

Frame-breaking Then and Now

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Minds which thirst for a tidy Platonism very soon become impatient
with actual history.

E.P. Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English."

I IMAGINE MANY HISTORIANS of social movements could trace turning points in their intellectual development to encounters with the works of E.P. Thompson.¹ I know that I can. Needless to say, each of those reading encounters occurs in moments not of the reader's own making. Re-reading *The Making of the English Working Class* in 2013 I had expected to gain a retrospective perspective on "where we are now" in cultural history, but was instead impressed by the immediate applicability and indeed necessity of Thompson's arguments with the neoliberal historical analysis of Frederick Hayek and others regarding the "standard of living debate" of the 1950s. What Thompson described as the "polarization of human consciousness" peculiar to the 1950s did not end with that decade, or even with the end of the Cold War.²

It was at the edge of the supposed "End of History" that I first encountered Thompson's *The Making*. It was the spring of 1988. I was a sophomore in college, enrolled in a European history seminar that pitted Thompson's chapters on starving weavers and framework knitters against Peter Laslett's "scientific" *The World We Have Lost*. I much preferred Thompson and was told I would probably not like social history. The reading of songs and poems was a more complete way to understand the world, I said, than numbers and graphs.

As it turns out, I was primed for Thompson before I arrived at university. In a high school history class, I had begun an essay on English industrialization with an epigraph of lyrics from Billy Bragg's "The Home Front." Charting a course of study and deciding to major in History, I was inspired by *The Making*. I rejected the required concentration of courses defined by time or place, and instead constructed my major around the approach of "history from the bottom up." This orientation, deemed lacking in rigor by some of the faculty, allowed me to take courses in Latin American, African American, and French Medieval, as well as British history with the incomparable Henry Abelove. This was my secret strategy for taking classes from the people I understood to be the most radical and stimulating professors in the department. It is amusing, given the caricature of Thompson as a parochial nationalist, that his

1. Note the many responses to the History Workshop's question about what the book "means to you" fifty years on which identify it as a book of life-transforming significance. <http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/the-making-of-the-english-working-class-fifty-years-on/> date accessed March 21, 2013.

2. Thompson, "Outside the Whale," in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York 2008), 212.

fine-toothed combing of the records of English radicals should have been an inspiration for my internationalist approach to studying working-class history back in the 1980s.

Illustrating the idea that class consciousness could be seen emerging through consumer action with the evocative image of “whole cheeses rolling down the street” during “The Great Cheese Riot of 1764”, while explaining that this was part of a “deep-rooted pattern of behavior,” Thompson’s work remains relevant both as activist inspiration and methodological guide.³ His analysis was not based on a reading of crowd actions as revolutionary in themselves. Rather, Thompson’s understanding of class identity stressed that it was formed by relations of production and property, and he noted the difference between genuine popular crowds and paid bands of “picked hooligans.” In the same discussion, he remarks as well that “patriotism, nationalism, even bigotry and repression were all clothed in the rhetoric of liberty,” a point with significance for contemporary historians of anti-abolitionist mobs, lynchers, and right-wing populist forms such as the neoliberal Tea Party. (75-78) Thompson points out several times the divergence of memberships’ beliefs from the leaders. So, while Cobbett might announce loyalty to King, Church and Constitution, his “followers” did not. (757) Much of *The Making* similarly shows how workers’ creative reinterpretations of ideas are part of intellectual history: Robert Owen’s ideas were “raw materials that workers made into different products.” (789) These empirical discussions give us a richer understanding of how ideas interact with experience than many more tortured theoretical accounts. Filtered through the work of Paul Buhle, the idea that members of movements interpret official ideologies in their own contexts helped me to understand the history of women in the Communist Party of the USA while writing my undergraduate thesis in 1991. Thompson’s careful reading of the traces left by people’s movements built upon Marx’s historical materialist practice as demonstrated in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* and *Writings on the Paris Commune*, filling the “real silences” in Marx’s narratives.⁴

Today, the “English” of the title undoubtedly marks *The Making* as a dated national history. Thompson apologizes to his “Scottish and Welsh readers,” whose histories he has neglected “not out of chauvinism, but out of respect,” and proceeds to note the important differences between the English and Scottish experiences. This location of class experience within national, regional and local traditions is particular, but not parochial. In his chapter on “Community,” Thompson argues that the Irish opposition to the British Empire helped to push English workers in more radical directions. Also in this section, Thompson discusses Irish workers’ rejection of industrial discipline in an at times essentialist way, reminiscent of DuBois’ comments on the gifts of

3. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York 1966), 63–67, with all subsequent references to page numbers in the text coming from this edition.

4. *Poverty of Theory*, 170.

Black workers in *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880*, first published in 1935. (430, 434-6) Thus, for me in the 1980s, Thompson's work fit right in with feminist theories that called for an end to universalist narratives and refused to separate national or class or gender identities into neat boxes. At the time, the exciting ideas I encountered in classes, whether Marxist, postmodernist, or Chicana-Lesbian-Feminist, did not seem to be in sharp conflict, until I read Joan Scott's "The Evidence of Experience" with horrified indignation.⁵

On the one hand, Thompson's method did not lead to the exclusions that Scott claimed it had. In a brief, but illuminating essay in 1995, for instance, Frederick Cooper noted the large number of works in post-colonial history that drew upon Thompson's insights, most successfully in his view, Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Rethinking Working Class History*, about workers in Calcutta Jute Mills between 1890 and 1940. Cooper stressed that in the tensions evident in Thompson's account of the ways in which workers' self activity encountered the structured determinations of capitalist development, there were creative opportunities to chart new understandings of historical process.⁶ The same point could be made in situating other important texts within this Thompsonian approach. Robin D. G. Kelley's discussion of class consciousness among Alabama sharecroppers during the Great Depression, *Hammer and Hoe*, is explicitly crafted within sensibilities indebted to Thompson. The ways in which Peter Hinks explores the dispersion of David Walker's *Appeal* among the slave and free black communities of the Carolinas in the 19th century does not mention *The Making*, but echoes Thompson's treatment of the writings of Thomas Paine. And the important contribution of David Roediger's analysis of "racial republicanism" examines how national traditions are fused with class politics, although this work – unlike Sean Wilentz's celebratory *Chants Democratic*, which claims Thompson as an influence – examines how racial formation of class identity had tragic results, an un-making of the American working class that Marx himself had identified in his comment that, "Labor in white skin cannot emancipate itself where the black skin is branded."⁷

On the other hand, Thompson's description of his work as a "biography" of a class could be taken to describe an overly unified identity. Paul Gilroy's *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* opens with a quotation from *The Making* describing a "tall Black man" as a dream of "Satan coming to meet

5. Joan Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (Summer 1991), 773–797.

6. Frederick Cooper, "Work, class, and empire: an African historian's retrospective on E.P. Thompson," *Social history*, 20 (May 1995), 235–41.

7. Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill 1991); Peter Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park, Pennsylvania 1998); David Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London 1991); and Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* (London 1994), esp. 21, quoting Marx; Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (New York 1986).

me,” a calling of attention to the failure of British scholars to address race.⁸ *The Making* did fail to address race and other categories of historical analysis, such as gender, adequately, especially in terms of standards established later by scholars who built on Thompson's approach. All historians, Thompson among them, produce scholarship that is limited, bounded by understandings and sensitivities of particular historical *and* historiographical periods. Nonetheless, looking again at *The Making*, it seems to me that the book is still a place where we “may discover insights into social evils which we have yet to cure.” (13) Here are four such insights, contributions of *The Making* that remain critically important today.

1) Thompson provided a biting attack on neoliberalism, a doctrine yet to be named, but the seeds of which were being sown well before the publication of *The Making* in 1963. Who would have guessed that a 1954 symposium edited by Frederick Hayek, *Capitalism and the Historians*, which Thompson describes as a “muddle” and a “confusion of history of apologetics,” would still be in print alongside Thompson's book?⁹ Thompson allows the original critics of *laissez-faire* to speak against views enunciated more than a century later, pointing out that when it was first elaborated, the ideology of free trade was seen as a “foul imposition” both “immoral” and “illegal.” (549) He argues for the importance of free speech as a working-class tradition, noting that it was not the property of the bourgeoisie; instead, Thompson emphasizes the repressive elements of the industrial workplace and the seizing of the commons as efforts to shut down dangerous spaces of popular indiscipline. Thompson also rebuts the evidence of rising material standards, identifying basic problems with the formulas used to derive the averages that constituted the evidence for the neoliberal argument. He suggested the need to consider, not just “rising real wages,” but also the hours and, most importantly, the “conditions of labor.” (211) At least, he remarks with sarcasm, “the average criminal” probably experienced an increase in the standard of living during this era because of opportunities to rob the proliferating warehouses, markets, canal barges, docks and railways. (265) Thompson also attacked the cultural side of neoliberal reaction, comparing disenchanting former radical intellectuals of his own time to the romantic poets who had disavowed the French Revolution. It was necessary to rebut “The myth of Jacobin ‘totalitarianism,’” Thompson wrote, thinking perhaps of Hannah Arendt, whose often paralytic spirit still

8. Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (Chicago 1991), 11–12. Gilroy also critiques Thompson's practical politics around crime in 1970s and 1980s Britain, noting a failure to address race as it was elaborated in Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John N. Clarke, and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis, Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London 1978). See also Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham 1997).

9. Happily, on 3/23/2013, Thompson's book's Amazon.com sales rank considerably higher than Hayek's at 117,000th to the 2 + millionth rating of Hayek.

haunts democratic theory. (100) Arendt had compared the French Revolution to Stalinism, a theme that would resurface in later historiographies influenced by postmodernism. Reading Thompson, we can appreciate that the answer to such defeatism is not to reject freedom. To answer neoliberalism with a recuperation of Stalin or Mao returns us to the “mutual confrontation of imperial structures”¹⁰ as Thompson wrote in “The Poverty of Theory,” so well described by contemporary blogger Teo Ballvé as, “Althusser: A Smack Down.”¹¹ *The Making* provides examples, both as an intellectual practice and in the stories it contains, about how to break such problematic frames.

2) *The Making* also introduced an important discussion of constitutionalism, one that Thompson would revisit in *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act*, and reflect on in his interview with Michael Merrill.¹² In the United States, the constitution has become increasingly a tool of “strict constructionists” and “Tenth amendment conservatives.”¹³ Thompson describes what he calls the rhetoric of constitutionalism, or what most of us might now call a “discourse,” as a limit on how people understand the realm of political possibility. In the period of class formation associated with 1790-1832, he notes that “for a Plebeian movement to arise it was essential to escape from these categories altogether and set forward far wider democratic claims.” However, rather than seeing constitutionalism as a linguistic trap without a means of escape, he writes that through a “dialectical paradox...the rhetoric of constitutionalism contributed to its own destruction or transcendence,” especially as Burke defended the tradition from corruption by the “swinish multitude.” (88-90) He praises those radicals, like Thomas Paine, who identified the class nature of the ‘language’ of politics: “a bad Constitution for at least ninety-nine parts of the nation out of a hundred.”(92) Thompson notes the case of the London Corresponding Society’s Joseph Gerrald, whose advocacy of Paine’s proposal for a National Convention of Reformers brought him to trial in 1794, where he was convicted and sentenced to fourteen years transportation. He died a year after his arrival in New South Wales, but not before he had argued the right to agitate for political change. “The word *constitution*, *constitution!* is rung in our ears with unceasing perseverance,” he exclaimed before the jury: “This is the *talisman* which the enemies of reform wield over the heads of the

10. *Poverty of Theory*, p. 73.

11. Teo Ballvé, “The Poverty of Theory Debate,” at <http://territorialmasquerades.net/the-poverty-of-theory-debate/> date accessed, March 21, 2013. Today the worst offender may not be Althusser, but another Lacanian Marxist, Slavoj Žižek, who is more seductive because of his great sense of humor.

12. E.P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* (New York 1975); MARHO, ed., *Visions of History: Interviews with E. P. Thompson ...* (New York 1983), 8–9.

13. Tenth amendment conservatives in the US are those who reject the constitutional amendments following the original Bill of Rights, most significantly the Reconstruction Amendments.

credulous and simple ... to hear placemen and pensioners talking of a constitution, when their whole lives are one uniform violation of its principles is like a monk preaching population." This, Thompson suggests, was "a constitutionalist case which exposed the rhetoric of constitutionalism." (127-129) And yet, Paine, Thompson reminds us, did not challenge the doctrine of *Laissez-Faire*. (96) The real inspiration remains with the "members unlimited," not the intellectuals and their "Benthamite jargon." The discussion of the sides represented by Francis Place and John Binns, the one representing a "withdrawal from agitation among members unlimited" and the other, "reform by revolution," grants the historical significance of the reformers, but emphasizes not only the necessity of the radicals breaking from the constitutional framework so that class consciousness could coalesce, but of the origins of those breaks in the experiences of the workers themselves.

3) Equally instructive is the way Thompson handles the relationship between state repression and resistance. Thompson provides a more sustained analysis of the state, crime, and their connections to working-class resistance than the much more frequently cited study of Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975). "The class war is fought out in terms of Tyburn, the hulks and the Bridewells on the one hand," Thompson writes, "and crime, riot and mob action on the other." (60) This basic point is then elaborated on throughout much of *The Making*. Thompson also provides useful advice for contemporary historians about how to evaluate evidence taken from spies' accounts. There are moments in *The Making* when I felt the author's desire to believe "the most extreme plots" as evidence of working-class radicalism might be in conflict with a distrust of government sources, since "they needed conspiracies to justify repressive legislation." (485) Instead of relying on police accounts alone, Thompson finds evidence of meetings in taverns and the circulation of handbills on a scale "which argues organization by committees with access to a printing press." Also persuasive is his argument that "anyone who has conducted a raffle or organized a darts tournament knows that scores of men cannot be assembled at night, from several districts, at a given point, disguised and armed with muskets, hammers, hammers and hatchets" without some prior organization existing. (473, 576-7)

4) Finally, Thompson provides a uniquely insightful appreciation of Luddism which, as a mobilization, was "not about looking backward but about a notion of democracy and ethnical priorities in production." (552) Critiques of neoliberalism and materialist analysis in academia are now on the rise, not because of the influence of texts and theories, but rather because neoliberalism has already successfully restructured university teaching by relying on part-time, underpaid labor. It is no doubt ridiculous to compare the horrible conditions of 19th century handloom weavers, whose activities included the formation of children's burial clubs, to today's academics, even adjuncts. Nonetheless, what

Thompson tells us about resistance to the impact of capitalism's continuing revolutions resonates. Weavers at one time were considered too well paid and not industrious enough; croppers were "notoriously the least manageable of any persons employed." (523) Some weavers preferred lower wages at hand-loom to better paying factory work because of the "time off for discussion and debate." (291) Thompson describes how these workers, through popular organization and discipline, organized to break machine frames. Today, it is not uncommon to hear a professor refer to himself as a "luddite" or explain that she's "NOT a Luddite, but –" during conversations about "online learning." It is time to embrace the Luddite past as Thompson understood it. Arguing that universities (not professors) should learn from the recent history of the MP3 and the online newspaper, Clay Shirkey, unintentionally channeling Jonathan Swift, wrote a few months ago that the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) is the best route to democratizing education in an age of massive student debt. Never once suggesting that perhaps public funding for education could be increased, or student debt forgiven, he instead advocates the MOOC for those who can not afford Harvard or Yale, because most students go to "mediocre" colleges, "4000 institutions you've never heard of," where the education isn't worth the price. He writes,

We ask students to read the best works we can find, whoever produced them and where, but we only ask them to listen to the best lecture a local employee can produce that morning. Sometimes you're at a place where the best lecture your professor can give is the best in the world. But mostly not. And the only thing that kept this system from seeming strange was that we've never had a good way of publishing lectures.¹⁴

The doomed "schools you've never heard of" include, presumably, one he mentions by name, Clayton State, a public University near my home in Atlanta, some of whose professors I happened to have met not long ago. They hold PhDs from the institutions that make Shirkey's list of worthies, but if we follow the lesson he reads from history, rather than Thompson's, there will be no value in those degrees a decade hence. (Their market value is questionable already). It would take another few hundred words to explain the masochism that would allow anyone, academic or otherwise, to accept the obliteration of his or her profession in the name of the future, so I'll leave it with a reminder to re-read Thompson's chapter "The Transforming Power of the Cross" and note that the way of Ludd is more appealing.

14. Clay Shirkey, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/dec/17/moocs-higher-education-transformation> date accessed, March 24, 2013.