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Edward Thompson's ethics and activism 1956-1963:
Reflections on the political formation of The Making of the English Working Class

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In the summer of 1959 the historian John Saville was approached by R.W. Harris of Victor Gollancz publishing house to write a textbook on the nineteenth century British labour movement, in a series on ‘Men and Ideas’ suitable for sixth form and undergraduate students. Saville declined the commission, but suggested his close collaborator and fellow editor of the New Reasoner, Edward Thompson. ‘I choose my words carefully’ Saville wrote, ‘when I say that in my opinion Thompson would do a better job than anyone in this field. I would add a warning. He is a very busy person, and if you are interested in him, and he accepted, I should insist on a firm timetable. I do not want to give the impression he is unreliable. Emphatically he is not, but on the contrary extremely efficient; but he is an extraordinarily vigorous and lively individual who carries on many things at the same time, and you will need a firm assurance that he will meet your deadline’. ¹ Later that year, Thompson signed a contract for a book, of about 60,000 words, on ‘Working class politics’, having renegotiated the time period as 1790-1945. In his preface to The Making of the English Working Class Thompson thanked Harris for the patience shown when the book ‘burst the bounds’ of the series for which it was commissioned, and when introducing a later edition wryly described The Making as ‘I suppose, the first chapter’ of the book that was originally envisaged. He would later say that he agreed to write it because ‘I was hard up, and a publisher wanted a textbook on the British labour movement’. ²

The Making, then, was written in a remarkably short period, between late 1959 and 1962. The research that went into it, however, was begun some years earlier. Before committing himself to Gollancz Thompson had planned to follow his 1955 political biography of William Morris with a social and industrial history of the people of the West Riding of Yorkshire, where he was then based as an extra mural tutor at Leeds University, teaching literature and history for the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA). These two projects – the textbook and the social history – became conjoined, and The Making was the result. The influence of his Yorkshire researches (he sometimes referred to The Making as his ‘West Riding book’) and the strong links between his text and the adult education in which he worked have been well-documented, as also has the continuing influence of William Morris on Thompson’s thought. ³ However, the focus of

this paper is less these elements of what made The Making - although the Morris theme remains critical - than the significance of Thompson's political work in the few years preceding and during the writing of the book. For Thompson was indeed, as Saville had said, carrying on many things at the same time, so much so that he later said he was ‘puzzled to know when and how the book got itself written’ in what was for him a period of intense political activity. During these years he broke with the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), after fourteen years of active membership, in the aftermath of the Khrushchev speech and Soviet invasion of Hungary, first to find an unofficial discussion journal, the Reasoner, that became the New Reasoner once Saville and Thompson resigned from the Party. Outside the CPGB, Thompson became a pivotal figure in the early British New Left, a lively activist and intellectual current that brought the dissident communists around the New Reasoner together with a younger group of independent socialists who produced the journal Universities and Left Review, to try and found a ‘movement of ideas’ to counter ‘apathy’, and ‘make socialists’, while also reworking the theoretical content of socialism to define a third space on the post-war left between Stalinist communism and Labour social democracy. A prime mover of the New Left’s efforts to become a serious alternative political force, Thompson was deeply involved in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), in the running of the innovative Left Clubs network, and in the electoral efforts of the Fife Socialist League, a New Left affiliate, which put ex-communist miners’ leader Lawrence Daly up as a candidate for the Scottish constituency of West Fife in the 1959 general election. In addition to his editorial and activist work within the New Left, Thompson was also one of its most prolific and prominent writers, authoring some sixteen substantial pieces for its journals between 1956 and 1963, as well as the key essays in its 1960 collection Out of Apathy.

Thompson’s role within the British New Left has been well documented. Yet, with some notable exceptions, the linkages between the political and ethical commitments he developed there and the key themes of his historical work are more often alluded to than actually explored. Thompson the activist and Thompson the historian are also frequently treated rather separately and at times seem to speak to separate audiences. No doubt such separation is partly a product of the fact that - with his personal papers unavailable to researchers - we still lack a complete biography to illuminate the interplay of influences between different parts of Thompson’s work. It is also in part a result of the immense impact of The Making, which established beyond doubt Thompson’s reputation as a social historian, and rapidly generated its own literature of critique and commentary. What is abundantly clear from his writing of this period, however, is that Thompson himself regarded his political and intellectual work as fused, and that he conceived of The Making as a political intervention of and within the New Left as well as a work of history. The coincidence of the book’s publication date with the disintegration of the New Left as a unified project, however, meant that the

positions and challenges it offered for the milieu were not taken up within it, and also conditioned the somewhat hostile and selective reading of Thompson’s work that would be offered by the younger NLR theorists Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn.

In this paper, I offer a reading of Thompson’s classic text through these debates within and around the New Left, drawing on unpublished correspondence and editorial documents as well as on his published New Left essays. I explore The Making as a strategic intervention in active political debates of the late 1950s about working class consciousness, identity and agency, and as a powerful expression of the ‘socialist humanism’ Thompson and other New Leftists articulated at this time. What can we gain from such a reading? Firstly and simply, I have interpreted part of my brief as being to remind us, in this anniversary year and as a starting point for our discussions, of the political context within which the book was written. Secondly, I think it helps us to approach certain themes in Thompson’s work (both in The Making and more broadly) and in the extensive commentary it has generated, a little differently than we otherwise might. In general terms, sensitivity to the political formation of Thompson and his book can provide a useful corrective to some subsequent interpretations of The Making which have focused on theoretical issues sometimes to the detriment of a broader appreciation of the context and purpose of the text. I am thinking here in particular of the 1970s Marxist historiographical debates around the supposed ‘break into culture’ of the British Marxist Historians and Thompson’s role in that, in which Thompson’s position and the project of ‘socialist humanist history’ was at times identified in a rather simplistic way with an almost purely agency –centred approach. In fact Thompson at this point was quite resistant to some aspects of New Left ‘culturalism’, and his work of the period demonstrates a sophisticated grasp of the interplay between structure and agency, social being and social consciousness. This has been well-argued by others and so will not be discussed here. Linked to that but less often explored is the significance of Thompson’s ethical thought, as expressed in his ‘socialist humanism’. This is often regarded as one of the weaker aspects of his work, with his critics (Anderson most famously but others too) seeing him as falling prey to a kind of naïve and messianic populism that repeatedly overestimated the radical potential of human agency and the political causes in which he was involved. Critics have also noted the failure of socialist humanism to go beyond moral critique of ‘Stalinism’ to real analysis of its roots, its isolation from relevant theoretical developments elsewhere, and the imprecisions and contradictions of its attempt to meld Morrisian romanticism and Marxism. There is certainly much in these critiques, but an appreciation of the theoretical limitations of Thompson’s thought does not preclude recognition that his essays of this period nevertheless show rich and creative thinking around questions of individual moral capacity and choice, and what he would later call the ‘education of desire’. Finally, reading The Making through Thompson’s political commitments of this period, and his debates with other New Leftists, can give a fresh perspective on his ‘Englishness’, a topic also debated in the past but which is now attracting renewed interest – and from some surprising quarters- in current political debates in the UK.


Socialist humanist ethics and politics

‘We take our stand as Marxists. Nothing in the events of past months has shaken our conviction that the methods and outlook of historical materialism ... provide the key to our theoretical advance ... although it should be said that much that has gone under the name of Marxism-Leninism is itself in need of re-examination. History has provided a chance for this re-examination to take place, and for the scientific methods of Marxism to be integrated with the finest traditions of the human reason and spirit which we may best describe as humanism’

‘I doubt whether socialist humanism can be usefully defined, but the attempt must be made again and again. If reduced to a set of propositions it becomes at once abstract and utopian. If we abandon the effort for one moment we fall victims to the realpolitik of determinism. It reveals itself as much in the form of a fruitful quarrel between agency and determinism, aspiration and context, people as they are and as they might be, as in any systematic theory. It postulates the validity and importance of forms of perception and of moral growth which have not hitherto been successfully formulated in Marxist schema. As a position in the world today it is most evident as a critique of other alternatives.’

Arguably one of the reasons that Thompson’s book has proved such a rich and enduring resource for discussion is the relative absence from the text of sustained conceptual analysis. At the heart of the book’s project is an imaginative, subtle exploration of the interaction between social being and social consciousness, between agency and necessity (or structure), in class formation, drawing on but not limited to the Marxist tradition. But this is only made partially explicit and the book offers little direct critique of Marxist orthodoxy. Far more explicit in this regard are Thompson’s early New Left essays articulating the position he described as socialist humanism.

Socialist humanism, first set out at length in a 1957 New Reasoner essay, is the theme that dominates and unifies all of Thompson’s political writing, certainly of the period of the New Left but also arguably also before and after that time. It was a political as well as theoretical perspective, an attempt to rescue Communism from Stalinism in the aftermath of the Khruschev speech and suppression of the Hungarian uprising, by asserting an alternative and more authentic Communist humanist and libertarian tradition that could find justification in Marx but that was most fundamentally inscribed in ‘a warm, personal and humane socialist morality’ to be found in rank and file militancy everywhere. It drew (political more than theoretical) inspiration from anti-Stalinist revolt in Eastern Europe, and was intended first as a kind of programme or rallying point for reform of Communism, then for a broader recombination of socialist energies outside the Party. It was viewed by Thompson as the unifying principle of the British New Left, drawing ex-communist militants together with the moral protest of CND anti-nuclearism, and also as the basis for a potential socialist foreign policy of ‘positive neutralism’.

In theoretical terms it entailed (in Thompson’s presentation) an interpretation of Stalinism as an aberrant ideology (‘of a revolutionary elite ... degenerated into a bureaucracy’), alongside a critique of longer run tendencies toward economism and dogmatism in Marxist interpretation. Base –superstructure, intended by Marx as a

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11 The first quote is from Editorial ‘Why we are publishing’ Reasoner 1 July 1956, the second from ‘Where are we now?’ unpublished memo from Thompson to the New Left Board, 1963.
12 ‘Positive neutralism’ envisaged unilateral renunciation of nuclear weaponry and British withdrawal from NATO, to be succeeded by alternative alliances with other ‘actively neutral’ nations, especially in the Third World, to break the grip of superpower politics.
metaphor for the dialectical interaction of social being and social consciousness, had
been employed by Stalin ‘not as an image of men changing in society but as a mechanical
model, operating semi-automatically and independently of conscious human agency’. Against this Thompson insisted on the centrality of conscious human action to Marx’
own conception of historical change. As well as drawing on Marxist sources, Thompson tried to rework the base-superstructure metaphor by introducing the concept of experience as a mediator between social being and social consciousness: ‘it is of first importance that men do not only ‘reflect’ experience passively: they also think about that experience; and their thinking affects the way they act. The thinking is the creative part of man, which even in class society makes him partly an agent in history, just as he is partly a victim of his environment.’ His most original move however was to assimilate the humanist content of Marxism with the moral consciousness of the English Romantic tradition, especially as represented by Morris. Thompson accorded special weight to the ‘moral imagination’ of the artist, in educating this ‘moral consciousness’ by ‘responding to the real quality of the life about him, evaluating this beside past culture, ordering his responses into forms which operate upon men, change their attitudes and their moral being in their turn’. 13 This function he was later to call ‘the education of desire’ (desire standing for agency/moral choice as opposed to historical necessity). 14

Much has been written about the limitations of Thompson’s socialist humanism, in terms of its problematic relationship to Marxism, its sidestepping of historical analysis of Stalinism in favour of moral condemnation, its underdevelopment of key concepts, its isolation from other currents of Marxist humanism, its romanticism, utopianism and ‘moralism’. Some of this criticism is justified, although we should also note some impressive defences and developments of Thompson’s perspectives. 15 I don’t propose to revisit these debates here other than to say that we should be careful not to abstract ‘socialist humanism’ from the political context and purpose of Thompson’s writing at this time and from the collective project of the New Left as described above. In keeping with Thompson’s view of ‘theory as provisional’ and as polemic, socialist humanism is better viewed less as a fully articulated position than as a polemical and provisional starting point, as an ethical sensibility rather than a theory. 16 It is not one static position but rather describes the developing project that Thompson said ran through all his work, an attempt to recover and claim for socialism a ‘lost vocabulary’ of agency and moral choice. He pursued this through his histories (including of course The Making) through what he described as an investigation of the dialectic of interaction between economics and values. 17 But he also pursued it in other ways and registers. Thompson started out considering himself a poet and writer rather than a historian, and it is often in his poetry that we can see the themes of his work distilled most succinctly. A poem he wrote in 1950 ‘The place called choice’ closes with the following lines:

I declare that man has choice

13 Quotations in this section are from Thompson, ‘Socialist humanism: an epistle to the philistines’, New Reasoner 1, Summer, 1957.
14 He borrowed the term ‘education of desire’ from Miguel Abensour in his postscript to the 1976 edition of William Morris: romantic to revolutionary. (Pantheon, 1976)
16 See Merrill, op.cit. p.
17 Ibid., p.
Discovered in that place
Of human action where
Necessity meets desire
And moors and questioning wind
Water, stone and air
Transfigured in the soul
Can be changed to human fire
Which man, becoming whole
Will order and control.\textsuperscript{18}

The date is interesting, because it shows the extent to which both The Making and Thompson’s work within the New Left developed a perspective that he had forged well before his break with the CP. He himself said he ‘commenced to reason’ in 1956, but it is clear that his thinking was characterised by a highly unorthodox (in Marxist or communist terms) and critical ethical sensibility considerably before that. Later, Thompson would situate himself within what he described as a partially suppressed and sublimated tradition within British communism that resisted (though not always directly) the didacticism, economism and dogmatism of Party officialdom.\textsuperscript{19} The main representative of this ‘muffled’ or ‘premature’ revisionism is often thought to be the CPGB Historians Group (this included Christopher Hill, Victor Kiernan, Eric Hobsbawm, John Saville and showed the influence of Maurice Dobb and Dona Torr), in whose histories can arguably be seen a more sophisticated version of social being than ‘orthodoxy’ strictly permitted. Thompson, however, was more active in the Writers’ Group than in the Historians’ Group, and at least as important an influence on his thought was the group of writers, poets and literary theorists which included Edgell Rickword, Christopher Caudwell, Ralph Fox, Alec West, and Randall Swingler. He later cited ‘A handbook of Freedom’, a 1939 compendium of English radical texts edited by Rickword and Jack Lindsay, as amongst his key inspirations, and in sensitive reflections on the work of Caudwell and Rickword, would clearly identify the work of this group as demonstrating the existence of a strand of ‘creative Marxism’, an ‘incipient heresy’ within the intellectual culture of British Communism, that challenged, though not always directly, the ‘correct pabulum offered as “Marxism”’.\textsuperscript{20}

This was the tradition of British communism that socialist humanism laid claim to, and sought to bring into dialogue with other sources of humanist revolt at home and abroad. Literary sources were highly prominent. Thompson’s 1950 poem – it is quite a long piece and remarkable in the extent to which it brings together many of Thompson’s characteristic themes - already shows powerfully his deep assimilation of Morris and the radical romanticism of Blake, and contains an implicit critique of Marxist orthodoxy. Partially suppressed before 1956, these themes were liberated in the New Reasoner. Taking its name from a shortlived nineteenth century radical publication begun by former secretary of the London Corresponding Society John Bone, it was subtitled ‘a journal of socialist humanism’ and took as its motto a quote from Marx ‘to leave error unrefuted is to encourage intellectual immorality’. It is to the whole project of the journal rather than to one specific essay that we need to look to appreciate the contours of socialist humanism and of Thompson’s political and ethical concerns at this time. Reflecting the centrality of literary sources in Thompson’s own intellectual

\textsuperscript{18} ‘The place called choice’, 1950 in Fred Inglis (ed.) EP Thompson: collected poems (Bloodaxe Books, 1999)
\textsuperscript{19} Thompson ‘Christopher Caudwell’ and ‘Edgell Rickword’, reprinted in Making History: Writings on politics and culture (The New Press, 1994)
\textsuperscript{20} Thompson ‘Edgell Rickword’, op cit., p.237.
development, the NR’s commitment to socialist humanism was demonstrated at least as much in its extensive attention to literature (poems by Tom McGrath and Tibor Dery, fiction by Doris Lessing and others, a Blake bicentenary supplement authored pseudonymously by Thompson) as in any one position paper. It was also shown in its coverage of promising movements and currents abroad (Yugoslav workers’ councils, African independence movements, Keralan communism, to name a few), its absolute commitment to the cause of nuclear disarmament, and in its direct, accessible and non-academic style. These were all essential elements in the project of the journal, described in an early editorial as fighting for a ‘rebirth of socialist principle’.

Socialist humanism, though it became a kind of organising principle for the early New Left, was not uncontroversial, and the role it played in the thought and politics of the milieu was actually quite complex. The immediate response to Thompson’s 1957 essay was quite critical, with several rejoinders published in the New Reasoner. Particularly of concern was the relationship of socialist humanism to communism and Marxism. Harry Hanson and Charles Taylor, in different ways, denied the compatibility of communism and humanism and thought Thompson’s reflections on the causes of Stalinism too limited. Alasdair MacIntyre, in a rich but rather neglected contribution, took up the theme of Marxism’s relationship to morality and developed it in ways that some ‘ethical Marxists’ today are finding productive.21 Also interesting to note is that there was more than one version of socialist humanism at play within the New Left. Though in the main associated with Thompson, the language of socialist humanism was also eagerly taken up, with different emphases, by the younger ULR theorists for whom it spoke directly to their aim of an expanded politics, a ‘socialism at full stretch .. relevant only in so far as it is relevant to the full scale of man’s activities’. Their interest in socialist humanism was far less as a means to rehabilitate Communism, than as a practical political project, describing and justifying an experimental form of grassroots organising that crossed political and social boundaries to pioneer a novel ‘politics of culture’.22

Thompson continued to defend socialist humanism, and indeed there is a strong case for the contention that it remained the touchstone of his overall perspective. However over time the balance of his emphasis between the different sources and inspirations that made it up shifted somewhat, no doubt partly as a result of these early discussions within the New Left. It is interesting to note that of all his early critics, he conceded most ground to Taylor, commenting that ‘I can now see more clearly that if Stalinism is a mutation of Marx’s ideas, the very fact that they are capable of undergoing such a mutation while still remaining in a direct relationship indicates an original weakness which goes beyond mere ambiguity.23 Gradually the influence of literary, artistic and non-socialist sources – always strongly present - came to predominate over Marxist ones in shaping Thompson’s ethical thought. If in 1957 Thompson was convinced of the compatibility of humanism and Marxism, by the late 1970s he revised his views to offer a more thoroughgoing critique of Marxism as unable to accommodate Morris’ ethical concerns, saying: ‘Morris can never be assimilated to Marxism, not

22 For ULR’s interpretation and use of socialist humanism see Madeleine Davis ‘Reappraising British socialist humanism’, Journal of Political Ideologies, 18(1) 2013.
because of any contradiction of purposes but because one may not assimilate desire to knowledge, and because the attempt to do so is to confuse two different operative principles of culture. So that I have phrased the problem wrongly, and Marxism requires less a re-ordering of its parts than a sense of humility before those parts of culture which it can never order'. But the sensibility of socialist humanism remained, and is perhaps best summed up in ‘Agency and Choice’ a reply to critics of his 1957 essay, in which he talked of the ‘vindication of the right of the moral imagination to project an ideal to which it is legitimate to aspire, and the right of reason to enquire into the means and ends of social arrangements, irrespective of questions of immediate feasibility’. This is the sensibility informs and animates the treatment of working class experience in The Making, and can be seen so clearly in his commitment to rescuing, as he famously put it, the ‘losers’ of history, the marginalised and defeated, ‘the blind alleys and lost causes’ whose struggles nevertheless were valid in their own terms and times.

Class analysis in the early New Left

‘We might discuss the uses of literacy a little less, and the uses of history rather more’ 26

The centrality of opposition, objection, and dissent to Thompson’s thought and to our interpretation of it has been well demonstrated.27 Thompson thought and wrote against, and The Making is animated by arguments against different opponents and pursued at different levels. The ‘double sided critique’ that structured the book and that Thompson made explicit in his 1980 preface was directed at conservative schools of economic history on the one hand and Marxist orthodoxy on the other, two sides of an economically reductionist argument that produced the simplistic equation ‘steam power plus cotton mill = new working class’ that Thompson set himself to counter, in the process forcing, as Palmer notes, an ‘unmistakable rupture’ in the historical literature such that ‘class formation could no longer be posed, by radicals and reactionaries alike, as a mechanical reflection of economic change’. But Thompson had other opponents in mind too. His argument was also with those social democratic ‘revisionists’ of the late 1950s British Labour Party, at the time exhibiting their own brand of economic determinism in the uncritical welcome they extended to post-war ‘affluent capitalism’, as well as with those colleagues within the New Left whom Thompson thought in danger of capitulating too easily to the ‘mythology of prosperity’ and of missing the political opportunities of the period. The Labour MP Tony Crosland’s case for a reorientation of socialist and Labour priorities away from economics - since ‘traditional’ capitalism was thought to have been ‘modified almost out of existence’ – was directed at shifting Labour away from its ‘dogmatic’ commitment to common ownership, regarded by Crosland as a product of a confusion between means and ends.29 Instead, it was socialism’s ethical aspirations (as he saw them) toward welfare and equality that should be prioritised. Crosland’s arguments were in the forefront of the revisionist agenda, but were part of a much wider discourse around post-war affluence which preoccupied the

24 Thompson, postscript 1976 op cit. p
26 Thompson ‘Commitment in Politics’ Universities and Left Review 6, Spring 1959.
28 Palmer, 1994 op cit, p. 94
British left. This discourse encompassed a number of linked developments (higher working class incomes, changing employment patterns, the establishment of a welfare state, rising working class consumption of new goods, suburbanisation and changes in communications, especially advertising, TV and mass market entertainment) which were widely presumed to be altering both the structure and the consciousness of class among working people. There was much talk of de-proletarianization or embourgeoisement, expressed in sociological debates around the so-called ‘affluent worker’; in the political arguments being deployed at this time by Crosland and his revisionist colleagues, and in a burgeoning interest in studying working class culture.

These issues were keenly debated within the New Left, in part touched off by Richard Hoggart’s 1956 The Uses of Literacy, a study of working class reading habits which saw working class culture and ways of life as threatened by the rise of mass culture. In general the New Left put up strong resistance to the revisionist agenda, denying that the objective structures of capitalism had changed, reiterating the importance of common ownership, and opposing much of the terminology and assumptions around working class affluence. Thompson, not surprisingly, was among Crosland’s most trenchant critics. But he was also wary of the interest of the younger theorists of ULR in the potentially depoliticising effects within the working class of ideological concepts associated with affluence (consumer choice, social mobility etc), as well as of Hoggart’s pessimism, and of Raymond Williams’ portrayal of culture as ‘a whole way of life’. Thompson’s essays and correspondence of the period rehearse the arguments he would pursue in The Making, often drawing on his historical researches. This is clearest in a 1959 polemical essay in which he took the ULR writers to task for a ‘precious, self-isolating’ and ahistorical approach which, Thompson charged, evaded the realities of class struggle and at its worst expressed an ‘anti-working class’ sensibility. Taking as his ostensible target a particularly weak and impressionistic ULR article, Thompson inveighed against a tendency to view working people as the subjects of history, as pliant recipients of the imprint of the mass media, as victims of alienation, as data for sociological enquiry, and against the patronising handwringing of the middle class intellectual over working class ‘materialism’. ‘Are working people to be allowed no consciousness of themselves, no power of moral reflection, no agency in shaping industrial society?’ Where, he asked, in this picture, were ‘Luddism and Peterloo, trade union experiments and Owenism, the ten hour movement and Chartism, and the proliferation of popular religious, educational and cooperative societies?’ Working class history, he insisted, (contra Hoggart, though his argument was also applicable to Williams), was the record not of a coherent or singular ‘way of life’ but of a way of struggle: ‘this way of struggle, against class rule above and between competing moralities within the working class, has never been a blind, spontaneous response to objective economic conditions. It has been a conscious struggle of ideas and values all the way’.

Thompson’s plea was for a ‘sense of history’, a sense of the dialectics of social change, to inform the contemporary debate on working class agency and consciousness. A historical perspective showed, for instance, that distrust of materialism and fears

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31 For Raymond Williams position at this time see Culture and Society (Chatto and Windus, 1958) and The Long Revolution (Chatto and Windus, 1961). The outstanding ULR contribution was by Stuart Hall ‘A sense of classlessness’, ULR 5, Autumn 1958.
32 Thompson, ‘Commitment in Politics’. The article against which Thompson took aim was Gordon Redfern ‘The real outrage’ ULR 5 Autumn, 1958.
about embourgeoisement and moral decline among the working class were nothing new; that the 1850-1880 period saw ‘a striving for status within the working class as sharp as any to be found today’: that what 1950s theorists called the ‘status ladder’, was equivalent to the Victorian notion of ‘self-help’; that working class culture had survived earlier onslaughts (‘the propaganda of church and squire .. the sentimental mush of the Sunday School and the orthodox Methodist pulpit, as debilitating and degrading in their way as anything offered today’). The Making would extend and deepen these points. Its chapter on working class living standards and consumption during the Industrial Revolution, while puncturing the pseudo-scientific complacency of pre-existing scholarship, can equally stand as a critique of those in the 1950s who (like Crosland) saw political and ideological changes as following quite unproblematically from minor shifts in the economic workings of capitalism. A later discussion of working class literacy and the development of a reading public, the growth of radical reading culture and of efforts to divert working class literacy into ‘more harmless’ channels, and of the struggle for ‘freedom of the press’ also developed the critique of 1950s contemporaries who Thompson felt underestimated the toughness of working class oppositional culture.

Many further examples and parallels might be drawn, but the above indicates the extent to which The Making was an extended and decisive intervention in these political discussions of working class consciousness and political agency in the 1950s. It was also an argument for political organisation. Thompson’s spirited insistence on working class self-activity was intended to inspire activism amongst those working class adult education readers to whom the book was addressed. But it also continued earlier New Left discussions about the role and responsibilities of intellectuals and the organisational priorities of the new movement. It countered the pessimism of those intellectuals such as C. Wright Mills who in 1960 urged his British New Left friends to abandon ‘the labour metaphysic’. Its rich historical detail illustrated the argument made in ‘Commitment’ - that the effects of social change at the level of consciousness were never pre-determined, and that the complexity and paradox of working class historical experience provided as many reasons to hope as to despair. In periods of relative quiescence and prosperity, an ‘acquisitive ethic’ and ‘status-striving’ could gain the upper hand in the ‘struggle of competing moralities’ within the working class, but the job of the intellectual in such circumstances was not to ‘write off’ the working class but to lend support to the ‘politically conscious minority’ who carried and nourished the ‘ideal of community’. ‘Commitment in politics’ said Thompson in 1959 when his hopes for the New Left were at their highest, ‘must mean commitment to living people’. Thompson saw in the emergence of the New Left, outside existing orthodoxies and outside of the traditional top-down forms of party organisation, a chance for the creation of a new style of grassroots socialist political formation with potential to bridge gaps between older and younger generations and between the labour movement and the intellectuals. By the time The Making appeared, however, the New Left as a movement had disintegrated, and those who took the helm of NLR had quite other views.

33 ‘Commitment’ p. 54.
34 See especially Chapter 16 ‘Class consciousness’ Section I ‘The radical culture’.
35 C Wright Mills ‘Letter to the New Left’, NLR 5, 1960
36 For his ambitions for the movement see ‘The New Left’, NR 9, Summer 1959.
Thompson’s ‘Englishness’
‘Causes which were lost in England might, in Asia or Africa, yet be won’

Attention, internationalists and intellectual workers! The old mole, revolution, may still be at work in Battersea and Fife, in Tyneside and Ebbw Vale. It may manifest itself in contexts far removed from your schema ... Alas, we have no colonists to shoot ... no peasants to shoot us, no campesinos who can bring revolution to our towns. But the towns themselves? Perhaps something ‘real’ could happen even in them, even in Britain? Perhaps, if we turn away from our own people, this might be the worst way in which we could betray the First, the Second and the Third World? 37

A fair amount of ink has been spilt in discussions of Thompson’s supposed ‘parochialism’, ‘cultural nationalism’ and ‘English exceptionalism’. Nairn and Anderson, reversing the Thompsonian class optic (but deploying their own brand of English exceptionalism), saw the distinct feature of English working class history not as self-assertion but subordination, result of a ‘historic class compromise’ between agrarian and mercantile capitalism in which ‘a supine bourgeoisie produced a subordinate proletariat’. 38 English working class consciousness for them expressed no more than a reactive and defensive impulse. Correctly seeing Thompson’s celebration of the native radical intellectual heritage as a continuation of 1930s Popular Frontism, more particularly of the Soviet Communist Party’s injunction to its local intellectuals to counter fascist attempts to appropriate the symbols and histories of national pasts with a Communist patriotism that would link present and past radical struggles, 39 they rejected the ‘populism’ and ‘parochialism’ of this approach and with it pretty much the entirety of pre-existing socialist and radical thought in Britain. Thompson’s angry response to this injurious judgement in ‘The Peculiarities of the English’, with its passionate and polemical defence of native traditions, as well as his later rejoinder to the debate in the anti-Althusserian ‘The Poverty of Theory’, gave further resources for a view of Thompson’s thought and historical writing as defined and limited by its ‘Englishness’. 40

Responding to such views, Thompson’s defenders have had little difficulty disproving the most simplistic of such charges, demonstrating the complexity of this ‘Englishness’ in the context of an unwavering internationalism. 41 And Anderson’s own assessment moved on considerably since that time, with Anderson coming to regret his own ‘national nihilism’ and to a more considered appreciation of the value of Thompson’s work. 42 Yet debate over the nature of Thompson’s Englishness persists, and has recently gained new impetus in the UK. This has been partly stimulated by a new biography by Scott Hamilton which to a certain extent revives a presentation of Thompson as an ‘English exceptionalist’, and partly also by a resurgence of political

37 The first quote is from Thompson’s preface to the first edition of The Making. The second is from ‘Where are we now?’; unpublished, 1963.
39 Though it also had other sources that they missed.
42 Perry Anderson, Arguments Within English Marxism, (Verso, 1980).
interest in the UK in ‘Englishness’ as a cultural category and the ways in which it can or ought to be deployed politically. The latter has helped stimulate a rather surprising renewal of interest in the New Left and Thompson’s work among sections of the Labour Party, especially that associated with the self-styled ‘Blue Labour’ and latterly ‘One Nation’ Labour agenda. These terms, drawing as they do rather provocatively on terms and imagery more readily associated with British conservatism, denote an attempt by this (at present fairly influential) current to articulate a language and politics that seeks to reconnect Labour traditions to English culture and society. Figures associated with this tendency have sought to claim Thompson as representative of a ‘progressive patriotism’ that they claim also forms a cornerstone of their own political project.

This political re-appropriation of Thompson has so far been shallow and selective, and he of course would have entirely rejected the far from radical agenda to which it is harnessed. It has though provided an opportunity for renewed discussion of Thompson’s ‘Englishness’ and its relationship to his internationalism. It should be obvious that Thompson’s commitment to ‘Englishness’ expressed above all his conviction that socialist consciousness and politics had to be rooted in and relevant to people’s lived experiences, of which particular – and complex – national traditions formed a part. Just as The Making was published he also wrote ‘Where are we now?’ an internal memorandum written during the break-up of the early New Left editorial board which, over more than twenty closely typed pages, developed a penetrating critique of a certain sort of internationalism developing within the new NLR, the sort that prostrated itself before the fashionable revolutionisms of the Third World while denigrating indigenous traditions as insular and parochial. Anderson and company, he suggested, so convinced of the superiority of the Marxisms available elsewhere, and of the poverty and empiricism of the British intellectual heritage, were the latest incarnations of the ‘deracinée intellectual’ whose earlier embodiments Orwell had lampooned in the 1930s. ‘It can be argued that not insularity but an excess of international preoccupation has been the vice of the English intelligentsia’. If Thompson’s accentuation of radical English culture and traditions was in part intended as corrective, it was an Englishness full of complexity and contradiction. Key to his argument was an insistence that the ‘English empiricism’ so despised by the new NLR was not (as Nairn had claimed) an ideology but an idiom, a characteristic mode of expression, with strengths as well as weaknesses. Thus if English culture had not produced the ‘certain kind of highly sophisticated and subtle tradition of Marxist exegesis’ whose absence the new NLRers lamented, the peculiar pattern of its assimilation of Marxism had nevertheless ‘given rise to a marxist-influenced eclecticism’ among whose best representatives he included Raymond Williams. And Thompson deftly disproved the new NLR team’s portrayal of a working class ‘immunised from theory’, politically insular and mesmerised by affluence, with a subtle short history of Labour movement internationalism and the cause of Indian independence.

Thompson, then, can neither be simplistically identified with Popular Frontism – Hamilton’s presentation of him as carrying ‘hardcore beliefs’ from this ‘decade of heroes’ tilts far too much in this direction nor assimilated to any complacent or

nostalgic Englishness. Certainly his thought has much to contribute to discussion of how particular local or national traditions and identities interact with broader commitments and discourses, as well as to any (serious) project of 'progressive patriotism'. But he would have recognised better than anyone that past traditions – while emphatically a source of radical inspiration – should not be opportunistically raided to suit present requirements.

Conclusion

I am conscious, in concluding this paper, that there are many aspects of Thompson's rich text, and indeed some elements of his political formation, that I have not addressed. The importance of his peace activism, for instance, a key source and imperative of his socialist humanism as well as an important element of the New Left, has only been treated tangentially. Biographical questions, of the influence of his family background and war service, of personal and political relationships, of his experiences as a teacher, are also absent. And there is a great deal more to be said about the formative influence of Communism, and of Thompson’s experiences within that movement at home and abroad. My selection of themes, and my starting point in 1956, has been conditioned by my own interest, which is primarily in the political thought of the New Left. Clearly Thompson's work within the New Left was only one of a number of elements and influences that flowed into the text we are discussing and celebrating. Nevertheless, it is clear that this was a transformative and in some ways defining period for him politically and intellectually. This was not only because of his break with official Communism, which allowed him to 'reason' more fully and freely, to bring more explicitly into his political and historical work his acute literary and ethical sensibilities and interests, but also because of the opportunities he saw for a new kind of political movement that might begin to make good Morris' ambition to 'make Socialists ... cover the country with a network of associations composed of men who feel their antagonism to the dominant classes, and have no temptation to waste their time in the thousand follies of party politics.' By the time he published The Making, it was clear to Thompson that these hopes were not to be realised. Yet his experiences within and ambitions for the New Left, as well as helping to shape the book's theoretical framework and characteristic themes – agency, moral choice, the importance of culture and lived experience – also gave that sense of political and intellectual possibility, of urgency, that so pervades the book and that contributes so much to its enduring appeal across national and historical contexts.
What Makes Making Marxist?

Michael Merrill

The Making of the English Working Class was not written by an historian. In 1963 its author, EP Thompson, was a writer and political activist who worked as a Tutor in English for the Extra Mural Studies Department at the University of Leeds. While still in his twenties, Thompson had already edited, together with his mother, the World War II letters and memoirs of his older brother, Frank; another anthology on post-war reconstruction efforts in what had become Yugoslavia; and had written a comprehensive, spirited political biography of William Morris. Following Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin’s crimes, the British incursion into the Suez, and the Soviet invasion of Hungary, he launched and co-edited with John Saville a mimeographed journal of dissent within the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), the Reasoner, which became the New Reasoner after he and Saville left the party (but not, it is important to note, the movement) rather than obey a directive to suspend publication. (The New Reasoner and Universities and Left Review would merge in 1960 to form New Left Review.) Thompson was also a local organizer of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), which mobilized hundreds of thousands of people in Great Britain to call for an end both to nuclear weapons testing, and to the weapons themselves; and was active in the network of New Left Clubs, which for a brief while at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s seemed destined to remake the British political landscape. As part of that effort, he also edited an anthology of essays, Out of Apathy, the first of a series of “New Left Books,” which helped to launch the New Left as an international movement. Thompson and his comrades wanted to create a viable British alternative both to the CPGB, which was almost solely identified in the public mind with defending the national interests of the USSR, whatever the impact of such defense on the interests of workers elsewhere; and, to the British Labour Party, which devoted itself far too slavishly in their opinion to defending the national interest of the United States and its NATO front. He wrote The Making of the English Working Class as a contribution to this creation, a witness to the possibility of a different kind of politics and a different kind of world.

Things did not turn out the way Thompson had hoped, though I will not tell that story here. On this occasion I wish simply to help honor The Making of the English Working Class and its author on the 50th anniversary of its publication by emphasizing the book’s importance, not only as a work of history, but also as a political tract for our time. I want especially to underscore the ways in which Making was not just a product of a particular political moment, but also a strategic intervention within it. It was addressed primarily to a broad audience of activists and working-class students rather than to historians; and it was intended more to change the way history was made than to change the way it was written.
Moreover, even though Making was written for an English audience, it was not written with only the English in mind: for Thompson the working class was global, and he was always at least as concerned with its prospects as with its formation. He sought to show the world, including his comrades on the Left, as well as his working-class students and the many people with whom he worked in campaigns for peace and other forms of social protection, that the history of earlier struggles provided imaginative resources to assist their common efforts to make the world a better place.

I first met Edward Thompson in the fall of 1975 when he accepted an invitation to discuss his recent work at a MARHO “Radical History Forum” and also agreed to be interviewed for the Radical History Review. He later spoke at another MARHO forum and made an exception to his general rule of not lending his name to enterprises with which he was not directly involved by becoming one of the Review’s editorial associates. I have vivid memories of both forums. At the first, he read for nearly ninety minutes to an overflow audience of some four hundred historians and others from his still unpublished polemic against Louis Althusser and the more anti-empirical strains of the Marxist tradition. At the second, he spoke to another large crowd of historians and writers about his long-time friend, the American poet, Tom McGrath. Thompson occupied different registers each time, appearing at the first not as an historian but as a Marxist theoretician, and at the second as a poet. Both performances were equally captivating. Everyone was transfixed. I particularly remember a radical philosopher friend commenting happily, during an interlude at the forum on Althusser, that they had “never heard a sexier lecture.” And it was true. No one ever caressed a podium more lovingly than E. P. Thompson.

The interview, conducted in March 1976, owed more to the theoretical register than to the poetic. In it Thompson returned again and again to his theoretical as well as to his historical practice. In particular, he did not want Making thought the product of conventionally academic intentions, important as they might be. He wanted it understood as a challenge to politically active people everywhere, and especially to Marxists and communists, with whom he had no hesitation associating himself. Thompson was particularly keen that his Marxist comrades come to think about society and social problems differently, in a less abstract, more empirically-informed way. That they may have learned their particular mode of abstraction, and their preference for the theoretic over the empiric, from Marx himself, did not deter him in the least! He did not hesitate to suggest that the movement would be better off if it were more Darwinian and less Marxian.¹

Not that Thompson wanted to give up on Marx altogether. On the contrary, he greatly respected Marx’s contributions to the continuing effort to imagine and to construct a better society. But he urged on his comrades, and on the movement, a different, more historical approach, both for intellectual and for specifically political reasons. He had come to believe that the characteristic intellectuality of the Marxist tradition was so closed-minded, even hermetically-sealed, against empirical controls and dissenting views that it led directly to Stalinism, the dictatorship of the proletariat in the form of a proletarian dictator. Thompson offered Making as an example of what a different approach might be and yield; and he spent

much of his life, as well as his considerable energies, trying to bring the movement back—or arguably to—this different, truly democratic, we might even say, scientific way of working.

Most of his American and British contemporaries knew nothing of these quarrels. They thought of Thompson, if they thought of him at all, as a peace activist and anti-nuclear campaigner, not as a Marxist historian. In Great Britain, reportedly, when the peace movement was at its peak in the early to mid-1980s, he was one of the “most admired” people in the country, trailing only Margaret Thatcher, Queen Elizabeth and the Queen Mother in the mass media admiration polls. Even as an activist, though, Thompson remained an historian. For example, at a disarmament rally of 250,000 people in Trafalgar Square, as Brian Palmer tells the story, Thompson:

waited for the crowd to quiet and, then, into the hush of thousands he spoke the politics of a past he had long labored to translate to the present: “Against the Kingdom of the Beast, wee witnesses do rise.” One protestor, confused as to the meaning and ancestry of this obviously antiquated language, uttered a quizzical, “Say what?” to which his companion, irritated, replied, “Blake, you idiot, William Blake.”

Of course, as Palmer points out, it wasn’t Blake at all, but a line from a marching song of Oliver Cromwell’s “New Model Army”:

For God begins to honor us,
The Saints are marching on;
The sword is sharp, the arrows swift!
To destroy [a] Babylon.
Against the Kingdom of the beast
Wee witnesses do rise …

Nevertheless, the lineage was clear and the tradition thus renewed.

The origins of Thompson’s sensibility can be traced to his parents’ home at Boar’s Hill, Oxford, where he was born in 1921. His father, Edward John Thompson, was the eldest child of a Methodist missionary couple who had served in South India. Raised and educated in England, Edward John earned a degree from the University of London, was ordained a Methodist minister, and in 1910 was posted to India, where he taught English literature at the Wesleyan College in Bankura, West Bengal. Returning to England in 1923, he joined the faculty of the Indian Institute in Oxford and served there with great distinction until his death in 1946, publishing an astonishing number and variety of books of poetry, literary criticism and history, including an account of the Great Revolt of 1857 from an Indian nationalist perspective.

He had married E. P.’s mother, the American Theodosia Jessup, in Jerusalem in 1920. She was the daughter and granddaughter of Presbyterian missionaries from Pennsylvania who had founded and continued to conduct the American College in Beirut. A graduate of Vassar with an MA from Columbia University’s Teachers College, Theodosia was also a writer and fluent in Arabic. Moreover, her great-grandfather, William Jessup (and thus E. P.’s great-great-grandfather), had chaired the platform committee of the 1860 Republican Party convention that nominated Abraham Lincoln for the presidency of the United States and
reaffirmed the party’s abolitionist principles, which set the country on a collision course with slavery. Tough- and high-minded liberal critics of British imperialism, Edward John and Theodosia provided the younger Thompson and his older brother Frank (killed during the Second World War behind enemy lines while on a mission to aid anti-fascist partisans in Bulgaria) with a childhood punctuated by a constant flow of stimulating visitors, from English poets laureate to Indian writers and nationalist politicians, including Mahatma Gandhi and Jawararal Nehru, the latter of whom helped school the young Edward in his cricket batting technique.2

Equally telling to Thompson’s own making was his seventeen years as a tutor in the Department of Extra-Mural Studies at the University of Leeds. He recalled going into adult education because “it seemed to me to be an area in which I could learn something about industrial England, and teach people who would teach me.” Which they did. “Extra-mural tutors,” he argued, “had to be willing to have 'hitherto accepted' academic judgments corrected in the light of the students’ experience.” At the same time, they could not abandon their teaching in the face of the “over-simplifications or distortions liable to arise from the limitations of this experience.” Tutors ought not to permit “social purposiveness to replace study, desire to master discipline.” In the healthy tutorial, therefore, a struggle constantly took place “between the scholarship of the tutor and the social dynamic of the movement.”3

The Making of the English Working Class was born of that struggle. Years later Peter Thornton, one of Thompson’s students, recalled that in his classes “history wasn’t something separate and apart; it was a progression that you were a part of. ... And when [Thompson] did things like the handloom weavers of Yorkshire, the Luddites, the social developments of the Industrial Revolution in this part of the world, you very quickly realized how much you and your people were part of it.” Dorothy Greenald, to whom (together with her husband, Joseph) The Making of the English Working Class was dedicated, had a similar experience. Edward Thompson, she recalled, “brought it out that your background wasn’t anything to be ashamed of.” “The warmth and affection past students still have for him is not because of what he has become, but for what we was as a friend and tutor, happy, friendly, and helpful, who treated all students as equals.”4

It is in this spirit that Making needs to be read. The book arose, according to Thompson, "from a two-sided polemic" against, on the one side, "the extremely firm, intellectually well-based discipline of economic history ... from Adam Smith and the orthodox political economists through to the present day," which had been "contaminated with capitalist ideology" (V:6); and, on the other, against various "abbreviated economistic notations of Marxism'," which had "the very simplified notion" that "the creation of the working class was ... a determined process:" so many peasants arriving from the countryside processed "into so many yards of class-conscious proletarians." Thompson declared himself concerned instead to show that class formation was not a mechanical stamping out of properly constituted proletes. "[N]ew experiences in social being” did not just happen to people; they were "handled” by them in “cultural ways,” with "existing plebeian consciousness refracted by new experiences” giving rise "to a transformed consciousness" (V:7).

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4 Ibid.
Thompson intended the lessons of Making to be applicable to the present as well as to the past. An "immense amount of existing historiography," he insisted, "has seen society within the expectations, the self-image, the apologetics, of a ruling class." It has been "the propaganda of the victors." Against this trend, he sought "to recover an alternative history," which he believed "often involves a polemic against an established ideology" (V:8), and to do so in ways that guarded against the temptation to become an apologist himself. He reported being "transfixed" by the "degeneration of the theoretical vocabulary of mainstream orthodox Marxism" after 1956, the "impoverishment of its sensibility" and the consequent "primacy of categories that denied the effective existence (in history or the present) of the moral consciousness" (V:21). He had come to think that a "whole area of imaginative passion" concerned with our obligations to concrete and particular others had been extruded from Marxism. The categories by which such passions could be understood, and the vocabulary by which they could be spoken, had been lost. It was, for example, absent from Marx, he thought. Where we might expect to find it there was "a silence," filled with "unarticulated assumptions and unrealized mediations." Thompson "tried to give that silence a voice," not only in Making but also in other writing in the 1970s, with what he hoped was "increasing theoretical consciousness" (V:21).

In fact, Thompson identified himself more as a writer than as an historian. "I never 'took a decision' to be a historian," he recalled in the interview. "I don't remember ever taking any decisions of that kind" (13). "I agreed to write Making because I was hard up, and a publisher wanted a textbook on the British labor movement, 1832 to 1945. I suggested it might be 1790 to 1945, and Making is the first chapter" (V:14). In so saying Thompson did not also mean that he was not "engaged all the time in a theoretical argument about the historical process" (V:15). That was precisely what he was engaged in, and fifty years on this particular feature of Thompson's text remains worth emphasizing. We should take him at his word: Making is a work of economic and social history, which was centrally concerned to counter the notion that economic relationships were (or are) in some sense impervious to culture; that they were (or are) natural and immutable, in ways that specifically cultural products are not. As such, Making tells the tale of the developing resistance of a part of the English working class to new and old forms of domination and exploitation. It documents a shift during the first third of the 19th century from deference to defiance, and details the development of new cultural, social and intellectual resources, which opened up possibilities not only for the English working class but for English society more generally. With these new possibilities the world changed. More specifically, it was made to change, to accommodate what was "in 1832, the most significant factor in British political life:" the "working-class presence" (M:12).

To treat such matters culturally, as the effects of conscious choices and intentional acts by knowable people who can be held responsible for their actions, and not as laws of nature or acts of God, is to treat them politically, as if they may be changed, and also theoretically, as instances of larger processes that still afflict us. In this regard Making may be read as Thompson's own "critique of political economy"—or, more exactly, as his description of the English working class's "critique of political economy" as it emerged in

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5 See his long postscript to the revised edition of William Morris: From Romantic to Revolutionary, reissued in 1977, on "Necessity and Desire," represents another landmark intervention, as does the defense of the law in the conclusion to Whigs and Hunters (London: Alan Lane, 1975). See also the sharp criticisms in Writing by Candlelight (London: Merlin, 1980) of the security measures being taken in Britain during the 1970s in response to popular resistance to the austerity measures of the Labor government led by James Callaghan.
the 1830s. What is offered is not so much an alternative to Marx’s approach, as an elaboration of it. In “The Poverty of Theory,” we may recall, Thompson taxed Marx quite severely for offering “a serial relation of categories” rather than “an integrative historical analysis,” a “logical formula” rather than a history — the very sins for which Marx had earlier taxed Proudhon in The Poverty of Philosophy. By being excessively theoretical and insufficiently historical, Thompson argued, Marx did not provide an alternative to “Political Economy,” understood as a lifeless system of abstract categories; instead, he merely put a different lifeless system in its place (T:60). Thompson thus built upon Marx, even as worked to go beyond him, by rooting his categories and critique in the continuing efforts of real historical individuals who were both seeking to understand what was happening and trying to do something about it.

Thompson’s Making succeeds where Marx’s Capital fails. It provides more than just an alternative political economy — the “positing” of abstract relationships like “commodity” or “capital” and a set of “laws” that govern their “actions” like “supply-and-demand” or “competition.” It provides an alternative to “Political Economy” — a “real historical process,” in which people struggle to improve and maintain their conditions of life, as members of specific communities and cultures, in the midst of changes they can affect but not control. Marx’s procedures, Thompson proposed, ensnared him in the inhuman categories he wanted to transcend, with his characteristic “mode of abstraction” reducing the history of capital, at least “on occasion,” to “the unfolding of its own idea” (T:63). The result, Thompson argued at length in “Poverty,” was a “static, anti-historical structure,” which was the product of what was essentially an idealist mode of thought” rather “extraordinary” to find “in a materialist.” Marx may have wanted to portray capital as a social relationship, but he became so obsessed by the theories he sought to criticize that it became an “Idea, which manifests itself in history” (T:61) — or as Thompson might well have more accurately written, “in History.”

Making may thus be read as the redeemed promise of a truly materialist critique of political economy. Like Capital, it is informed by political economy’s categories. But unlike Capital, it is not trapped within them. In the early 1960s, and perhaps for his entire life, Thompson wholly accepted and worked within Marx’s framework that wage labor is a structure of exploitation within which “class” may be said to happen. Following “the terrible conflicts of 1834 and 1835,” Thompson wrote, the years “reveal a passing beyond the characteristic outlook of the artisan” to a view “more reconciled to the new means of production,” a view which sought to exert the “collective power of the class.” By this community, or that co-operative society, by this check on the blind operation of the market economy, ... [or] that means of relief for the poor,” leading elements of the nineteenth-century English working class sought to fight “not the machine, but the exploitation and oppressive relationships intrinsic to industrial capitalism” (M: 830-1). The story Thompson had to tell was thus of a “new class consciousness” (M: 807), a new awareness or appreciation that the principal obstacle to the social improvement of working people was no longer a corrupt aristocratic government, but hypertrophic, profit-seeking enterprises, upon which the wage-earning classes increasingly depended for their livelihood. The developed alternative to the former had consisted of some combination of

6 Thompson, “Poverty of Theory,” in Poverty of Theory and Other Essays, 121. Subsequent references in the text (e.g., T: 121).
constitutionalism (or the rule of law), republicanism (or public virtue), and democracy (or popular power). The developing alternative to emergent capitalism sought to preserve the political responses of the past, while also turning them to newer, more economic purposes.

It is important to be clear at this point, however, that Thompson, so far as I know, never asserted that this “new class consciousness” was universally shared by, or even dominant among, the English working class. On the contrary, he asserted merely the emergence of this new awareness, the fact of its accession to the culture as a resource that working people could draw upon. Its universality mattered less than its effectivity as a way of deciding what to do about the developing circumstances. That there were wage earners who did not share the “new class consciousness,” therefore, does not really tell against his case. No class is monolithic and no consciousness smooth or unfragmented. Thompson followed Marx in understanding class as a social category defined by its constitutive relationships rather than by the particular individuals caught up in them, or by the specific qualities those individuals acquire as a result. The particular family of social relationships by which class was constituted, both for Marx and for Thompson, were those of property (who owned what and who is owed what). In these terms, class-as-a-relationship and class-as-an-identity differed from nation, race, or gender as a relationship or an identity by virtue of being one particular set of social facts rather than another. Of course they overlapped. But the nature of the overlapping could not be posited in advance. There is not one of them, not class, not nation, not race, not gender, which was the universal solvent by which all the others might be reduced or made to disappear.

In The Making of the English Working Class is thus the product of a specifically Marxist imagination. Thompson meant by “class” what Marx meant by it, and he more or less took for granted what Marx also had to say about capitalist production, exploitation and working-class struggles. To this basic framework, his contribution was to insist, first, that class and class consciousness were complex manifolds of social and cultural facts, and not purely “objective” sociological or political categories; and, second, that resistance to capitalist exploitation need not take only undemocratic Leninist forms. Much has already been written with respect to the first. With regard to the second Thompson observed that “the working class ideology which matured in the [Eighteen] Thirties (and which has hence endured, through various translations ever since) put an exceptionally high value upon the rights of the press, of speech, of meeting and of personal liberty.” He shared this view and was always centrally concerned to emphasize the importance of such rights against “some late ‘Marxist’ interpretations, by which these claims appear as a heritage of ‘bourgeois political economics, and heroic radical artisans triumphing in the working-class movement of 1832,” what she refers to as a “melodrama,” to her own more “sorrowful,” gendered story of a “chronic sexual crisis,” a “tragedy,” in which the best that might be said is that an older “artisan culture” of “drunken misogyny” gives way to a “respectable patriarchy” where “exclusivism persisted” and whose “fatal flaws … ultimately muted the radicalism of the British working class.” The Struggle for the Breeches: Gender and the Making of the British Working Class (Berkley: University of California Press, 1995), 271. Breeches is an exemplary study in many respects. But in this brief summary of her findings one misses the sense of culture as a fluid and contested space that one always finds in Thompson. “Drunken misogyny” cannot capture the “artisan culture” any better than can “sexual egalitarianism” or, for that matter, “production for use not for profit.” There is a to-ing and fro-ing to all cultures that must be attended to. At the very least, even if all male artisans were drunkards and women-haters, which is hard to credit, we must at least take account of the mothers, wives and sisters of artisans, whom it is hard to believe were, every one, cringing and powerless. There is surely heroism and virtue, as well as villainy and vice, in the artisans’ “gender story,” just as there is in their “class story.”
individualism.” “In the contest between 1792 and 1836 the artisans and workers made this tradition [of ‘the free-born Englishman’] peculiarly their own,” he wrote, “adding to the claim for free speech and thought their own claim for the untrammeled propagation, in the cheapest possible form, of the products of this thought” (M: 732).

According to Thompson, this “new class consciousness” evidenced two further themes, “which arose again and again” in the years leading up to beyond the Chartist agitation: internationalism and “industrial syndicalism.” The first was part of “the old Jacobin heritage” that, as Thompson reminded his readers, “the Radicals had never forgotten.” It was later “extended to embrace social and class solidarities” especially by Owenites co-operators and trade unionists. As early as 1833, for instance, “the question of some common alliance between the trade unionists of England, France and Germany had already come under discussion.” Equally important was the second theme: “industrial syndicalism.” “When Marx was still in his teens,” Thompson wrote, “the battle for the minds of English trade unionists, between a capitalist and a socialist political economy, had been [already] (at least temporarily) won.” The winners: Thomas Hodgskin, William Thompson, James Morrison and Bronterre O’Brien; the losers: Adam Smith, James Mill, David Ricardo, and J. R. M’Culloch. To this effect, Thompson quotes “A Member of the Builders Union,” who also in 1833 declared, “The Trades Unions will not only strike for less work [i.e., shorter hours], and more wages, but they will ultimately ABOLISH WAGES, become their own masters, and work for each other; labor and capital will no longer be separate but they will be indissolubly joined together in the hands of workmen and workwomen.” This same building trades unionist also went on to suggest that the unions themselves “could solve the problem of political power” with a “‘Parliament’ of the industrious classes … delegated directly from workshops and mills,” a sentiment that the Chartist movement would soon reveal to be very widespread indeed (M: 828-30).

By the 1860s, the cooperative movement was the great rival of trade unionism for the loyalties of the anti-capitalist segment of the English working classes. Within the labor movement there was also already a continuing debate between, on the one hand, those who opposed modern industry in all its forms and favored smaller enterprises organized on a cooperative basis; and, on the other, those who felt that modern industry was a fait accompli and that the labor movement had no choice but to make its peace with the new methods and concentrate on securing improvements in the condition and status of wage earners within the new capitalist dispensation. Marx was generally of the latter view, though he never wanted to settle for mere “improvement” and always insisted that only a thorough-going revolution would do. He thus supported trade unions and trade union struggles, but only as means to help wage earners develop, first, the social capacity to “expropriate the expropriators” and, second, the social desire to abolish “capitalistic production.” Thus, when a founding member of the London section of the International Working Men’s Association (IWMA), John Weston, a carpenter and working-class cooperative advocate, introduced two resolutions sharply critical of trade unionism and of strikes, Marx rose to the challenge and agreed to address Weston’s issues publicly.  

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9 Marx wrote to Engels in June 1865 to say that it was generally expected he would respond to Weston’s claims; and as Weston had enlisted the support of T. J. Dunning, the influential secretary of the bookbinders’ union and one of the leading figures in the London Trades Council, who shared Weston’s views, Marx felt compelled to do so. In the lectures themselves, Marx referred to Weston, politely, as “our friend” and in his private correspondence he characterized him “a good old fellow” and “an old Owenist.” But he also remarked that having Weston as an intellectual opponent was not exactly “vanity-flattering.” Nevertheless he felt he could not
lectures were a powerful, albeit critical defense of trade unionism, which upon publication many years later as Value, Price and Profit (1898; 1902) quickly became one of Marx's most influential productions.\footnote{10 Marx decided not to publish the lectures at the time they were delivered because he worried that if published they might steal the thunder of his Capital, the first volume of which would appear in 1867. He thought readers might vastly prefer the argument in its abbreviated more than in its extended form, which has proved to be true. Value, Price and Profit comes to barely 100 pages of comfortably set type; Capital was unfinished at more than 900 densely printed pages.}

In the lectures themselves, Marx first summarized and then demolished Weston's principal economic assumptions.\footnote{11 They were: (1) that the distribution of income among the several classes is fixed; (2) that a general increase in money wages is always accompanied by a general increase in prices, which leaves real wages unchanged; and, (3) that the supply of money is fixed at any given moment, so that an increase in the money wage for one part of the wage-earning population reduce the supply of money available to pay the rest, which must necessarily lead to a decrease in their wages. Marx countered (1) that the proportion of the national product that went to wages was variable. Otherwise, he observed, it would be as futile for wage payers to attempt to reduce them as it was for wage earners to organize to raise them. (2) Under competitive market conditions, a general rise in wages would not automatically result in a proportionate offsetting rise in prices. Rather, it was more likely to result in an equivalent general decline in profits. Marx’s argument turned on a distinction between the subsistence and luxury sectors of the economy, of which he estimated the latter accounted for two-thirds of the whole [17] A general increase in wages will initially drive up prices in the subsistence sector because effective demand for subsistence goods, which are purchased by wage-earning families, increases in step with wages. But demand for luxury goods, which are purchased by the propertied classes, remains the same. A general rise in wages does not increase property income; if anything it reduces it. The increase of wages in the luxury goods sector therefore leads not to a rise in prices but to a decline in profits. Subsequently, by well-known mechanisms, investors shift capital from the luxury goods sector, where profits have fallen, to the subsistence goods sector, where they have at worst stayed the same and perhaps even risen (with increased demand and relatively inelastic supply), resulting, eventually, in a general decline in profits. Finally, Marx summarily dismisses Weston’s notion (3) that currency is a fixed quantity by correctly pointing out that there are numerous payment mechanisms for increasing or decreasing the quantity of currency available to circulate goods and services through the economy. (Marx incorrectly asserted here that the increased commercialization of an economy resulted in an increase in the so-called “velocity of money.” In fact, the opposite is true: the velocity of money decreases with commercialization. However, the mistake has no bearing on Marx’s main point, which is that the quantity of money is also not a static or constant quantity.)}

Thompson was clearly on Marx's side of the matter. The class consciousness that he celebrated was democratic and revolutionary.\footnote{12 For more on this see E. P. Thompson, “Revolution,” in Thompson, et al., Out of Apathy (London: Stevens & Son, 1960), 287-308.} The "poor stockinger" to whom he famously refused to condescend was part of a militant network whose organizational, agitational and
insurrectionary impulses he honored. The specifically Marxist inflection of Making is thus very evident here, especially where Thompson goes on to credit the English working class, or elements within it, with a developing appreciation that “production must be, not for profit, but for use” (M: 830). Further, he counted this “collective self-consciousness” as “the great spiritual gain of the Industrial Revolution, against which the disruption of an older and in many ways more humanly comprehensible way of life must be set” (M: 830).

The line from Thompson’s English working class to Peter Linebaugh’s and Marcus Rediker’s “Atlantic proletariat” is, in this regard, short, straight and clear. Indeed, The Many-Headed Hydra (2000) owes much to Thompson’s example, despite the different emphases, not only in The Making but also elsewhere. To be sure, their proletariat is not the “waged, nationalistic, propertied artisan/citizen or industrial worker” of most labor histories, including Thompson’s. On the contrary, it is landless and therefore poor; laboring but often unwaged; a diverse, mobile, transnational “motely” crew,” coerced, even “terrorized,” and aware of itself as such; also cooperative, creative, self-active, vulgar and alive—in short, a “oneamove.”

We do not understand Thompson’s efforts, if we do not acknowledge how many of these elements also appeared in and are celebrated by his Making. The difference is more one of emphasis than of counter-posed interpretations. At the end of the 1950s, under the shadow of an ossified and tyrannical “Marxist” state system, Thompson chose to recover an alternative tradition of democratic, constitutional, and revolutionary English radicalism in the name of which he could urge his comrades on. Fifty years later, Linebaugh and Rediker told of another “making,” by means of which they sought to reaffirm the possibilities of a militant, democratic, revolutionary radicalism for a new generation.

Thompson’s sentiments and purposes were generally more aligned with the constitutional and agitational traditions of the “moral force” wing of the Atlantic labor movement, while Linebaugh and Rediker appear at times to lean more toward its “physical force” wing (which should not be understood to be simply insurrectionary or incendiary: it also has a very strong non-violent civil disobedience side as well). Be that as it might, the younger E. P. Thompson, the Thompson of The Making, would have surely agreed with them. “Against the Kingdom of the Beast, wee witnesses do rise!”

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13 All the descriptives from Many-Headed Hydra, 332-3. “Oneamove” is a coinage of, and an homage to, Mumia Abdul-Jamal. See Hydra, 409n11.
I.
In 1950, a young E.P. Thompson, then an aspiring poet, tried his hand at prophecy. The poem, titled “The Place Called Choice,” summoned this vision of the future:

Already the windows are shut, the children hailed indoors.  
We wait together in the unnatural darkness  
While that god forms outside in the shape of a mushroom  
With vast blood-wrinkled spoor on the windswept snow.

And now it leans over us, misting the panes with its breath,  
Sucking our house back into vacuous matter,  
Helmeted and beaked, clashing its great scales,  
Claws scratching on the slates, looking in with bleak stone eyes.

“Such an apocalyptic expectation” of species-suicide through nuclear holocaust, Thompson confessed three decades later, “has never left me.”

Yet for the bulk of Thompson’s career this existential terror was a minor theme. More often, his writings thrummed with anticipation. He predicted not the end of the world but an end to what Marx termed “prehistory”: passage from the “realm of necessity” to the “realm of freedom.” Thompson characterized his utopia as both socialist and humanist. “It is humanist,” he explained, “because it places once again real men and women at the centre of socialist theory and aspiration ... It is socialist because it re-affirms the revolutionary perspectives of Communism.” Though Thompson’s confidence in the imminence of the transition to this better society careened in subsequent decades, socialist humanism remained his lodestar.

Until 1980, that is, the year Thompson announced that the threat of nuclear war had grown so great that “Secondary differences must be subordinated to the human ecological imperative.” The challenge, he elaborated, was “not a ‘class issue’: it is a human issue.” A new politics was required, a politics of what he elsewhere labeled “human beingism.”

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appeal resonated widely, for a time making him perhaps Britain’s most renowned intellectual. It also supplied a convenient rationale for extricating himself from debates over socialism that he, along with many others, had grown tired of. Total devotion to the campaign against nuclear weapons left him little time to ponder troubling questions about socialism. I’m going to argue today that the hydraulic relationship between these two elements in Thompson’s politics—socialist humanism declining, anti-nuclear activism rising—is not merely a minor curiosity in Thompson’s intellectual biography. For Thompson, dreams of a socialist future and premonitions of nuclear conflagration were always twinned, and both were linked to arguably the most important tool in his intellectual repertoire: agency. Exploring the connection between Thompson’s greatest hopes and fears casts new light, then, not just on Thompson’s politics but also his scholarship—including the masterpiece that has brought us all here today, The Making of the English Working Class. In the remainder of this paper, I will sketch the framework that undergirded both this book and Thompson’s activism from, roughly, his renunciation of Communist Party membership in 1956 to the close of the 1970s. Then I will examine why in the 1980s he abandoned the politics that had guided him for almost a quarter of a century, what he used to replace it, and what remnants of his earlier beliefs endured. Next I will discuss the most sustained reflection on agency that Thompson produced in his lifetime: a science fiction novel, titled The Sykaos Papers, that some scholars dismiss as a “joke” but that Perry Anderson has rightly observed, “is the most complete statement of his [Thompson’s] thought, giving imaginative form to ideas that find comparable expression nowhere else in his work.” Revealingly, the novel ends—spoiler alert—with global nuclear war. Then I will conclude by briefly discussing what lessons Thompson’s struggles have for us today.

Before continuing, it is worth pausing to consider what is at stake here. In the twentieth century, nobody did more to force the question of agency onto the historical profession’s agenda than E.P. Thompson. For decades, the recovery of agency, along with the restoration of humanity with which it was often identified, became so ubiquitous a goal that it bordered on the cliché. More recently, however, a post-baby-boom cohort has subjected the concept to more critical scrutiny. Agency, the argument goes, has functioned as a kind of Trojan Horse, sneaking a liberal conception of autonomous, rational subjects into even ostensibly radical histories and forcing a spurious definition of humanity that is both normative (conflating humanity with resistance) and banal (pretty much everything counts as resistance). A formerly useful project has been preserved well past its expiration date, and now we must decide how to study the past without genuflecting to this once sacred totem.

This narrative, however, raises a puzzling question, one that has been not so much unanswered as unasked: why would a socialist like Thompson, who whatever his other faults was hyperaware of his categories of analysis, embrace a notion freighted with so much liberal baggage? There can be no doubt that agency was central for Thompson. He described it as the essence not just of socialism but of what it meant to be a person: “it is precisely the element of agency,” he argued, “which is the human part of man.” Yet Thompson used the term in a very different way than we are accustomed to deploying it today. Studying the work agency raises some of the biggest questions historians, or any social theorists, can ask: questions about freedom, choice, and humanity itself. It also opens up a distinctive vantage point on the political history of the second half of the twentieth century, a history whose legacies we still grapple with today. And, finally, it uncovers a surprising intellectual genealogy where agency emerges not as a byproduct of the social struggles of the 1960s, or a noble aspiration to restore dignity to the common people of bygone eras, but out of a guilty ex-Communist’s attempt to hustle away from Stalinism while retaining his socialist bona fides. It is that story to which we now turn.6

II.
Eric Hobsbawm remembered 1956 as a year when “British Communists lived on the edge of the political equivalent of a collective nervous breakdown.” Outrages committed in the name of communism appeared in such rapid succession that they seemed to trip over themselves: revelations of Stalinist atrocities in Nikita Khrushchev’s so-called secret speech, the Soviet Union’s brutal repression of uprisings in Poland, then its even more ferocious demolition of rebellion in Hungary. In Britain, Communist Party membership plunged by a fifth, and the ranks of ex-Communists swelled to include some of the movement’s most renowned figures, including Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton, Raphael Samuel, and, of course, E.P. Thompson.7

By 1957, Thompson was eager to explain himself, and he used a manifesto in his recently founded journal the New Reasoner to do it. Titled “Socialist Humanism,” the article made agency the fulcrum of its repudiation of Stalin. According to Thompson, Stalinism was defined by its “belittling of conscious human agency in the making of history” and the “inhumanity” fostered by a representation of social evolution as the working out of internal logics existing outside conscious human control. Against this


ironclad determinism, Thompson held out the prospect of a politics based on reason and choice—in short, on agency. Today, this vocabulary is more common on the right than on the left, and it is usually coupled with an invocation of supply and demand as arbiter of the rational and a depiction of the market as the ideal venue for choosing. The difference between Thompson’s understanding of agency and the contemporary version is, largely, a product of scale. For the self-proclaimed heirs of Friedrich Hayek, the relevant unit of analysis is the individual. For Thompson, however, it was both the individual and society as a whole.\(^8\)

Expanding agency’s terrain was both a historical and a political commitment. It entailed a vision of history as the progressive development of human decision-making—starting, perhaps, with Eve’s mutinous snack in the Garden of Eden and working its way forward. Agency was the spark that kindled history, real history, into existence, and the historian’s task was to map the spread of this flame. Socialism, in this view, was the extension of the capacity for conscious, rational choice to society as a whole. Just as a person had the ability, within constraints, to make decision, so could societies, on a grander scale, decide what to make of themselves. Socialists were those who encouraged societies to make what they portrayed as they grandest choice of all: the choice to abolish class. In a properly dialectical twist, only under socialism would individual choice assume its fullest expression, allowing “man” to become “victim no longer of nature or of himself, but a conscious moral agent.” We often picture agency and structure like a seesaw, with one side climbing as the other falls: crediting more influence to structure diminishes the importance of agency, and vice versa. For Thompson, however, the relationship was more like the ascending spiral of a dialectic, with strong agents and strong structures bolstering each other.\(^9\)

Thompson identified his battle with the cause of both agency and humanity. (References to the “human” appear more than a hundred times in the essay.) The turn against Stalinism was “a revolt against inhumanity,” against regimes that could only survive through denials of agency that reduced humans to the status of “beasts” and “things.” The irony was cruel: socialism had been coopted by regimes dedicated to principles antithetical to those upon which it was founded. The greatest aim of socialism was “not a ‘political’ end, but a human end; or rather, the end of man’s transition from the animal, the beginning of man, the assertion of his full humanity.” Stalinism was a lie, and its coming downfall would clear a path for the arrival of truth—of an authentic socialism.\(^10\)

There was, however, one last hurdle to clear. The obstacle came in the form of a thing, “the biggest Thing of all, a Thing to end all things”: the nuclear bomb. “This thing is there,” Thompson wrote, “because both capitalism and Stalinism have

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\(^9\) Thompson, “Socialist Humanism.”

\(^10\) Thompson, “Socialist Humanism.”
reduced human being to things,” and it would only be defeated if humanity—the opposite of thingness, that stubborn force neither capitalism nor Stalinism could eradicate—united against it. “As Lysistrata cried out, “We are all Greeks,” Thompson continued, “so now humanity cries out, “We are all men!” But Thompson’s universalism was held in an uneasy tension with his conviction that humanity was but an intermediary stop on the path to a much loftier terminus: what Marx, in a line Thompson borrowed for his essay’s epigraph, called “socialised humanity.””

Though the prospect of nuclear annihilation was horrifying to contemplate, there was a certain dramatic elegance in the juxtaposition between socialist revolution and nuclear winter. They were mirror images, two different ways of displaying agency on the largest possible scale: one ushering history to its highest stage, the other ending (human) history altogether. Mankind had evolved to a point where it could choose to remake the world or to destroy it. “The bomb,” Thompson maintained, “is like an image of man’s whole predicament: it bears within it death and life, total destruction or human mastery over human history.” If history was the liberation of humanity from the restraint of things, it was only appropriate that this final battle would be with a thing that had the potential to destroy humanity; if the essence of what it meant to be a person was the capacity to choose, there could be no better way to conclude mankind’s evolution than by the species as a whole choosing life over death.

No wonder Thompson could assert, in the second sentence of The Making of the English Working Class, that class formation was “an active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning.” When he declared that “The working class made itself as much as it was made,” he did more than enter an ongoing dispute among historians—he extended a conviction forged years earlier in a scramble to cleanse socialism, and himself, of Stalinism.

III.
Though Thompson’s political assessments were often gloomy, from the fifties through the seventies he was, at least, clear about the destination he hoped to reach. Yet a note of anxiety could be heard, and it grew louder with the passage of time. In 1973, he coupled a portrait of communism—“the society in which things are thrown from the saddle and cease to ride mankind”—with a warning that “the capacity to control nature . . . bring[s] with it simultaneous opportunities for human emancipation and self-destruction.” Still more striking, he cautioned that even if mankind overcame its suicidal tendencies, there was one more test to pass. It was possible that nature’s subordination would allow the “ruling group” atop a society to inoculate itself against future rebellions. A post-scarcity political economy would rule out the possibility of a revolution generated by contradictions within “social being,” while savvy manipulation of “social consciousness” could produce a docile population trained to comply with the dictates of its rulers. In this scenario, there

11  Thompson, “Socialist Humanism.”
12  Thompson, “Socialist Humanism.”
would be only one reservoir of hope: “a faith in the ultimate capacity of men to
manifest themselves as rational and moral agents.”

Even here, Thompson’s “faith” showed signs of cracking. While polemically
ganging against Althusser in The Poverty of Theory, Thompson pictured a worker offered
one of the French philosopher’s tomes by another employee. After flipping through
the text, she erupts “I’m not a bloody THING!” and tosses the book at her colleague.
Yet this story has an ambiguous resolution. After spinning out his anecdote,
Thompson insisted that “whatever we conclude, in the endlessly receding argument
of pre-determination and free will—for our friend may have been determined by her
protestant upbringing to cry out, ‘I am not a bloody THING!’—it is profoundly
important . . . that we should think ourselves to be ‘free.’ It is a strange twist, less
Marxist than pragmatism at its bleakest. Agency, it turns out, might just be a useful
lie we tell ourselves, an illusion we cling to because it makes action possible when
the truth could be paralyzing.

Whatever his ultimate convictions—and that is a question we will return to—
Thompson continued to act as if his decisions mattered. Yet ambivalence had also
crept into his politics. After decades of ferocious debates, Thompson pronounced
himself “less and less interested in Marxism as a Theoretical System. I’m neither pro
nor anti so much as bored.” He was far from alone. Though Marxism arguably peaked
as an intellectual movement in the 1970s—certainly, these were the years of its
greatest academic prominence—in the wider world, the utopian energies of the
1960s had been depleted. As a thriving body of scholarship has demonstrated, this
ehaustion held true even for the left. Pleas in the name of humanity, especially in
the form of human rights, displaced more ambitious socialist programs, and explicit
political aspirations gave way to appeals for basic morality.

Thompson had long depicted his vision as both political and moral—socialist
and humanist—but this did not stop him from marching with his times. The socialist
half of his formulation was, if not dropped altogether, then at least radically
attenuated. Humanism, meanwhile, ballooned to fill the empty space left by the
shriveling of its onetime companion. The itinerary that Thompson followed, though,
was not quite what the literature on the rise of human rights in the 1970s would
lead us to expect. Thompson’s confidence in a socialist future had dwindled, but his
intellectual commitment to agency endured—including what he called “the agency
of nuclear war.” Socialism might have been taken off the table, at least for the
present, but its dark twin remained.

Dreams of socialized humanity would have to be put on hold, Thompson
concluded in the 1980s, while actually existing humanity confronted the existential
threat posed by nuclear annihilation. To meet this challenge, he proposed a three-
part platform: abolition of nuclear weapons, promotion of human rights, and

anatomizes the emergence of human rights over the 1970s in The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History
(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 120-75.
17 Thompson, “Open Letter.”
creation of a peace movement that transcended the divide between capitalist and communist spheres. All these goals were united by the effort to forge a politics that discarded the binaries of the Cold War, and even moved beyond the nation-state itself. Thompson held out the possibility that this fusion would, eventually, open up space for a reinvention of socialism. But details on what that novel variety of socialism would look like were in short supply, and fixation on disarmament licensed him to keep it that way.\textsuperscript{18}

For Thompson, discontent with socialism’s political relevance seem to have bred, though to a lesser degree, skepticism about Marxism’s analytic utility. The problem was the bomb. He now thought it was “more than an inert Thing,” and that prompted him to do something very strange: he attributed to the bomb a kind of agency. “Nuclear weapons,” he wrote, “are things: yet they, and their attendant support-systems, seem to grow of their own accord, as if possessed by an independent will.” They were “self-generating independent variables,” and they nurtured specific social orders that could not be explained with the standard Marxist toolkit.\textsuperscript{19}

Flirtation with post-humanist social theory only encouraged Thompson to lash himself tighter to the cause of humanity in his role as self-appointed strategist for the anti-nuclear popular front. The “self-generating” capacity of nuclear weapons to shape the contours of the social order ruled out dialectical contradiction as a potential escape hatch. To be more precise, the one contradiction it admitted was the negation of humanity itself through total war, a resolution that would satisfy no one. Yet not even the hydrogen bomb could override the verdict of a political movement large enough to force the architects of state policy to comply with its demands. When organizing against the world the bomb made, however, the anthropocentrism Thompson now ascribed to Marxism would be insufficient—perhaps, given the high stakes involved, fatally so.

IV.

Thompson gave up, temporarily, his role as a historian at about the same time he began to distance himself from Marxism. But while he claimed he was too busy to produce another monograph, he found time to write a very different kind of book: The Sykaos Papers, a 482-page meditation on agency and determinism. The work is, at its core, an exploration of what it means to be human. But the chief explorer is an alien—Oi Paz, sent from the dying planet of Oitar to investigate Earth, or, as he calls it, Sykaos.

Though Thompson’s histories are unmistakable products of his unique authorial voice, Sykaos Papers eschews the omniscient narrator. Instead, it presents itself as a collection of primary sources—diaries, newspaper clippings, transcripts, and even commentaries from blundering Oitarian historians struggling to make sense of the


\textsuperscript{19} Thompson, “Exterminism,” 6, 7.
available evidence. It is, in that sense, a historian’s work, a single-volume archive that asks readers to do the interpreting for themselves.

Like all archives, however, Thompson’s has its own narrative, one that, aliens aside, should be familiar to his longtime readers. Agency, determinism, humanity—these are the novel’s obsession. Largely, they are examined through a dialogue between Oi Paz and the book’s other central character, Helena Sage, an anthropologist and thinly veiled Thompson stand-in hired by the British government as part of a team of researchers assigned to study Oi Paz. With her introduction about a third of the way into the text, The Sykaos Papers becomes a much better work, rising to a level it sustains, mostly, through its surprisingly affecting final pages.

As is often the case with science fiction, the aliens exist mostly to illuminate what is unique about the humans. Oitar is Thompson’s rendition of an Althusserian paradise, an instantiation of the post-dialectical totalitarianism he had warned of in the 1970s. Oi Paz himself is a model Oitarian (and enthusiast for Althusser). While recognizing himself as a member of a larger collective, Oi Paz draws no meaningful distinctions between himself and his people, all of whom follow lives dictated, with a few circumscribed exceptions, by a shadowy ruling class working through sophisticated computer programs. A life determined in advance leaves no room for contingency, or even absurdity: laughter baffles Oitarians, who refer to it as “the Incongruous Noise.”

If the book were just a rehearsal of Thompson’s polemics, The Sykaos Papers would not be anywhere near as interesting a text as it is. What makes the work compelling—indeed, what makes it a far more persuasive exposition of Thompson’s beliefs than anything in his non-fiction—is the freedom to dwell in uncertainty that the novel as a genre allows him. Although Oi Paz and Sage begin as incarnations of conflicting worldviews, she the humanist and he the Althusserian caricature, the longer Oi Paz stays on earth, the more a coherent identity starts—haltingly, painfully—to emerge. Given Thompson’s earlier work, that is a predictable outcome. What is not predictable, though, is Sage’s transformation. While Oi Paz wrestles with the making of his identity, Sage loses hers, becoming increasingly convinced that she is as programmed by her culture as any Oitarian.

Thompson maintained this agonizing balance through the novel’s two key plot developments. Consummating a plotline obvious from the outset, Sage and Oi Paz’s relationship becomes sexual about two-thirds of the way through the book, and they eventually bear a child. Then, just before the end, after an escalating series of Cold War provocations brought about by the presence of aliens—who, Thompson made clear, sought peace—a nuclear war sparked by Cold War antagonisms wipes out humanity.

Anyone eager to discover Thompson’s pet peeves as a scholar should survey those historical sections, where the analyses display a spectacular failure to understand what is actually going on. E.P. Thompson, The Sykaos Papers (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 59

The mechanics of this are explained away with the suggestion that Oitarians have a deeper, more imbricated history with Earth than either has acknowledged: Buddha, Homer, and Krishna are all listed as potential earlier visitors from Oitar. When Oi Paz, described as “about 35, 6 foot 6 inches in height, of a dark complexion, with shoulder-length fair hair,” lands on earth he is mistaken for human. Thompson, Sykaos Papers, 35.
Oi Paz sees both events as contingent: sex with Sage is a crucial stage in the making of his self, and a different set of leaders could have averted war. (Especially inspiring was a United Nations “Human Rites Commission” that included “writers, anthropologists . . . historians, peace movt people, [and] representative commonpersons.”) For Sage, it is precisely the opposite: sex with Oi Paz feels as preordained as nuclear self-destruction. On the latter, she concludes that mankind’s “programme was botched from Genesis. . . . Just took a few millennia to work out.” This is Thompson at his most pessimistic, shifting his fear—suspicion?—that individual agency might be a myth to society itself. Whatever his ultimate verdict on determinism, the yawning chasm separating the novel’s pivotal events—two individuals embracing eros, the species descending into thanatos—is decidedly grim. In the book’s final pages, however, Oi Paz and Sage flip again: he rejoins Oitar as a loyal subject, and she kills herself rather than live in a society without choice, declaring shortly before her death that she “[leave[s] life of my own free will.”

This equilibrium breaks apart in the novel’s conclusion. Sage and Oi Paz’s son, whom the Oitarians had struggled to assimilate, rebels against his would-be masters and flees Oitar to launch a new civilization in the name of freedom, contingency, change—in short, of agency. The ending feels unsatisfying because unearned. After sustaining for hundreds of pages the uncertainty that he acknowledged to in his debate with Althusser—“whatever we conclude, in the endlessly receding argument of pre-determination and free will...”—Thompson delivered a seemingly arbitrary ruling in favor of choice.

Groundless faith in an instinctive will to freedom proved a shaky foundation for politics. Though Thompson was lucid in his portrayals of the social orders he rejected—the status quo on Earth, the ominous prophecy of Oitar—he could offer no positive vision of the future. The once sturdy tie between individual and social agency had snapped, and Thompson had nothing to replace it with. Sage ends her life, in the words of her will, “REFUSING THE LEAST TRIBUTE TO THE RULE OF NIHIL,” but a rejection of rejection is not by itself an affirmation of anything. Shortly after the novel’s publication, Thompson claimed that “What I’m saying is that human civilization depends upon laughter and poetry. That’s not very political is it?” He was right, but, not too many years earlier, he would have considered that a problem.

V.

“How on earth,” Thompson groused in 1991 while communist regimes tumbled across Europe,

can these prestigious persons in Washington rabbit on about an ‘end to history’? As I look forward into the twenty-first century I sometimes agonize about the times in which my children and grandchildren will live. It is not so much the rise in population as the rise in universal material expectations of the globe’s huge

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23 Thompson, *Sykaos Papers*, 446, 458, 460.
population which will be straining its resources to the very limits. North-South antagonism will certainly sharpen, and religious and nationalist fundamentalisms will become more intransigent. The struggle to bring consumer greed within moderate control; to find a level of low growth and satisfaction, which is not at the expense of the disadvantaged and poor; to defend the environment and to prevent ecological disasters; to share more equitably the world’s resources and to ensure their renewal—all this is agenda enough for the continuation of ‘history’.

Not bad, as far as predictions go. Though we would probably modify some of its suggestions—giving ecology greater prominence, or drawing subtler geopolitical distinctions than the North-South axis provides—the forecast matches the outlines of our moment, much more so than the auguries from Francis Fukuyama that prompted it, or Thompson’s own earlier divinations of a world teetering between nuclear holocaust and socialist revolution.²⁶

Not that socialism was discharged entirely. Thompson dangled the prospect that “The most viable future may well be a kind of socialism, albeit a green and individuated kind with strong anti-state resistance.” Yet the gap between the specificity of his fears for the twenty-first century and the inchoate character of the socialism that “may” arise—more a catch-all of early-nineties trends than a platform—offers a striking reminder of how far he had travelled. The prospects for revolutionary change, for better or for worse, had faded. It was difficult to see how a planet “straining its resources to the very limits” could ever liberate itself from nature, though at least inhabitants of this constricted future would not dwell in perpetual terror of nuclear war.

None of this seemed to fit with the teleology that Thompson had once endorsed: the steady advance of progress, with progress defined as “the growing emancipation of man from nature and his growing capacity to control it.” Instead, protracted crisis—what we might recognize today in the slow-motion ecological catastrophe promised by global warming, the stubborn persistence of economic stagnation and austerity politics, the spasms of waning American geopolitical hegemony provoked by chemical rather than nuclear weapons—would become the new normal.²⁷ History had not ended, but it had slowed down.

Thompson’s future has become our present, which raises the question of how it should affect the ways we think about the past. Without pretending to unfurl a grand theory of history, I want to conclude by reflecting on some of the questions raised in the course of this paper—chiefly, those related to agency. There are good reasons to be troubled by the work Thompson made this concept do for him; Thompson realized some of them himself later in his career. Yet I cannot help being struck by the ease with which historians, of all people, have in their reconsiderations of agency plucked it from the larger context in which it was imbricated.

The erasure of collective social agency from historiographical discussion is, I think, emblematic of the limits of our contemporary political imagination. In the academy, or at least the small corner of it occupied by historians, this constriction often manifests itself in a fraught relationship with Marxism—trapped in limbo, neither

²⁶ Thompson, “Ends and Histories,” 20.
²⁷ Thompson, “Ends and Histories,” 20; quoted in Thompson, “Open Letter.”
embraced nor rejected, and sometimes not even acknowledged. Retrievals of lost modes of human solidarity and connection are essential, and inspiring. But introducing these qualifications to Marxism often, paradoxically, reaffirms it—uncovering, for example, the exceptions that prove the rule of “the logic of capital,” not challenging the notion of such a logic in the first place. Absent a deeper rethinking of our existing frameworks, it is possible to imagine a moment when salvaging difference will seem as noble but gratuitous as, well, recoveries of agency do today.28

We can find suggestions of a more satisfying way forward, I believe, in Thompson’s own writings—not so much the Making, a text that has already given us more than enough, but his later ruminations on the agency of the atomic bomb. There, Thompson arrived at a profound insight: that people make history, to be sure, but they are not alone in this. Things have a kind of agency too. Thompson confined this bestowal to nuclear weapons, but there was no reason for him to be so stingy. A hydrogen bomb is a powerful tool, but a tool nonetheless. On the ontological front, pushing Thompson’s thesis would allow us to see humans not as set off by clear demarcations from things but as always-already embedded within them. People are products of networks, but those networks are not merely interpersonal. It is as impossible to think of a person separated from tools as it is to conceive of a person cut off from all other people. Treated as a matter of social theory, this perspective offers an opportunity to reimagine the social itself as not just the space where humans interact with other humans but a site for much more complicated interactions between persons and things.29

Thompson thought the consequences for expanding the boundaries of the social were enormous when he redrew them to include the atom bomb. Consider what would happen if that exception were universalized and the walls between people and things torn down altogether. The result would be a history not of emancipation and control but of entanglement and invention; a history of a humanity whose definition, far from being eternal, is always in flux; a history of radical breaks and ruptures that refused the comfort of an ultimately homogenizing dialectic; a history that equipped us with new ways to understand, and change, our collective life. It would, in short, be a history that met the demands of our time. On the importance of that, at least, E.P. Thompson would agree.

28 Dipesh Chakrabarty’s discussion of “History 1” and “History 2” in “Universalism and Belonging in the Logic of Capital,” Public Culture 12.3 (Fall 2000), 653-678 and Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), though dazzling, is representative of this difficulty.

29 The most familiar expositions of this perspective have come from Bruno Latour, most recently in An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 2013. Ahmad Shokr, “Hydropolitics, Economy, and the Aswan High Dam in Mid-Century Egypt,” Arab Studies Journal 17.1 (2009), 9-31 provides a sterling example of this kind of historical analysis in action.