

E. P. Thompson: Recovering the Centrality of Class

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WHEN E.P. THOMPSON'S *The Making of the English Working Class* came out in 1963, there still existed a vibrant anti-capitalist culture on the intellectual left, which flourished with a special vigor among the British Marxist historians, a remarkable group to which Thompson belonged. Within little more than a decade, despite (or maybe because of?) the militant eruptions of 1968 and various dramatic workers' struggles in the following few years, the intellectual life of the left in the West was being shaped by a surrender to capitalism and a "retreat from class."

The leading academic fashions on the left, beginning with "post-Marxism" and culminating in postmodernism, seemed now to operate on the principle that, for better or worse, capitalism was the only viable option and class struggle was no longer on the agenda.

These fashions were well on the way in the late 1970s, developing more or less in parallel with the "New Right" and neoliberalism. At a time when governments driven by neoliberal doctrine were pursuing open class war on behalf of capital against labor, the concept of class was in decline. In Britain, for instance, when Margaret Thatcher's government was waging its ruthless class war against workers, its rhetorical strategy was to deny the very existence of class.

This ideological strategy was even more alarming in having its mirror image on the intellectual left. This was true not only of so-called post-Marxists. Even *Marxism Today*, the British Communist Party's trendy theoretical magazine which invented the concept of "Thatcherism," enthusiastically engaged in "the retreat from class."

The new non-class warriors of the left effectively accepted the neoliberal construction of the social universe. Here, too, there was really no class or class politics, only a postmodern world where fragmentation, diversity and multiple "identities" had dissolved the old solidarities of class.

It is true, of course, that for many this meant pursuing other necessary struggles against other forms of oppression, especially those related to gender and race. But there was more to the retreat from class — or perhaps we should say less — than an interest in other forms of struggle; and the retreat cannot simply be blamed on the decline of the labor movement in the 1970s and '80s. The abandonment of class by certain sections of the intellectual left had other roots, which preceded that decline. [1]

Those left intellectuals most disposed to give up the concept of class were also inclined to suggest that there was no longer any need to challenge capitalism as a systemic totality, because, in the new fragmented reality, there was no such thing as a capitalist system, if it had ever existed. There was now a tremendous expansion of "civil society," we were told, which vastly extended the range of individual choice. The way to fight neoliberal doctrines, evidently, was to concede their basic assumptions and try to beat them at their own rhetorical game.

The Real Capitalist Crisis

Today we are confronting the real world of capitalism in a way we haven't seen for a long time. Since the crisis of 2008 and the disastrous austerity project that has followed, it has been hard not to recognize the brutal systemic effects of capitalism or the grim realities of class.

There have been some promising signs of new oppositional movements, like Occupy, which, if they haven't yet produced a coherent political movement, have certainly begun to change the conversation on the consequences of capitalism and class inequalities. Yet much of the intellectual left has lost the habit, the means or even the will to oppose capitalism not just in practice but in theory.

That's what makes this the right moment to revive Edward Thompson. It's not just that he, probably more than any other historian, brings the processes of class formation and struggle so vividly to life. It's also that more than any other historian, or maybe even any other scholar or writer of any kind, he has sharply defined capitalism as a historically specific social form, not as a law of nature, and compelled us to see it from a critical, anthropological distance.

That's especially important now, at a time when we have long since acquired the habit of taking capitalism for granted as if it were as universal and invisible as the air we breathe. Thompson challenges the most basic presuppositions of capitalism as a set of social practices and moral principles, tracing their development as a constantly contested process.

He does this not only in *The Making of the English Working Class* but also in his other works: his classic essay on the "Moral Economy of the Crowd," where he tracks the contestation of market rationality as it was being imposed against resistance from opposing customs and expectations and from different conceptions of the right to subsistence; or his essay "Custom, Law, and Common Right," where he reveals how definitions of property, based on productivity for capitalist profit, asserted themselves against prevailing practices and conceptions of use-rights; or his attack, especially in his essay on "Time, Work Discipline and Industrial Capitalism," on the concept of "industrialization," and his insistence on the specificity of industrial capitalism as a historically distinctive mode of exploitation and not some neutral process of technological change, with effects not only on the practices of work but also on something as fundamental to everyday life as our experience of time. [2]

Thompson's approach to history sums up what for me is the essence of historical materialism, an approach that sheds light on both theory and practice, and on history and politics. Although he tended to avoid theoretical language, I have always found his historical work as theoretically fruitful as it is historically illuminating.

His characterization of theoretical knowledge was that it's not about "static conceptual representation" but about "concepts appropriate to the investigation of process." This means, among other things, that there isn't the kind of neat antithesis between history and theory, the empirical and the theoretical, which some influential varieties of Marxism have insisted on.

The challenge for Thompson was to capture and illuminate historical processes, to treat class not as a static location in a structure of "stratification" but as a process and a social relation. In other words, he took seriously Marx's own principle that historical materialism is about human "practical activity," human agency within the constraints of specific historical and social conditions. That's what made him such an effective analyst of capitalism as a contested terrain and a target of struggle.

P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] This was discussed in greater detail in my “A Chronology of the New Left and Its Successors, or: Who’s Old-Fashioned Now?” Socialist Register 1995, 22-49 and in the Preface to the 1998 edition of my Retreat from Class.

[2] These essays are collected in Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture (New York: New Press, 1993).