The Hidden Marxism of *The Making of the English Working Class*

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I'VE CHANGED the focus but not the title of my talk. In response to the call for papers I thought I would do a commemorative piece defending Thompson against recent critics, but I'm not a historian of Britain and I'm currently completing a book entitled *The European Union as Neo-Liberal Construction*, so for this and other political and personal reasons had no time to do extra research, so I've decided to renew and deepen the critique I did of Thompson's culturalism in the early '90s, which started out as a talk I gave at a reception for the Thompsons in Auckland New Zealand, which then became a paper that was set up for demolition by some New Left professors at the American Historical Association in 1991 and which was finally published in 1993 in the journal *Comparative Studies in Society and History* as "Republican Socialism and the Making of the Working Class in Britain, France and the United States: A Critique of Thompsonian Culturalism".

Critique I think is more useful than commemoration to socialist historians concerned about the future; that is how Marx advanced his understanding of history against Hegel and the left Hegelians and Thompson himself achieved his masterpiece by taking on the self-proclaimed capitalist historians of the Cold War era.

The Making... made its most immediate impact on historians of the early American labour movement so my connection with it as the author of *The Origins of the French Labor Movement: The Socialism of Skilled Workers* was not typical. I was first introduced to it in a seminar I took in 1966 along with my friend Peter Linebaugh, who left Columbia after the strike of 1968 to study with Thompson at Warwick and who followed in his footsteps with *The London Hanged* and recently *The Many-Headed Hydra*, tales of early modern trans-Atlantic rebels. Peter and I had very different readings of *The Making…*, essentially that of the new versus the old left. As a child of the McCarthyite fifties in which left-wing politics were transmuted into Bohemian culture, I was full of wonder at the creative use of Marxist concepts and socialist ideas in *The Making...*.

Whereas Peter was persuaded of the tradition of the free-born Englishman, of an accumulated culture of popular resistance to market capitalism made up of custom, religion and constitutionalism, I was struck by the discontinuity of British history between the Civil War and industrial revolution and by the role of very un-English Jacobinism and early socialism in the making of the English working class. I took these lessons forward in my book on the origins of the French labour movement to try to understand why it developed in a revolutionary way in contrast to the British and American. I stressed the importance of the alliance with middle class radicals, what I called republican socialists, and of the movement to establish trade co-operatives as the ideological seedbed for the growth of revolutionary syndicalism and eventually Communism.

The lessons I drew from *The Making...* can be summed up in the Marxist tradition as aspects of combined and uneven development – which Marx deployed to explain French radicalism in 1848 and which Trotsky and Lenin used more explicitly to

understand the socialist potential of the democratic revolution in Russia. There were three principal lessons I drew concerning capitalist development, political class-consciousness, and the nature of capitalist hegemony.

The first lesson was that of uneven economic development, that the industrial revolution powered by the machinery of the factory system was a total process that increased the number and the rate of exploitation of handworkers of town and country, semi-independent outworkers and skilled workers, who formed the mass of the active and organised working class. These workers were not subjected to the direct discipline of the factory system, but suffered exploitation primarily in the realm of circulation, taxation and finance; hence the distinction made by radicals like Cobbett and Wade between parasites – placemen, tax-collectors, financiers, speculators, and monopolists – and the producing classes, including masters as well as journeymen, that corresponded to an existing social relationship. Thompson describes both masters and journeymen as artisans, but it was the wage and piece-earners among them who became the cadre of the working class in every town and village.

The second lesson was that the working class was present at its making in that it faced the experience of industrialisation with its own values, ideas and ideologies, which were initially traditionalist, customary, religious or constitutional, but which were transformed among the skilled cadre by the rational ideologies of democratic Radicalism and co-operative socialism. The mind of the working class was not the blank slate of the economic man that the Webbs and Lenin in *What is to be Done?* assume, for simple trade unionism in Britain and economism in Russia were not spontaneous outpourings but liberal political constructions in the later nineteenth century.

Radical ideas of natural and equal rights introduced by the Painites accompanied with a conflictual social analysis were enriched in the 1820s by labour economists like Hodgskin, Thompson and Owen – Thompson is a bit too disdainful of the manufacturer turned co-operator – with concepts of labour value and exploitation. The twin streams of democratic radicalism and co-operative production came together after 1829 to produce probably the greatest revolutionary – at least the largest unitary – movement for socialism that Britain has ever known, in the 1831 agitation for electoral reform and, following the exclusion of workers from the vote, in the formation of the Grand National Consolidated Trades Unions that grouped a half a million under the banner of syndicalism and co-operative production.

The third lesson I drew was that you cannot do working class history without understanding that of the ruling class and of its political hegemony. History from below is a nonsense without also history from above, if class is a relationship. The English working class was made in confrontation with both the economic exploitation that is inherent in capitalism as well as a counter-revolutionary repression that united the landed and commercial classes against French-type Radicalism. The English governing class had a genius for co-opting successive strata of the propertied classes – mercantile in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and commercial and industrial by 1832 – in the nick of time to isolate the working class and spare the country revolution. The English thus lacked that body of middle class radicals, the Jacobins, who served as a bridge to the working class and who carried the revolution forward toward socialism in France, as Thompson acknowledged in *The Making*.... The result of counter-revolution was a working class that was very conscious of its own identity but lacked the drive for political power that French workers in conjunction with republican socialists acquired in 1848 and the Paris Commune.

What was and is my critique? My original article focused on the contradiction between the culturalist manifesto contained in the preface and the text of *The Making*..., but culturalist themes vie with Marxist ones also in the text.

First one must ask the question whether *The Making*... is really a history at all. Thompson admits in the preface that it is not a consecutive narrative but a series of essays admittedly with common themes and some chronological progression. He denies the need for any contemporary relevance to history and rejects the older socialist history of forerunners done by the Labourites G.D.H. Cole and Raymond Postgate, which I've always found very instructive.

As a self-confessed empiricist, in the preface he claims he records events just as they happened in some Rankian – *wie es ist eigentlich gewesen* – way, not as selected and ordered by theory and interpretation, which is what most socialist historians think they do. He seeks to rescue the losers from the condescension of history, but the losers left an important legacy and their story is incomplete without that of the winners and why they won. His essays thus lack

a clear sense of progression, which is a feature not only of the socialist but also the Western historiographical tradition as Alex Callinicos explains in *Theories and Narratives*. His narrative faces two ways, both forward and backwards. In the end he offers not an explanation but a celebration, moral and aesthetic, of a most distinguished and heroic popular culture.

The preface challenges the basic premises of socialist history. The vague and vacuous term experience conflates the economic, social, cultural, political and ideological that are the frames of Marxian analysis. He rejects, ambivalently to be sure, the economic determination of class and consciousness in production relations in favour of the category of the happening or experience over time and denies that class can be dissected and consciousness measured as a thing. Now classes are constantly changing, composing, decomposing and recomposing, but that does not mean we cannot quantify their composition or measure their consciousness as we routinely do in electoral and trade union analysis. He attacks the substitution of the party, sect or theorist for the class itself, but his book demonstrates the role of writers, theoreticians and agitators in forming the class or at least its self-consciousness. The *prise de conscience* or awakening of political class consciousness is the work of people like Bronterre O'Brien, graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, lawyer and editor of the *Poor Man's Guardian* from 1831 to 1835.

Instead of acknowledging the role of rationalist ideologies in the making he lumps them together with religious cults, custom and constitutionalism as culture – traditions, value systems, ideas and institutional forms – and sees a continuous organic growth out of capital accumulation that fuses the spirit of 1688, Dissent, Methodism, Wilkes and Liberty, Painite Radicalism, and co-operative socialism. There are of course important distinctions to be made, and Thompson usually makes them subtly in the text, as among the disciplinary repressiveness, moral earnestness (which still by the way imbues the Labour Party) and sometimes explosive force of Methodism, as that behind the prophetess Joanna Southcott, and distinctions among constitutionalists, Wilkes, and the Painites, but the penultimate fudge that the English working class faced the industrial revolution as "free-born Englishmen", when in fact the Radicalism generated by the French Revolution was probably more important, simply will not do. But only a historian of France or Eric Hobsbawn would have the gall to say this in England.

In his conclusion in the last chapter Thompson presages his turn in *Customs in Common* to traditional usages as the basis of a popular rural resistance to capitalism – class struggle without class he called it – in the early eighteenth century. Peasant studies in France have shown that there was little continuity between food and communal riots and the growth of red republicanism in the countryside. Thompson's displacement of consciousness from the autonomous and voluntarist sphere of politics to the heteronomous one of culture, governed by inherited norms, was ironic given Thompson's own personal political concern with human choice and action.

Now the contradictions and conflation between culture and politics in *The Making* ... was not peculiar to Thompson in the CP Historians' Group. You can find the same problem in Hobsbawn who remained in the party and in Hill who remained more orthodox. There are two good reasons why the Communist historians evaded politics: one was their relation to the party, which allowed them autonomy so long as they did not dabble in anything that would be of relevance to the party line; secondly and most profoundly there was the Cold War, a counter-revolution similar to that provoked by the French Revolution in which all intellectual energies in the West were directed against refuting Marxism and Communism and in which anti-capitalist politics had to be disguised in the vestments of culture.

The result was a Marxian-based historiography that achieved academic and public recognition but remained incomplete and strangely truncated much like mainstream social or representational history, one in which questions of power and politics were transmuted or left out.

Conditions have changed radically since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of Communism. Paradoxically, the fall of Communism has exposed ever more crudely the contradictions of capitalism, which faces its most serious economic crisis (for the first time since the industrial revolution living standards have fallen – manifestly in the US – over the long cycle) as well as its greatest crisis of political legitimacy in mass disaffection from the major political parties. What is missing is a credible socialist alternative provided by leaders armed with theory, which is but a generalisation from history. There is thus a real opportunity for socialist historians not only to contribute to that leadership, but also to correct and complete the work started by E.P. Thompson and the Communist Historians' Group. ■