

E.P. Thompson: History as Argument

Saturday 14 September 2013, by [PALMER Bryan D.](#) (Date first published: 1 September 2013).

A GREAT DEAL could be said about E.P. Thompson's tremendous book, *The Making of the English Working Class*, on the 50th anniversary of its publication. Yet I want to make only one rather simple point: argument animated Thompson for his entire life, and it figures centrally on almost every page of his evocative account of class formation.

This is not the minor point it might seem on the surface. There was a time when apprentice historians were schooled in history as argument. We thought the seminars we were in, and the books we would eventually write, would be about argument. That time, in my view, is long gone.

Young historians are now educated to think that argument is actually a bad thing, that polemic is to be avoided rather than cultivated as a specific type of political intervention and a particular kind of writing form, with its own artistry. Argument is dismissed as a bad career move. Historical writing is the worse for this kind of conventional wearing down of its potentially serrated political edge.

There was no smoothing out Thompson's awkward sides; nothing mattered more to him than argument. The somewhat odd, almost rambling, certainly repetitive, structure of *The Making*, is composed of three distinct, but overlapping Parts.

They can only be understood, I suggest, if we appreciate that each of the book's three parts develop distinct arguments (posed with different purposes and ordered by specific levels of disagreement) with particular traditions that Thompson thought either required complicating or repudiation: the working-class's self conception; the ideological impositions of apologists for capitalism, be they 18th-century political economists, 19th-century churchmen, or 20th-century academics; and the conventional wisdoms of left-wing advocates, among them Communists and social democrats.

Exploring Complex Traditions

The most subtle argument is posed in Part I, "The Liberty Tree," where Thompson may well be attempting to draw his adult education readers (it was for them, rather than academics, that *The Making* was written) into analytic territory with which they were familiar, complicating conventional home-grown traditions of the English working class the better to revolutionize it.

He had become an itinerant adult education tutor in Yorkshire locales, teaching literature and history. It was within this milieu that *The Making* was written.

Thompson placed innovative readings of the dissident meanings of the Norman Yoke, the liberty tree, reform societies, Tom Paine, and Pilgrim's Progress alongside the irksome realities of "Satan's Strongholds" and the contradictions of constitutionalism.

Familiarities with John Bunyan's seventeenth-century account of Christian pilgrimage, with William Blake's renditions of innocence and experience, perhaps even with the labor movement's origins as filtered through understandings of the traditions of mutual aid elaborated by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, could be assumed to be part of the fabric of the autodidact culture that Thompson entered into in the late 1940s and 1950s.

If Thompson elaborated the radical currents and oppositional eddies that sustained Bunyan into the 18th and 19th centuries, when they flowed into the thought of Paine, Cobbett and Owen, Part I of *The Making* follows the confluence of this stream of thought as it grows more robust in its revolutionary inclinations.

Yet Thompson was anything but one-sided in his embrace of these traditions. He argued against Dissent's other countenance, turned as it was to quietist consolations with their capacity to enervate radicalism and drain it of its oppositional nerve, substituting a "callow emotionalism" for the impulse of democratic anti-authoritarianism.

He brought into the political mix the anarchic Bedlam of Beelzebub, in which the "beggarly, idle, and intoxicated mob" might, with its cries to Damn Kings, Governments and Justices, take a tumultuous turn directed by "Brechtian values." Constitutionalism, with the revered Francis Place sitting in liberal homage to it as "the White Man's Uncle Tom," was for Thompson always fighting a "dialectical paradox" in which its rhetoric was contributing to either its destruction or its transcendence. Radicalism was brought to the borders of Socialism, with figures such as John Thelwall rejecting Place's policy of reform by educational gradualism.

Theorists of the revolutionary left within the London Corresponding Society, open to a politics beyond constitutionalism, in which "the secret press, the anonymous handbill, the charcoaled pavement, the tavern club, perhaps the food riot" figured forcefully, were for Thompson an antidote to the constraining respectability of the orderly committee and its routinized regularities.

There was, for instance, the example of Thomas Spence, whose extension of Paine's arguments against a hereditary aristocracy led him to call for the abolition of private property in land. When hauled before the magistrates, Spence described himself as "the unfee'd Advocate of the disinherited seed of Adam. (*The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth, England, 1968 edition, 58, 63, 75, 6, 170, 175-177. Further citations to this text will appear in parentheses.)

Confronting Apologies and Orthodoxies

This takes us to Part II, "The Curse of Adam." In this section Thompson's arguments are more commonplace, more polemical, and more transparent. I will provide some examples below, but for now it is sufficient to note that these arguments take up an antagonistic engagement with readily recognizable conservative apologists of the emerging disciplines of capitalist exploitation, be they the Adam of political economy (Smith) or the Adam of original sin, with a shot across the bow of conservative academics thrown in for good measure.

Finally, in Part III's exploration of "The Working-Class Presence," Thompson is directing his arguments against left orthodoxies, at the time of the book's writing reigning in the Communist Party on the one hand, or in quarters of social democratic thought, such as the Labour Party, on the other.

His exploration of the agency of class ("present at its own making") railed against the economic determinism of a kind of vulgar Marxism that Thompson associated with Stalinism and its British advocates, just as it grasped the inadequacy of seeing class struggle only through the prism of a parliamentary road to reform.

In such well known interpretive frameworks, the process of class formation was reduced to an equation in which enclosures + steam technology = the proletariat, or handcuffed by a muted electoralism that had no purchase on the experience of a working class largely locked out of formal political institutions in the 1780-1830 years.

Insisting on seeing class in its cultural as well as its economic or conventional political/organizational dimensions, balancing structural determination with active human agency, liberated Thompson. He was free to explore the rough, direct action traditions that he located in the "opaque society" of early resistance to industrial capitalism. There he found clandestine collectivities, insurrectionary uprisings and underground mobilizations, undertakings of immense importance that had nevertheless been bypassed and misunderstood by past historians, including those with left inclinations.

It is only when all three of these complicated levels of argumentation are brought together in the specific parts of *The Making of the English Working Class* that Thompson's interpretive breakthrough, a kind of paradigm shift in understanding class, is imaginable. This explains much about the way Thompson put the book together, which has no counterpart in contemporary historiography.

When exploring the lost world of early 19th-century laborers, Thompson told readers that crafts and traditions may have been dying, hostilities to the new industrial capitalism were no doubt backward looking, insurrectionary mobilizations had about them many mistaken and foolhardy thoughts, and the communitarian ideas floating about many communities might well now be thought little more than utopian fantasies. Yet those who lived with the times in which such perspectives and actions constituted a part of the experience of oppression, exploitation and resistance deserved to be situated in their own context of social disturbance and dislocation.

In finding fault with histories in which "[t]he blind alleys, the lost causes, and the losers themselves are forgotten," Thompson exposed the centrality of contingency in historical process, reminding us that the imbalances of power relations must be appreciated as influencing outcomes, registering the basic point that history's seeming ends were seldom if ever inevitable and that reversals were potentially always in the making. The everyday lives of people who often struggled to survive within, and sometimes to transform, their social order, should never be suppressed in an unreflective privileging of "subsequent preoccupations." (12-13)

Thompson's argumentative prose passages bristled with brio. Who can forget Thompson's account of the "average" working man's share in "the benefits of economic progress," nurtured in the shadows of the dark Satanic mills of early capitalism: "more potatoes, a few articles of cotton clothing for his family, soap and candles, some tea and sugar, and a great many articles in the *Economic History Review*."

Or consider his rebuttal to those conservative economic historians such as R.M. Hartwell, whose judgment on child labor and early industrialism was deformed by a misplaced relativism. Hartwell, writing in 1959, insisted that modern readers, "well disciplined by familiarity with concentration camps," were "comparatively unmoved" by unduly sentimental tales of the ways in which children were harnessed to the machine age of the early 1800s.

Thompson's rejoinder was gruff, its offence registered with perfunctory refusal: "We may be allowed to reaffirm a more traditional view: that the exploitation of little children, on this scale and this intensity, was one of the most shameful events in our history." (351, 384)

Argument, then, wrote every page of Thompson's *The Making*. It did so in complex, often unpredictable, ways. Argument made the book great: in its interpretation and in its tone, *The Making* was like no other study and, to this day, the text remains unique. After half a century, it speaks to us still. It will speak to us, again, fifty years hence. Argument, when done with insight, sensitivity, and panache, always does.

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P.S.

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