Class and Collective Action: Writing Stories about Actors and Events"

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ABSTRACT

In this article I re-visit E.P. Thompson's The Making of the English Working Class to find resources for doing historically-grounded studies of class and collective action. Building on Thompson's work, I argue that historical analyses of collective actors should be both sociologically robust and dramatically persuasive. I begin by reviewing Thompson's portrayal of class formation in The Making, which I describe as a form of "collective biography." I discuss some limits of collective biography, including the problems of discontinuity, narrative central subject, and reification. I compare Thompson's class analysis with that of his contemporary historian Barrington Moore, Jr., as a way of highlighting the problem of representing class actors. I then propose an alternative approach that breaks down the analysis along the dimensions of economy, state, and civil society, in which class functions as a necessary but not exclusive medium of actor formation and historical agency. Finally, I introduce a few examples of historical research from the United States that illustrate the potential for this perspective.

KEYWORDS: Barrington Moore, Jr.; class formation; collective actors; E.P. Thompson; historical agency, narrative history.

The fiftieth anniversary of E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* marks a strange occasion for social history and historical sociology. While the book was a landmark achievement and a tremendous influence for generations of scholars, its impact today seems more distant and attenuated, like a classic work that hardly anyone now actually reads. Many would argue that its approach and subject matter have been superseded by other debates, while others deny altogether the salience of class as a central category for historical and political analysis. Ironically, the intellectual turn away from class in the last several decades has occurred just as economic inequality has

increased sharply in many countries and as the world now struggles to recover from global capitalist financial crisis (Saez, 2013; Kristal, 2010; Stiglitz, 2010).

To be sure, many of the most prominent criticisms of the book are well-founded, not least of which are the inattention to England's role as a global imperialist power; the silence on gender and other basic categories of social inequality; and the unmediated foundations for interpreting working class "experience" (Linebaugh, 1982; Hall, 2002; Scott, 1999; Sewell, 1990). Published in 1963, *The Making* pre-dated the several paradigmatic "turns" – feminist, cultural, linguistic, and otherwise – that have occurred since in history and sociology (Adams, Clemens, and Orloff, 2005; Bonnell and Hunt 1999). At the same time, it remains an astonishingly rich and provocative work of scholarship. Can we still draw ideas from it now to understand the role of class in history?

In this essay, my aim is not to reprise the many well-known critiques of the book, but to return to it to find resources for doing historically-grounded studies of class and collective action. Building on Thompson's approach, I sketch a more theoretically explicit model of the making of historical actors. In this model, class functions as a necessary but not exclusive medium of actor formation and political agency. By clarifying the terms of analysis, I hope to provide a conceptual scaffolding for the construction of a narrative story of actors and events.

I begin by reviewing Thompson's portrayal of class formation in *The Making*, which I describe as a form of "collective biography." I then discuss some of the pitfalls of collective biography, and I briefly compare Thompson's class analysis with that of his contemporary historian Barrington Moore, Jr. Finally, I propose an alternative approach that breaks down the process of actor formation along the dimensions of economy, state, and civil society. Multiple interests and identities emerge and interact in these fields without reducing the analysis to a single axis of class, as opposed to other categories such as race or gender. Collective actors can and do mobilize and exercise agency, even if not always as they please, and this is demonstrated in critical junctures that alter established paths of institutional development. Finally, I introduce a few examples of historical research that illustrates the potential for this perspective.

The processes that I discuss here occur in and through time, and the narrative form is the best way for representing them (Somers, 1997; Griffin, 1992). I do not share the common social science prejudice toward narrative as mere descriptive storytelling (Gorski, 2013:357). On the contrary, I believe any good historical analysis of collective action should be both sociologically robust and

dramatically persuasive. My goal here is simply to contribute to a more disciplined self-awareness in the practical use of narrative, in order to write more clearly and effectively about the subjects that concern us. Fifty years on, Thompson's work continues to challenge us to think about how we can write about class and history. As scholars and writers, it is up to us to try to meet that challenge as best we can.

THE MAKING OF HISTORICAL ACTORS: COLLECTIVE BIOGRAPHY

In the preface to *The Making*, Thompson famously argues that class is not an objective structure but "an active process," a dynamic relationship and not a thing. More than that, class is an event, "something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships" (Thompson, 1963 [hereafter MEWC]: 9). As such, it is best captured not by a statistical analysis that isolates or freezes moments of time but by a historical narrative that describes a temporal unfolding of events (MEWC: 11). For Thompson the English working class was "present at its own making," an historical agent and conscious subject emerging in relations of conflict with other classes. The process involves the formation of a distinctive working class subjectivity or class consciousness, that is, the articulation of a collective identity of interest by diverse groups of workers for themselves and against other classes. Class consciousness is the product of a long-term process of social and cultural development, and is embodied in popular customs, values, organizations and institutional forms. (MEWC: 194).

This way of representing class formation can be described as a kind of "collective biography," and Thompson himself wrote that his book was "a biography of the English working class from its adolescence to its early manhood [sic]" (MEWC: 11). In this sense, classes are not simply variables or even outcomes, but characters in a story, embedded in a narrative plot and developing through interaction with other characters or collective actors. The development of class consciousness or culture, then, appears like the biographical portrait of an historical protagonist, a *Bildungsroman* of the moral development of a working class collective subject.

The process, of course, occurs *in medias res*. As Thompson argues, "The changing productive relations and working conditions of the Industrial Revolution were imposed, not upon raw material, but upon the free-born Englishman," the inheritor of craft traditions and remembered village rights, influenced both by secular radicalism and the Methodist church. The

construction of class consciousness was by no means automatic, and was "a fact of political and cultural, as much as economic, history." (MEWC: 194). Workers in England drew on a variety of traditions and discourses to make sense of and resist the economic exploitation and political repression they experienced with the rise of capitalist industrialization in early 19th century.

And, according to Thompson, English workers did in fact achieve a sense of collective self-consciousness in the years between 1790 and 1830, and thus succeeded in forming themselves into a class. Although notoriously suspicious of theory, Thompson offers two clear empirical criteria for what makes a "made" class: 1) the growth of class consciousness, as reflected in popular cultural values, intellectual traditions, community patterns, and a working class "structure of feeling," and 2) the growth of corresponding forms of political and industrial organization, including working class institutions such as trade unions, friendly societies, educational and religious movements, political organizations, popular periodicals, and the like (MEWC: 194).

On this elementary conceptual footing, Thompson builds his massive account of English working class formation. He devotes enormous effort to adducing primary evidence for his case, and the sheer weight and density of the argument contributes strongly to the impact of the book (Sewell, 1990). In evaluating his historiographical practice, three things can be noted here: the particularist attention to detail, the attempts to "rescue" the historically inarticulate, and the stylistic problem of portraying actors in history.

Thompson argues that class formation is a process of long-term development, and yet his book covers a period of only around fifty years, not really all that long in macro-historical terms. Moreover, his concern for specificity is so great he declines to generalize beyond England even to Scotland or Wales, despite writing a book of more than 800 pages (MEWC: 13). This resolute particularism, concreteness, and dedication to place, serves to ground the image of workers acting as unique, independent subjects in their self-formation as a class. It also drives the importance of capturing the lost voices and experiences of the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the utopian artisan, and others, to affirm their presence in history and the lived reality of class.

On this score, Thompson is to be credited for his ambitious attempts to reach out toward the illiterate workers, the underground movements, and the masses of persons who left few or no records of their own. As Sewell writes, Thompson's version of working class history incudes "popular political and religious traditions, workshop rituals, back-room insurrectionary conspiracies, popular

ballads, millenarian preaching, anonymous threatening letters, Methodist hymns, dog fights, trade festivals, country dances, strike fund subscription lists, beggars' tricks, artisans' houses of call, the iconography of trade banners, farmers' account books, weavers' gardens, and so on in endless profusion." (Sewell, 1990:50). The scope of Thompson's imaginative reconstruction dramatically expanded the boundaries of research and made possible a new vision of social history "from below."

At the same time, the history of the inarticulate poses problems of interpretation, and Thompson occasionally constructs plausible scenarios of events and persons for which virtually no direct evidence exists. These are often so brilliantly written that, even without hard data, the reader is persuaded that such persons very well must have existed. Here is but one example, on the role of the immigrant Irish underground:

> *We can cite no actual biographies (what Irishman, in an English court, would have confessed to former membership of the Carders or "Levellers"?) but there can be no doubt that some of the immigrants brought with them the traditions of these secret organizations. . . The rapid movement of men with blackened faces at night, the robbery of arms, the houghing of horses and cattle -- these were methods in which many Irishmen had served an apprenticeship* (MEWC: 442).

As Edmondson (1984: 24) writes, this kind of rhetorical strategy is called *hypotyposis*, or "giving a description so vivid that the reader envisages the event as happening before his or her very eyes." In the final chapter of *The Making* on "Class Consciousness," Thompson shows a special admiration for the literary style of the plebeian journalist William Cobbett: "[W]herever he was, Cobbett always compelled his readers, by the immediacy of his vision, the confusion of reflection and description, the solidity of detail, and the physical sense of place, to identify themselves with his standpoint." (MEWC: 752). One can't help but think here of E.P. Thompson.

We can recognize Thompson's efforts to grasp empirical social phenomena which by their nature do not leave obvious traces. This is a constant challenge for historians of poor, working class, and marginalized peoples in general, especially when it comes to recovering evidence of popular agency. Thompson does provide data on points such as the sales and distribution of leading Radical authors and newspapers, the extent of mass participation in demonstrations, the

formation of institutions like the trades unions and the London Rotunda, and the structure and ethos of the friendly societies. At times, however, his efforts can be breathtaking in their reach. Thompson speculates at one point on a "sea-change in the opinion of the masses, some subterranean alteration of mood" (MEWC: 116). Such changes are certainly plausible, but we would have to ask how the masses of people themselves understood or recognized them.

THE LIMITS OF COLLECTIVE BIOGRAPHY: THE PROBLEM OF AGENCY

The model of collective biography is not peculiar to Thompson or to research on class. A similar approach can be traced in the classic American sociological genre of urban "community studies." A paradigmatic example would be St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton's *Black Metropolis* (1945), an ethnographic account of the development of the black community on the South Side of Chicago in the early middle 20th century. Significantly, Drake and Cayton divide their book into two parts. Volume One describes the experience of urban migration for the African American population and its structural segregation from the rest of the city. Volume Two shows the indigenous creation of social and cultural institutions, and the development of racial consciousness, within the black community, or what the authors call "Bronzeville."

The advantages of collective biography are its emphases on popular self-organization and the ways in which people construct their own sense of collective identity and interest. Methodologically, framing the history of subaltern groups in terms of a larger intentional movement can give meaning to myriad local and individual actions for which the data is inevitably fragmentary. At the same time, the model is not without its limits. Among these are the assumption of continuity in the development of collective actors, the exclusion of other identities from the narrative of class formation, and the problem of reification.

Despite all of the challenges and setbacks that workers faced, Thompson's story is of the cumulative building of an independent working class movement in England before 1830. Yet the ending of the book foreshadows a turning point, and after the peak of Chartism developments would follow a very different path. "At all events," as Anderson (1980: 45) writes, "it is *discontinuity, not continuity*, that is the keynote of 19th century working-class history [emphasis in original]." Subsequent decades would see a "re-making" of the English working class in its size, occupational composition, urban concentration and national integration, as well as in its cultural patterns and relationship to the

state (Stedman Jones, 1983; Hobsbawm 1984). If collective biography assumes continuity in the process of class formation over time, what we see instead in England and elsewhere are a series of breaks or radical reconstructions of the economic, cultural, and political terrain. The historical "cast of characters" does not remain stable; qualitatively different actors can emerge from different social origins and with different collective identities, not all of them necessarily centered on class.

This leads to a related problem. Against abstract theorizing, Thompson asserts that "Class is defined by men (sic) as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition." (MEWC: 11). What happens, then, if class formation appears to lose its practical salience among working people? If class analysis rests on an empirical demonstration of class consciousness and mobilization, then its apparent absence could be taken to mean that class no longer really matters, or that its history had come to an end (Clark, Lipset, and Rempel, 1993; Fukuyama 1992). Without an analysis of the socio-economic and political context, the ebb and flow of protest is by itself an insufficient basis for recognizing class or its relation to other currents of group formation and struggle.

Analyzing these multiple and often inter-related currents is difficult so long as we define any single group or movement, class or otherwise, as our narrative central subject (Abbott 1992; Hull 1975). From its own point of view, each historical movement revolves around a core axis of social inequality, group formation and cultural identity, in which alternative formations appear as marginal or separate phenomena, subplots or deviations from the primary narrative path. Thus, *either* class, *or* gender, *or* race functions as the central organizing principle, without showing how these may occur simultaneously or interact with each other.

Finally, the biographical metaphor implies that once formed, classes persist as independent, organic entities, much like mature adult persons. There is a tendency to treat collective actors like individual actors writ large, at the risk of reifying or essentializing group culture. Notwithstanding Thompson's own principled insistence on social construction, the notion of a collective subject can just as easily overestimate collective consciousness and intention, and slide into a hardened, objective entity like the frozen categories of Stalinist Marxism, a Proletariat with a capital P. The result parallels what Paul Gilroy (1990: 266) has called "ethnic absolutism," in which culture becomes "a fixed property of social groups, rather than a relational field in which they encounter one another and live out social, historical relationships."

One of the principal motives for collective biography is the desire to understand subaltern groups as active subjects. A focus on internal processes of social and cultural formation, however, can undermine the grasp of practical historical agency. Thompson's book deals mainly with how workers were able to make themselves into a class, and much less with how they were able to make history *as a class*. The climax of the book is the struggle over the Reform Bill, yet the result is a significant defeat for the working class. In response to structural forces, groups might well develop autonomous social institutions or cultures of resistance, but it is not always clear how these in turn produce wider social change. Thompson argues that in 1832 "England was without any doubt passing through a crisis in these twelve months in which revolution was possible," even if for other reasons that did not actually occur (MEWC, :808). Yet we are left without a clear picture of the kind of revolution the working class movement was supposed to produce?

We might step back from Thompson's work here and ask if there are alternative ways to representing class conflict and political change. As a contrast, we can compare *The Making* with another landmark book that appeared around the same time and likewise had enormous influence. Barrington Moore's *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966, hereafter *Social Origins*) offers a type of class analysis from a very different perspective: Where Thompson is local and particular, Moore offers a sweeping comparison of revolutions and civil strife in a half-dozen powerful nation-states across centuries and from around the globe. Moore also pursues a very different goal – a causal explanation of the origins of modern state institutions from the transformation of feudalism into capitalism – but we can highlight aspects of his analysis in order to sharpen the problems of representing class and collective action.

ACTORS BUT NOT SUBJECTS? THE CLASS ANALYSIS OF BARRINGTON MOORE, JR.

While he also departs from traditional Marxist and sociological theory, Moore takes a decidedly more objective approach to class. His definition begins from the relationship of groups to the means of production; in agrarian societies, this means above all relationship to the land. Moore identifies a range of classes and class fractions: the landed upper classes (including the traditional aristocracy, commercial-farming gentry, upper yeomanry and various strata in between), the peasantry rich and poor (from small landholders and well-off tenants to landless

agricultural laborers), the urban bourgeoisie and their varying ties to the landed upper classes, state bureaucrats, and the urban artisans and "plebs."

The significance of these categories depends on the social structure in each society and the changing relations of production in the process of modernization (*Social Origins*: 36-38). Nevertheless, in order to carry out his comparative analysis, Moore necessarily relies on class concepts that are objectively-based and consistent across space and time. Thus, 16th century English yeomen are equivalent to early 20th century Russian kulaks, and 19th century American Southern planters are comparable to German Junkers. These categories form the ground for Moore's key comparative variables: the relation of the landed upper classes to the state, the response of these classes to the requirements of production for the market, the connections between the rural and urban upper classes, and the role of the peasantry.

Like Thompson, Moore argues that quantitative statistical data are often insufficient and misleading indicators of the direction of class action and interest. This requires instead a qualitative understanding of the configuration of structural conditions and situated choices that actors face (*Social Origins*: 36-37). Yet Moore characteristically interprets this from the point of view of "representative" individual members of the class or group. (ibid.: 24; 41; 55). This type of literary figure is described by Edmondson (1984: 95) as a form of rhetorical induction, which she calls *epitome*, or the construction of an "image of a single figure whose textual function is to demonstrate what can be expected from members of the group in question."

At the same time, Moore frequently denies that classes have any coherent collective self-consciousness of their actions, much less of the consequences (*Social Origins*: 50-52; 246). For example, he writes:

> *Hence, as the dramatic events of the [Puritan] Revolution unfolded and men were confronted by events they could not control and whose implications they could not foresee-- in short as the process of revolutionary polarization advanced and receded, many high and low felt themselves in terrible predicaments and could reach a decision only with the greatest difficulty. Personal loyalties might pull in a direction opposite to principles that the individual only half-realized and vice versa* (:18).

For Moore, "classes" as organized collective entities do not act: members of classes act. Even members of the same classes can perceive their interests through different ideological frames and pursue different lines of action. Thus, some of the English gentry succeed by adopting aggressively commercial outlooks and behavior, while others who do not merely stagnate and eventually disappear (*Social Origins*: 15).

Historical analysis shows a limited range of variation in the options that are available; actors must choose among alternative forms of integration with other actors in society. Class conflict, therefore, involves a conflict between opposing ways of organizing society, and members of higher and lower classes perceive their interests and ally with each other in defense of existing or ascendant modes of social and political organization. Structurally constituted collective actors move through historical change like shifting groupings of individuals on a volatile ground, and the classes that prevail are those that succeed in reorganizing themselves by adapting to or imposing the new conditions of social existence (*Social Origins*: 8n; 38).

What the struggle is about is more important than where the actors come from; analyses of the social origins of actors on different sides fail to show that the conflict is between opposing hegemonic projects (*Social Origins*: 518). Conflicts among various class fractions criss-cross one another, and class alliances are forged through the formation or destruction of key political institutions. So, the Star Chamber united the English King with the peasantry against the lords, the French aristocracy joined together through the *parlements*, and in general the destruction of peasant village institutions was a necessary condition for the victory of the landed upper classes.

Contrary to Thompson, however, Moore has little faith in the efficacy of popular class insurgency. Revolutions emerge out of state breakdown or the collapse of ruling class alliances, not from the challenge of social movements or uprisings from below (*Social Origins.*, pp. 16; 70). Even in the case of China, Moore argues that peasant solidarity was achieved more by the Japanese invasion in World War Two than by any intentional mass organization-building or insurrection. Strikingly, he devotes more attention in his analysis to the Kuomintang, whom he regards as somewhere between incompetent fascists and outright gangsters, than he does to the Chinese Communist Party (ibid.: 223).

Moore also strongly discounts cultural traditions and values as explanatory factors, seeing these as a reflection of changing material circumstances and interests.

Yet this stance is motivated less by any intellectual prejudice than by fear of a conservative bias for the imposed ideologies of the powerful. As he writes in the conclusion to the book:

> *We cannot do without some conception of how people perceive the world and what they do or do not want to do about what they see. To detach this conception from the way people reach it, to take it out of its historical context and raise it to the status of an independent causal factor in its own right, means that the supposedly impartial investigator succumbs to the justifications that ruling groups generally offer for their most brutal conduct* (: 487).

Moore's framework calls our attention back to the structural bases of class conflict, as a problem for social and political integration. While for Thompson the early 19th century English state was little more than a corrupt and reactionary repressive apparatus, Moore has a stronger sense of the ways political institutions bind class fractions in a hegemonic project, revealing the class character of those institutions even in moments of relative stability. His analysis is also better disposed to explain discontinuity or reconstructions of the social and political terrain as institutions are created or destroyed. He avoids reification, however, only by denying any kind of cultural self-consciousness or collective subjectivity. This makes it harder to represent classes as actors in an historical narrative.

These problems lead us to try a different approach. The goal is to develop an account of actor formation that can specify the effects of class structure without claiming it as an exclusive category of social inequality and group affiliation. In addition, we need to account for institutional discontinuity, in which the outcome of events can produce significant consequences for subsequent development. Finally, the challenge is to overcome reification without sacrificing agency, to show that collective actors are socially constructed but also to show how they interact with each other, and how in some situations they may become causal forces in their own right.

CLASS FORMATION AND COLLECTIVE ACTORS: A MODEL

We can start to develop an alternative framework by returning to the problem of narrative design, beginning with the competing streams of actor formation. Rather than choosing a particular actor as a narrative central subject, we can

shift the point of view to a designated place, as a relational setting or stage where multiple groups form and interact in different ways (Rhomberg, 2004). In *The Making*, Thompson was intensely devoted to the sense of place, as we have seen, but without an explicit definition of place as an analytic context. As others have shown, however, "place" is a not a fixed entity, and its boundaries are themselves the object of structural forces and political conflict (Isaac 1997; Ethington and McDaniel 2007). Nonetheless, whether the scale is urban, regional, national, or global, place serves as a local configuration and observable site for the historical nexus of economic structures, political institutions, and social relations. These provide the contextual conditions for the more proximate processes of actor formation and interaction.

How do these contextual causes contribute to the process of actor formation? Thompson, of course, rejected any structural determination, subsuming the impact of the relations of production within workers' "experience" and thereby preserving the primacy of human agency. The concept of "experience," however, was later roundly criticized by culturalist critics who insisted that objective conditions were always mediated through discourse, for both workers and historians (Eley and Nield, 2007). Without deciding in favor of either structure or agency, we can acknowledge both as methodologically different orders of analysis (Sewell, 1990). The significance of economic structure lies not in any direct constitution of experience or subjectivity, but in creating the social bases for group formation and the potential for systemic conflict.

The analysis of social structure calls attention to categorical inequalities between groups, in terms of their access to and control over resources (Tilly, 1998). Structures embody enduring, unequal and contradictory relationships, and therefore generate recurring problems of integration and social order. A structure of wage labor creates problems of recruiting, paying and controlling a labor force for employers, and problems of securing jobs, income and regulation of work for workers. Structures of urban settlement create shared conditions of collective consumption for residents, as well as competition with other users of the spatial environment, while capitalist real estate markets divide property investors, small homeowners, and tenants (Castells, 1983: 294; Harvey, 1989). In each case, the structural position of actors may systematically afford or deprive them of resources or advantages.

Macro-historical changes like urbanization, industrialization, and migration further affect groups' potential for self-organization through changes in population size and demographic patterns, relative societal location, ecological

concentration, and means of communication. Such factors highlight an important qualification to Thompson's argument on the English working class movement, which remained largely concentrated in its artisanal base. As late as 1830, the uprisings of agricultural laborers failed to produce any common organization with urban workers, and even in London, Thompson writes, "there remained a wide gulf between [the artisans] and the mass of London labourers, and workers in the dishonourable trades." (MEWC: 228, 813). Moreover, in a numerical sense, "Next to agricultural workers the largest single group of working people during the whole period of the Industrial Revolution were the domestic servants." (MEWC: 211).

A structural approach, then, identifies societal cleavages and the unequal conditions affecting different groups. By itself, however, structural analysis does not explain concrete political interests, the alignment of class fractions with or against other groups, or the form or actions of the state; nor does it explain the outcomes of actual events of mobilization. In short, economic class structure is a necessary but insufficient determinant of actual patterns of class conflict. For that we need to extend the analysis to the arenas of the state and civil society.

Within the Marxist tradition, contemporary theorists now generally distinguish analysis of economic structure from the institutional analysis of politics and the state (Aronowitz and Bratsis, 2002; Jenkins and Leicht, 1997). These form part of the causal context for actors insofar as they actively shape the exercise of power and the political terrain for all groups. The state shapes the political terrain through its repressive powers of social control, its "infrastructural" activity including the selective promotion and extraction of resources from the economy and population under its authority, its administrative ability to formulate and carry out policy, and its regulation of the channels through which groups can claim access to the state (Jenkins 1995; Jessop 2002). Concrete interests emerge from within the political arena, and depend on the strategic opportunities for action, the prospects for alliances, and what is and can become an "issue." Thus, the emergence of class conflict in England took the form of a struggle, not for socialism, but for democracy and the rights of "free-born" Britons (McCann 1997: 81-84).

In the course of struggle, conflicts can reach critical junctures that result in victory or defeat for movement goals. As theorists of historical institutionalism and path dependency have shown, a range of causal feedback or "lock-in" mechanisms can then reproduce those settlements and push further development down established institutional paths (Pierson 2004; Mahoney,

2000). Events matter, and their outcomes can produce discontinuity in the formation of collective actors. The defeat of Chartism, for example, set the terms of British politics for a generation and sent the working class movement down a road different from the one it had traveled before (Stedman Jones, 1983: 237).

A state-centered or institutionalist mode of analysis emphasizes the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in the polity, the political construction of interests and alignments, and the durability of relations of power. Yet, while these can highlight the *channeling* of popular mobilization, they still do not explain the *origins* of insurgency itself, how oppositional identity develops among the excluded, or how the latter sometimes do challenge regimes.

For these questions, we can recall here Thompson's criteria for class consciousness, which are 1) the popular expression of an identity of interest among working people as against other classes, and 2) the creation of corresponding political and industrial institutions. Class consciousness is by no means unmediated; rather, it depends on the re-articulation of the traditions, experiences, and interests of diverse groups of workers into a common cultural discourse, one that enables persons to recognize each other and act as a collective subject or unified class (McCann: 85). Thompson in fact shows a very subtle sense of how ideological elements divide along class fault-lines: Thus, in the face of middle class fear and reaction, the Radical heritage of free speech and civil rights fell to the artisans and laborers (MEWC: 182). Similarly, ideological divisions define the boundaries of class consciousness; e.g. the rejection of Malthus and Political Economy was a crucial step in preventing an autonomous working class ideology from succumbing to middle class hegemony (MEWC: 773).

Thompson grounds his conception as a question of consciousness; however, since the cultural turn we can now re-conceive this in terms of the medium of discourse and the politics of framing (Steinberg, 1991:266-267). These processes occur not solely within a group but in the manifold spaces of the public sphere and its various subaltern and counter-publics (Fraser 1992; Eley, 1992). The construction of class, gender, racial and other identities emerges from a wide-ranging cultural contest and negotiation characterized by the innovation, opposition, and amalgamation of discursive elements. These constructions are neither isolated from each other nor infinitely variable, but occur in localized fields where their interaction can be traced historically.

Likewise, the creation of political and industrial organizations occurs on the field of civil society, with its array of religious, ethnic, neighborhood, and other voluntary associations as well as the more informal world of "family and friends," personal networks of mutual dependency and support, and the conviviality of the "daily round." Multiple streams of group formation encounter one another across these matrices, but civil society does not automatically produce insurgency. Subordinate groups are fractured by structural contradictions and divided by legacies of prior organization and political conflict, while civil society itself harbors exclusionary and hierarchical relations of private power.

The ambivalence of civil society underlines the importance of specialized social movement organizations as strategic agents, who interact with the values and relations of civil society to make groups into collective actors. Strictly speaking, classes do not make themselves, though neither are they made by outside, vanguard elites. Localized working populations respond to economic exploitation and political oppression by generating cultures of resistance and organizational agents, who in turn seek to activate the larger community. To paraphrase the sociologist C. Wright Mills, movement organizations turn private troubles into public issues, transforming common experiences of group inequality and traditions of action into cohesive oppositional identities and specific goals, alliances and political demands.

The combination of economic, political, and cultural processes can produce critical junctures where actors openly confront one another in the public sphere. Such moments not only reflect the breakdown of established institutions but the possibility that challenging actors may have sufficient resources or leverage to "seize the day." Social movement challengers engage in collective action in order to change their world, to interrupt the reproduction of the dominant order and alter the paths of future development, whether economic, political, or cultural (Schwartz and Paul, 1992). The impact of their actions can be measured by their effects on the ongoing processes of structural inequality, institutional politics, and the organization of civil society.

In sum, any given place exhibits an intersection of economic forces, political power, and streams of cultural discourse. Challenging actors develop and mobilize in this context, and exercise agency in moments of collective action. In turn, these proximate actions produce outcomes that can affect the underlying context and continuing processes of actor formation.

CONCLUSION: REWRITING CLASS AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

The five decades since the publication of *The Making of the English Working Class* have seen an enormous outpouring of scholarly research on the history of subaltern groups and their challenges to established forms of power. The book was path-breaking in its time, and it continues to inspire us to think about how popular collective actors are made and how we can tell their stories. As we have gained a better understanding of the complexities of history "from below," however, it has become harder for us to grasp clearly the role of class and its relation to processes of social change.

In this essay, I build on Thompson's example in order to clarify the terms for a narrative analysis of class and collective action. Although Thompson insisted that the "making of the working class is a fact of political and cultural, as well as economic, history" (MEWC: 194), and his book is teeming with vivid accounts of such events, he did not explicitly theorize either the state or civil society as arenas where class-making might occur along with other relations of power and group formation. The problem is not the breadth or density of evidence embodied in the historical narrative of the case, but specifying the otherwise implied causal dynamics and space for agency.

I propose a framework here that attempts to make those relations more transparent. It resolves the problem of multiple streams of actor-formation by taking the designated place or relational setting of action as its narrative center and causal context, allowing diverse identities and groups to emerge and interact with one another over time. This framework recognizes the dynamics occurring in the economic, political, and cultural arenas without reducing the explanation to any single order, and it provides for a disciplined narrative analysis of "thick" history without falling into a simple empiricism. Actors are socially constructed and embedded in their context, but their encounter with one another opens up strategic choice points and the possibility of change.

This approach does not signal a retreat from class or structural analysis, but rather identifies the unique impact of class among a range of social forces. By breaking down the mutually exclusive focus on different social conflicts, it helps reveal the complex ways that class may be constructed, as well as the class content of struggles that may not be primarily identified with class. In addition, it avoids reification by situating actors in the temporal flow of events, in which the outcomes of collective action can alter pre-existing paths of development, including the ongoing process of actor-formation.

Although their work stands on its own, we can get an idea of how this perspective might look in several recent studies examining class, race, gender, and popular movements in American history. For example, sociologist Moon-Kie Jung (2006) has written about the extraordinary transformation of the working class movement in Hawaii from the late 19th to the mid-20th century. Emerging from the colonial era, a dominant *haole* capitalist class of plantation owners and merchants controlled the main industries in sugar, pineapples, and stevedoring, and met their increasing demands for labor by recruiting immigrants from Portugal, Japan, and the Philippines to work alongside native-born Hawaiians. These groups were set in competition and often used as strikebreakers against each other, contributing to bitter hostilities and a social hierarchy with each group facing its own forms of racialization. Yet, within a short span from the 1930s through the 1950s, all the major industries became unionized and workers had built a lasting interracial solidarity that dramatically reformed the islands' political culture.

Beginning in the 1930s, a conjuncture of political and social forces opened the space for a popular challenge. Institutional opportunities came from the intervention of the metropolitan state, in the form of the newly-established National Labor Relations Board. More importantly, the Hawaiian labor movement gained crucial support from its alliance with the insurgent International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) on the west coast of the United States.

As Jung notes, sociologists have tended to see race as a barrier to class consciousness and to assume its erasure as a necessary condition of class unity. By contrast, he shows that ILWU organizers constantly referred to workers' experiences of racial discrimination. Organizers stressed the "divide and rule" practices of the employers, framing them as a shared past which now united each group's distinctive history in a common narrative of interracial solidarity. The effect, Jung writes, was not "to replace the workers' racial consciousness with class consciousness, but to render them coincident and mutually reinforcing" (2006: 164).

This ideological re-articulation left the union well-positioned to take advantage of events in World War Two and afterward. The foundation of interracial solidarity was crucial to the union's victory in several critical postwar strikes, solidifying the narrative construction of collective solidarity.

Workers also transposed the discursive frame of "divide and rule" to the anti-communist reaction of the late 1940s, allowing the union and its left leadership to survive and make an enduring impact on Hawaii's subsequent political development.

In a more contemporary case, historians Eileen Boris and Jennifer Klein (2006) have studied the movement of home care providers in the U.S., the majority of whom are Black, Latina, and immigrant women. These workers provide in-home care services including personal hygiene, cooking, cleaning, shopping, and emotional companionship for elderly, blind, disabled, and other clients. The work is typically low-paid, with little job security and few benefits. Providers are hired directly by clients or through non-governmental agencies and generally work alone in private homes, but in most cases it is the government which pays for their services and which also defines the legal status of the job and the content of its duties.

The home care industry itself is a product of the evolution of government old-age, disability, and welfare policies, but providers were left with few rights and an ambiguous employment relationship. Culturally, personal care work was "invisible" labor that traditionally has been performed by women within the family. Starting from the 1930s, federal labor laws governing wages and hours and union rights excluded workers employed in the home. At the time, conservative Southern Senators in Congress had refused to allow "domestic servants" – in the South, primarily made up of African Americans – and others access to federal protections. The devaluation of care work persisted and dovetailed with other institutional aspects of the welfare state: At the state level, local welfare authorities often regarded home care employment as an opportunity to push poor women into low-wage jobs and off of the relief rolls.

For the home care workers, then, the struggle was not only for better wages but for the right to be considered workers in the first place, to re-define their labor as deserving of the same protections as other employees. In states like California and Oregon, the movement forged coalitions with organizations of seniors and disability rights activists in political campaigns to re-structure the law, codify their status as workers, and establish a public employer of record with whom they could negotiate. As Boris and Klein write, "[M]obilized workers joined with consumers of care to use the domain of the welfare state to force changes in labor as well as social policy. . . Mobilization to pass these laws has helped to organize workers; in turn, these political victories provided institutional spaces for union organizing." (2007: 83, 94). Such outcomes have helped strengthen the

movement as a collective actor: In 1999, 74,000 home care providers won an election for union recognition in the largest single gain in union membership since the 1930s.

Finally, the social and political terrain is shaped by struggles across the spectrum of classes and class fractions, including reactionary movements led by coalitions of "middling" classes. In my own work, I compared cases of urban popular mobilization in the 1920s Ku Klux Klan movement in the U.S., considered by some to be the largest right-wing movement in American history (Rhomberg, 2005; Rhomberg, 2004). Unlike its 19th century predecessor, the 1920s (or "Second") Klan was national in scope, extending beyond the South to many industrialized northern and western states, and it attracted an estimated 4 to 6 million members before declining rapidly by the end of the 1920s.

Traditional interpretations of the Second Klan once held that it was the backward-looking movement of a dying, small-town Protestant middle class, the last gasp of a provincial nativism in the face of 20th century industrialization and urban modernism. Evidence from a number of studies now shows instead that the movement enjoyed a broad base of support among urban middle strata, and it was strongest in areas where native-born white Protestants were an overwhelming majority. Klan chapters mobilized around issues like Prohibition and immigration restriction, as well as a range of local "civic" concerns like law enforcement, good government, public schools, and city services. In many areas, the movement eschewed overt violence and gained wide support through participation in electoral politics. These findings have stimulated a debate over whether the movement represented a mainstream "civic populism" or a more racist reaction to change (Moore, 1991; MacLean, 1994).

I argue that the 1920s Klan was *both* a racist *and* a civic reform movement because processes of white racial and populist class formation were joined in the same movement. Cities and states with concentrated or majority native-born Protestant populations had greater densities of resources available to the movement, especially from rising middle classes striving to advance or secure their social position. Klan organizers deliberately sought alliances with local Protestant ministers and fraternal and civic leaders, whose affiliation offered legitimacy and a source of networks for bloc recruitment. "Moral" issues like Prohibition, schools, law enforcement and political corruption also coincided with major areas of state intervention in society, typically through local authorities, prior to the New Deal.

Finally, the Klan employed an extensive repertoire of cultural symbols to attract members and build solidarity. From popular values of republican egalitarianism, Protestant moralism, and racial and ethnic chauvinism, the movement fashioned an ideological rhetoric that framed a powerful collective identity among its social base.

Thus, the Klan's "civic" reformism was neither a simple reflection of community sentiment nor a mere code-language hiding its true agenda. Rather, the movement represented a rising white Protestant middle class in its bid for hegemony within a presumptively white-dominant urban social order. As such, the movement powerfully asserted a vision of the class and racial requirements for membership in the community, and served as a catalyst defining the conditions of assimilation among European American groups. When the Klan as an organization eventually collapsed, other actors often pre-empted its issues, absorbed its constituency, and incorporated their interests. If the Klan itself failed, however, its white middle class base did not do so badly. On the contrary, in many ways they succeeded in establishing themselves and influencing the paths of American urban and suburban social and political development.

These examples give us just a brief idea of the potential for a non-reductionist analysis of class and its relation to historical patterns of group formation and collective action. For the most part, however, that is a goal and a task that remain before us. Thompson's great book continues to set a powerful standard for all who are interested in writing about the history of working people under capitalism. On this fiftieth anniversary of its publication, we may take the occasion to thank him for the heroic example he has left us, and to honor his work by continuing the pursuit of that history in our day.

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