "transfixed" by the "degeneration of the theoretical vocabulary of mainstream orthodox Marxism" after 1956, the "impoverishment of its sensibility" and the consequent "primacy of categories that denied the effective existence (in history or the present) of the moral consciousness." (V:21) He conveyed this concern starkly in a poem from that momentous year:³

... we
Who moralize necessity
With slate of sophistry erect
A gibbet of the intellect

3. E.P. Thompson, "In Praise of Hangmen," *Collected Poems* (Newcastle Upon Tyne 1999), 75.

And from its foul and abstract rope
 Suspend all social hope
 Until with swollen tongue
 Morality itself is hung.

He had come to think that a “whole area of imaginative passion” concerned with our obligations to concrete and particular others had been extruded from Marxism. The categories by which such passions could be understood, and the vocabulary by which they could be spoken, had been lost to the tradition. It was absent from Marx. Where we might expect to find it there was “a silence,” filled with “unarticulated assumptions and unrealized mediations.” Thompson “tried to give that silence a voice,” not only in *The Making* but also in other writing in the 1970s, with what he hoped was “increasing theoretical consciousness.” (V:21)⁴

In fact, Thompson did not think of himself as an historian. “I never ‘took a decision’ to be a historian. I don’t remember ever taking any decisions of that kind,” he recalled in the interview. “I agreed to write *Making* because I was hard up, and a publisher wanted a textbook on the British labor movement, 1832 to 1945. I suggested it might be 1790 to 1945, and *Making* is the first chapter.” But in so saying he did not also mean that he was not “engaged all the time in a theoretical argument about the historical process” (V: 13–15). That was precisely what he was engaged in. And fifty years on, this particular feature of Thompson’s text remains worth emphasizing. We should take him at his word: *The Making* is a work of *economic* and social history, which was centrally concerned to counter the notion that economic relationships were (or are) in some sense impervious to culture; that they were (or are) natural or mechanical or immutable, in ways that specifically cultural products, which are social, fluid and ephemeral, generally are not. As such, *The Making* tells the tale of the developing resistance on the part of English working people to new and old forms of domination and exploitation. It documents a shift during the first third of the 19th century from deference to defiance, and details the development of the new cultural, social, and intellectual resources with which the English working class opened up possibilities for itself. The world changed, then. More specifically, it was *made* to change, to accommodate what was “in

4. Thompson defends “the Marxist tradition” in “An Open Letter to Leszek Kolawkowski,” *Socialist Register* 1973, (London: 1974), 1–101, while raising pointed questions about it, and about Marx’s own practice, in the “The Poverty of Theory; or, An Orrery of Errors,” which first appeared in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York 1978), 1–210. Subsequent references in the text (e.g., T:1–210). His long postscript to the revised edition of *William Morris: From Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York 1976) on “Necessity and Desire,” represents another landmark intervention, as does the defence of the law in the conclusion to *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* (London 1975). See also the sharp criticisms in *Writing by Candlelight* (London 1980) of the security measures being taken in Britain during the 1970s in response to popular resistance to the austerity measures of the Labour Party government led by James Callaghan.

1832, the most significant factor in British political life:" the "working-class presence." (M:12)

To treat such matters culturally, as the effects of conscious choices and intentional acts by knowable people, who can be held responsible for their actions, and should be, rather than as facts of nature or acts of God, is also to treat them politically, as if they may be changed; and theoretically, as instances of larger processes that still afflict us. In this regard *The Making* may be read as Thompson's own "critique of political economy" – or, more exactly, as his description of the English working class's "critique of political economy" as it emerged in the 1830s. What is offered is not so much an alternative to Marx's critique, as an elaboration of it. In "The Poverty of Theory," Thompson taxed Marx quite severely for offering "a serial relation of categories" rather than "an integrative historical analysis," a "logical formula" rather than a history (T:121) – the very sins for which Marx had earlier pilloried Proudhon in *The Poverty of Philosophy*. By being excessively theoretical and insufficiently historical, Thompson argued, Marx did not provide an alternative to "Political Economy," understood as a lifeless system of abstract categories; instead, he merely put a different lifeless system in its place. (T: 60) Thompson thus built upon Marx, even as worked to go beyond him, by rooting his categories and critique in the continuing efforts of real historical individuals who were both seeking to understand what was happening *and* trying to do something about it.

Thompson's *The Making* succeeds where Marx's *Capital* fails. It provides more than just a different political economy – the "positing" of abstract relationships like "commodity" or "capital" and a set of "laws" that govern their "actions" like "supply-and-demand" or "competition." It provides an alternative to "Political Economy" – a "real historical process," in which people struggle to improve and maintain their conditions of life, as members of specific communities and cultures, in the midst of changes they can affect but not control. Marx's procedures leave us still ensnared in the inhuman categories we need to transcend. Indeed, his characteristic "mode of abstraction" still left him, at least "on occasion," with "capital as the unfolding of its own idea." (T: 63) The result, Thompson argued at length in "Poverty," was a "static, anti-historical structure," which was the product of what was essentially an idealist mode of thought," which he considered "extraordinary" to find "in a materialist." Marx may have wanted to portray capital as a social relationship but he became so obsessed by the "Political Economy" he wanted to criticize that it became an "Idea, which manifests itself in history" (T: 61) – or as Thompson might well have more accurately written, "in History."

Read this way, *The Making* is the redeemed promise of a truly materialist critique of political economy. Like *Capital*, as Ellen Meiksins Wood, too, has noted, it is informed by political economy's categories.⁵ But unlike *Capital*, it

5. Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge 1995), esp. chapters 2 and 3.

is not trapped within them. Thompson does not describe a closed, theoretical system but an open historical process, which, while deeply imbricated with capitalist relationships, is also decisively shaped by emergent alternatives. No one, it seems to me, can deny *The Making's* status as a work of history, even if we might differ as to its worth. But neither ought anyone deny its status – and stature – as theory. A properly materialist critique of *any* structured totality of social relations, including a properly materialist critique of a specifically capitalist political economy, will be a history of the sort that Thompson gave us. Other more abstract work, including Marx's own, certainly contributes to the effort. But it does so, if at all, as *prolegomena* or as *coda*. It provides “hypotheses, informed by consistent theoretical propositions” (T: 66), which historians and others (Thompson being in fact one of these others) can interrogate and investigate, as well as general lessons that, if found telling, may be applied elsewhere. This is as it should be. But according to Thompson the concepts of Marxism must be “historical categories,” if they are to make an actual contribution to the struggle and not be simply another burden on it. (T: 68) Moreover, they must be deployed concretely, as part of a discovered “real historical process,” and not abstractly, as part of a closed, self-sufficient system. Otherwise they are not historical at all. This is the kind of “theory” Thompson's *Making* showed was possible and we would all do well to follow his example, as best we can.

Among the Autodidacts: The Making of E.P. Thompson

Margaret C. Jacob

THINKING ABOUT E.P. THOMPSON and *The Making of the English Working Class* immediately calls to mind the British left of the 1960s. Its leading figures included many workers and intellectuals, such as Thompson himself, who had left the British Communist Party (CP) in 1956 when the Soviet Union invaded Hungary and brutally suppressed a revolt led by students and workers. After much soul searching, Edward, among others – handworkers as well as professionals – joined the Labour Party and from within sought to push the party further to the left and to consolidate and extend the advances of post-war socialism. Although not from the working class, during his years in the CP Edward Thompson developed close ties to many workers.

The Making reflected the post 1956 desire to maintain class solidarity as well as the belief that an extension of socialism was still possible in Britain, provided the Labour Party did not renege on its commitments to substitute communal cooperation for the divisive forces of competition. That fear materialized only after *The Making* was published when, in the following year, in 1964 Labour under Harold Wilson came to power. In its policies, the left