

The Face of Power

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MY COPY OF *The Making of the English Working Class* looked old-fashioned when I bought it in 1984. There was something about the narrow margins, crammed type, and lack of any illustrations to leaven its 950+ pages that marked it as a SERIOUS BOOK. Now, nearly thirty years later, it still strikes me that way, not least because I found it covered in a thin layer of dust when I went looking for it to write this.

But what is old can be new again. Not being an early adopter, I find myself turning to some of the book's ideas now. Being late to the party is better than missing it all together. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Although I was an outsider to history, I shared my classmates' relief and delight in discovering that this fat book was actually interesting. It was less the details of working-class life and more its arguments that captured me: class was a matter of culture and not just economics, and ordinary people made their own history. Heady stuff. Before encountering Thompson I thought "agency" referred to a business.

But what was particularly exciting about *The Making* was its ability to convey why history mattered beyond the classroom. The fact there was a larger purpose and politics to Thompson's writing made history seem somehow more practical. Whether we agreed with those politics or even understood them, we certainly came away from the book feeling that historians like Thompson were doing important work in the world.

By the time I read the book, its international impact was already well-established: it had animated research on different aspects of working-class experience in Canada, from the waterfront to the baseball diamond. Historians of gender and race complicated the idea that productive relations were central to forging experience and identity in fundamental ways. Pigs, cows, and boarders as well as crimps, navvies, and Knights populated the world of the working class. Despite the diversity of their subjects, as a group these historians all shared Thompson's desire to "rescue" the working class and the disenfranchised more broadly from the "enormous condescension of posterity," demonstrating how ordinary Canadians made history in conditions not of their own making.¹

Labour history was at the forefront of social history in Canada. As "history from the bottom up," social history remade the discipline, fundamentally disrupting the narrative of nation building that had given Canadian history its coherence. Until the 1960s, Canadian historians had been few and their work told the story of the country's transformation "from colony to nation," focusing on the traditional centres of power and politics conventionally defined.

1. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth 1984), 12.

Social history put an end to all this in the 1970s and 80s by revealing the limitations of Canadian history's dominant narrative. What kind of national history left out the experiences of most people? Incorrectly labelled "history without the politics," social history was in fact centrally concerned with questions of power; that is, with politics of a different kind. *Annales*-inspired work revealed how demography, geography, economy, and *mentalité* structured lives and choices, while that prompted by Thompson showed how ordinary Canadians – workers, women, indigenous people, and immigrants among others – experienced and resisted oppression, shaping their own lives even as they were being shaped by larger forces. Canadian history was part of the story of capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism, and racism. These narratives might have been less familiar than the story of nation-building, but they were no less political or grand for being so.

Such politics were invisible (or at least distasteful) to some like Michael Bliss and Jack Granatstein, who worried about the "sundering" of Canadian history and wondered aloud if the profession or the public who funded it needed yet another study of "housemaid's knee in Belleville in the 1890s."² To social history's critics, E.P. Thompson's rescue mission had taken a dangerous toll, one that continued to rise in the 1990s as historians (like me) followed the cultural and linguistic turns that *The Making of the English Working Class* had helped prepare the ground for. Canadian history had lost its way; "professing trivia," its academic practitioners had sacrificed "relevance" for inclusion, relevance to a non-specialist public, and to the nationalist project of an earlier generation of historians.³

I agree – in part. We should write in a variety of genres for different audiences, including non-specialist ones, and academic historians are doing so in greater numbers now thanks in part to the possibilities offered by Web 2.0. And yes, much of the Canadian history written from the last third of the twentieth century to the present has little relevance to the nationalist project that preoccupied the country's historians to that point – and that's not necessarily a bad thing. Instead of a single political project, historians now pursue a number of different ones, many of which use the nation state as a scale of analysis or object of inquiry.

But Canadianists have not lost their way. If anything they continue to follow the trails blazed by social and cultural historians, looking for new prospects from which to see how power works. Those paths are now well-worn and well-signed, their views familiar, even taken-for-granted. But there are other routes, leading to different but equally expansive vistas, and we can find them by going back to the map provided in *The Making of the English Working Class*.

2. Michael Bliss, "Privatizing the Mind: The Sundering of Canadian History, the Sundering of Canada," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 26 (Winter 1991–2), 5–17 and Jack Grantstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto 1998), 73.

3. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History*, 67–78.

When Thompson wrote he did so to restore the working class to its rightful place in making history. He succeeded. In fact, if any group needs rescuing from the condescension of posterity now it's those who had a modicum of power. In contrast to the richly textured portrait of the working class, the one we have of those who exercised power over them is flat and monochromatic. With some exceptions, even as social and cultural historians called attention to the downtrodden as makers of history, they tended to dehumanize power, rendering it an abstract force. The poor were parsed and their actions subjected to careful analysis, but the same care and respect did not always extend to the study of the "powerful," particularly in analyses informed by the ideas of Michel Foucault. They remained something of a lumpen mass, their actions seemingly more a matter of reflex than reflection and the consequences a foregone conclusion.

In thinking of the "powerful," I am not referring so much to prime ministers or members of parliament, though these members of the "ruling class" are certainly subjects worthy of the historian's gaze. Instead, I am thinking of the ordinary people of the middle class whose daily decisions shaped the lives of the poor in myriad small but meaningful ways. In the process of acting they too made themselves – and history. The social worker and the urban planner, to take examples from my own research, lived lives entangled with the people they regulated, yet we know little of what power looked like from their perspective, to say nothing of their motives and aspirations. We sometimes forget that bureaucrats as well as anarchists were capable of "dreaming of what might be."⁴

In the same way E.P. Thompson used historical materialism to change our understanding of working-class agency, so too can it be used again, this time to give power a face and deepen our understanding of its dynamics. One of *The Making's* most important, but sometimes overlooked, interventions was its insistence that class was "something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships."⁵ That being the case, there is something to be gained analytically by looking at how power was experienced from the perspective of those who exercised it; in other words, by looking at another part of the relationship.

The razing of Africville, a "slum" on the edges of Halifax, and the forced removal of its Africadian residents between 1964 and 1967 has been rightly portrayed as an example of racism and the violent spatial politics that defined postwar urban "renewal." Thanks to sociologists, historians, filmmakers, and the residents of Africville themselves, we have a good sense of what state power felt like from the perspective of those it was visited upon. We are witness to its effects: the city garbage trucks used as moving vans taking residents'

4. Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, *Dreaming of what might be: the Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880–1900* (Cambridge and New York 1982).

5. Thompson, *Making*, 8.

possessions to a nearby housing project; the broken glass; the splintered wood; the corrosive sense of loss.

But what we do not have is a sense of what power looked like or how it worked, of what Thompson called “the fluency” of the relationship that gave it meaning.⁶ When Africvillers looked at the face of state power they saw Peter Macdonald – and caught glimpses of some of their neighbours. In 1964, the middle-aged Cape Bretoner found himself seconded from his job as a provincial social worker to oversee the relocation of Africville’s 400-plus residents. His job was to work with each family to sort out their compensation and determine what their housing needs were. As I have written, this was no small task given the illegibility of property boundaries and ownership in Africville, and one that was only accomplished with the active assistance of some of the residents themselves who provided Macdonald with the necessary information.⁷

Our understanding of the character and dynamics of state power can not help but change when we appreciate how the machinery of removal operated in Africville, and realize the extent to which it was in the hands of a single overworked white social worker confronting an impossible deadline set by the city and a suspicious clientele who had their own calculus of cooperation and resistance. As Macdonald’s experience confirms, people make history in conditions not of their own making – and those people included representatives of the state like him, who found their agency shaped, albeit differently, by some of the same structures of power that constrained those who were the objects of administration.

If historians have not fully appreciated the importance of giving state power a face, governments certainly did. In the 1970s, the cities of Vancouver and Calgary hired Lincoln Cheng and Janice Gung as urban planners. Both cities were in the midst of comprehensive urban renewal and had proposed plans that affected members of their Chinese populations. In Vancouver, urban renewal involved razing the largely working-class inner-city neighbourhood of Strathcona, and in Calgary, plans called for the demolition of the city’s Chinatown to make way for the “East-West Penetrator,” a roadway designed to ease the flow of traffic.⁸

Conscious of the controversial nature of their plans, the cities hoped that changing the face of government would mollify community concerns. They were wrong. Cheng and Gung were representatives of a Chinese-Canadian middle class, one whose social mobility had, to a great extent, been accompanied

6. Thompson, *Making*, 8.

7. Tina Loo, “Africville: the Dynamics of State Power in Postwar Canada,” *Acadiensis*, 39 (Summer/Fall 2010), 23–47.

8. On the urban renewal of Vancouver, see Karen Bridget Murray, “Making Space in Vancouver’s East End: from Leonard Marsh to the Vancouver Agreement,” *BC Studies*, 169 (Spring 2011), 7–49 and City of Calgary, Planning Department, *Calgary Chinatown* (City of Calgary, November 1972).

by geographic mobility. By the time they were hired, only a fraction of each city's Chinese-Canadian population lived in the inner city neighbourhoods that were designated for destruction, six per cent in Vancouver and nine per cent in Calgary.⁹ Lincoln Cheng and Janice Gung may have been Chinese, but they were not members of the communities affected by renewal – literally and in class terms.

Theirs must have been an unenviable position to be in, one that speaks again to how making history is a matter of structure and agency – even for members of the middle class. Trapped between the essentialist expectations of their respective municipal planning departments and those of the Chinese in Strathcona and Calgary's Chinatown, the planners quickly learned their professional expertise was incidental to their authority. Their ability to act – even the authenticity of their identity – had been compromised by their class. After Lincoln Cheng was introduced at a meeting with city officials, for instance, the largely Chinese-Canadian executive of the Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association was unimpressed, noting that it “would have been an impressive gesture if it hadn't been for the fact he didn't speak the dialect spoken by most people in Strathcona.”¹⁰

What I hope these examples show is that exercising power was a messy and complicated business, and it is in that mess and complexity that the possibilities for outcomes different from those we might imagine lay. Examining the dynamics of power in the way Thompson did reminds us that class, or any relationship of power, “must always be embodied in real people and a real context.”¹¹ We ought not, he warned, become “impatient with actual history” as we pursue our theories of how the world is ordered.¹²

The signal contribution of *The Making* was to show how there was a “logic” to the exercise of power, but no “law” that explained or could predict specific outcomes.¹³ Thompson revealed how members of the working class exploited the cracks in the edifice of power to their benefit: what I am suggesting is that

9. In 1968, there were 3000 people living in Strathcona, and of these 70 per cent, or 2100, were of Chinese origin. The Chinese population of Vancouver in 1971 was 36,405, meaning that approximately 5.7 per cent of the city's Chinese population lived in Strathcona. See City of Vancouver, Urban Renewal Program, *Urban Renewal Scheme 3, Sub-Area 1 – Strathcona* (City of Vancouver, 9 August 1968), 17; Kay J. Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875–1980* (Montreal and Kingston 1991), 207; Table 6, Population By Ethnic Group and Sex, For Census Metropolitan Areas, Urbanized Core and Fringe, 1971, Statistics Canada, 1971 Census of Canada: Population – Ethnic Groups, Catalogue 92–723, Volume 1, Part 3 (Ottawa 1973); and City of Calgary, Planning Department, *Calgary Chinatown*, 15.

10. City of Vancouver Archives, Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association Fonds, Add. MSS 734, Box 583-B-5, file 5, “SPOTA, 1968–1971: The History of a Rehab Project – 1st Draft,” 80.

11. Thompson, *Making*, 8.

12. E.P. Thompson, “The Peculiarities of the English,” *Socialist Register*, 2 (1965), 321.

13. Thompson, *Making*, 9.

by applying his methods to another group of ordinary people – those who were in the position of exercising power over others on behalf of the state – we can see where those fissures were and how they were created. While they were often bridged or avoided, they also had the potential to trip up the unsuspecting state agent, interrupting history's trajectory.

But there are other reasons to pursue the kind of historical materialist approach that *The Making* exemplifies. Humanizing power, giving it a face, does not just enrich our understanding of the past; it also cultivates empathy and a sense of ourselves as historical actors. The people who read the history we write include the social workers and the planners of the future, people who find themselves, as we do, acting in the world, imperfectly, butting up against structures as we exercise our agency. While it is important to understand the sometimes brutal consequences of wielding power, recognizing that which we possess – albeit in different amounts – and the circumstances that shape how we use it, is also vital to making the world we would like.

A Definitive 'And fookin' Amen to that!

David Levine

IN THE FALL OF 1967, I was in my fourth year at the University of British Columbia and had enrolled in Jim Winter's History 418 course – “modern Britain”. I was excited – and rather trepidatious – especially when I saw his reading list. The very first item was a massive book – published by Vintage in New York – that “everyone” had heard about, but only some had bought and very few had read. So it was that I first encountered *The Making of the English Working Class*.

I read the big orange/black tome diligently but did not really understand – or appreciate – much of what Thompson was arguing for and against. Some of that misunderstanding was due to my callowness but most of my incomprehension was due to the reality that the study of history is wasted on the young. I did not know the period and had no familiarity whatsoever with the nuances of the historical literature. Having read the book – and really struggled with the long final section on working-class intellectual life called “Class Consciousness” – I completed the assignment and promptly forgot most of what I had poured over.

Fast forward to 1975. Now I had a doctorate-in-hand and – against all odds – a job. My thesis was a study of the demographic implications of rural industrialization in England, using the then-novel technique of family reconstitution to explicate fertility, nuptiality, and mortality statistics with fine-toothed precision. My first course was inherited from Doug Myers – “Canadian Working-Class History and the Schools”. I did not know Myers