

## History as Argument: The Contrarian Analytics of *The Making of the English Working Class*<sup>1</sup>

Bryan D. Palmer  
*Trent University*

“...being as reasonable as we are able to be, we all ought to argue”

C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*

### ABSTRACT

The article explores the wide-ranging meaning and importance of argument in E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. It explores how Thompson used the three parts of his study - 'The Liberty Tree'; 'The Curse of Adam'; and 'The Working-Class Presence' - to argue against specific traditions of interpretation of working-class experience arising from working-class autodidacts and the labour movement, conservative apologists for capitalism's development, and left-wing understandings associated with social democracy on the one hand and mechanical versions of Marxism on the other. Thompson's well-known accent on human agency is thus explained through the ways in which he argued against conventional wisdoms associated with the working class and its institutions, conservative commentators, and conventional left-wing thought.

KEYWORDS: E.P. Thompson; Marxism; Argument; Adult Education; Capitalism; Social Democracy; Fabianism; Stalinism; Historical Interpretation; Working Class; England; Dialectics

---

<sup>1</sup> This article formed the substance of two keynote addresses delivered to conferences marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* in October and November 2013. The first presentation was to the Humanities Division, Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana de Mexico, and the second was to the Society for the Study of Labour History at its annual conference, in Halifax, England. I thank the organizers for inviting me to participate in these events and the audience for their comments.

## INTRODUCTION

There are few words in the vocabulary of Edward Thompson more valued, or more used, than argument. Consider the 1978 Foreword to *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays*, where Thompson insisted that the politics of socialist internationalism was necessarily a “concourse, an exchange. Argument is its true sign.” (Thompson 1978: iv) Indeed, for Thompson argument was something of a methodological imperative. “It is only by facing into opposition that I am able to define my thought at all,” he wrote to Leszek Kolakowski in 1973, likening himself to a great bustard who, “by a law well-known to aeronautics, can only rise into the air against a strong head wind.” (Thompson 1978: 396) Thompson, akin to the William Blake he so admired, articulated ways of “breaking out from received wisdom and moralism, and entering upon new possibilities.” Argument was, for both Thompson and Blake, a way of keeping “the divine vision in time of trouble,” and in this often paradoxical historical hybrid, it was possible to embrace “incompatible traditions,” which could be “held in polarized tension” and “argued as contraries.” (Thompson 1993: 20-21, 228-229; Palmer 2013; Chandavarkar 1997) As early as his 1956 exit from the Communist Party of Great Britain, Thompson had embraced the importance of reasoned argument. When he and John Saville were discussing the kind of journal they wanted to launch as the voice of a renewed communism, Thompson wrote, “[The] chief thing I want in this journal is attack.” (Matthews 2013: 68) There was, of course, much to criticize, not only in terms of conventional society and its capitalist hegemony, but on the left as well, where misplaced allegiances to a degenerated Soviet Union and uncritical embrace of Stalinist ideology weakened substantially the possibility of revolution. The Reasoners of 1956, led by Thompson, his wife Dorothy, and John Saville, took their leave from the Communist Party under the banner of a quote from Marx: “To leave error unrefuted is to encourage intellectual immorality.” (Palmer 1981: 73) Thompson, like his co-worker in the mobilizations of 1950s dissent, C. Wright Mills, adopted a stance reminiscent of the best of W.H. Auden’s powerful poem, 1 September 1939, written as war broke out in Europe:

*All I have is a voice to undo the folded lie, the romantic lie in the brain of the sensual man-in-the-street and the lie of Authority whose buildings grope the sky...* (Thompson 1978: 220; Thompson 1979: 64)

## UNDOING THE FOLDED LIE

It is precisely this diversity of argument that animates Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. At the level of Thompson's *tone*, this made his writing powerfully different than almost anything known in academic circles. And Thompson justified this argumentative voice, inveighing against the false gentility of scholarly discourse, draped as it was in the seductions of genteel dialogues, weighted down as they were with the fetishization of vacuousness, paraded promiscuously as the only form of piously polite dialogue:

*"I sometimes imagine this medium (and it is the church-going solemnity of the procession which provokes me to irreverence) as an elderly gentlewoman and near relative of Mr. Eliot, so distinguished as to have become an institution: The Tradition. There she sits, with that white starched affair on her head, knitting definitions without thought of recognition or reward (some of them will be parcelled up and sent to the Victims of Industry) – and in her presence how one must watch one's language! The first brash word, the least suspicion of laughter or polemic in her presence, and The Tradition might drop a stitch and have to start knitting all those definitions over again. ... But The Tradition has not been like this at all: Burke abused, Cobbett inveighed, Arnold was capable of malicious insinuation, Carlyle, Ruskin, and D.H. Lawrence, in their middle years, listened to no one. This may be regrettable: but I cannot see that the communication of anger, indignation, or even malice, is any less genuine. What is evident here is a concealed preference – in the name of 'genuine communication' – for the language of the academy"* (Thompson 1961: 25; also Thompson 1970)

All contemporary recognition of gendered social constructions aside, this is a defence of writing as argument that bears reflection. And while it must be acknowledged that Thompson became, *after* the academic success of *The Making of the English Working Class*, more inhibited in his *historical scholarship*, more inclined to "sharpen" his "own scholarly equipment" with the precision, accuracy, and weight of documentation required of works necessarily subject to the criticism of a "largely conservative profession," his most famous and influential text was actually not written in this vein, as was evident in what he would later refer to as "my rather irreverent attitudes to the academic

proprieties.” *The Making*, in short, was “not a book written for the academic public.” Rather, it was nurtured in the adult education milieu, and its audience was imagined by its author to be “working people, trade unionists, white-collar people, teachers, and so on ... and the audience of the Left also, of the labour movement and the New Left,” which included the New Left Clubs that both Edward and Dorothy Thompson and Stuart Hall so valued. (Thompson 1959; Thompson 1959a) “I was trying to express the theoretical and philosophical preoccupations of ten years of extra-mural work,” Thompson noted in 1980, the book being aimed at “the good extra-mural student. ... My material was more likely to come from the Batley library than the *Economic History Review*.” For Thompson, this was “NOT the learned or academic tradition.” (Matthews 2013: 68, Merrill 1983: 7; Palmer 1994: 90-92) Thompson’s tone, when he was making *The Making*, then, had more in common with that of Jonathan Swift or William Hazlitt than it did with that of the university seminar room.

In addition to tone, however, argument ordered *The Making of the English Working Class* in particularly important ways. There is a powerful contrarian analytics that drives the book, and excavating the folded lies that envelop the process of class formation in the many different levels of “the enormous condescension of posterity” is what gives the book its powerful ongoing salience and explains its unique structure. (Thompson 1968: 13) On one level, and as Thompson himself stated quite clearly, the book arose “from a two-sided theoretical polemic,” pitting itself against a “firm, intellectually very well-based discipline of economic history ... largely contaminated with capitalist ideology,” on the one hand, and, on the other “abbreviated economistic notations of Marxism” that “simplified ... the creation of the working class.” (Merrill 1983: 6-7). That said, how *The Making of the English Working Class* was made was more complicated than this. For all that Thompson has spawned an industry of critical commentary, few are those who have ventured into discussion of the somewhat odd, almost rambling, certainly repetitive organization of *The Making of the English Working Class*. (Anderson 1980) And yet, as I will suggest in this discussion of the different levels of Thompson’s argumentation, there were reasons behind the book’s peculiar way of ordering its narrative of the making of class.

#### ARGUMENTS ON ALL OF AUDEN’S SIDES

If we take Auden’s metaphor of the “unfolded lie” and pluralize it as he did, we locate distinct areas where Thompson argued against received conventions and

ideological postures. This was what he meant when, in the preface to *The Making of the English Working Class*, he declared that he had been “conscious, at times, of writing against the weight of prevailing orthodoxies.” (Thompson 1968:12) This was understatement. Complicating matters further was the extent to which the orthodoxies were by no means all cut from the same cloth. Following Auden we can discern three particular kinds of orthodoxy – all quite different and all demanding either reconsideration or refusal – that Thompson argued against. Thompson’s tone shifted, depending on the stance he was trying to develop which, in turn, was inseparable from the received conventions he was interrogating.

First, were the traditions and associations that might be linked to the “sensual man in the street”. This can be likened to the complex heritage of the English working class. Its autodidacticism contained much that was two-sided: on the one hand, there were radical currents and oppositional eddies that sustained streams of resistance flowing from the 18<sup>th</sup> century into the post-World War II era. These Thompson wanted to revitalize. But there was, always, a complicating inertia built into this history and its often contradictory character. Sensual practices and knowledges generated out of working-class life and the class collisions embedded within its everyday routines, needed often to be stirred from somnolence, challenged in their descent into complacency, even capitulation. This was especially the case, with respect to the labour movement, where the historical achievement of victories through struggle might validate specific orientations that appeared to have consolidated gains, understating or even negating more oppositional practices that had, in actuality, contributed to advances even as they seemed to be displaced. (Anderson 1966; Nairn 1964) Thompson’s relationship to the “sensual man in the street” was not one of a supplicant before agency, then, but rather a complex balance in which renegotiating the strengths and weaknesses of a class heritage was paramount. He knew, as a young tutor in adult education in the Extramural Department of Leeds University, headed by Stanley Raybould, that he had to raise the level of working-class consciousness, not appear before it on bended knee. Thus, when asked what his purpose was in teaching workers, he replied forthrightly, if apparently breezily, that it was to “to make socialists, create revolutionaries and transform society.” (Searby 1993: 3; Fieldhouse 2013: 27; Steele 2013)

Clancy Sigal’s *Weekend in Dinlock* presents a fictionalized Edward Thompson, designated Charles, a Halifax scholar writing a book on labour history and teaching workers. The protagonist in Sigal’s novel seeks out “instruction” from Charles in what he has experienced in a mining community. Charles listens

carefully to the Dinlock stories, thinks about them, and replies, “It is a backward place, you know.” (Sigal 1961: 83) Throughout *The Making* Thompson’s enthusiasm for the accomplishments of working-class organizers and militants extends routinely into appreciative sensibilities of what was accomplished within communities battling against the depressing material realities of the depersonalized market economy. Yet he also grasped what was lost as “years of self-education” collapsed, in trades such as hand-loom weaving, inward into “a patina of cliché.” Some weaver-poets, Thompson reported, managed to acquire a knowledge of classical writing by Virgil, Ovid, and Homer, as well as biology and botany. But the fruits of their autodidact culture atrophied, their verse exhibiting “few literary merits,” marked as it was by pathos and the strained emulation of alien literary forms, self-conscious reflections bemoaning, “it is all over; I must continue to work amidst the clatter of machinery.” This was not the stuff of romanticization, of populist concessions to the pedigree of class. Rather, it saw class as formed in the vice-grip of subordination, its creativity buoyed by radicalism and collective mobilizations such as Chartism. Sadly, as Thompson recognized, there were many casualties in the making of this class, among them those whose reduction in status were measured in losses of material well-being, independence, and cultural vitality. (Thompson 1968: 322-325) Moreover, even icons of emerging radicalism were subject to scrutiny. As much as Thompson saw Paine as a publicist of genius, revered by radical sections of the working-class, he knew well the limitations of Paine’s agitational interventions: Paine, wrote Thompson, lacked “any depth of reading, any sense of cultural security, and is betrayed by his arrogant and impetuous temper into writing passages of mediocrity”; “the limitations of Paine’s ‘reason’ must also be remembered,” stressed Thompson, who detected “a glibness and lack of imaginative resource” that brought to mind “Blake’s strictures on the ‘single vision’.” (Thompson 1968: 98, 107)

Thompson’s refusal of condescension thus did not translate into sentimental backing away from reasoned criticism of the limitations of working-class experience. Yet such criticism was always informed by the learning that Thompson insisted all intellectuals and University-based academics could garner from contact with labouring people and their experience.

In 1950, in a workers’ education debate over ‘University standards’, Thompson stood his ground against the view that the pedagogy of the oppressed was something of a one-way street, in which the rigours of academia had to be brought to a plebeian community. Quoting Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*, Thompson highlighted the illumination within Hardy’s text that a mason’s

“stone yard” constituted “a centre of effort as worthy as that dignified by the name of scholarly study within the noblest of colleges.” (Palmer 1994: 64-67) Thompson embraced wholeheartedly William Wordsworth’s compassion and capacity to hear, “From mouths of lowly men and obscure/A tale of honour.” Indeed, this was turned by Thompson into a necessity charged with political and intellectual import:

*“When I began to inquire, to watch and question those I met, and held familiar talk with them, the lonely roads were schools to me in which I daily read with most delight the passions of mankind there saw into the depths of human souls, souls that appear to have no depth at all to vulgar eyes. And now convinced at heart how little that to which alone we give the name of education hath to do with real feeling and just sense”* (Thompson 1968a: 6, 8)

Arguments would thus be posed on all sides, and without such arguments learning was impoverished. “There is too little rebellion in the class,” Thompson once complained of one of his extra-mural adult education tutorials, “and ... [it] looks as if the whole course of the class might be run without one good earnest row between the students.” (Searby 1993: 10) Even “the sensual man in the street,” then, might be inhibited and restrained by lies of consensus. Argument was required to shake such lies loose, unfolding them in ways that would nurture oppositional consciousness. Second, however, was the more straightforward “lie of Authority,” which could take many forms, embedded both in the past and in interpretations of that history. For the mindset of the sensual man in the street was never immune from ideological apologetics and their capacity to construct the hegemonic values out of which class place was in part fashioned. This involved 18<sup>th</sup> century political economists, 19<sup>th</sup> century churchmen, and 20<sup>th</sup> century academics, all of whom, among others, would be argued against by Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class*. Third, and finally, there was the complicated folded “romantic lie in the brain.” This, we can suggest, involved the mistaken assumptions associated with the left, the promise of social transformation rooted in the premises of, for instance, official Communism and its Stalinist constructions, or the gradualism and evolutionary, parliamentary proceduralism of social democracy in general, lived out in the Fabianism and Labour Party traditions particularistic to the British case. Against this kind of politics and how it had managed, for decades, to read the history of workers’ struggles, Thompson would pose forceful arguments.

It is only when we appreciate that the three parts of *The Making of the English Working Class*, titled “The Liberty Tree,” “The Curse of Adam,” and “The Working Class Presence,” are indeed arguments posed with different purpose, orchestrated by quite distinct levels of disagreement, that we can understand, I think, how Thompson’s book was made. In bringing us into engagement with concrete historical developments, embedded in specific social, economic, political, intellectual, and cultural contexts, circling back on the personalities and practices of the 1790-1832 years again and again, Thompson peeled back the folds of metaphorical lies, exposing strengths and bringing weaknesses into view, complicating stands and sensibilities of actors and analysts, recovering meanings long lost through neglect or derision, and, when necessary, standing the ground of unambiguous refusal. *The Making of the English Working Class* is nothing if not the articulation of argument on all sides.

#### MAKING THE MAKING OF THE ENGLISH WORKING CLASS: ARGUMENTATION’S STRUCTURE

Argument structured all of Thompson’s writing. Thompson explained to Michael Merrill, interviewing him in March 1976, how his book projects did not so much develop out of choice as they grew out of material that took him over. And the original impetus in this process was always one of standing *against* specific writings, which pricked Thompson’s antagonisms. In the case of his study of William Morris, Thompson stated unequivocally how he was taken with Morris and his meaning for his adult education classes and then, upon reading “two books *so* dreadful about Morris” he “thought I must answer these.”

With *The Making of the English Working Class*, a book that was contracted to be a textbook on the history of labour from 1832 to 1945, written for money, “It is just the same story again as with the Morris.” As background preparation to introduce his reconnaissance of labour history, Thompson started to read some recently published works on popular struggles and agitations and their repression in the pre-1832 years. He was appalled at how bad they were. Argument propelled him forward, the material took hold of him, and *The Making of the English Working Class* was the result. (Merrill 1983: 13-14; Thompson 1951; Thompson 1955; Thompson 1957; Goodway 2013; Palmer 1994: 52-106).

That said, it was precisely because *The Making* was conceived and developed as Thompson was teaching his adult education tutorials, that it was structured in the peculiar way that it was. Thompson was keen to enter into a dialogue with



the autodidactic culture of the working class that he encountered in his classes, and he undoubtedly shaped the introduction to his study of class formation in ways that would touch down on the received intellectual and political experience of the working class audience he encountered in his peripatetic teaching in Yorkshire. Thus, he was less interested in structuring his book along the conventional Marxist lines sketched out by Anderson, or in adhering to some template routinized in academic publications. Rather, he commenced with “certain aspects of plebeian consciousness,” reporting later that in Part One of *The Making* he was deliberately trying to answer the challenge posed by a number of issues that he felt were “not fully disclosed ... [that] remained as a challenge.” (Merrill 1983: 14-15) From there, he could move on to Part Two’s arguments, which took a more polemical turn against those who, past and present, defended and rationalized capitalism’s disciplines and its exploitative essence. Finally, in Part Three, Thompson had then set the stage for an examination of the working-class presence as it developed a consciousness of self-identity and espoused a politics of radical challenge to its class adversaries. In exploring this history Thompson was not just combating the complacency and condescension of the right, but also the ways in which a different kind of ideological blinkering blinded much of the conventional left to the nature and dimensions of class struggle in the past. Thus, Thompson’s book was arguing against Auden’s lies: of the sensual man in the street; of Authority; and of the romantic brain of orthodox opposition. “To write old history afresh,” Thompson once insisted, “cannot be done without un-writing other people’s history.” (Palmer 1994: 157; Thompson 1967; Thompson 1993a)

#### ARGUMENT I: THE LIBERTY TREE RECONSIDERED

The most subtle argument to be unearthed in *The Making of the English Working Class* is posed in Part I, “The Liberty Tree.” Thompson alluded to this argument rarely and obliquely, but its importance, I would suggest, is paramount, and addressing it goes a long way towards rectifying wrong-head criticisms of Thompson as a merely populist voice in the socialist project. (Matthews 2013: 59-104; Palmer 2013) What I want to suggest is that *The Making of the English Working Class* opens with Part I for a reason. Thompson chose to commence his book with an account of democratic plebeian organization in the 1790s London Corresponding Society, then moved jarringly into discussions of religious dissent and foundational texts of the “slumbering Radicalism” (Thompson 1968: 34) of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries – John Bunyan’s

*Pilgrim's Progress* and Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* – before shifting gears into an encounter with the denizens of “Satan’s strongholds,” within which superstition, passive irreligion, prejudice, and patriotism co-existed with tendencies more challenging to the *status quo*. Finally he closes Part I with accounts of how the Industrial Revolution was grafted on to the pre-existing human socio-political stock of “the freeborn Englishman,” the liberty tree being planted in the soil of capitalism’s new regime of accumulation at the very moment that the ideas of the French Revolution wafted across the channel. This created a situation in which, as John Thelwall stated in *The Rights of Nature* (1796), “every large workshop and manufactory is a sort of political society, which no act of parliament can silence, and no magistrate disperse.” (Thompson 1968: 203)

Thompson began *The Making* with this complicated set of juxtapositions precisely because he was attempting to draw his adult education readers into analytic territory with which they were both familiar and unfamiliar. He was self-consciously complicating conventional home-grown traditions of the English working class, interrogating assumptions that had too long gone unquestioned, and looking squarely at places the respectable face of ‘Labour’ had, over decades, closed its eyes of interpretation against. As an adult education tutor in Yorkshire, Thompson knew that Paine and Bunyan were on the shelves of the often self-educated readers that took his classes, having been passed down from one generation to another, even as avenues of modest upward mobility shifted the material ground of class place. (Eley 2013) He appreciated the weight of conventional belief in Methodism’s positive contribution to the working-class movement. (Thompson 1976).

It was, as well, impossible not to grasp that the instinct of those dedicated to education was to divide people into “the organized or chapel-going good and the dissolute bad,” just as this inclination was reinforced in historical sources *and* in much of the ideological complacency of self-help. (Thompson 1968: 59)

The purpose of Part I of *The Making* was thus twofold: to revolutionize appreciations of conventions like that of “the free-born Englishman,” which had, through time, become *too* conventional; and to complicate these traditions by insisting that their staid essentials, which had hardened over generations into barriers to the outright spirit of rebellion that had originally animated them, be leavened with appreciations of the rough social strata and their resistance to assimilation into capitalism’s machinery of incorporation.

Thompson thus placed radical readings of the Norman Yoke, the liberty tree, reform societies, Tom Paine, and *Pilgrim's Progress* in the context the 1790s. This proved a cauldron that congealed the economics of capitalist consolidation and the politics of an emerging, expansive democracy, pressured by the state's proclivity for repression, corruption, and confinement. He drew on familiarities with Bunyan's 17<sup>th</sup>-century account of Christian's pilgrimage, with William Blake's renditions of innocence and experience, perhaps even with the labour movement's origins as filtered through understandings of the reflex of mutual aid elaborated by Sidney and Beatrice Webb. Thompson took the radical currents and oppositional eddies that sustained Bunyan into the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, when they flowed into the thought of Paine, Cobbett, and Owen, but shook them loose from the hegemonic hold of 'the nation' and its subordination of all class interests to those of the rising bourgeoisie. Accenting the Jacobin agitations of 1792-1796, Thompson insisted that this radicalism of the 1790s "altered the sub-political attitudes of the people, affected class alignments, and initiated traditions which stretch forward into the present century." He reinterpreted the rights of the free-born Englishman, which an official history had compressed into policies of educational quietism and constitutionalist, parliamentary gradualism, putting the stamp of revolutionary initiative on them. John Thelwall took Jacobinism to the borders of Socialism and revolutionism, advocating unlimited agitation of a kind that went further than Thomas Hardy's London Corresponding Society's declaration, "That the number of members be unlimited." Thomas Spence, a poor schoolmaster from Newcastle, embraced underground agitation, the abolition of private property in land, and the rights of women to sexual liberation. If such leaders were too few, the tenor of their times was perhaps captured in a short note from William Blake's friend and fellow-engraver, George Cumberland: "No news, save that *Great Britian* is hanging the Irish, hunting the maroons, feeding the Vendée, and establishing the human flesh trade." (Thompson 1994; Thompson 1968: 131, 175-179) Thompson's purpose in *The Making* was to remind English readers that such "Jacobin conspirators did exist," but it was also to underscore how, by 1799, nearly all of them "were in gaol or in exile." (Thompson 1968: 191) The tradition of the free-born Englishman was not a gift of any benevolent state or a recognized and honoured consensus. It was contested terrain. In the context of the 1790s it was consolidated through reform struggle, the underside of which included entrenched power's passage of anti-trade union legislation such as The Two Acts, heresy hunting and the infiltration of popular movements by government-placed spies, naval mutinies at Spithead and the Nore in April and May 1797, and the Irish Rebellion of 1798.

Nor was Thompson simply one-sided in his embrace of specific traditions. In the chapter on Christian and Appollyon, for instance, there is no mistaking Thompson's complex argumentation: Wesleyan Methodism *was* "a politically regressive" influence, the weight of its official impact registering in ways prejudicial to the extension of popular liberties; yet there was within Methodism a "shaping democratic spirit" which could never quite be entirely suppressed and which, in spite of Wesley's managed commitment to hierarchy, might well nurture clandestine egalitarian sensibilities, even oppositional, ranting, sects. More generally, the English history of dissenting religion, Thompson argued, was made up of "collisions, schisms, mutations; and one feels often that the dormant seeds of political Radicalism lie within it, ready to germinate whenever planted in a beneficent and hopeful social context." (Thompson 1968: 39) But Dissent's other countenance, turned to quietist consolation and its capacity to enervate stands of resistance and unravel oppositional fibre, substituted "callow emotionalism" for the impulse of democratic anti-authoritarianism. In Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* there may well be the possibility of the good fight being waged, but there is no mistaking the connection between the ongoing spirit of moral integrity and the inheritance of struggle:

*"When the context is hopeful and mass agitations arise, the active energies of the tradition are most apparent: Christian does battle with Apollyon in the real world. In times of defeat and mass apathy, quietism is in the ascendant, reinforcing the fatalism of the poor: Christian suffers in the Valley of Humiliation, far from the rattling of coaches, turning his back on the City of Destruction and seeking the way to a spiritual City of Zion" (Thompson 1968: 37).*

Against the received wisdoms of religion's unproblematic contribution to the making of the English working class, Thompson argued for a complex reciprocity of rebellion and utilitarianism, a tension that he saw lived out in regional differentiation between England's South and North, its metropolitan secularism and its moral force enthusiasm. "Each tradition," he concluded, seemed "enfeebled without the complement of the other." (Thompson 1968: 58)

This dialectical argument was also posed against the conventional understandings of the traditions of the free-born Englishman. Thompson insisted that a social stratum that would, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century, come to be designated the residuum or the underclass, demanded attention.

There was little space in the respectable social construction of the “forward march of labour,” which ordered the working-class movement’s self-conception, for accounts of “Satan’s strongholds.” Thompson brought into the political mix of “members unlimited” a refusal to write out of the depiction of the making of a class those whose fit within it was less than prettifying. Respectable working-class people, of the sort that attended adult education classes, were unlikely to appreciate those whose response to the new industrial work disciplines of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was not *self*-discipline but its refusal. Drawing on researches that presaged Henry Mayhew’s mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century investigations of London’s dispossessed, especially the inquiries of Patrick Colquhoun into policing, public houses, and indigence in the 1790s, Thompson complicated understandings of class formation by gesturing towards the importance of the “dangerous classes.” Neither the propertied classes of the era Thompson studied, nor the advancing phalanx of propriety, which included the greatest archivist of the emerging labour movement, Francis Place, proved able to put aside “their abhorrence of the improvidence, ignorance, and licentiousness of the poor.” And so the recalcitrance of those who refused the project of a disciplinary incorporation, Thompson suggested, had become folded into one of the many lies of exclusion about how the working class was made. In order to unmake this making, especially among the autodidacts of his tutorials, Thompson brought into the political mix of the introduction to his study 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.” Riots and mobs were interrogated, not just as vectors of the people’s will, but as forms of activity that reflected all manner of protest and were orchestrated by a wide set of impulses, sometimes contradictory, a “half-way house in the emergence of popular political consciousness.” This was positioned analytically by Thompson in ways that questioned the pioneering studies of George Rudé as much as mainstream dismissals of so-called mobs. The late 18<sup>th</sup>-century crowd that Thompson brought into his analysis of class formation might raise the banner of “Liberty!”, but it could just as easily attack “alien Others” in brutalizing displays of chauvinistic bigotry. Old paternalist notions of moral economy jostled with newer, if still vaguely formulated, discontents with the market economy and its most visible edifice, the sprawling mill. Riotous congregations of rowdies might be riding their sense of grievance into the public domain or, alternatively, they could still be doing the bidding of authority, which retained a capacity to manipulate the masses. (Thompson 1968: 59-83)

In addressing what he regarded as “the more robust and rowdy features” of class formation, Thompson stepped outside of the received orthodoxies of adult education. (Thompson 1968: 63) These accented “the sober constitutional ancestry of the working-class movement.” Calling attention to the need for more studies “of the social attitudes of criminals, of soldiers and sailors, of tavern life,” *The Making of the English Working Class* eschewed “the moralizing eye” that often cast its gaze downward, averting “the fatalism, the irony in the face of Establishment homilies, the tenacity of self-preservation” that could be readily seen among those who refused “the inhibiting pressures of magistrates, mill-owners, and Methodists.” (Thompson 1968: 63-64)

There was value enough in this insight, but it broadened, as well, into Thompson’s willingness to venture into deeper critique, interrogating the constitutionalist and gradualist politics that germinated in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and that figures such as Place privileged in their deliberate, and somewhat sanitizing, compilation of the documentary record of the labour movement’s origins. It was this record, assembled with due obeisance to the respectable, restrained meetings of craftsmen, in which a Whiggish march to collective bargaining rights proceeded through enlightenment, order, and sobriety, that J.L. and Barbara Hammond and Sidney and Beatrice Webb drew on in their pioneering representations of labour history’s evolution. Thompson recognized this dimension of labour’s past, but he also grasped, more completely than any previous student of the workers’ movement, how limiting it was. Constitutionalism, with its patient legalism and gradualist faith in education and legitimate, inevitable reform and with the revered Francis Place sitting in liberal homage to it, in Thompson’s words, as “the white man’s Uncle Tom,” may well have been triumphant in the long haul, but it was also always fighting a “dialectical paradox” in the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. (Thompson 1968: 96, 170) Its rhetoric, of which Paine supplied the most influential and powerful examples, seemed always to be contributing either to its destruction or its transcendence. Jacobins like Joseph Gerrald harangued the courts where they appeared habitually in the early wave of repression directed at reforms in 1794:

*“The word constitution, constitution! is rung in our ears with unceasing perseverance. This is the talisman which the enemies of reform wield over the heads of the credulous and the simple; and, like old and wicked enchanters, having first bound them in the spell, take advantage of the drowsiness which their arts have created. But to hear placemen and pensioners talking of a constitution, when their whole lives are one uniform violation of*

*its principles is like a monk preaching population*" (Thompson, 1968: 140)

Paine carried this message into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and with it the impulse of the plebeian Jacobinism of the 1790s. This was the free-born Englishman transformed by the political economy of class, forged amidst Industrial and Bourgeois-Democratic revolutions. Born in the 1790s, the possibility of a revolutionary movement would rear its head again and again in the events that punctuated the next three decades. It was sustained by those who no longer needed figures of authority to guide their reading or their agitations, their tumult or their thought. "And the movement for which they waited did not belong to gentlemen, manufacturers or rate-payers; it was their own." (Thompson 1968: 201)

Radicalism thus fused with class formation. 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 routinized regularities of respectable trade union committees. There was, for instance, the example of Thomas Spence, whose periodical *Pig's Meat* (1793-1796) took aim at Edmund Burke's denigration of the swinish multitude. Spence, who was imprisoned under the suspension of Habeas Corpus in 1794, and served another jail stint in jail seven years later, was anything but shy in promoting his vision of a "beautiful and powerful New Republic" that would come into being as the People put an end to war, scalped the Tyrants of their revenues, and built their Temple of Liberty. When hauled before the magistrates, Spence described himself as "the unfee'd Advocate of the disinherited seed of Adam." (Thompson 1968: 170-184). This, then, was a complicating reconfiguration of 'official' understandings of the labour movement's origins. As much as it reconfirmed *some* orthodoxies that would have formed the mindset of Auden's sensual man in the street, it pushed them, as had Jacobin arguments of the 1790s, in decidedly combative and radical directions. In doing so it also placed new accents on old concerns, to the point that Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* unfolded the metaphorical lies of class formation in England, destabilizing the respectable labourist endeavour. He laid out a sense of the revolutionary challenges that had been central to the making of the working class as it developed out of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and consolidated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

ARGUMENT II: ANTAGONISM TO APOLOGETICS IN ‘THE CURSE OF ADAM’

Spence’s self-description of himself as ‘unfee’d’, or untouched by the corruption of revenues, as an ‘Advocate’, or a defender, and as speaking on behalf of the ‘disinherited seed of Adam’, or the class defined by its need to labour, is an apt introduction to Part II of *The Making of the English Working Class*. “The Curse of Adam” opens with a passage from Genesis III: “In the sweat of thy face shall thou eat bread.” (Thompson 1968: 206)

The argumentation of this second section of *The Making of the English Working Class* is more conventional, and it comes closest to conforming to the kind of orthodox template of working-class history that Perry Anderson chastised Thompson for neglecting in *Arguments Within English Marxism*. (Anderson 1980) Thompson had, through his break from Stalinism in the mid-to-late 1950s, broken decisively from the strictures of the base-superstructure metaphor that ordered such analytic accounts. This stamped his orientation with an accent on agency as opposed to obeisance to structure, although Thompson would, repeatedly throughout his life’s writings, insist that the determinations of the objective, economic base obviously exercised a profound impact on historical process and its outcomes. (Thompson 1957a; Thompson 1958; Merrill 1983: 17, 19-20; Thompson 1978a: 149-150) Thompson would thus later note, “The Curse of Adam” begins with a discussion of “Exploitation,” and that chapter is “exactly a structuralist statement.” (Merrill 1983: 17) Subsequent chapters detail the immiseration of particular sectors of the working class – field labourers, artisans, and weavers – and in all of these statements Thompson is at pains to convey both the diversity of experiences within the working class *and* the generalized costs imposed on labouring people as capitalist disciplines took hold and reconfigured material life.

To be sure, Thompson was less concerned with excavating the economies of this process than the political meanings, arguing that it was the “political context as much as the steam engine, which had most influence upon the shaping consciousness and institutions of the working class,” forcing all manner of labouring men, women, and children into what he designated a “social *apartheid*.” (Thompson 1968: 216-7) One part of this accent on the social was Thompson’s determination not to simply reduce working class experience to a determined outcome of subordination, leading Thompson to declare defiantly, “The working class made itself as much as it was made.” (Thompson 1968: 213) But Thompson was also conscious of operating as part of a collective of historians exploring problems of class in congruent ways, but with specialized



areas of expertise. As he explained in the 1970s, if there was “a certain kind of silence in [his] writing about the harder economic analysis,” this was because Thompson considered that others – like Hobsbawm and Saville – were writing complementary and more economically-ordered histories. Taking *The Making of the English Working Class*, and its presentation of class formation, out of what Thompson referred to as “the whole,” created a false sense of divorcing the social, the cultural, and the political from the economic and the material. (Merrill 1983: 22)

Not surprisingly, Thompson’s arguments in “The Curse of Adam” took direct aim at the considerable body of economic history scholarship that, by the 1950s, had displaced an older “classical catastrophic orthodoxy” which stressed the “economic disequilibrium, intense misery and exploitation, political repression and heroic popular agitation” of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Against the writings of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Arnold Toynbee, Thorold Rogers, and the Webbs and the Hammonds, had arisen a vociferous scholarly rejoinder, distinguished by its “empirical caution,” and headed by Sir John Clapham, Dr. Dorothy George, and Professor Ashton. If Thompson recognized the ways in which this new optimistic school “enriched historical scholarship,” he was, nonetheless, adamant that its adherents exhibited “a moral complacency, a narrowness of reference, and an insufficient familiarity with the actual movements of working people of the time.” Lost in their qualifications and generalizations was “a sense of the whole process” by which the working class was forced into a structure of subordination that it resisted in many creative and resolute ways. At its worst, the “sympathies of some economic historians today for the capitalist entrepreneur have led to confusion of history and apologetics,” the benchmark of this ideological descent registering with the publication of F.A. Hayek’s 1954 edited collection of essays, *Capitalism and the Historians*. (Thompson 1968: 214-229)

If Thompson’s arguments against such apologetics took a more muscular polemical turn in this section of *The Making of the English Working Class*, it is impossible to understate how rigorously he reconceptualised premises of debates that had grown stale and routinized. At the core of Thompson’s important revisionist insight was a willingness to reconfigure the mechanical outlines of controversy with an appreciation of paradox sustained by a dialectical approach. (Palmer 2013) He argued, for instance, that it was “perfectly possible to maintain two propositions which, on a casual view, might appear to be contradictory. Over the period 1790-1840 there was a slight improvement in average material standards. Over the same period there was intensified

exploitation, greater insecurity, and increasing human misery. By 1840 most people were 'better off' than their forerunners had been fifty years before, but they had suffered and continued to suffer this slight improvement as a catastrophic experience." (Thompson 1968: 231) As Thompson sliced through the methodological nonsense of creating mythical averages and socially constructing arbitrary indices of "well-being" – in which, for instance, one historian developed a cost of living computation that he confessed contained food calculations that seemed to be derived from the diet of a diabetic – he actually rewrote the terms of contested trade within the standard of living controversy. (Thompson 1968: 269) The level of argumentation evident in Thompson's chapters in "The Curse of Adam" reaches new heights of sophistication, not only in terms of its engagement with specific historical writings, but with interrogations of kinds of evidence and what they can and can not reveal.

It is of course in this section of Thompson's book where his caustic prose took argument in the direction of polemic. Not surprisingly, Thompson was relentless in putting down those whose apologetics managed to curtly and cutely dismiss the suffering he detailed with such outrage. 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*." (Thompson 1968: 351) Or, alternatively, his rebuttal to those conservative economic historians such as R.M. Hartwell, whose judgement on child labour 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 expressed disgust at the ways in which the abusive growth of the child and juvenile labour market grew yearly over the course of England's Industrial Revolution and, upon reflection, thought "few questions have been so lost to history by a liberal admixture of special pleading and ideology." He offered a gruff rejoinder to Hartwell, his offence registered in perfunctory analytic refusal: "We may be allowed to affirm a more traditional view: that the exploitation of little children, on this scale and this intensity, was one of the most shameful events of our history." (Thompson 1968: 367, 384) Nor did Thompson bend his pen only against modern historians. When a member of Parliament remarked, in 1819, that the climbing boys employed in

specific tasks were not “the children of poor persons, but the children of rich men, begotten in an improper manner,” as if the stigma of being born out-of-wedlock marked them, justifiably, for early lives of exploitation, Thompson snorted in reply: “This showed a fine sense of moral propriety, as well as a complete absence of class bias.” (Thompson 1968: 377)

It also, according to Thompson, suggested how easily it was in this period to deflect legitimate social criticism with recourse to “religious scruples.” If, in the “Liberty Tree” introduction to *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson had argued through the impact of Methodism somewhat two-sidedly, in the chapter on “The Transforming Power of the Cross,” in “The Curse of Adam,” he revisited the moral machinery of religion as a process of acculturation to capitalist discipline. “Puritanism – Dissent – Nonconformity: the decline collapses into a surrender,” is the phrasing that opens his discussion of religious apologetics. (Thompson 1968: 385) Thompson closed this chapter with an insistence that, as much as Methodist-inflected radicals in the Chartist and other workers’ movements might bring to their struggles many positions developed out of the dissenting tradition, they had little in common with the authoritarian clergymen who came to inhabit the officialdom of established Churches. “It is only by doing violence to the imagination,” Thompson concluded, that “we can conceive of the Chartist weaver,” Benjamin Rushton, and Jabez Bunting, the dominant figure of orthodox Wesleyanism for much of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and himself the son of a Methodist Manchester tailor who espoused the Jacobinism of the 1790s, as ever “having been connected in a common ‘movement’.” “For who was Rushton,” asks Thompson, “but the Adam whom Bunting’s God had cursed?” (Thompson 1968: 436-440) It is in this section of the book that Thompson paints the most devastating picture of Methodism as “the desolate inner landscape of Utilitarianism in an era of transition to work-discipline and industrial capitalism.” (Thompson 1968: 402) Indeed, later in *The Making*, Thompson indicts Methodism as a strongly “anti-intellectual influence, from which British popular culture has never wholly recovered.” (811) And against just this kind of record Thompson unleashed his argumentative vitriol:

*“It is the paradox of a ‘religion of the heart’ that it should be notorious for the inhibition of all spontaneity. Methodism sanctioned ‘workings of the heart’ only upon the occasions of the Church; Methodists wrote hymns but no secular poetry of note; the idea of a passionate Methodist lover in these years is ludicrous. (‘Avoid all manner of passions’, advised Wesley.) The word is unpleasant; but it is difficult not to see in Methodism in these years*

*a ritualized form of psychic masturbation. ... Sabbath orgasms of feeling made more possible the single-minded weekly direction of these energies to the consummation of productive labour. ... the flames of hell might be the consequence of indiscipline at work. ... Work was the Cross from which the 'transformed' industrial worker hung"* (Thompson 1968: 405-406)

In a passage that presaged Foucault, Thompson wrote of how the transformation extended into all reaches of everyday life:

*"The pressures towards discipline and order extended from the factory, on one hand, the Sunday school, on the other, into every aspect of life: leisure, personal relationships, speech, manners. Alongside the disciplinary agencies of the mills, churches, schools, and magistrates and military, quasi-official agencies were set up for the enforcement of orderly moral conduct"* (Thompson 1968: 442)

In the process the battle of the Industrial Revolution was won by the advocates of the methodical money-economy, who reconfigured the plebeian community of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, stripping it bare of customary holidays, recalcitrant temperaments, and indulgences of all kinds. Against this record of repression, subordination, and indoctrination, Thompson's language knew few restraints. Of Bunting winning his "national spurs" in the Methodist Connexion, Thompson refused to close his eyes to the callous indifference of the religious hierarchy to the sufferings, especially prominent among the women and children, attendant on the rise of the new factory-based industrial-capitalist order:

*"The spurs were needed, perhaps, to stick into the children's sides during the six days of the week. In Bunting and his fellows we seem to touch upon a deformity of the sensibility complementary to the deformities of the factory children whose labour they condoned. In all the copious correspondence of his early ministries in the industrial heartlands (Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield, Halifax and Leeds, 1804-1815) among endless petty Connexional disputes, moral humbug, and prurient inquiries into the private conduct of young women, neither he nor his colleagues appear to have suffered a single qualm as to the consequences of industrialism."* (Thompson 1968: 390)

And then follows a language of provocative denunciation: an “essential disorganization of human life”; “psychological atrocities”; “psychic processes of counter-revolution”; “chiliasm of despair”; “repressive inhibitions.” Thompson found W.E.H. Lecky’s 1891 judgement of Methodism in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century shockingly apt: an “appalling system of religious terrorism.” (Thompson 1968: 409, 414, 419, 427, 430, 415) Not for Thompson was the polite balance of the academic lecture hall, what he described in 1957 as an “established history which adopts an aloof pseudo-sociological approach to working-class history.” As a powerful counter to this bleaching of the historical process, Thompson insisted, in the pages of the *New Reasoner*, that “The ‘human factor’, the ‘psychological problem’,” was critical to understanding “a system of economic and political oppression.” Objectivity concerned with truth, he asserted vigorously, “will lead the historian to the heart of this real human situation; and once he is there, if he is worth his salt, he *will* make judgements and draw conclusions.” (Thompson 1957: 79, 85)

Combined with other developments, especially the brutal repression unleashed by the state, the “transforming power of the cross” had a decided impact. Jacobinism was driven underground, losing such coherence and dramatic performativity as it had managed to develop in the 1790s, and the solidarities of nascent trade unionism hardened, in the aftermath of the Two Acts, into codes that fetishized model rules and channelled the rituals of mutuality into the sobriety and self-help protections of the friendly society. Still, collectivist rather than individualist values were dominant, and there were segments of the proletariat, like the diasporic Irish community, that retained a rebellious disposition, refused subordination, resorted to “physical force”, and resisted the intimidations of constitutional inhibition. Against Blake’s reading that, “All the arts of life they chang’d into the arts of death,” Thompson insisted that for all the dissipation of “felt cohesion in the community,” the working people of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century still managed to nurture an antagonism “to their labour and to their masters,” building for themselves a sense of alternative possibility. Arguing against the unfolded lies of Authority, and all of those propagating such misinformation in both the past and the present, Thompson, after almost 500 pages, was ready to explore “The Working-Class Presence” as it existed in the years leading up to Chartism in the 1830s. (Thompson 1968: 488)

ARGUMENT III: CONSCIOUSNESS OF CLASS AND THE HEROIC CULTURE OF STRUGGLE

The arguments marshalled in Part III of *The Making of the English Working Class* had been rehearsed in the book's preceding sections. "The Liberty Tree" introduced constitutionalism and its critics, as well as its leading advocate and architect within the emerging labour movement, Francis Place. The consolidation of the artisan-led initiatives, associated with Place, which structured the traditions of mutuality in staid, sober, and sanctified rules of procedural order represented *both* an accomplishment of self-discipline and a domestication of the threateningly substance of much of working-class life.

Within the history of the 1790-1830 years this dualism was in constant tension, but as the institutions of the workers' movement developed and secured a footing against their class adversaries, the tendency was for historians, relying on Place's archive, to rewrite this history of tension. They exorcised those forces and events that reached outside the boundaries of propriety in their practices of clandestine organization or in responses to attacks upon their perceived rights and entitlements that broke with the almost refined institutional etiquette of trade union committees dedicated to "Decency and Regularity," abhorring of "Intemperance, Animosity, and Profaneness." (Thompson 1968: 457) Respectable reform and proper treatment came to be the watchwords of a reasonable labour history, of the kind written by the Hammonds and the Webbs, and it had, in Thompson's view, too little of the underground fire and the clandestine conspiracy. If it was true that by the end of the 1830s protest gatherings of tens of thousands of miners, craftworkers, and labourers might march in orderly processions in Manchester and Newcastle, disdaining the provocation of authority in well-disciplined restraint, this show of class force, and this distance from the 18<sup>th</sup> century mob, was premised less on respectable articulations of the need for reform and more on recognition, in the words of one working-class leader, that "Our people had been well taught that it was not riot we wanted, but revolution." (469)

And while revolution reared its head in many ways in the opening decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, not all of working-class protest could be accommodated to Place's constitutionalism. Thompson insisted on digging deeper into what he termed the "opaque society," investing legitimacy in the conspiratorial underground, taking seriously oath-taking, pike-making, and machine-breaking, refusing the tendency to see in official reports, often filed by spies, only the class phobia of the powerful. As Thompson noted of the Hammonds, whom he had

defended in Part II of *The Making* against the attacks of capitalist academic apologists and advocates of the new orthodoxy of an optimistic assessment of the impact of the Industrial Revolution, they betrayed a “marked disposition to *commence* their research with the assumption that any *bona fide* insurrectionary schemes on the part of working men were either highly improbable or, alternatively, wrong, and undeserving of sympathy, and therefore to be attributed to a lunatic, irresponsible fringe.” Alongside the Webbs and figures like Graham Wallas – Fabians all – the Hammonds framed their history of the labour movement in light of subsequent developments: the Reform Acts; the establishment of the TUC; the rise of the Labour Party. “Since Luddites or food rioters do not appear as satisfactory ‘fore-runners’ of ‘the Labour Movement’,” wrote Thompson, “they merited neither sympathy nor close attention.” This was the unfolded lie of the romantic brain, and Thompson saw little reason to continue its misrepresentations. (Thompson 1968: 647-648)

The arguments of “The Working-Class Presence” were not only pitched at this broadly social democratic sensibility. In Part II of *The Making*, Thompson’s discussion of “Exploitation” commenced with a questioning of the consensus among conservative, radical, and socialist interlocutors, past and present, that posited a deterministic understanding of class formation: “steam power and the cotton mill = new working class.” Citing Engels’s *The Condition of the Working Class in 1844*, which posited that the factory hands of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century formed the nucleus of “the Labour Movement,” Thompson dissented, suggesting instead that Jacobinism, Luddism, and Chartism, all of which he considered vital chapters in the making of working-class organization, were less the product of factory hands than other sectors of the labouring people and their allies and advocates. If Thompson saw consensus on this general premise, it was nonetheless undoubtedly its Marxist variants that focussed his arguments. “The Working-Class Presence,” as Thompson later said, took direct aim at the simplified understanding of class formation prominent in the Communist movement of the late 1950s, polemicizing against the view that “some kind of raw material, like peasants ‘flocking to factories’, was then processed into so many yards of class-conscious proletarians.” Thompson’s arguments were meant “to show the existing plebeian consciousness refracted by new experiences in social being, which experiences were handled in cultural ways by the people, thus giving rise to a transformed consciousness.” (Thompson 1968: 209-213; Merrill 1983: 7)

Thompson's arguments start by taking account of London, "Radical Westminster," where something of the Jacobinism of the 1790s survived and where the conduits between middle-class and working-class reformers existed. Part of the tradition of 'Wilkes and Liberty' remained, as well, with Westminster elections a licence for tumult. But the characteristic form of London organization was the committee, in which artisan radicals rubbed shoulders with men of modest property or professional title, all of which might, with the exception of the rare patrician radical comfortable in a milieu of tavern conspiracy, harbour prejudice against the rough manners and even rougher politics of the demoralized "dangerous classes." In the provinces where, as Wade Matthews has recently argued (Matthews 2013; Palmer 2013) Thompson was always more comfortable, repression closed down the capacities of this committee culture, forcing reformers into contact with trade associations long outlawed, bringing the politics of radicalism into conjuncture with secret night meetings of oath-taking labourers, whose grievances multiplied in the oppressions associated with political tyranny and industrial autocracy. "North of the Trent," Thompson pointed out, mapping regional differences in "The Working-Class Presence," we find the illegal tradition." (Thompson 1968: 514)

Thompson's excavation of that illegal tradition in *The Making* is, in some ways, the soul of his argument about class agency, for it is in his excursion into the underground where his imaginative powers are perhaps at their greatest. Not only is he perpetually rubbing up against received wisdoms and brushing against their interpretive grain, but he is probing sources and reading between the lines of evidence the better to suggest alternative understandings to the clamour of condescending dismissal. Investing meaning other than catastrophe into the Despard and Cato Street Conspiracies and the Pentridge Uprising, Thompson repudiates the popular and prejudicial view of Luddism as little more than an "uncouth, spontaneous affair of illiterate handworkers, blindly resisting machinery." Sensitive to regional differentiations, Thompson nonetheless develops a picture of Luddism as a *movement*, characterized by a high degree of organization and arising out of a political context conducive to impulses of insurrection. (604) While his *interpretation* would later generate intense repudiation on the right, the argument was perhaps posed more forcefully against the assumptions of the left, particularly the milder social democratic variant on exhibit in the pages of the Hammonds's *The Skilled Labourer* and followers such as F.O. Darvall's *Popular Disturbance and Public Order in Regency England*, both of which denied the existence of any evidence suggestive of a revolutionary mobilization or a politics extending past mundane (if the



word can be used credibly) disputes between workmen and masters. Thompson argued back, responding to this particular example of “the condescension of posterity” with a marshalling of evidence, reasoned speculation, as well as informed appreciation of material referents like the geography of the Midlands and the north. In the end he concluded that the pejorative and dismissive views of Luddism could be sustained “only by a special pleading which exaggerate[d] the stupidity, rancour, and provocative role of the authorities to the point of absurdity; or by an academic failure of imagination, which compartmentalizes and disregards the whole weight of popular tradition.” (Thompson 1968: 631) It is not just that Thompson imagined Luddism differently, but that he brought into academic discourse from the outside a sense of how to interrogate evidence – such as spy reports – with an eye to what was legitimate in informers’ files, and what, in contrast, was exaggeration, presented sycophantically to curry favour with Old Corruption. Consequently, he raised the bar of understanding historical events and developments necessarily shrouded in secrecy, mystery, and uncertainty. These events are not necessarily unimportant for all that they are opaque, and Thompson’s treatment of Luddism is an example of the creative intelligence, grounded in such sources as can be recovered, that historians, at their best, utilize in extending analysis. In Thompson’s case, argument animated method.

As *The Making of the English Working Class* proceeds to its conclusion, Thompson explores the ways in which a consciousness of class place and difference, and a subsequent politics of revolutionary challenge, was nurtured by radicals – Cobbett, Hunt, Owen, Bronterre O’Brien, others – and bolstered brutally by repression, through events like Peterloo. In his exploration of the impact of radicals like Cobbett, not surprisingly, he accents the value of argumentation. “Cobbett,” Thompson notes, “brought the rhythms of speech back into prose; but of strenuously argumentative, emphatic speech.” (Thompson 1968: 823) Like Thompson, Cobbett also valued argument, defending “the People, or the vulgar,” as they were pleased to often be called by Establishment voices, from the claim that they were “*incapable of comprehending argument.*” “Which argument?” asked an argumentative Thompson? (Thompson 1968: 820)

Ultimately Thompson argues that it was within paradox that the making of the English working class happened, consolidating “the most distinguished popular culture England has known”:

*“It contained the massive diversity of skills, of the workers in metal, wood, textiles, and ceramics, without whose inherited ‘mysteries’ and superb ingenuity with primitive tools the inventions of the Industrial Revolution could scarcely have got further than the drawing board. From this culture of the craftsman and the self-taught there came scores of inventors, organizers, journalists and political theorists of impressive quality. It is easy enough to say that this culture was backward-looking or conservative. True enough, one direction of the great agitations of the artisans and outworkers, continued over fifty years, was to resist being turned into a proletariat. When they knew that this cause was lost, yet they reached out again, in the Thirties and Forties, and sought to achieve new and only imagined forms of social control. During all this time they were, as a class, repressed and segregated in their own communities. But what the counter-revolution sought to repress grew only more determined in the quasi-legal institutions of the underground. Whenever the pressure of the rulers relaxed, men came from the petty workshops or the weavers’ hamlets and asserted new claims. They were told that they had no rights, but they knew that they were born free. The Yeomanry rode down their meeting, and the right of public meeting was gained. The pamphleteers were gaoled, and from the gaols they edited pamphlets. The trade unionists were imprisoned, and they were attended to prison by processions with bands and union banners”*  
(Thompson 1968: 914-915)

Small wonder that Thompson, argued out, perhaps, concluded on a note of gratitude, thanking working people for having nourished, for half a century, the Liberty Tree, for waging the struggles on which an heroic culture had been built.

#### CLASS AND THOMPSON: HISTORICAL HAPPENINGS

I have suggested that Thompson argued, not just with this side, but with all sides; not just against interpretation but through and with particular kinds of evidence; not only with particular analysis of the past, but with certain actors who shaped our understanding of their times in deliberate and partial ways.

This accent on argument, its diversity revealed in the multi-faceted metaphor of Auden's unfolding lies, explains how Thompson structured *The Making of the English Working Class* and it also goes a long distance towards situating Thompson outside of the labels that have often been imposed upon him. The contrarian analytics that I have been exploring mean that it is fruitless to try to pigeon-hole Thompson. No sooner is he labelled, for instance, a sentimental populist than he is found to be raising his critical voice against much that would seem to fall within this sensibility. As a Marxist he has been attacked, and as a Marxist he has been judged wanting. His Marxism, when it existed as he wrote *The Making*, argued against specific inclinations within the analytic tradition of 'Marxism'. Thus Thompson, and his penchant for argument, stood somewhat alone, and to complicate matters his uniqueness was often built on embracing paradox, on a double-visioned understanding that was imaginatively dialectical.

How, then, to appreciate Thompson. We can do no better, I would suggest, than to turn to Thompson's own understanding of class, as outlined in the preface to *The Making of the English Working Class*. "The finest-meshed sociological net cannot get us a pure specimen of class, any more than it can give us one of deference or of love," Thompson wrote. (Thompson 1968: 9) Thompson, like the historicized process of class that he analytically and argumentatively unleashed so brilliantly, was also relational. Always situated inside historical developments, Thompson could engage only by active interventions that brought him *into* opposition, just as class was made in struggle, and *The Making of the English Working Class*, as a text, was scaffolded on argument. Thompson's meaning, like that of class, is therefore inseparable from *historically-constituted relations*: with individuals and their ideas, as well as Thompson's sense of their responsibilities and duties; with movements and mobilizations, and Thompson's contributions to these collectivities and his expectations of them; and with research, and its dialogue of evidence and conceptualization, a dance of the dialectic in which past, present and future are brought into argumentative, even polemical, encounter. Thompson happened inside history, and he was never long separate from its human relationships, caught as they always are in webs of determination that outline the possibilities of political alternative. It may well be preferable to see Thompson, and the contrarian analytics that made *The Making of the English Working Class*, then, as he saw the process of class formation which he explored with such insight, as nothing less than an immensely creative *historical happening*.

BIBLIOGRAFÍA

- ANDERSON, P. 1964. «Origins of the Present Crisis», *New Left Review*. 23 (enero-febrero): 26-53.
- ANDERSON, P. 1965. «The Left in the Fifties», *New Left Review*. 29 (enero-febrero): 3-18.
- ANDERSON, P. 1966. «Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism: The Myths of Edward Thompson», *New Left Review*. 35 (enero-febrero): 2-42.
- ANDERSON, P. 1980. *Arguments within English Marxism*. Londres, Verso.
- CHANDAVARKAR, R. 1997. «The Making of the Working Class: E. P. Thompson and Indian History» *History Workshop Journal*. 43 (primavera): 177-196.
- ELEY, G. 2013. «Class Formation, Politics, Structures of Feeling». De próxima aparición, *Labour/Le Travail*. 72 (otoño).
- FIELDHOUSE, R. 2013. «Thompson: the adult educator», en Fieldhouse, Roger y Charles Taylor. eds., *E. P. Thompson and English Radicalism*: 21-43. Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- GOODWAY, D. 2013. «The making of The Making», en Fieldhouse, Roger y Charles Taylor, eds., *E. P. Thompson and English Radicalism*: 44-65. Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- MATTHEWS, W. 2013. *The New Left, National Identity, and the Break-Up of Britain*. Leiden y Boston, Brill.
- MERRILL, M. 1983. «Interview: E.P. Thompson», en Abelow, Henry, et al., eds. *Visions of History: Interviews with E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm ...* : 5-25. Nueva York, Pantheon.
- MILLS, C. Wright. 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*. London: Oxford University Press. [La imaginación sociológica, Madrid, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1999]
- NAIRN, T. 1964. «The English Working Class», *New Left Review*. 24 (marzo-abril): 43-57.
- PALMER, B D. 1981. *The Making of E. P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism, and History*. Toronto, New Hogtown Press.
- PALMER, B D. 1994. *E. P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions*. London and New York: Verso. [E. P. Thompson, objeciones y oposiciones, Valencia, Universidad de Valencia, 2004]

- PALMER, B. D. 2013. «Paradox and the Thompson School of Awkwardness» en Fieldhouse, Roger y Richard Taylor. eds. *E. P. Thompson and English Radicalism: 201-224*. Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- SEARBY, P. and R. MALCOLMSON. 1993. «E.P. Thompson as a Teacher: Yorkshire and Warwick», en Rule, John y Robert Malcolmson. eds. *Protest and Survival: Essays for E.P. Thompson: 1-23*. Londres, Merlin.
- SIGAL, C. 1961. *Weekend in Dinlock*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- STEELE, T. 2013. “E.P. Thompson, the WEA and Radical Workers’ Education in Yorkshire.” In Fowler, Luke. *The Poor Stockinger, the Luddite Cropper, and the Deluded Follower of Joanna Southcott: 11-38*. Wolverhampton: Film and Video Umbrella.
- THOMPSON, E. P. 1951. “The Murder of William Morris.” *Arena*. 2 (7): 9-28.
- THOMPSON, E. P. 1955. *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*. London: Lawrence & Wishart [William Morris, de romántico a revolucionario, Valencia, Edicions Alfons el Magnanim, 1988.
- THOMPSON, E. P. 1957. «God and King and Law», *New Reasoner*. 3 (invierno): 69-86.
- THOMPSON, E. P. 1957a. «Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines», *New Reasoner*, 1 (verano): 105-143.
- THOMPSON, E. P. 1958. «Agency and Choice», *New Reasoner*. 5 (verano): 89-106.
- THOMPSON, E. P. 1959. «The New Left», *New Reasoner*. 9 (verano): 1-17.
- THOMPSON, E. P. 1959a. «A Pessay in Ephology», *New Reasoner*. 10 (otoño): 1-8.
- THOMPSON, E. P. 1961. «The Long Revolution (Part I)», *New Left Review*. 9 (mayo-junio): 24-33.
- THOMPSON, E. P. 1967. «Preface», en Lynd, Staughton. *Class Conflict, Slavery, and the United States Constitution*. Indianapolis: Bobs-Merrill.
- THOMPSON, E. P. 1968. *The Making of the English Working Class*. Harmondsworth, Penguin. [La formación de la clase obrera, Barcelona, Crítica, 1989 / Madrid, Capitán Swing, 2012]
- THOMPSON, E. P. 1968a. *Education and Experience: Fifth Mansbridge Memorial Lecture*. Leeds, Leeds University Press.
- THOMPSON, E. P. 1970. *Warwick University Ltd: Industry, Management, and the Universities*. Harmondsworth, Penguin.

- THOMPSON, E. P. 1976. «On history, sociology, and historical relevance», *British Journal of Sociology*. 27 (septiembre): 387-402.
- THOMPSON, E. P. 1977. «Preface», en Lynd, Staughton. *Class Conflict, Slavery, and the United States Constitution*
- THOMPSON, E. P. 1978. *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays*. Londres, Merlin.
- THOMPSON, E. P. 1978a. «Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class», *Social History*. 3 (2): 133-165.
- THOMPSON, E. P. 1979. «C. Wright Mills: The Responsible Craftsman.» *Radical America*. 13 (4): 61-74.
- THOMPSON, E. P. 1993. *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- THOMPSON, E. P. 1993a. «Theory and Evidence», *History Workshop Journal*. 35 (primavera): 274-275.
- THOMPSON, E. P. 1994. «Hunting the Jacobin Fox», *Past & Present*. 142 (1): 94-140.

Recibido: 19 de julio de 2013

Aceptado: 30 de septiembre de 2013

**Bryan Palmer** is Professor of Canada Research Chair. Chair of Canadian Studies Department. His research interests are social and working-class history; history and theory; historiography; radical traditions and the revolutionary left; 1960s. Select publications: He is the author of 12 books, editor of 5 collections of essays/oral biographies/pamphlets, and editor of the journal *Labour/Le Travail*. His writings has been widely published in Canadian scholarly journals, as well as in international journals in the United States, England, Italy, Spain, Brazil, and elsewhere. His most recent books include the edited collection (with Joan Sangster), *Labouring Canada: Class, Gender, and Race in Canadian Working-Class History* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2008) and *Canada's 1960s: The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

His publications have been nominated for or won a number of academic prizes, including both the Canadian/American Historical Association's A.B. Corey Prize and the Canadian Historical Association's Wallace K. Ferguson Prize. A recent book, *James P. Cannon and the Origins of the American Revolutionary Left, 1890-1928*, published by the University of Illinois Press in 2007, was judged the best book published by a historian in Canada in a field other than Canadian history. Another book, *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the History of Transgression – from Medieval to Modern* (New York: Monthly Review, 2000) was awarded a Choice Gold Seal Award in that magazine's annual competition for outstanding academic titles.