

is not trapped within them. Thompson does not describe a closed, theoretical system but an open historical process, which, while deeply imbricated with capitalist relationships, is also decisively shaped by emergent alternatives. No one, it seems to me, can deny *The Making's* status as a work of history, even if we might differ as to its worth. But neither ought anyone deny its status – and stature – as theory. A properly materialist critique of *any* structured totality of social relations, including a properly materialist critique of a specifically capitalist political economy, will be a history of the sort that Thompson gave us. Other more abstract work, including Marx's own, certainly contributes to the effort. But it does so, if at all, as *prolegomena* or as *coda*. It provides “hypotheses, informed by consistent theoretical propositions” (T: 66), which historians and others (Thompson being in fact one of these others) can interrogate and investigate, as well as general lessons that, if found telling, may be applied elsewhere. This is as it should be. But according to Thompson the concepts of Marxism must be “historical categories,” if they are to make an actual contribution to the struggle and not be simply another burden on it. (T: 68) Moreover, they must be deployed concretely, as part of a discovered “real historical process,” and not abstractly, as part of a closed, self-sufficient system. Otherwise they are not historical at all. This is the kind of “theory” Thompson's *Making* showed was possible and we would all do well to follow his example, as best we can.

Among the Autodidacts: The Making of E.P. Thompson

Margaret C. Jacob

THINKING ABOUT E.P. THOMPSON and *The Making of the English Working Class* immediately calls to mind the British left of the 1960s. Its leading figures included many workers and intellectuals, such as Thompson himself, who had left the British Communist Party (CP) in 1956 when the Soviet Union invaded Hungary and brutally suppressed a revolt led by students and workers. After much soul searching, Edward, among others – handworkers as well as professionals – joined the Labour Party and from within sought to push the party further to the left and to consolidate and extend the advances of post-war socialism. Although not from the working class, during his years in the CP Edward Thompson developed close ties to many workers.

The Making reflected the post 1956 desire to maintain class solidarity as well as the belief that an extension of socialism was still possible in Britain, provided the Labour Party did not renege on its commitments to substitute communal cooperation for the divisive forces of competition. That fear materialized only after *The Making* was published when, in the following year, in 1964 Labour under Harold Wilson came to power. In its policies, the left

gradually saw what it defined as capitulation to capitalist and imperialist institutions.

I arrived in Britain in 1967, on an exchange between Leeds University and Cornell and, quite by accident, the historian of science, Jerry Ravetz, had gotten me an attic room owned by a couple in their late 50s, clothing workers named Jim and Gertie Roche. The Roches regularly let the space out, generally to visiting students. Thus began what became our life-long friendship, with long evenings spent discussing politics, or the latest book we were all reading, and in Jim's case our common Irish background. To my enormous good fortune, through their years as Communists and after, the Thompsons and the Roches were also good friends.

Within months of my arrival in Leeds, and in the company of Jim and Gertie, I first met Edward Thompson. The occasion was a gathering of militant Labourites held in an upstairs room of a Victorian pub near Leeds Town Hall. *The May Day Manifesto* was being discussed, and with what I came to see as his ever-present intensity, Edward was there, representing the authorial group that included himself, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and a few other backers and supporters. The atmosphere was electric with working-class radicals, students and professors expressing their disillusionment with the Labour Party, and proclaiming that, as *The Manifesto* put it, "it is only necessary to imagine, in a utopian sense, what a democratic mass party of socialist and working-class aspiration – capable of confronting managed capitalism – would be like, to disclose, by contrast the present predicament." The assembled endorsed the *Manifesto's* call for education and agitation, for initiatives undertaken by shop stewards, intellectuals, and student and youth movements. Opposition to the American war in Vietnam complemented the commitment that Edward and many others in the room had to the Committee on Nuclear Disarmament (CND). Like so many northern industrial cities, Leeds with its famous clothing factories acted like a school where the meaning of industrial life could be lived and examined. A century earlier Engels in Manchester had done what Edward Thompson and his associates were doing in Leeds. Being an American graduate student of barely-educated blue collar parents, yet sharing many of the values being articulated that night, I can only recall the sheer awe of being in the presence of Edward Thompson and of hearing factory workers be as articulate as professors.¹

Very quickly pieces of the present began to fit into the past that Thompson had created in *The Making*. The sense of class identity coming out of the experience of work, particularly factory work, the gnawing grievances about wages, hours, and working conditions, the articulation of radical positions as the only means forward, the belief in solidarity, the experience of poverty – these

1. Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, Edward Thompson, eds., *New Left May Day Manifesto*, 1967 (London 1967), 38. There is a slightly expanded Penguin version, Raymond Williams, ed., *May Day Manifesto*, 1968 (Harmondsworth 1968).

grievances, values and assumptions were lived by Jim and Gertie, and both were leaders in the Leeds Labour Party when I got to know them. They instantiated the workingmen and women that Edward sought to rescue from the condescension of posterity.² Born in 1909, by age sixteen Jim Roche had made his first suit and joined the ranks of clothing workers and tailors. He had grown up in deep poverty in the Bank, a Catholic and working-class part of Leeds. In a tape recording that he made for me shortly before his death, he recounted the dearth of everything from food to shoes that shaped his childhood and turned him into a militant trade unionist. Gertie started her factory work at the age of fourteen, and quickly became a trade union leader; she battled the bosses through the 1930s and 40s, and beyond. Still militant in 1970, Gertie Roche led the unofficial Leeds women's clothing workers strike that demanded equal pay for equal work. Jim was with her all the way. Long before that strike they had been organizers of the 1936 clothing workers' strike; joining the CP was, then, the next logical step.³

By 1970 Jim and Gertie were proud to say that, between them, they had spent over eighty years in the clothing industry. Lacking all but the most elementary of education, both became self-educated, a process accelerated by their membership in the British Communist Party. Like Edward and Raymond Williams, who had had formative experiences teaching in adult education, Jim went on to teach Marxism and the history of socialism in the Workers Educational Association during the war. In what must count as one of the war's greatest ironies, Jim, like other known Communists, was prevented from fighting abroad because of his membership in the party. Only a military bureaucracy could think of the task then set for him as compatible with national security: he was put to the job of educating soldiers up and down the country side. From that time onward, Jim took on the seemingly natural traits of a leader and by the 1950s he was a full-time organizer for the CP.

In 1985, many years after my first star-struck meeting with Edward Thompson, he told me that he had Jim and Gertie in mind when he wrote about what he called in *The Making* a working-class elite, "a specially favoured aristocracy."⁴ He focused particularly on those men with skilled artisanal backgrounds – like Jim who kept a private tailoring practice in his home – who had independence of mind and the sense of being as good as the next fellow that made them potentially an elite with higher wages, the ability to read and buy books, to articulate the desires and needs of other workers, in short to

2. See Delia Davin, "Obituary: James Roche (1909–1988)," *History Workshop Journal*, 27 (Spring 1989), 245–246; Diane Gold, "Obituary: Gertie Roche," *History Workshop Journal*, 45 (Spring 1998), 313–16.

3. Liz Leicester, "The 1970 Leeds' clothing workers' strike: representations and refractions," *Scottish Labour History*, 44 (2009), 44–55. The Roches' papers were given to Ruskin College, Oxford.

4. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London 1964), 237.

become leaders of their class. Edward Thompson researched and wrote about the making of a class that he personally knew well. He had debated members at party meetings, organized rallies, and socialized with them – for a time almost exclusively. In short *The Making* was intimately influenced by the Communist experience, and then after 1956 by the search for socialism with a moral compass and a commitment to freedom of thought and expression.

Like Edward, the Roches were freethinkers, hostile to clergy and churches. Nothing about the critique of Methodism Thompson offered in *The Making* seemed in the slightest out of synch with their experience of the major religious denominations. Unlike Edward, who had Methodism in his own background, the nuns had educated Jim, and Gertie came from French Huguenot ancestry. In their circle secularism and atheism were simply givens. Here I was in Britain studying eighteenth century freethinking and settled in among people who may not have read John Toland (d. 1722) but who certainly knew the writings of Thomas Paine, William Cobbett, and Robert Owen. Among the many achievements of post-war left-wing British historians has been the recreation of an intellectual tradition that stretched from the Levellers and Diggers of the 1650s to socialists of the twentieth century.

In that reconstruction Edward Thompson did something with the seemingly irrational that we would associate more with Frances Yates, whose *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* appeared in 1964, a year after *The Making*. Thompson took early modern millenarian beliefs seriously, one could say almost anthropologically. He attacked the approach found in the writings of Norman Cohn, which used words like “delusional” and “paranoid” to describe apocalyptic warnings. Thompson posited the need to understand the time and place, the imagery used to express the grievances, the signs “of how men felt and hoped, loved and hated, and of how they preserved certain values in the very texture of their language.”⁵ While he may have been unduly harsh on Methodism, Thompson had an ear for the religious language embedded in the new radicalism of working people during the early nineteenth century. Their language harkened back to the radical sectaries of the 1640s and 50s.

This attention to language, to how to read and to listen, gave Edward a unique purchase on what was being said, in the 1980s, among Eastern European dissidents. No lover of the Soviet Union after 1956, Thompson recognized the signs of its increasing failures. In a visit to New York in 1985 he, Christopher Hill, Perry Anderson, and Eric Hobsbawm spoke at a New School for Social Research forum that I moderated on “The Future of Radical History.” Differences among them were muted for the occasion, and all four praised the renewed interest in intellectual and cultural history. Edward confessed his apostasy from the historian’s task; peace activism had become his passion. In fact his craft had

5. Thompson, *Making*, 49.

given him the advantage of being able to interpret the historical significance of what he was witnessing.⁶

During the New York visit, Edward managed to shock his audiences. The next day after the Radical History forum, he gave an audacious keynote address at the inauguration of Eugene Lang College, a new undergraduate component of the New School. Edward predicted the end of the Cold War and looked toward the collapse of the Soviet Union and the demise of the American empire.⁷ For those of us who had not been following closely his reports on the activities of CND and its contacts in Eastern Europe, the analysis was unprecedented and profoundly interesting. At that time no American intellectual was making similar predictions. Little did we know how prescient they would prove to be – at least in the case of the first empire. The jury is still out on the second.

The expression of “pox on both your houses” sentiments was a mainstay of the British left in the 1960s and indeed can still be found in some quarters. On a personal level political thinkers and activists like Thompson and the Roches showed nothing but warmth to their American friends and associates, but they did harbor a not-always-fair or coherent anti-Americanism. Their search for a third way, for an alternative to the bipolarities of the Cold War, required the equation of Russian and American imperialisms. A similar myopia infected the idealism of *The May Day Manifesto* (1967). There were no concrete, pound and shilling plans to make British socialism stronger or to extend its reach. Who would pay for such an expansion of benefits and services? In addition what no one could have foreseen when the manifesto was written was the stunning demise of the British economy and the concomitant fear and insecurity that led to Thatcherism. Similarly, the passing of the generation of workers who knew poverty intimately, who had lived through the 1930s and 40s, meant that by the twenty-first century, Thompson’s working class had all but vanished in the mists of so-called New Labour. Not one of them could have endorsed the British invasion of Iraq. Once there had been thousands of Jims and Gerties and out of their lived experience emerged Edward’s historical *tour de force*.

In *The Making* Thompson explained that he wrote only about the English working class largely because he felt that he did not know enough about the Scots, Welsh or Irish, except as immigrants to England.⁸ In the case of the last more was involved than I think anyone on the English left cares to admit. Except for people with personal links to Irish Catholicism (like Jim), there was very little sympathy or interest within the British left for the plight of Northern Irish Catholics. In conversation with Edward and Dorothy Thompson I learned the depth of distrust, the lack of any identification with Ulster Catholics,

6. Margaret C. Jacob and Ira Katznelson, “Agendas for Radical History,” *Radical History Review*, 36 (Fall 1986), 26–45.

7. For similar sentiments to what was said at the inauguration see Thompson’s remarks in *The Nation*, 245 (12 December 1987), 701–05.

8. Thompson, *Making*, 13.

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