

“The something that has called itself ‘Marxism’”

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working class or not. The British left expended so much energy on Cold War issues, on the struggle against imperialism and capitalist greed, even for a time on opposing Britain's entry into the EU, that major injustice within the British Isles went largely unaddressed. That is simply to say that for all its brilliance, the left of Thompson's generation was resolutely English and deeply suspicious of all religious identities, but particularly Papist. It professed solidarity with the oppressed everywhere, but in practice the focus was on English industrial cities, London, and Washington.

The Making of the English Working Class is magisterial because it captured, identified with, and then gave origins to an industrial working class of its generation. Thompson's porosity and insight into workers' lives – so different from his own – taught historians how to read in the past and listen in the present to the voices of the semi-literate who lived lives of often numbing tedium, or to reconstruct the radicalism of reformers such as John Thelwall, Thomas Spence, Thomas Evans, and Father O'Coigly (alias Captain Jones). Thompson comfortably researched among the shadows of barely legal organizing, clandestine publishing, and revolutionary plotting. He used the State Papers with their spy reports and the manuscript remains of radicals, either left out of the historical account entirely or unconnected with shaping the consciousness of the new industrial class. The habits of secrecy were closer to his Communist experience than to anything the left of the 1960s might have entertained.

The Making gave a history to working class identities that have now all but disappeared. A *May Day Manifesto* today is unimaginable, although the moral compass to which Edward gave a history, and by which Jim and Gertie lived, survives to this day in left-of-center circles on both sides of the Atlantic. Writing about those who have been forgotten or despised continues apace among a new generation of historians, whose aspirations are often global and whose ability to take up new languages and cultures is breathtaking. Whether writing about West or East, *The Making* remains an exercise in historical imagination that most of us can only envy and seek to emulate.

"The something that has called itself 'Marxism'"

Peter Way

FIFTY YEARS CONSTITUTE AN EON in terms of scholarship. Only the very best books weather the inevitable cycling of historical subjects and we can learn much from the vicissitudes of their "careers." That we are still debating E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* attests to its continued salience. The book served as a harbinger of a cultural tide of social history in the 1960s that called the very nature of society into question, a tide cresting in

the early 1980s. During these years, Thompson cast a large shadow for graduate students, myself included. Inevitably tides ebb, as did social history, only to be succeeded by another wave of scholarship concerned primarily with positioning the self in culture. Key historians, Thompson included, made real this turning of the tide at a colloquium at New York's New School for Social Research in 1985. The event proved pivotal to socialist scholarship, signaling the cultural turn but also Thompson's growing disengagement from Marxism. I will use this event, near equidistant in time between the book's publication and the present, as a glass through which to gain perspective on Thompson's enduring sway on historical scholarship as well as to discern how, over the last decade, a riptide of current events and intellectual exhaustion with postmodernist conceits would return to the forefront of historical consciousness the same concerns addressed by Thompson: oppression and the quest for social justice in a world modeled on the market.

The Making

The Making took shape during the most frigid point of the Cold War. Most historical writing at that time tended to conservative examinations of politics and personalities within a past assumed as consensual and free of class conflict. Historical materialism still obtained on the left but structuralist enforcers of dogma had a theoretical stranglehold on Marxist history imagined as a reflex of economic forces. They conflicted with English scholars who believed theory only became real through praxis, human experience recovered by empirical study. Writing within this tradition, Thompson may have wished to rescue Marxist history from the enormous condescension of contemporaneity but certainly, with *The Making*, extracted human possibility from historical materialism, a quiet revolution caught in a simple shift of emphasis. Marx most succinctly expressed his understanding of historical causation in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852). "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past." He allowed for human agency but ascribed more power to the "tradition of all dead generations." Since then, most of his followers and his myriad critics seemed to have ignored the sentence's first clause whereas Thompson embraced the opening offered. He first reiterated Marx. "The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born – or enter involuntarily." Then he realigned the polarity of meaning with significant consequences. "Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms. If the experience appears as determined, class-consciousness does not." Moreover, Thompson defined class not as "a thing" but as "a *historical* phenomenon" entailing "the notion of historical relationship" between classes. Finally, in explaining the book's title,

he provided the capstone to this revisionary Marxism: "*Making*, because it is a study in an active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning."¹ From a static category of analysis conceived of as predetermined by objective forces, Thompson resuscitated class as a historical concept and struck the shackles from Marxist analysis.

Thompson's prioritization of culture over mode of production and human agency over historical determination derived at root, it appears to me now, from ambivalence toward Marxism that grew over time. But this unease, manifested in a devaluing of theory relative to exposition, made *The Making* the breakthrough Marxist history text. Its rich descriptive passages and expansive detailing of working-class life allowed less politically committed academics to indulge in consumer-friendly socialism. But it came at a cost. A deracinated understanding of class too often allowed historical *mise-en-scène* – recreations of moments of class conflict – to substitute for a model of causation. Many followers also forgot Thompson's dictum that classes only exist in relationship to one another, privileging workers and pushing the agents of capital to the periphery. And ultimately, the very feature of *The Making* that had invited so many people into the house of labour – its formulation of class in cultural terms and emphasis on human agency – also provided a point of egress.

The Unmaking

October 20, 1985, eight months after the Politburo elected Mikhail Gorbachev as General Secretary paving the way for *Perestroika* and *Glasnost*. An extraordinary meeting convened at the New School for Social Research. The cream of British Marxists – Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, Perry Anderson, and E. P. Thompson – addressed "The Agenda for Radical History," with Joan Scott offering comments. A group of grad students traveled from Maryland by Greyhound to this event. My first time at an academic gathering of this scale and the first time these four fellow travelers sat together around the same table, the occasion also marked Thompson's return to the academic sphere after six years in the peace movement fighting the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Called in response to the threat posed by Thatcherism and Reaganism, it seemed scripted as a love-in of British Marxism and unwound as expected, with statements of achievement and mild calls for expanding, contextualizing, and rethinking of Marxist scholarship. Then Thompson darkened the tone. The proceedings reveal a man tired of the fight – both with triumphant conservatism but also the struggle over Marxism's meaning – and facing an intellectual existentialist crisis.²

1. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London 1964), 9–11.

2. Margaret C. Jacob and Ira Katznelson, "Agendas for Radical History," *Radical History Review*, 36 (Fall 1986), 26–45. All ensuing quotations are from this text.

"I feel like an impostor here," Thompson began, "because for six years now my trade has been submerged in peace activity" and, under the shadow of nuclear war, "all talk of history and culture becomes empty." The experience made him look at history with another eye. "I have to say honestly, without any sense of particular criticism, or of any large theoretical statement, that I'm less and less interested in Marxism as a theoretical system. I'm neither pro nor anti so much as bored with some of the argument that goes on. I find some of the argument a distraction from the historical problems, an impediment to completing my work." He found "it difficult to say what my relationship to the Marxist tradition is," and in any event he felt "happier with the term 'historical materialism.' And also with the sense that ideas and values are situated in a material context, and material needs are situated in a context of norms and expectations, and one turns around this many-sided societal object of investigation. From one aspect it is a mode of production, from another a way of life." And here he returned to the central theme of *The Making* and the ambivalence at its heart. "I think the provisional categories of Marxism ... those of class, ideology, and mode of production, are difficult but still creative concepts. But, in particular, the historical notion of the dialectic between social being and social consciousness – although it is a dialectical interrelationship which I would sometimes wish to invert – is extraordinarily powerful and important. Yet I find also in the tradition pressures towards reductionism, affording priority to 'economy' over 'culture.'" Defining need economically "tends to enforce a hierarchy of causation which affords insufficient priority to other needs: the needs of identity, the needs of gender identity, the need for respect and status among working people themselves." Thompson then offered a stinging rebuke to radical history. "[O]n so many of the great problems of the twentieth century, the something that has called itself 'Marxism' has had so little helpful to say."³ Consequently, Thompson did not want to tell anyone how to write history. "If our work is continued by others, it will be continued differently." Nonetheless, he prophetically cautioned against cultural studies unhinged from an understanding of material forces. "Some studies of 'culture' forget the controlling context of power." He then yielded the podium to Joan Scott.

A preview of her seminal article "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,"⁴ Scott's comments presaged the multiple critiques that soon assaulted Marxist scholarship. She chastised the panelists for ignoring women or treating them as add-ons to masculine history. She proposed gender as a historical concept equally valid to class, and gender "understood not just as

3. I corrected the text, which reads: "the something that called has itself 'Marxism.'" "Agendas for Radical History," 40–41. Thompson indicated nationalisms, Nazism, Stalinism, the Chinese cultural revolution, and the Cold War as issues upon which Marxism had had little to offer.

4. Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review*, 91 (December 1986), 1053–1075.

a physical or social fact, but as a way of organizing and talking about social relations of power." Moreover, post-structuralist language theory, not historical materialism, offered the best means of understanding the gendered past. Finally, Scott argued for multicausality in place of Marxism's "simple mono-causal" model. This blunt wedge caused the first crack in the Thompsonian model. I do not mean to attribute this development solely to Scott or to devalue gender as a historical concept. But Scott's critique served as a catalyst for a critical onslaught. A phalanx of criticism fed by differing conceptual models later contained within postmodernism's portmanteau posed an epistemological threat to Marxist theory and led to a paradigmatic shift in social history from the study of society to that of culture, from a thing (the structured relationships of people) to an idea (how these relationships are imagined/articulated). Thus while Thompson used the podium that day in October in part to recount his struggles with the right, the real threat to his way of understanding history sat to his left as regime change was in the air. Forces beyond the academy conspired as well, being in the very *zeitgeist* of the late 1980s: the end of the Cold War and the de-Stalinization of eastern Europe; the rediscovery of race as well as gender; the cultural fashions of political correctness and multiculturalism; and the identity politics to which they gave rise. These factors ushered in an era deeming Marxism *déclassé*.

My Making

My time at grad school straddled this pivotal moment. Somehow I had avoided reading *The Making*, not having studied much British history. Similarly, I avoided being a Marxist until my road-to-Damascus moment as a Canadian moving to Reagan's America in 1983, studying with Ira Berlin and Richard Price at the University of Maryland. From the first, I had problems with Thompson's "culturalism." In hands less adroit than the master's, the model too often led to simplistic renderings of working-class power and the removal of the master class from the scenario. Theory did not precipitate this critical awakening; instead, historical documents I encountered (both in my research on canal diggers and my work as a research assistant on the Freedmen and Southern Society Project) told me a different story. For every instance of class struggle among workers or freed slaves, episodes of their oppression, quiescence, or internal dissonance multiplied. Trying to square that received wisdom with these documents spurred the development of my understanding of class. However, possessing my own ambivalence to theory and finding the storytelling of British Marxism beguiling, *The Making* also drew me in. But I never stopped searching for a firmer handle on class than it seemed to offer. The same can also be said, I think, of Thompson, particularly in his writing on the 18th century.

The critical assault on Marxism was underway by the time of my writing the dissertation but, if anything, this reaffirmed my radical commitment. Some

have read my work on canal diggers as a critique of the Thompsonian approach, and to a certain extent that is true, particularly as American labour historians applied his concepts. However, I considered it an attempt to work within his framework and to expand our understanding of some of his key ideas. In particular, I sought to show how the cultural mediation of class experience did not always lead to class-consciousness and how human agency did not always produce acts constitutive of class conflict, while I also tried to restore Thompson's more catholic understanding of the working class. In problematizing elements of Thompson's framework, I sought to show what a destructive creation capitalism was, something Thompson gave more attention to in his writings on the 18th century. And in attempting to accommodate gender, race, and ethnicity within my framework without neutering class I intended to reinforce the weak point in Thompson's cultural model. In any event, the cultural politics of the era swept o'er my intervention.

The Remaking

The 1990s had not been a good time to believe in class. Many labour historians, experiencing an existentialist crisis, turned introspective if not self-flagellant. They juggled class, gender, and race as if apples, oranges, and pears; they explored whiteness, republicanism, market revolution, simplistic reifications of elements of a more profound historical process. Thompson's ambivalence had become a denial of faith by recusants of the Marxist altar. Still, many persevered and, inevitably, the tide began to turn once more on passing the millennium. Class, a revenant concept, turned material once more. A dubious "war on terror," in part prompted by the need to control the oil market, and an obdurate recession precipitated by unhindered capitalism even brought Marx back into discussion in the popular media. The academy's cold war with class began to thaw, as the siren call of "pomo" lost some allure. Survivors hardened in the culture wars of the 1990s, brought their own work to fruition, as did their grad students, the lifeblood of ideas. *The Making* remained the "bible" to studies of class formation under industrial capitalism. Thompson's work on pre-capitalist Britain (as well as that of Hill and Hobsbawm), with its emphasis on men and women navigating the treacherous currents of history, proved particularly central to the fields of the Atlantic World and the African Diaspora. One thinks of the work of established scholars such as Ira Berlin, Philip Morgan, or Robin Blackburn, but Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker's *The Many-Headed Hydra*⁵ proved the perfect symbol of this renaissance. Published at millennium's turn, it signaled to the academic world that Marxist history still mattered, empirically based history with an explicit model of explaining change over time and a concern for human justice at its heart. The

5. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (London 2000).

fresh scholarship of Laurent Dubois, Emma Christopher, Christopher Brown, Niklas Frykman, Denver Brunsman, and John Donoghue, among others, confirms this rebirth.⁶

Thompson plays an obvious part as well in my current work on British soldiers in the 18th century. As an institution modeled on the class structure of British society with patrician officers and plebeian rank-and-file, the army encapsulated the dynamic relations of class Thompson espied in this period. The military's parsing out of the day and clockwork training strikes a chord with his reading of time, work, and discipline. The egregious application of military justice calls to mind the enforcement of the Black Act. Notions of moral economy and customary rights guided troops who, however savagely punished, nonetheless articulated in word or deed their own understanding of justice. And Thompson's grappling with class struggle as a historical phenomenon in an era before the working class had fully taken shape informed my own engagement with soldiers who, against all reason, followed orders but when pushed too far could as easily desert en masse or mutiny. In short, I very much view the military in Thompsonian terms, even if the subject matter gives rise to a darker vision of the conjoining of material forces and cultural constructs.

The works of E. P. Thompson as well as that of Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, and others of their generation of British Marxists, still resonate today. Like Marx, these historians may go out of fashion but do not disappear. Historical materialism makes as much sense in the era of European Union in economic disarray, America on its fiscal cliff, and a "postcommunist" China as it did at the height of the cold war and the economic hollowing out of the Eastern Block, the oil crisis and recession of '70s America, and a post-Stalin USSR. Despite his ambivalence to its theoretical imperatives (and perhaps because of this), E. P. Thompson left a lasting mark on "the something that has called itself 'Marxism.'"

6. Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution & Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787–1804* (Chapel Hill 2004); Emma Christopher, *Slave Ship Sailors and Their Captive Cargoes, 1730–1807* (Cambridge 2006); Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill 2006); Niklas Frykman "The Mutiny on the Hermione: Warfare, Revolution, and Treason in the Royal Navy," *Journal of Social History*, 44 (Fall 2010), 159–187; Denver Brunsman, *The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Charlottesville, Virginia 2013); John Donoghue, "Fire Under the Ashes": *An Atlantic History of the English Revolution* (forthcoming).