

Why I Still Assign E. P. Thompson

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THE YEAR 2013 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). Throughout the year, essays, articles, and conference panels—indeed, whole conferences—explored the legacy of this influential historian and his most monumental work. 2013, coincidentally, also marked the first time I chose to assign Thompson's magnum opus to graduate students. In this article, I share my reflections on this decision. I do so, both as a means of offering my own humble contribution to the year's larger assessment of Thompson's legacy, and as a way of suggesting why his book still remains relevant to historians of the twenty-first century. Despite being subjected to critiques from a number of different quarters over the past five decades, Thompson's *Making* continues to offer important lessons to the student of history. In particular, *Making's* relative strengths and weaknesses make it an ideal venue for exploring the question of professional conduct—for considering how we, as historians, ought to approach the peoples of the past who form the subjects of our inquiries, and the implications these decisions have on both the scholarship we produce individually and the wider historical literature as a whole.

The decision to assign Thompson's *Making* in a graduate course may not seem especially controversial. References to the work and

its author have long occupied such a prominent place within the historical literature that there is a tendency to assume that “everyone” has read Thompson. Yet is this actually the case? In November of 2013, I attended an excellent panel examining the legacy of *The Making of the English Working Class* at the annual meeting of the North American Conference on British Studies.¹ During the course of the session, each of the four panelists noted that they no longer assigned the book to their students, and the comments of many other audience members—British historians from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom—likewise indicated that they had removed *Making* from their course syllabi.

I relate this anecdote not to criticize the panelists or any of the other scholars who related that they had ceased assigning Thompson’s *Making* in their courses. (Indeed, as I hope this essay makes clear, there are very valid reasons why scholars choose not to assign this book.) I offer it instead simply as evidence that the idea that Thompson’s book is still part of the common historical canon (if such a thing even exists) is a serious misconception. After all, if many British historians are not teaching *The Making of the English Working Class*, then who is? Well, me, for one—which returns us to the primary purpose of this essay: exploring my decision to assign Thompson’s *Making* to my graduate students in the fall of 2013, and explaining why, despite significant misgivings, I ultimately concluded I was justified in doing so.

In the interests of full disclosure, I am, as my statement above has likely already suggested, a (relatively) young historian. Unlike many of the scholars who reflected on Thompson’s influence over the course of 2013, I have never encountered him outside the pages of his prose, nor did I witness the evolving response to his scholarship during the second half of the twentieth century. Thompson had been deceased nearly a decade when I began graduate school, and by this time, many of the scholars who had offered the most potent critiques of his work likewise had become established, senior figures in the field. Thus, as a fledgling graduate student, I wondered why one of the first books I was required to read was a massive tome, more than 800 pages in length, composed almost forty years before.

I found myself pondering this same question in the summer of 2013, albeit from the other side of the syllabus. When asked to develop a new graduate seminar on the “Rise of Modern Britain” for

my department, Thompson's *Making* was one of first texts I placed on the reading list. Yet, when the time came to submit the list to the university bookstore, I found myself plagued with misgivings. "Of course, I have to assign Thompson," I thought. "Or do I?" The more I considered my decision, the more the counter-arguments began to gather strength. Yes, Thompson's work played a foundational role in the historiography of Modern Britain, but it had since been subject to serious critiques. My own research is sympathetic to several of these revisions, and most of the rest I acknowledge as valid and useful. Given the present state of the field, for example, how could I in good conscience assign a work in which Methodists are treated as caricatures, domestic service (the largest field of female employment during the industrial revolution) is barely mentioned, and the British Empire is seemingly non-existent? Furthermore, the reality of my department's student profile meant that I could expect most (if not all) of my students to be specializing in neither British nor even European history. Could I justify requiring them to read a book the length of Thompson's *Making* (which really must be read in its entirety to achieve the full effect), especially given that it had been the subject of so much compelling revisionism?

Ultimately, I concluded that the choice was indeed justifiable, and the book went on the list. While I made a number of arguments to myself and to my students about why the book belonged on the syllabus, at the end of the day, one particular factor convinced me that it was important (if not imperative) that my students grapple with *The Making of the English Working Class*. The choice had less to do with my sense of Thompson's importance to the field of British history than with the role his work had played in influencing my own philosophy of historical inquiry. At base, my decision to assign Thompson's book came down to his famous claim that in his book he sought to "quarrel" with historians who read "history in light of subsequent preoccupations, and not as in fact it occurred"—an argument encapsulated in that most oft-cited statement about "seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity."² This statement (one of two quotations, incidentally, from *Making* that appears in Thompson's entry in *Wikipedia*)³—a veritable battle cry for social and cultural

historians—left an enormous impression on me as a graduate student, and continues to give me goose bumps every time I read it. After all, what is more central to what we as historians ought to endeavor to achieve in our work than to understand our subjects' thoughts and actions within the "terms of their own experience"?⁴

Thompson's contribution to the ongoing debate about the "standard of living" in the industrial revolution exemplified this approach. By shifting this question from "standards" to "experiences," Thompson introduced the psychological and the cultural into a scholarly discussion overwhelmingly focused (to this day) around quantifiable phenomena. A worker's sense of satisfaction and well-being (or lack thereof), he argued, could not be understood purely in terms of wages received and enhanced opportunities for consumption, but also involved considering things like pride, independence, and sensory perceptions. He observed, for example, that while child labor was "not new," the nature of child labor in factories—its regularity, for example—*was*, and, as Thompson shrewdly noted, "monotony is peculiarly cruel to the child." In arguments like these, Thompson demanded (and continues to demand) that historians entertain the possibility that a British man, woman, and child in the early nineteenth century could perceive their "standard of living" as having declined—despite improvements in their incomes—on account of "the general pressure of long hours of unsatisfying labour under severe discipline for alien purposes."⁵

The subsequent critiques Thompson's *Making* received makes it easy to dismiss the signal importance of the philosophical position he so eloquently articulated. "Rescuing" (or "recovering") the experiences, ideas, and beliefs of different groups previously silenced in the historical record today has become such an integral part of the mission of the historical discipline (one essential, in fact, to revisions of Thompson's own work) that it is easy to forget that this was not always the case. Thompson's goal of saving the "poor stockinger" from the disdain of subsequent generations has been so regularly quoted, paraphrased, and parodied that it has become a sort of cliché. Consider, for example, Donald Reid's praise of a recent work of historical theory for seeking "to rescue the deluded follower of social history from the enormous condescension of the cultural turn"—one inspired by, but also founded upon, an assumed familiarity with Thompson's quotation.⁶ Yet this statement was not a

cliché when Thompson wrote it. If “rescuing” various constituencies from the “condescension of posterity” has become a stock phrase in the historical lexicon, students ought to encounter this philosophical position in the context in which it was initially deployed.

Understanding the people of the past on their own terms is, of course, no simple matter, and no study better illustrates the potentials and pitfalls of such an approach than Thompson’s *Making*. Indeed, it is no coincidence that some of the most trenchant critiques of this book represent the very places where Thompson failed to overcome his own pockets of historical “condescension,” arguably most notably in his treatment of women, gender, and Methodists.⁷ Yet, to my mind, Thompson’s failure to live up to his own philosophy of history does nothing to diminish the importance of this ideal, or of his (or any other historian’s) attempt to put it into practice. In 1857, Abraham Lincoln observed that part of the genius of the *Declaration of Independence* lay in the fact that in it, Thomas Jefferson had introduced “an abstract truth, applicable to all men and all times,” one that the founding fathers themselves proved incapable of fully realizing.⁸ I see Thompson’s *Making* in much the same light. In his quote about the “poor stockinger,” Thompson introduced his own “abstract truth,” one that demands a specific code of behavior on the part of the historical practitioner.

Much of Thompson’s life was devoted to exposing and attacking different types of injustice, and *The Making of the English Working Class* was certainly no exception. Indeed, the anger Thompson channeled in describing the destruction of many of England’s traditional customs and industries—of chronicling the struggles of the political and economic “losers” in the age of French and Industrial Revolutions—remains just as prominent a feature of his prose for the twenty-first-century reader as for scholars in the 1960s. The idea that historians had a duty to analyze their subjects within the confines of their own historical environment represented an integral part of this project. For example, he concludes his treatment of the Luddites (running to more than one hundred pages!) with a restatement of this philosophy: “for those who live through it, history is neither ‘early’ nor ‘late.’ ‘Forerunners’ are also the inheritors of another past. Men must be judged in their own context.”⁹ Thus, the historical perspective Thompson invoked in order to understand history’s “losers” (and thereby “rescue” them) involved the more

general demand that historians endeavor to analyze the people of the past in light of the specific historical milieu they inhabited, rather than on the basis of post-facto outcomes. In so doing, he thus simultaneously presented an argument about how historians ought to approach the peoples of the past in a “just” and responsible fashion, applicable to any time and place.

Because Thompson made this demand such a prominent and recurring element of his overall argument in *The Making of the English Working Class*, the book offers an ideal medium to expose students to both the benefits and hazards involved in undertaking historical scholarship. In its significant insights and its equally significant shortcomings, this book forces the reader to confront that central tension inherent in all historical research—between the need to understand the past in all its foreignness, while continually acknowledging the ways that we ourselves remain prisoners of our own historical contexts. In reading Thompson’s *Making*, we receive a humbling reminder that historians’ reconstructions of the past are always uncertain and contentious because they remain “contingent on their unavoidable remoteness from their subjects.”¹⁰ By confronting those areas where a brilliant, careful scholar like Thompson was himself unable to escape both the limitations imposed by historical distance and the weight of his own contemporary circumstances, we are reminded that all historical research is at base an imperfect endeavor, one that will always produce incomplete comprehension and provisional conclusions, and thereby require that further research be undertaken in order that we can all become collectively “less wrong”—and thereby less condescending—toward the subjects of our studies.

I realize that not all historians share this commitment to evaluating and understanding the peoples of the past on the basis of their own available knowledge alone. In assigning Thompson’s *Making* partly as an expression of this particular philosophy of history, it is not my intention to force my students to commit to my own set of scholarly values. My decision to assign the text, in other words, was not motivated by the desire to indoctrinate. I do believe, however, that in training the next generation of historians, we as professors have a responsibility not only to expose our students to historiography and theory, but also to introduce and model the values that we as individual historians hold dear. My own graduate professors

certainly did so, and for this, I am very grateful. In my own teaching and advising, therefore, I seek to live up to their examples and carry on their legacies.

To my mind, this involves not only encouraging students to respect the people of the past on their own terms, but also to approach previous works of historical scholarship from a similar perspective. In preparing a future generation of historians, we have a responsibility to help them appreciate the prior accomplishments of other practitioners in the discipline—to make them aware of what we have inherited from previous generations of historians, not merely how we have improved upon or moved beyond their work. Thompson's influence across the varied subjects of historical inquiry during the second half of the twentieth century ensures that, sooner or later, students will likely encounter someone seeking to revisit or revise some aspect of his work. Indeed, nothing attests to the impact of Thompson's scholarship on the discipline more than the continued appearance of research seeking to overturn his conclusions. Emma Griffin's recent reexamination of the British working-class standard of living during the Industrial Revolution, for example, represents a new attempt to address this question in terms of Thompson's own criteria of "standards and experiences," on the basis of the analysis of a body of sources frequently viewed with "condescension" by much of the profession—the evidence contained in working-class autobiographies.¹¹

In order to fully grasp the import of revisions like Griffin's, however, students ought to be exposed to the work that helped to inspire them in the first place, both intellectually and philosophically. Thompson deserves the right to speak in his own defense through the pages of his prose, rather than in the footnotes and summations of subsequent historical studies. Denying him the chance to do so runs the risk of consigning him to the very same "condescension of posterity" his scholarship sought so valiantly to overcome. It is for this reason that my graduate students can be sure that, for better or worse, they will be reading E. P. Thompson for a long time to come.

Notes

1. "Roundtable: E. P. Thompson and *The Making of the English Working Class*, Reconsidered: Fifty Years After, Critique and Reinvention," Panel #38, North American Conference on British Studies, November 8-10, 2013, Portland, Oregon, <<http://www.nacbs.org/blog/nacbs-2013-draft-program-august-2013/>>.
2. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963; Reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 12-13.
3. "E. P. Thompson," Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E._P._Thompson>.
4. Thompson, 13.
5. Thompson, 314, 332-333, 446-447; the entirety of chapter 10 examines the relationship between "standards and experiences." On the "experiential" and Thompson's theory of history, see William H. Sewell, Jr., "How Classes are Made: Critical Reflections on E. P. Thompson's Theory of Working-Class Formation," in *E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990), 64-67.
6. Donald Reid, review on the back of Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, *The Future of Class in History: What is Left of the Social?* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007).
7. For critiques of Thompson from feminist and gender historians, see Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1983); Joan Wallach Scott, "Women in *The Making of the English Working Class*," in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Catherine Hall, "The Tale of Samuel and Jemima: Gender and Working-Class Culture in Early Nineteenth-Century England," in *White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992); and Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995). For Methodism, see David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005); and Phyllis Mack, *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment: Gender and Emotion in Early Methodism* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Carolyn Steedman's *Master and Servant: Love and Labour in the English Industrial Age* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2007), unites both of these critiques deftly in a single study.
8. Abraham Lincoln, as quoted in David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 97.
9. Thompson, 592.
10. Simon Schama, *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 320.
11. Emma Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn: A People's History of the Industrial Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).