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E.P. Thompson in the “Orient”: His Belated Impact on Young Scholars of Turkey during 1990’s

Although Turkish historiography is very much in tune with the international fashions and to a certain extent follows the hegemonic schools of thought in history writing, E.P. Thomson did not influence Turkish studies at all. This was not because the historians were not aware of him or his studies but because of their mentality that considered him irrelevant to the study of “Oriental” societies.

Until 1990’s both nationalist/traditional and liberal historiography on Turkey and the Ottoman Empire attributed agency only to Great Men in their narratives. The state elite and the intervention of the Great Powers are the main forces that brought change to the society. The majority of studies are based on the activities of Great Men, political elite, and transformation of state structure. Therefore, the great bulk of studies are restricted to the terrain of intellectual and political history. The liberal school that criticizes the former mainly focuses on economic structures and continues to exclude the agency from their narrative.

However, particularly after 1990’s an increasing number of young scholars deeply influenced by the studies of E.P. Thompson. This new trend has to with the social and political context of their own era. This new generation also started to question fundamental pillars of different former schools of historiography. E.P. Thompson played significant roles as an inspirer in these new trends. Before analyzing the reasons why this new generation find Thompson interesting it is better to explain why Turkish historiography ignored Thompson and a “history from below approach.”

Conventional Historiography on Turkey and Working-Class

The main pillars of historiography on Turkey, The Modernization School, Oriental Studies, Nationalist/Kemalist Historiography, Conservative Political Islamist Thought, World-System Theory, Dependency School, Liberal Revisionist School etc. take into account mainly the state and the state elite as agent of fundamental changes in the history of the Ottoman Empire and Turkey or focus on broad structural transformations. Thus, it omits the existence of different social actors in history, which also hided the existence of lower and working classes, from the scene.

1 To a certain extent this is also true for the other Middle Eastern and North African countries. In a recent edition Stephanie Cronin put forwards a similar argument for this region: Stephanie Cronin, “Introduction,” *Subalterns and Social Protest: History from Below in the Middle East and North Africa*, (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 1.

2 One should also underline the fact that in the last decades there appeared a number of seminal studies on the social history of the Ottoman Empire and Turkey in which different social actors have entered the stage. However, although the quantity of these studies continues to increase, they are still marginal within the literature. Moreover, their impact on social and political thinking in contemporary Turkey is rather weak. I would like to mention Quataert’s work as one of these seminal studies that deeply influenced young scholars in Turkey: Donald Quataert, *Social Disintegration and Popular Resistance in the Ottoman Empire, 1881-1908: Reactions to European*
The historiography on Turkey constantly repeats the lack of adequate information on the history of the lower classes in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey. According to most studies this lack of information is due to the lack of a history or even the existence of working-classes in the Ottoman Empire. Although there have appeared numerous studies on the history of the working class in Turkey, younger scholars still refer to the “poverty” of the present state of the literature. Scholars who are interested in the history of the working-class in Turkish history relate this “poverty” to the mentality of the historians, as they are primarily preoccupied with the actions of the state and the political elite. This is why historians have not focused on the history of the working class. Apart from the mentality, scholars who deal with labor history also mention difficulties related to the sources and archives, which are said to be unproductive.

The nationalist and Kemalist historiography was not interested in the actions of popular classes but tried to polish the roles of national heroes and Great Men. It was hard to hear the voices of women, peasants, and workers in this nationalist and modernist historiography. The main interest of this school of thought was to glorify, legitimize or explain the making of the nation and nation-state. The scholars who were critical to this vein of thought criticized nationalist and modernist paradigm and political history harshly but were over emphasized the role of structures in history during 1960’s and 1970’s. It was not a coincidence that the main area of research in these decades was Economic History. Therefore, these revisionist scholars had more or less similar attitudes towards working classes and their agency in the history.

General Characteristics of Historiography on Working Classes


5 One of the most recent studies on working-class history in Turkey refutes the argument that archival sources are insufficient to write a history of labour in Turkey. Kadir Yıldırım, Osmanlı’da İşçiler (1870-1922) Çalışma Hayatı, Örgütlü, Grevler, (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2013), p. 18.

6 One of the first influential critiques of conventional political history and nationalist historiography was the article of İslamoğlu and Keyder: Huri İslamoğlu and Çağlar Keyder, “Agenda for Ottoman History,” Review, Vol. I, No. 1, 1977; For an evaluation of this article which considers it as a path breaking essay see Oktay Özel-Gökhan Çetinsaya, “Türkiye’de Osmanlı Tarihçiliğinin Son Çeyrek Yüzyılı: Bir Bilanço Denemesi,” Toplum ve Bilim, No. 91, Kiş 2001-2003, pp. 8-38.
Interest in labor history emerged when social and leftist political movement gained power in Turkey. Work that appeared in the 1960s and 1970s were to a great extent focused on the history of the worker’s movements and their organizations. Before, research on working-class history had been left to amateur historians, journalists and union activists. Their studies brought to the fore crucial information concerning workers’ movements and their first attempts at establishing unions and political organizations. Hüseyin Avni [Şanda] wrote in 1935 on the 1908 Strike Wave, which was one of the flourishing periods of workers’ strikes in the history of Balkans and Middle East. He has analyzed different aspects of the 1908 Strikes, such as the actions in various industrial and service sectors, women and child labor, foreign capital, the suppression of the state, the political elite’s treatment of the workers, the organizations of workers, and so on. In 1951, Lütfi Erişçi published a booklet on the history of the working-class in Turkey. His book is similar to Hüseyin Avni’s study and has mainly focused on occupational and political organizations that emerged during the labor struggles. Both writers have contextualized the labor struggles in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey in relation to semi-colonialism. In addition to these two works, Kemal Sülker has also mentioned the history of the working-class and labor struggles in his book on trade unions in Turkey.

These early studies have not had a significant impact on the historiography on Turkey, although many of these writers’ articles were also published in newspapers. However, as social and political movements in Turkey experienced a revival in the 1960s, activists and young scholars became more curious. Under these circumstances, two crucial studies have appeared, one of them the continuation of Sülker’s research, but in a much better organized version, and the second by Oya Sencer [Baydar], who has brought together information of workers’ movements and their organizations in unprecedented detail and scale. Although this PhD thesis did not result in Sencer receiving the PhD degree, for political reasons, her subsequent book has been based on a survey of primary sources. The events surrounding this thesis and book has also demonstrated why historians avoided the study of working-class history in the university circles.

The relationship between workers and socialists has also been another subject that these narratives concerned with. The studies of socialist Turkologists — such as Rozaliyev, Şnurov and Şişmanov — which were translated into Turkish during the 1970s took working-class movements into consideration, as a determined outcome of historical progress. Accordingly, the industrialization process in Turkey had given birth to a working-class that was to pioneer socialism in Turkey. Obviously, these books were only a Turkish variation in the field of international labor history and Soviet historiography. This is why they neither included detailed information, nor were based on in-depth research.

7 Hüseyin Avni [Şanda], 1908’de Ecnebi Sermayesine Karşı İlk Kalkınmalar, (İstanbul: Akşam Matbaası, 1935).
8 Lütfi Erişçi, Türkiye’de İşçi Sınıfının Tarihi (özet olarak), (İstanbul: Kutulmuş Basmevi, 1951).
9 Kemal Sülker, Türkiye’de Sendikacılık, (İstanbul: 1955).
10 Kemal Sülker, 100 Soruda Türkiye’de İşçil Hareketleri, (İstanbul: Gerçek Yayınevi, 1968).
11 Oya Sencer [Baydar], Türkiye’de İşçi Sınıfı –Doğuşa ve Yapsı, (İstanbul: Hobora Kitabevi, 1969).
12 A. Şnurov and Y. Rozaliyev, Türkiye’de Kapitalismizin Gelişme Özellikleri ve Sınıf Kaynakları, (İstanbul: Ant Yayınları, 1970); A. Şnurov, Türkiye Proletaryası, (İstanbul: Yar Yayınları, 1973); Y. N. Rozaliyev, Türkiye Sanayi Proletaryası, (İstanbul: Yar Yayınları, 1974); Y. N. Rozaliyev, Türkiye’de Kapitalizmin Gelişme Özelliği, (İstanbul: Onur Yayınları, 1978); Dimitır Şişmanov, Türkiye İşçi
However, they provide significant information and a particular point of view regarding labor history, at a time when historiography virtually ignored the lower classes and excluded them from the narrative. Numerous socialist periodicals published in the 1970s simplified and repeated the general findings of this literature. Although this political tendency paved the way for an academic critique of labor history for being reductionist, a significant amount of information was gathered as a result of this process.\footnote{Two studies can be regarded as outcome of this accumulation: Tüm İktisatçılar Birililiği (Union of Economists) Türkiye İşçi Sosyalist Hareketi Kısa Tarih (1908-1965), (İstanbul: Belge Yayınları, 1978).}

Most of these studies on working-class history in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey have concentrated on the activities of the trade unions, organizational initiatives, political struggles, the leaders’ deeds, and strikes. Yet, this tendency to limit working-class history to such fields is not peculiar to Turkish historiography; it is a universal trend in labor historiography.\footnote{For a classification of different trends in the historiography on the working class see: Marcel van der Linden, “Labour History: The Old, the New and the Global,” African Studies, Vol. LXVI, No. 2-3, August-December 2007, p. 169.}

Different facets of working-class history—such as daily life, gender, ethnicity and race, culture, religion, identities, and the like—have entered historiography as novelties, particularly after the 1960s.

The working-class found mention in the works of the elite as well as scholars only within the framework of debates regarding socialist thought in Turkey. Intellectual history is one of the most developed areas in the historiography on Turkey, when compared to social and cultural studies. Historians and political scientists often mention the working-class when analyzing socialist thought in intellectual circles. The literature has asserted that socialism was restricted to a few personalities. Moreover, some of these, like Hüseyin Hilmi (İştirakçı), were not aware of what socialism really was. This was so because socialism did not have a social base in the Ottoman Empire.\footnote{For an assessment of this literature see Y. Doğan Çetinkaya and Foti Benlisoy, “İştirakçi Hilmi,” Modern Türkiye de Siyasi Düşünce, Sol, Vol. VIII, (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2007), pp. 165-183 and Y. Doğan Çetinkaya, “Sosyalizmi İdrak Etmek: Bir Mütareke Dönemi Gazetesi,” Mete Tunçay’a Armağan, İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2007, pp. 499-536.}

These arguments take into account a particular definition of working-class. The narratives of the Turkish historiography, to a great extent, assume the
working-class as a population of men working in a modern industrial plant. Workers who operate in service sectors, such as transportation, are not even counted among the members of the working-class. That is to say, a member of the working-class is a blue-collar worker. Once more, this approach is not peculiar to the historiography on Turkey. Marcel van der Linden has argued that a significant number of interpretations on the working-class are based on “free” wage-earners. He has claimed that the working-class is comprised of different types of labor. Capitalist relationships may even be compatible with unfree labor. For him, the main point is the commodification of labor, and “this commodification may take on many different forms.”

Scholars who belong to similar schools of thought may have different definitions and classifications. For instance, E. J. Hobsbawm has pointed out the end of the 19th century as the period in which a working-class was formed. He has mainly focused on blue-collar workers operating in the modern industry, who subsequently created a particular way of life and culture. On the other hand, E. P Thompson has not restricted his definition of the working-class to industrial labor. His seminal work on the making of the English working-class concentrates mainly on the experience of the 18th century and ends at the very beginning of the 19th century. Thompson was interested in various formations of the working-class as comprised of declining artisans and their experience and consciousness. He has considered class as a historical phenomenon against the structuralist definitions and uncovered how the workers were active and conscious participants in the process of their own making. This is why he has concentrated on the real experience of the working-class, through which they emerged as an agent in the historical process.

Although Thompson in his book refers to different sections of the working-class—such as unskilled workers, causal laborers, paupers, and agricultural laborers—he has been accused for mainly concentrating on skilled artisans. As mentioned above, this particular point is crucial at this conjunction, since the literature on Turkey has delineated a sharp distinction in between industrial laborers and artisans, or guild workers. The presumption underlying this distinction is the equation of capitalism with industrial revolution. Therefore, for many Turkish historians, it is nonsense to speak of capitalism, bourgeoisie and working-class, since there was no industry in Turkey until the

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17 Marcel van der Linden, “Labour History as the History of Multitudes,” Labour/Le Travail, No. 53, Fall 2003, pp. 235-43. In a similar vein, Hanagan and van der Linden have asserted that a definition of labor should include “the vast world of unfree labor, including apprentices, bonded laborers, soldiers, serfs, indentured labor, prison labor, and slaves, as the world of the underemployed and the part-time worker.” Michael Hanagan and Marcel van der Linden, “New Approaches to Global Labor History,” International Labor and Working-Class History, No. 66, Fall 2004, p. 1.
21 Some critiques also accuse Thompson of concentrating on the activities of artisans, rather than the struggles of the working-class. See, for instance, Craig Calhoun, The Question of Class Struggle: Social Foundations of Popular Radicalism during the Industrial Revolution, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). For Calhoun, the people that Thompson discussed were not even the workers, only dissolving artisans. Therefore, his critique was very different from that of Eley and more similar to the approach of Turkish historiography.
mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century. For them, the Turkish case has been a unique example from which notions such as class and social agency are absent.\textsuperscript{22} However, as Sewell has argued, the class-conscious workers’ movement was not an outcome of factories and industry, until the 1871 Paris Commune. These workers were, to a great extent, artisans. Yet, he has also underlined the fact that there no longer were any “traditional” urban crafts, since capitalism and new exploitative practices had already transformed crafts long before the invention of machinery.\textsuperscript{23} Therefore, one should focus not on the level of industrialization, but the development of capitalist relationships in the Ottoman Empire, Modern Turkey and Middle East, in order to evaluate and analyze the social classes.

Christopher H. Johnson has argued that proletarianization was not an outcome of technological development only. The division and specialization of labor, the increasing control over the means and knowledge of production, the disciplining of labor, and the existence of replaceable labor units were all there before the emergence of modern industry.\textsuperscript{24} Therefore, before the industrial revolution, capitalism had already degenerated many artisans and journeymen into a proletariat. Producers had lost their ownership of and control over the means of production. This separation of producers from the means of production turned them into wage laborers.\textsuperscript{25} Many master artisans lost their control over the means of production if they were unable to become capitalists. “Capitalism and proletarianization are two perspectives on the same historical phenomenon,” and there were many different routes to the formation of a working-class.\textsuperscript{26} Furthermore, as Raphael Samuel has once underlined, it was not only the factory system that, together with capitalism, emerged as a new mode of production, but also a proliferation of small producers. Samuel has referred to the combined and uneven development of capitalism and revealed how steam-power and

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\item[22] This claim is not unique to the historiography on Turkey. These types of claims are generally based on the comparison of a particular country with an ideal model that has experienced a “proper” modernization process. This country is generally Great Britain. For instance, a similar tendency also appeared in German historiography regarding the place of the bourgeoisie in national history. It has widely been claimed that Germany had its own way of development (sonderweg, or special path). Roughly speaking, the German bourgeoisie was weak and shy before the landed aristocracy (junkers) and, therefore, failed in its supposed struggle against it. For a critique of this point of view see: David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, \textit{The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany}, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984). This approach presupposes a conflict between the rising bourgeoisie and the landed aristocracy in England during the emergence of capitalism. Yet, many studies have refuted this theory and shown how capitalist relationships emerged in rural areas and in agriculture. Robert Brenner, “The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism,” \textit{The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe}, H. Aston and C.H.E. Philpin, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 213-327; Ellen Meiksins Wood, \textit{The Pristine Culture of Capitalism: A Historical Essay on Old Regimes and Modern States}, (London: Verso, 1991).
\end{itemize}
handicraft skills went hand in hand in the mid-Victorian Britain.\(^{27}\) That is to say, the absence of large industrial plants does not necessarily mean the absence of working-class formation and working-class movements.

The refrain of the Turkish historiography on labor and the history of the lower classes as well as the agency of different sections of society is based on evasion and theoretical assumptions. Yet, different theoretical backgrounds and approaches might also shed light on the history of different classes in the course of Ottoman and Turkish history.\(^{28}\)

Therefore the historiography that did not focus on working class history was part and parcel of universal trends in the history writing. However, although historiography on Turkey was influenced by different schools of thought, “history from below” and British Marxist Historians had very marginal impacts on history writing until 1990’s. This was to a great extent due to the peculiarities of this era. From here on I will try to examine the link between the emergence of such a generation of historians in the political milieu of 1990’s and their interest in E.P. Thompson as an inspirer. The critique of Kemalist/nationalist world view, allergy against the rising conservative parties, the critique of existing state institutions and the critique of Stalinist left brought this young generation to the studies of British Marxists. The critique above on conventional historiography came onto agenda in Turkey during 1990’s and should be read within the context of this particular era.

### A New Generation of Historians

Historians are women and men of their era. As E.H. Carr has written many years before “the historian...is also a social phenomenon, both the product and the conscious or unconscious spokesman of the society to which he belongs; it is in this capacity that he approaches the facts of the historical past.”\(^{29}\)

A significant aspect of the 1990’s was the deep crisis of Turkish state. The political system was experiencing a hegemony crisis and confronted difficulties in maintaining the consent of the society. The rise of the Political Islam and Kurdish National Movement undermined the hegemony of Kemalist nationalist discourse. In this milieu the literature on working-class also influenced by the critique of the nationalistic historiography. Editors of a recent supplement issue of *International Review of Social History*, which is on Ottoman and Republican

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\(^{27}\) Raphael Samuel, “Workshop of the World: Steam Power and Hand Technology in mid-Victorian Britain,” *History Workshop*, No. 3, Spring 1977, p. 8, 39. According to him, “capitalism in the nineteenth century grew in various ways. Mechanization in one department of production was often complemented by an increase of sweating in other; the growth of large firms by a proliferation of small producing units; the concentration of production in factories by the spread of out-work in the home” p. 17.

\(^{28}\) Crucial contributions in this vein are the articles by Sherry Vatter who has written on the struggle of journeymen in Damascus. Her studies have demonstrated that the structure of guilds or a production based on artisanship was not an obstacle to the emergence of a labor struggle and the emergence of a working-class. Moreover, the traditional organizational structure of guilds and their traditional ideals facilitated and legitimized their struggle. Sherry Vatter, “Şam’ın Militan Tekstil İşçileri: Ücrete Zanaatkârlar ve Osmanlı İşçi Hareketi, 1850-1914,” *Osmanlı’dan Cumhuriyet Türkiye’ine İşçiler 1839-1950*, (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1998), pp. 55-9; “Militant Journeymen in Nineteenth-Century Damascus: Implications for the Middle Eastern Labor History Agenda,” *Workers and Working Classes in the Middle East: Struggles, Histories, Historiographies*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 1-20.

Turkish Labour History underlines the fact that studies on labour history are in themselves a critique of conventional nationalist historiography. The student movement was also a reaction to the break down Kemalist hegemony and legitimization crisis of the political system, which was based on unsuccessful coalitions. There appeared sensational assassination throughout the decade, which have revealed an harsh struggle for power among the political elite and their disability to rule. Therefore, young critical historians did also influenced by this political climate.

The 1990’s were opened by 1989 Student movement, Miners Great March of 1991 and the rising illegal mobilization of public employees, which culminated in the biggest independent confederation of public employees in Turkey in 1995, followed these significant mobilizations have left its print on the radical student movement 1990’s. The legitimization crisis of the political system and the social mobilization paved the way for discussion among Leftist circles. Unorthodox socialist ideas became popular in the Leftist parties and movements. The polemics of E.P. Thompson with Orthodox Marxist historiography and structuralism, his involvement in anti-nuclear movement and his former anti-Stalinist tendency attracted the attention of a generation who were looking for an alternative. Therefore it was not a coincidence that first translation into Turkish from Thompson literature was his theoretical work in 1994: The Poverty of Theory. The establishment of Freedom and Solidarity Party (ÖDP) in 1996, which was comprised of several left-wing currents, was also an indication of a search for an alternative. The party was defending an anti-nationalist, anti-militarist libertarian socialism and claiming to build a “party which was not actually a party” in the classical sense. This was also a time when alternative Anarchist and Trotskyist ideologies gained power among social movements.

A numerous young generation of scholars who were to a great extent a part of the radical student movement of early 1990’s started to study history of labor with an emphasis on “history from below” approach. Although there were many other sources that they were influenced, their common mentor (not to say guru) was “the Making” and E.P. Thompson. They not only started to work in the traditional workplace of nationalist historians; “the Ottoman archives;” but also paved the way for the study of neglected social classes such as working class, peasants and artisans. They first had to prove the existence of lower classes and the significance of their presence in historical process and then fight against the elitist and structuralist schools of thought.

Therefore most of the studies appeared at the end of 1990’s and 2000’s tried first to underline the existence and prominent place of laboring classes in

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33 E.P. Thompson, Teorinin Sefaleti, (İstanbul: Alan Yayınçılık, 1994).
34 Barış Soydan, Türkiye’de Anarşizm: Yüz Yıllık Gecikme, (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2013).
modern Turkish history. During the second half of the 1990’s studies came out that stressed the existence of working class history. These studies should be considered as a link in between classical historiography on laboring classes and much more analytic and detailed historiography that came out in 2000’s. Secondly, the main argument they brought to fore is the agency of lower classes. During the 2000’s scholars who wrote articles and thesis on working class history was deeply influenced by E.P. Thompson. Not only because they wanted to fill the gap which once neglected but also wanted to pave the way for a theoretical discussion in Turkish historiography. And again, it was not a coincidence that the translations into Turkish from Thompson literature in 2000’s were his historical studies.

Short book of E. Atilla Aytekin is a good example of this fashion. He starts his book with a section on theoretical debates and mentions the significance of E.P. Thompson in a particular sub-section. His book is based on his MA thesis which was submitted in 2001 and received a reward for young social scientist in 2002 which both indicates the breaking point after 2000. I myself started to study history by a direct influence of British Marxist historians on me. I was very much influenced by the approach of history from below and the political debates that we had during the student movement of 1990’s provoke me to follow the steps of Thompson. I have started writing my MA thesis in 1999 on a boycott movement that appeared after the 1908 Ottoman Constitutionalist Revolution. I was interested in the actions of lower-classes. Like Aytekin I have also started my study with a discussion of historiography and besides other reasons wrote it to mention the name of E.P. Thompson. My thesis was completed in 2002, received a national reward in 2003 and was published in 2004. These rewards say more about the rising interest on the subject of a generation and rising awareness of the history establishment in Turkey than their quality. Thompson’s definition of class and his stress on the experience of working class was the main peculiarities of E.P. Thompson that influenced our generation. Besides historical studies there appeared theoretical and conceptual discussions on class, which was considered to be out of date. These debates were heavily influenced by the discussions invoked by Thompson.

A young scholar defined this movement as “butterflies flying to the light.” The main pillars of E.P. Thompson’s studies and his seminal study “The Making” coincided well with the political and scholar needs of a generation. They were deeply influenced and inspired by what he has written on moral economy, experience, class as a relationship etc. The only radical peer-reviewed academic
journal in Turkey, Praksis, published its first issue in 2001 with a reference to E.P. Thompson in its first opening sentence.  

A young generation of scholars who were to a great extent part of the radical student movement started to study history of labor with an emphasis on “history from below” approach. They not only focused on the existence of former labor movements and searched agency of different sections of the society but also experienced a new proletarianization process under neo-liberal economic and social structural adjustment programs. In contrast with the 1990’s, a single-party government came to power in 2002 in Turkey. It was a legitimate, strong and hegemonic government until 2013 Spring Upheavals. During this decade a harsh neo-liberal economic and social policy was put into practice. The education system was privatized in an unprecedented scale. Most of the scholars who were trying to write thesis had to pay unprecedented fees for the public universities. The research assistants started to work under precarious working conditions. Those who were working in the market had long been in flexible working conditions. This process is mostly labeled as the process of proletarianization of middle classes. As a result one of the most radical assistant movement emerged first in public universities in 2007 and then in private universities.  

Those scholars who were interested in E.P. Thompson and their colleagues plunged into a public discussion on precarity. These social and economic circumstances increased the scholarly and public interest towards E.P. Thompson and his analysis of proletarianization and actions of artisans. That is why, it was not a coincidence that his seminal work has been printed 3 times in 8 years although it is a thick and expensive book in Turkish standards. One should also keep in mind the general low reading rates in Turkey.

The Practice and Politics of Thompsonian Social History in South Africa Since the 1970s

Jonathan Hyslop

In 2009, one of South Africa’s most prominent young journalists, Jacob Dlamini, published a book which was to be highly controversial. Entitled *Native Nostalgia*, it explored why, despite the ghastly nature of the apartheid system, at least some black South Africans, including the author himself, looked back to township life in that era with feelings of affection. Posing this question was clearly a provocative thing to do. The government Department of Arts and Culture’s spokesperson, Sandile Memela, soon penned a blistering article denouncing Dlamini’s book, along with a list of other works by leading academics, journalists and creative writers as examples of “how some black writers easily fall into the trap of rubbing the achievement of freedom and democracy”. This was an absurd and paranoid misreading of Dlamini’s text. Dlamini’s aim was in no way to minimize the horrors of apartheid, or to deny what was positive about the present. Rather it was, in a sense, to make a point about versions of history. The state was increasingly portraying the entire modern history of South Africa as a story of how the ANC had, from its exile headquarters in Lusaka, Zambia, led the process of the liberation, showing a unified African people the way into a glorious future. What Dlamini was seeking to say was that this was an altogether simplistic framework into which to crowd the complexity of black experience. For him, it did not recognize the creative social spaces which people in the townships had been able to carve out for themselves in the most adverse of political circumstances, it did not acknowledge the conflicts, divided loyalties and betrayals which had existed within the struggle, and it did not face the reality of the problems of the present, which could not always be reduced to the legacies of apartheid.

What is interesting for us in the context of this conference though, is that Dlamini invoked a perhaps unexpected authority for his highly controversial argument. On page 13 of his book, he wrote:

> To understand the question of what it means for a black South African to remember his life under apartheid with fondness is to appreciate that the freedom of black South Africans did not come courtesy of a liberation movement. There were bonds of reciprocity and mutual obligation, social capital that made it possible for millions to imagine a world without apartheid. To apply what E.P. Thompson said of the English working class, black South Africans were present at their own making as citizens. Freedom was not sent to them in a gift box from Lusaka (Dlamini 2009:13).

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http://www.thoughtleader.co.za/sandilememela/2009/11/30/black-celebrity-authors-for-the-white-market/
This statement immediately provokes a number of questions, the answers to which should become apparent in the course of this paper. Why would a young South African writer, in the year 2009, choose to refer to *The Making of the English Working Class*? Why would he find some of Thompson’s central ideas useful? Why should he write in a tone that might suggest that his intended audience, clearly an educated but not an academic one, might reasonably be expected to know who E.P. Thompson was?

In this paper I will provide an account of the career of E.P. Thompson in South Africa. Thompson of course never visited the country, although, as a couple of references to apartheid in *MEWC* suggest, he was well aware of the importance of its political struggles. In South Africa, Thompson’s work had an enormous impact on the writing of history, beginning in the 1970s, reaching its height in the 1980s and early 1990s, and extending into the present. South African scholars have, amongst themselves, diametrically opposed views on whether this influence was a benign one or not, but that it existed seems incontestable. A Thompsonian brand of history also gave an intellectual impetus to remarkable efforts in the popularization of historical research over the last thirty five years. As a minor participant in this story, I want to argue, hopefully without being defensive, that this body of Thompson-influenced South African work holds much that is of value. And I want to suggest that it has played a small but noticeable role in shaping contemporary South African literary culture beyond the academy.

The key group in the development of a Thompsonian style of social history in South Africa came together in the late seventies at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, popularly known as Wits. A few individuals interested in labour history, including, notably, the historian Phil Bonner and the sociologist Eddie Webster, organized the first conference on labour history at the University in 1976. Shortly thereafter, Belinda Bozzoli and Charles van Onselen came to work at Wits after studying and working abroad. Bozzoli and van Onselen were rapidly to emerge as, respectively, the leading theorist of a South African adaptation of the Thompsonian style of social history, and as its most creative practitioner. In 1977, these four and a number of others formed a group known as the History Workshop, which held its first academic conference in early 1978. From then until the present, the Workshop has been the focus not just a series of important academic conferences, but also of a huge range of initiatives in popular education and heritage. Bozzoli would lead the Workshop until 1987, when Bonner took over and guided it through the next two and a half decades. The Workshop continues to flourish down to the present, under the leadership of Noor Nieftagodien, although of course most of the early participants have dropped away at one point or another.

Who were the History Workshop? Essentially, it was always a small committee, based at Wits, mainly though not exclusively faculty. The composition altered over time, but the group who organized the 1981 conference well represents the initial individuals who shaped it, and is thus worth examining in detail. The 1981 committee reflected the remarkably interdisciplinary nature of the workshop, which was an undoubted source of its intellectual strengths. It comprised three

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3 I was an active member of the committee of the University of the Witwatersrand History Workshop from 1987 to 2010.
Panel 3: Jonathan Hyslop, "Politics and Thompsonian Social History in South Africa" 3

historians (Bonner, van Onselen, Luli Callinicos), two anthropologists (Patrick Pearson, David Webster), two sociologists (Bozzoli, Eddie Webster), a political scientist (Tom Lodge) an educationist (Peter Kallaway), and a literary scholar (Tim Couzens). There was a strong British academic connection in the group, and it is here that the vector of Thompson's influence on them is to be sought. Van Onselen's doctoral work was at Oxford, Bozzoli's at Sussex, Lodge's at York and Bonner's at London, while Couzens and Eddie Webster had taken other degrees at Oxford. Three UK based intellectual developments had a great impact on the Workshop. They were influenced by the new British Africanist scholarship that was coming out of the School of African Studies at London (SOAS) and elsewhere. Especially important here was the work of the SOAS-based South African Shula Marks, with her emphasis on the recovery of African agency, and the historian of Zimbabwe, Terence Ranger. Marks and Ranger themselves had strong connections to the British social history movement. Marks supervised the theses of Bonner and Peter Delius (who was later to become a leading member of the History Workshop), as well as of a significant number of other South African scholars. Almost all of the young South Africans who studied history or social sciences in Britain during the 1970s were some extent exposed to the wide range of ideas generated by the then current efflorescence of Marxist scholarship. And, very importantly, Belinda Bozzoli and Charles van Onselen participated in the meetings of the History Workshop at Ruskin College, Oxford, which gave them a particularly strong link to the British social history tradition. There was some influence on the South Africans from American social historians – Herbert Gutman was an important reference point for Bozzoli and Eugene Genovese for van Onselen. But by and large it was the relationship with British intellectual life which was crucial to the new work which developed in South Africa.  

In order to understand why the writings of E.P. Thompson found resonance the South Africa of the 1970s and 1980s, the reader will need to know something of the political context, of South African intellectual history and of the institutional shape of South African universities in that period. The late 1960s saw the apparent triumph of a completely racially segregated society. The main oppositional movements, the ANC, its ally the South African Communist Party (SACP), and the Pan Africanist Congress were completely dismantled by the state, their leaders in prison, under house arrest or in exile. But there were signs at the beginning of the seventies of renewed resistance from new forces. The Black Consciousness Movement emerged amongst students and there were demonstrations and signs of a new radicalization amongst small numbers of white students. A new movement of independent black trade unions started up, and in 1973 there was a spectacular strike wave. In 1976, a mass school pupil revolt began in Soweto, and spread across the country, 

4 Although there was no interdisciplinary tradition at Wits, policing of disciplinary boundaries was perhaps less intense than at metropolitan universities, which facilitated a real intellectual exchange. There was a strong sense on the part of the social scientists that they needed to understand the present historically, and on that of the historians that they needed to interrogate their theoretical frameworks. Interdisciplinarity imparted an unusual genre-crossing dynamism to much of the work. Lodge’s writing, for example, reads more like finely written narrative history than conventional political science, but the perceptive reader will recognize a mastery of political science underlying everything he says.

5 There is also another dimension to the British connection. Of the ten 1981 committee members, seven were South African born, but three had British family backgrounds, with a trajectory through late colonial Africa. Lodge had spent part of his early childhood in Nigeria, where his father had worked for the British Council; Bonner had grown up in Kenya; both had taken jobs at Wits after doing graduate work in South Africa. David Webster’s father had worked on the Zambian copper mines, but David had been educated in South Africa and remained there.
while the state responded with massive violence. The new trade unions became a significant force and in 1979 the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) was formed. Small community activist groups started to spring up. These movements owed very little to the exile organizations, which were obsessively focused on their not very successful strategy of guerilla warfare. The SACP and the Communist Party were, in the late 70s, actively hostile to the new trade unions, which they saw as a diversion from their militarist approach, and quite unfairly labeled as collaborationist. But they slowly came to recognize the potential of above-ground movements. By the start of the 1980s the ANC and SACP were successfully rebuilding their internal networks, and began to hegemonize the new internal movements. This culminated in the foundation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1983, an umbrella group which was broadly aligned with ANC ideology, but which placed somewhat greater emphasis on questions of mass participation and of non-racial ideology than the ANC had historically done. The oppositional movement was though, still characterized by many internal conflicts: for example, the trade unions were divided between so called ‘workerists’, predominant in FOSATU, who stressed independent working class organization, and the ‘populist’ grouping who advocated following the leadership of the ANC.

South African social historians of the time were involved in, or supported, organizations across the whole of this political spectrum. A few individuals were drawn into the underground ANC. Early History Workshop member David Webster became an activist for political detainees. He clandestinely joined the ANC. Eventually, he attracted the interest of the intelligence agencies, when, during his field work in north-eastern Natal, he began gathering information on South Africa’s covert stoking of the civil war in Mozambique. On May Day 1989, David was gunned down by a government hit squad outside his home. But generally, the scholars who were attracted to a Thompsonian style of social history were sympathetic to the emerging black trade unions and community organizations, and felt mixed wariness and sympathy toward the ANC. For the most part, they were skeptical of the Communist Party, which provided much of the intellectual leadership within the ANC. In particular, they often disagreed profoundly with the SACP’s antagonistic view of the new unions. Amongst the early History Workshop group, Phil Bonner and Eddie Webster were deeply involved in the FOSATU labour movement, while Luli Callinicos, who in earlier life had earlier been a member of the ANC-aligned Congress of Democrats, became engaged in union education. Many of the graduate students drawn to the Workshop participated in student, community and political campaigns. Some of the initial Workshop group – especially Couzens and van Onselen – were very skeptical of the organized left. The activists and the skeptics alike though, tended to view the SA Communist Party in ways that resonated with Thompson’s critique of Stalinism. For all its undoubted heroism, the SACP remained ideologically one of the most unreconstructed Stalinist parties in the world. It was proud of its support for the Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia, and in the 1970s added to this, unwavering backing for the homicidal Mengistu regime in Ethiopia and the USSR’s intervention in Afghanistan. It also treated the Soviet version of ‘dialectical and historical materialism’ as received wisdom, adding only a slight nationalist gloss. The SACP’s purportedly original doctrine of the ‘National Democratic Revolution’ was in fact imported wholesale from post-war Eastern Europe. Thompson’s attempts to re-examine the basic assumptions of his early political and intellectual life were likely to appeal only to those who were not convinced by the SACP’s line.

These historical circumstances help to explain the emergence of a Thompsonian moment in South Africa. New movements stimulated intellectuals’ interest in better understanding working class
history and culture. And the participants in these movements – students, trade unionists, community activists – were a potential audience for this new research.

At least a part of the success of Thompson’s work in the mid to late 1970s came because a group of intellectuals reacted against the influence on radical South African thought of Thompson’s great antagonist, Louis Althusser, and other Francophone Marxist Structuralists. In the 1950s and 1960s, anti-apartheid scholarship had been dominated by liberals. From the early 1970s they faced a Marxist challenge. This took a form in which Althussian ideas were central. A South African Communist exile in Britain, Harold Wolpe, published a series of articles which explained apartheid as a system based on the exploitation of ultra-cheap migrant labour, made possible by the way in which family subsistence production in the rural areas subsidized migrants’ wages. Basing himself on Althusser and on the work of the Marxist-structuralist anthropology of Claude Meillasoux, Wolpe delivered an analysis of the ‘articulation’ of modes of production underpinning the South African social order (Wolpe [1972] 1995). The ideas of some of the South African intellectual left over the next couple of decades were substantially shaped by Wolpe. Moreover, the influence of Althusser was reinforced via that of his follower, Nicos Poulantzas. In the mid-seventies, a group of South African graduate students at Sussex University began applying Poulantzas’ analytical device of ‘fractions of capital’ to understanding the South African state (Davies et.al. 1976) The work of the ‘Sussex School’, as it became known, was widely read by South African leftists. Two features of the structuralist literature are worth noting. Firstly, while the Althussers and Poulantzians put forward complex analyses of capital and the state, they had much less to say about working class and popular movements. And where they did write about strikes and revolts, their analyses were often economistic and instrumental in the extreme. Secondly, their writing was often characterized by a stupefying stylistic obscurity.

For a significant group of South African left academics who could not swallow the prescriptions of Structuralist Marxism, Thompson and the British social history tradition represented a much-desired alternative. Thompson provided a model of a sensitive and flexible way to think about the mass movements as they were actually emerging on the ground, and about their historical predecessors and antecedents. His luminous clarity of style contrasted attractively with the turgidity of the Sussex School. And Thompson’s demolition of Althusser and his cohorts in The Poverty of Theory would, serendipitously, offer a comprehensive alternative to the prevailing South African intellectual left fashions. Not all the History Workshop members took this pro-Thompson, anti-Althusser position; but it was to become the most influential one within the work of the group.

The South African university system changed during the late 1970s and early 1980s, in a way which was favourable to new kinds of critical scholarship. There were three types of universities. The Afrikaans universities were all white, and firmly supportive of the apartheid project. A series of segregated black universities had been set up by the government. Although they became hotbeds of student protest, they were largely dominated by pro-government Afrikaner professors and administrators. Then there were the so-called liberal universities, dominated by English speaking whites, and this was where social history took root. These colleges had in varying ways and forms admitted black students in the 1940s and 1950s, but had been forbidden from doing so

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The fine work of Dan O’Meara on Afrikaner nationalism was an admirable exception on both counts.
by legislation passed in 1959. They were forced to accept this state of affairs, under protest. However in the late seventies, the state seemed lose the will to enforce this rigid segregation and the liberal universities began to increase their black enrollments. At Wits, black student numbers went up rapidly, from a handful at the end of the 1970s to about a quarter of the student body at the start of the nineties. Moreover, this demographic change was concentrated in the humanities and social sciences, so that some classes in these disciplines were largely black by the end of the eighties (Lodge 2012:7). This shift brought on to the campuses of Wits and the other universities a generation of students who came out of high schools and townships where they had been involved in political mobilization and often in conflict with the army and the police. They had often been exposed to Marxist ideas, albeit usually in the formulaic version of the SACP. At the same time, white students at the liberal universities produced an increasingly leftist leadership in the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) (Lodge 2012). Campus life was characterized by a relentless political activism; confrontations with the police were common and tear gas often hung in the air. Yet campuses were also somewhat protected environments. Their high status as institutions and international connections, the high level of media coverage of events there, even the strange deference of Afrikaner nationalists to the professoriate, meant that they were somewhat safer spaces than the streets of South Africa in general. In this context, critical scholars were able to bring their ideas to classrooms of exceptionally responsive students and to wider audiences. During the 1980s and 1990s a whole generation of undergraduate history and social science students at Wits, Natal, Cape Town, Rhodes and Western Cape universities heard in at least some of their classes about Thompsonian ways of thinking about labour, culture and politics. Some of these students went on to do graduate work and to publish work in a similar vein. Others, who did not go into academia, took some of the ideas into other spheres of cultural life.

What is striking about this time of course is that because of the quasi-revolutionary upheaval that South Africa was going through in the 1980s, left intellectuals were, by and large, much less beset by doubts about Marxism than were their contemporaries in Europe and North America. In a sense, in South Africa, the 1970s lasted until the early 1990s, as far as the vigour of Marxist academic work was concerned.

A selection of papers from the first History Workshop conference were rapidly edited by Belinda Bozzoli, the first History Workshop book coming out from Johannesburg's radical publisher, Ravan, in 1979. There was some representation of the more structuralist tendencies of the time in the volume, but Bozzoli’s Thompsonian proclivities were already showing. In her introduction to the book, she explained the purpose of the conference in this way:

Contributors were invited to present studies of the [Witwatersrand] region from the point of view of the ‘common man’, the ‘people’, the subordinate groups of society, be they factory workers, domestic servants, traders, diggers, the unemployed or the ‘marginal’. In the tradition set by the Ruskin History Workshop this conference set out to begin the process of recreating Witwatersrand history from a grassroots perspective (Bozzoli 1979:3).

The first four were the ‘liberal’ universities. Western Cape was started as a segregated university for ‘coloureds’ but successfully asserted its independence, claiming a role as the ‘university of the left’.
It is worth noting here a certain imprecision about exactly how academics could adopt the ‘point of view’ of the oppressed, a way of thinking which was to cause trouble down the tracks. But for the moment what needs to highlighted is the desire to apply the example and politics of the then current British style of social history in the South African context. Although Bozzoli did not specifically cite Thomson in her introduction, there was a clear congruence between the way she understood the Workshop’s project and Thompson’s critique of economistic, base-and-superstructure Marxism. Bozzoli wrote of the conference:

> Time and time again, it emerged in discussion that the economic identification of classes is not the last word, but merely the first, and that it is the political, social, cultural and ideological character of classes that renders them real and recognizable social categories. And it was once these matters began to be pursued that participants began to become aware of our appalling ignorance of these non-economic features of classes and sub-classes in South Africa in general and on the Witwatersrand in particular (Bozzoli 1979:5).

Bozzoli identified the lack of studies of the townships, the grim residential areas created by segregation and apartheid, as “the great unwritten history of the South African working class” (Bozzoli 1979:5). Closing that gap has remained a central focus of Wits social historians down to the time of writing, especially in recent years through a program of producing township local histories, based on oral history interviews, under the direction of Phil Bonner and Noor Nieftagodien (Bonner and Nieftagodien 2008, 2012; Nieftagodien and Gaulle 2012).

Bozzoli implicitly acknowledged the new history’s debt to Thompson’s famous re-definition of class. She pointed out that some of the papers in the book examined the processes whereby the black working class “makes itself, through its own action, the formation of alliances, the creation of cultural forms, and the expression of resistance against oppression in spheres other than that of production” (Bozzoli 1979: 6). The interest in alliances, cultural expression and political oppression are of course echoes of some of Thompson’s preoccupations.

The conference also seems to have help form an insight that would be very important to the Wits History Workshop. As Bozzoli put it: “an interesting theme emerged. The tendency of the working class to become multi-racial, particularly in its living areas is continually resisted by capital and the state”. In the 1890s, she observed, “[r]acial, skill and ethnic differences which divided those early workers from one another were not as rigidly institutionalized as they came to be” (Bozzoli 1979:7). Previously, scholars had tended to project the very rigid racial boundaries characteristic of apartheid back into the South African past. What the research generated by the new thinking showed was that in fact nineteenth and early twentieth century South Africa’s cities had been places where racial difference were often very blurred. It had subsequently taken an enormous amount of ideological and political work by those who held power to create the tightly policed racial divisions of apartheid South Africa (see especially Koch 1983; van Onselen [1982] 2001). This view challenged not only the state’s racial ideology, but also the essentialist arguments of some African nationalists.

Bozzoli remarked on the conference’s discovery of the importance of regional differences in the country, particularly praising Phil Bonner’s study of the 1920 black miners’ strike which showed
the differential response to the strike of miners from different regions (Bozzoli 1979:11-12). Teasing out regional difference within South Africa was to be a preoccupation of the new history.

Bozzoli shared Thompson's belief that working class agency required a multi-layered and complex explanation, and that it could not be reduced to structural factors. With a jibe at the then fashionable Althusserian idea of overdetermination, she observed:

> The mere existence of contradictions, however ‘overdetermined’ is surely not a sufficient explanation for their expression in one or another kind of human action ... classes are not the abstracted embodiment of social laws, but are also groups of people characterized by particular political, social, cultural and ideological features, each with its own history (Bozzoli 1979:11)

With views like that, Bozzoli was almost the ideal reader for Thompson's newly –published *The Poverty of Theory*. When, in 1983, Bozzoli produced a collection of papers from the second History Workshop conference, held at Wits two years earlier, she put forward in her introduction a confident defence of the value of social history. *The Poverty of Theory* became something of an intellectual charter for Bozzoli's hostility to excessive theoreticism in general and to the influence of Althusser and Poulantzas on South African historiography in particular. Citing two contributions in her book, one on the life of a western Transvaal sharecropper and one on Indian flower sellers in suburban Johannesburg, she commented that “When E.P. Thompson talks of class as ‘experience’ it would seem that these are two example of what he meant”, and went on to quote directly from *Poverty of Theory*: “experience ... arises because men and women ... are rational, and they think about what is happening to themselves and their world” (Bozzoli 1983:15).

The Thompsonian category of ‘experience’ became perhaps the central idea in the South African social history writing of the 1980s and beyond, in large part through Bozzoli’s mediation. It was pervasively used even by those who had not read much of Thompson. Its employment clearly marked the followers of social history as against the structuralists.

Thompson’s use of a fairly unproblematised notion of ‘rationality’ in the quotation above, which goes so strongly against the grain of much social theory today, would have struck a cord with leftist South African scholars for particular local reasons. Conservative, and even to some extent liberal social scientists in the country had often portrayed African workers as driven by irrationalism; migrants came to the mines because of ‘the bright lights of the city’ and so forth. For the new historians, part of their task seemed to be to insist that black workers acted as rationally as anyone else. Thus, van Onselen’s (1980) book on black migrants in Zimbabwe, for example, is in part a passionate defence of the rationality of the miners. This way of thinking clearly glossed over the question of wherein rationality inheres. It tended to have the negative effect of leading to an avoidance of exploring the irrational; workers’ religious and magical beliefs for instance, tended to be off-limits to the early Workshop historians. But it was understandable in the context of the time.

Bozzoli also followed Thompson in attacking ‘evolutionary and teleological narratives’ of resistance. In doing so she was also taking a swipe at the practice of the South African left. She quoted Thompson’s observation that ‘judgmental Marxism’ tends to mathematically deduce from class analysis "the class consciousness which [the working class] ought to have (but seldom does
have) if ‘it’ was properly aware of its own position and real interests” (Thompson quoted in Bozzoli 1983:33).

Basing herself on Thompson, Bozzoli condemned a politics which she saw as blaming the political inadequacies of leaders on the supposed ‘failure’ of the working class to develop the correct ‘consciousness’. In accordance with this critique she insisted that writing the history of the oppressed should avoid any preoccupation with “organizations, leaders and ‘lines’, instead focusing on:

The history of the people from whom organizations may or may not emerge; to whom leaders may or may not be responsible; and for whom ‘lines’ may or may not possess appeal (Bozzoli 1983:34).

In 1983 Bozzoli ([1983] 1995) published an article in *Journal of Southern African Studies* advocating the need for a feminist turn in scholarship in South Africa, which was at that time very undeveloped. This piece was immensely influential, and has been cited by virtually all feminist historians of the country in subsequent years. Interestingly, given Thompson’s fraught relationship with feminism, Bozzoli’s argument has clear links to Thompson’s thought. She made her case through an explicit attack on the influence of Harold Wolpe in the field, which was implicitly based on a Thompsonian-style critique of Wolpe’s adherence to Althusserian theory. Wolpe’s model of migrant labour, Bozzoli explained, failed to account for why women remained behind in the rural areas.

More broadly, Bozzoli accused structuralist Marxism of having blocked feminist scholarship by failing to provide any room for women’s agency in their analysis. With a jeer at the influence of Althusser’s famous article on ideology, she observed that:

Theories which interpret the family as an ‘ideological state apparatus’ are unlikely to provide fruitful ground for discourse about the struggles between men and women within it; or the struggles between the family and the wider system within which it is located (Bozzoli [1983] 1995:123).

The emphasis on women’s agency in Bozzoli’s work reflects as well, a constant theme in her teaching and seminar interventions at the time, which was her strong critique of functionalist modes of argument. She and other Wits sociologists argued that while the Althusserians and Poulantzians had been able to produce an explanation of why apartheid had functioned as a closed system, they were not now able to give good accounts of the revolts sweeping the country, because they lacked a theory of agency. Bozzoli’s position resonated closely with Thompson’s (1978:75-81) suggestion that Talott Parsons’ version of social science and Althusser’s Marxism were simply mirror images of each other; both accounts of structure in which institutions functioned in a machine-like fashion. Bozzoli and a number of the leftist sociologists at Wits often polemicized...

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8 At the time of writing it was approaching three hundred Google Scholar citations.

9 This observation is based on my recollections of working as a ‘tutor’ (graduate assistant) on Bozzoli’s courses and later as her colleague in the Wits Sociology Department during the mid-1980s.
along the lines that there was no significant difference between the analyses offered by Parsonians and Althusserians: they just reversed their political values. This was another theme that had particular local resonance. Parsonian sociology had developed some following in the country, especially at the Afrikaans universities where its (arguably) inherently conservative implications fitted well in institutions which supported apartheid policy. In the South African context, equating Parsons with Althusser had the additional satisfying polemical effect of suggesting that the left wing structuralists were thinking in a ways no different from those of their political enemies.

In the last of her History Workshop edited volumes, based on the 1984 conference and appearing in 1987, Bozzoli did not draw on Thompson directly in her introduction. But like Thompson, she sought to nuance an understanding of class through an exploration of its relation to culture and community. She questioned simplistic versions of the concept of community. In the political discourse of the time, the term ‘community’ was often used on the left, approvingly but unreflectively. Bozzoli wanted to point to the cleavages of gender, class and skill, within community which both nationalist and ‘workerist’ politics tended to overlook.

There is no doubt that Bozzoli, through the introductions to her three edited books set much of the direction for how South African social history in general, and the Wits History Workshop in particular, and that that direction was a broadly Thompsonian one.

The work of Charles van Onselen represents perhaps the strongest substantive body of historical writing taking inspiration from Thompson in the South African scholarship. He made an extraordinary contribution to South African social history, following his early book on Zimbabwean labour history with a classic work on the early years of Johannesburg (Van Onselen 1980, [1982] 1995). His magnum opus was an enormously elaborate biography of an African share-cropper, Kas Maine. In the book, Maine’s life becomes a lens through which the whole history of rural South Africa during the Twentieth Century is read (Van Onselen 1996). Later van Onselen turned his attention to the Jewish gangsters and Irish bandits of early industrial South Africa. He very seldom explicitly invoked Thompson, but the Thompsonian stamp of his work was evident. Martin Murray (1988:86) has pointed out that in van Onselen’s work on labour migrants in Zimbabwe, both the emphasis on the way in which pre-industrial obligations helped shape the working class, and on informal types of worker resistance, echo themes in MEWC. The premier American historian of Africa, Fred Cooper, sees van Onselen as influenced by Thompson in sharing “both the desires to rescue the memories of extinguished lives from the condescension of posterity and an aversion to structuralist theory” (1995:237). Another very distinguished American Africanist, Luise White, describes van Onselen’s book on Johannesburg as ‘pure Thompson’ and the author as being ‘far and away the most Thompsonian’ of the South African scholars.

Martin Murray (1988) took van Onselen to task for not emulating Thompson in telling a tale of the formation of a working class. Indeed, van Onselen has certainly been attracted to the study of those who resisted the process of proletarianization; the share-croppers, the self-employed and the criminal. However, at another level, this focus does resonate with Thompson’s concern for the artisan victims of industrialization. And it could be argued that it is a virtue of van Onselen’s work that he which does not ultimately yield to a teleology of class formation.

10 Luise White, personal communication to the author, 25 August 2013.
Some other contributors to the new South African historiography drew directly on Thompson’s work. Dunbar Moodie (1986) deployed the notion of moral economy to brilliant effect in analyzing the 1946 Witwatersrand African mineworkers strike on the basis of his interviews with elderly participants. History Workshop member Peter Delius and Oxford historian Stanley Trapido (1983) also invoked ‘moral economy’ in their work on rural social relations in the Transvaal. Paul La Hausse (1996:32) acknowledged Thompson’s part in the “specifically English debates about culture and history” which shaped the finely researched series of studies of African working class history and culture in Durban which he produced. Bill Nasson, as a young South African student in England in the 1970s, attended a Thompson lecture at Hull, and was also present when Thompson ‘shredded’ Richard Johnson in Oxford. Nasson acknowledges the influence on Thompson’s thinking, especially concerning liberties and the rule of law, on his brilliant book about men of colour in the Cape who fought for the British in the Boer War (Nasson 1991). Durban-based American Bill Freund, who became a major historian of the African city, got to know Thompson personally while living in England, and was deeply impressed by him. And numerous graduate students footnoted Thompson in the remarkably high quality graduate thesis work produced under Bonner and Delius’ supervision at Wits in the 1980s (for instance Koch 1983:10).

But more generally, the influence of Thompson, as mediated by Bozzoli, became a kind of theoretical commonsense in History Workshop and amongst its co-thinkers in the Cape and Natal. Deborah Posel indeed suggests that the social historians were somewhat theoretically inert after Bozzoli’s interventions:

> It became a matter of consensus as if the … theoretical work had been done and settled. This may explain the subsequent tendency among social historians in the HW to have avoided explicitly debate or reflection (Posel 2010:34).

This is perhaps a little harsh; under Phil Bonner’s leadership after 1987 the History Workshop were building more and more sophisticated understandings of urbanization, of generation and of rural and urban political cultures. Nevertheless it is true that right into the early 1990s, there was relatively little interest amongst South African social historians in engaging with the proliferating new international debates on post-structuralism and post-colonialism. A striking contrast is with the Indian Subaltern Studies school, which emerged in that period out of a not dissimilar social history group, but which attained a huge international impact through its engagement with global theoretical debates. History Workshop had neither the interest nor perhaps the theoretical equipment to engage with theory in this way. South Africans were overwhelmingly preoccupied with their national politics and, in the eighties intellectually isolated by the cultural boycott of South Africa.

It would be far fetched to claim an inspiration from Thompson for the History Workshop’s initiatives in popularizing historical research. Nevertheless, there was certainly at least an elective

11 Bill Nasson, personal communication to the author, 12 August 2013.

12 Bill Freund, contribution to Thompson closed gmail forum on Thompson, 2013. I would like to thank Professor Keith Breckenridge for organizing this forum and permitting me to draw on the contributions.
affinity between the work of History Workshop in this field and the ideas its members drew from E.P. Thompson, the sometime Workers Education Association tutor. In 1981, Luli Callinicos produced a book, *Gold and Workers*, aimed at bringing the new research on the history of South African industrialization to a working class audience (Callinicos [1981] 1985). This book was extremely successful in its aims. It was widely used in trade union educational in the 1980s, and was serialized in the newspaper of the powerful new National Union of Mineworkers (Callinicos 1987:51). Explaining her intentions, Callinicos cited Thompson, in suggesting that ‘historical consciousness’ might help us to realize the ‘possibilities of transformation’ (Callinicos, 1987:64).

It is noteworthy that the book includes a brief section drawing explicit parallels between industrialization in South Africa and the Industrial Revolution in England (Callinicos (1981) 1985:107). Callinicos used this comparison in an attempt to show how racial attitudes of upper class whites in contemporary South Africa worked in a similar way to the contempt of the nineteenth century English bourgeoisie for the working class. This kind of parallelism, which would certainly be rejected by postcolonial theorists, was quite appealing to South African social historians. Though they had seen too much of the problems of postcolonial Africa to entirely share Thompson’s early 1960s confidence that “[c]auses which were lost in England might, in Asia or Africa, yet be won” (Thompson [1963] 1966:13), they certainly saw the processes of industrialization and urbanization in eighteenth century England and twentieth century South Africa as alike in crucial ways.

If Scott Hamilton (2011:40) is correct to say that one of Thompson’s core ideas was “the essential unity of political, scholarly and imaginative work”, then History Workshop certainly labored in that spirit. Well-attended public cultural festivals, drawing in trade unionists, students, community activists and students accompanied all the History Workshop conferences during the first decade and a half. At these events there were numerous performances by workers’ choirs, dance and drama groups, performances and exhibitions by sympathetic artists, screenings of political films and public lectures by scholars. For the first conference this ‘public day’ was held on a small scale in the industrial town of Benoni. The festivals subsequently were moved to the Wits campus and steadily grew in size. In 1987 about 3 500 people attended the event, and in 1987 5 000, a large proportion of them in both years trade unionists (Bonner 2010). At the 1990 conference, held shortly after the government had unbanned the liberation movements, a roaring University Great Hall greeted a rousing speech by Ahmed Kathrada, an ANC leader recently freed after a quarter of a century’s imprisonment on Robben Island. It is notable that the cultural side of the workshop included artists of high caliber. Amongst those who collaborated closely with the Workshop, the artists William Kentridge and Penny Siopis, the Afro-fusion musician Johnny Clegg, and the Junction Theatre Company all later attained international fame.

With the transition to democracy, the opening of many other political spaces meant that there was no longer an audience for this type of jamboree. Thus when the workshop held a conference on the concept of Democracy in 1994, the academic event was a great success, attracting scholars from many African countries and featuring academic stars Orlando Patterson and Eric Foner as keynote speakers. But the cultural festival was a flop. With great astuteness, Phil Bonner turned the workshop toward new modes of public education, appropriate to the new times. Perhaps his most notable achievement in this sphere was the creation of Johannesburg’s Apartheid Museum, which has become a landmark for visitors to the city, and which presents a distinctly History Workshop-inflected account of South African history. The core of the overview of South African history
presented in the museum is really a history of the Making of the Working Class on the Rand, conceived in a recognizably Thompsonian manner.

Around the time of the transition to democracy in 1994 however, the tides of opinion amongst the South African radical intelligentsia turned strongly against Thompsonian social historians. One issue was the rhinoceros in the room: race. The History Workshop committee was mainly white. The proportion of black paper presenters in History Workshop conferences steadily increased, but still constituted a minority. Perhaps surprisingly, these problems had not really been a subject of public conflict in the previous decade. The oppositional public culture of the time tended to deflect attention away from such issues. In the 1980s, at Wits and the other universities, there had been remarkable unity between left faculty and students, who had on occasion faced off against police together in campus demonstrations. Both FOSATU and the UDF organizations had a strong commitment to playing down potential racial divisions amongst the anti-apartheid forces. But the 1990s saw a change in these political dynamics. Black students became increasingly confrontational toward university authorities over racially defined issues, in ways which were often resented by even leftish faculty. And a more overtly African nationalist position began to be articulated by sectors of the ANC, which was to become especially strong under the presidency of Thabo Mbeki in the 2000s. In this context, the Workshop was bound to be criticized for its racial make up, and it was. And more generally, white social historians came under criticism for the racial politics of their professional practice. Some critics particularly questioned the employment by white social historians of black research assistants, arguing that the assistants had been exploited or given inadequate credit for their intellectual contributions. The Workshop did change its racial composition, gradually, and then quite dramatically after Phil Bonner gained funding for a large group of black graduate students in the mid 2000s. But the racial relationships under which some of the classic Wits Social History work was produced have continued to be used by critics to cast doubt over its validity.

Overlapping with the racial issue, was the increasing challenge to a Thompsonian social history from scholars influenced by poststructuralist and postcolonial theory. This was perhaps most forcefully articulated, from the late 1990s, by Ciraj Rassool of the University of the Western Cape (Witz, Minkley and Rassool 1999; Rassool 2010). These scholars argued that the South African social historians had been blind to issues of representation and institutional power. Social historians were accused of presuming to speak for the working class. The History Workshop was criticized for treating workers simply as an audience and not as interlocutors. The social history literature was portrayed as mindlessly empiricist and its authors as crassly averse to theoretical engagement. It was suggested that the apparently impressive achievements of South African social historians using oral history interviews were fundamentally flawed, because they had naively treated interviews as sources of evidence about the past, when they should have heard them as statements about the present. At their most extreme, these positions tended to suggest that it was only possible to work with representations of history, and that it was therefore quite impossible to say anything substantive about the past. This latter point resonated in a striking way with the development of a post-apartheid heritage industry, in which many historians were involved.

These critics of social history had no interest in engaging Thompson’s work. For them, it was hopelessly tainted by its History Workshop associations. If they thought about Thompson at all, it was probably through the lens of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s critique of the inappropriate importation
of western labour history into a southern context (Chakrabarty 2000). Chakrabarty, who visited South Africa in this period, had a significant impact on historical and literary debate.

Practitioners of the Thompson-derived brand of social history were not deaf to criticisms based either on racial politics or on theoretical grounds. Phil Bonner (2010) acknowledged a degree of validity in some them in his keynote speech at the History Workshop’s thirtieth anniversary conference in 2008. But the question really was whether to view the work of the Thompsonian social historians as flawed but valuable, or whether, as Rassool and his supporters seemed to think, it needed to be totally abandoned. Yet surely, as Geoff Eley (2005) has argued for the British and American social history of the 1970s, it should be possible to recognize the limitations of a body of historical work, while still valuing what was creative and innovative about it?

However, scholars who had come up through the social history movement did continue to keep some direct interest in Thompson alive. I myself taught Thompson’s essay on time to hundreds of Wits undergraduate Sociology students during the 1990s. Keith Breckenridge taught the MEWC chapter on Methodism to students at the University of Kwazulu Natal in the same period. Peter Alexander included the ‘class’ section of MEWC in his courses at the University of Johannesburg over many years. Bill Nasson currently teaches MEWC to students at the University of Stellenbosch.

This brings me back to Jacob Dlamini’s book. If some South African academics have hurled Thompson out of the front door, he may have returned through the back, via the work of a younger generation of writers in non-academic genres. The literary scholar Hedley Twidle (2012) has recently suggested that the remarkable recent boom in South African non-fiction writing has an affinity as a genre with the strong social history tradition. I agree with him, but I would suggest that the connection is often even more direct than he believes. The current generation of non-fiction writers were often directly influenced by, and drew on, the teaching and writing of the social historians. Dlamini was a student in the Wits History Department and acknowledges the influence of Clive Glaser and other social historians on his intellectual formation, which certainly helps explain his reference to Thompson. Of course it would be totally unfair to Dlamini to reduce his creative achievement in his book to a function of his education. But in opposing his own investigations of black working class experience to an official political narrative, Dlamini was certainly proceeding in a thoroughly Thompsonian manner. And in his evocation of ‘reciprocity and mutual obligation’ in township life, there is surely a sensibility at work that Thompson’s admirers would find sympathetic. There are other examples of this direct connection of the new South African non-fiction and social history. Xolela Mangcu, a foremost public intellectual and journalist, and author of a recent biography of Steve Biko (Mangcu 2012), sees his reading in social history as having given him “a better sense of the subpolitical currents in our society”. Mangcu says that “social history can … help us understand and write better about the ‘breakdown’ of authority in our communities instead of dismissing them as just unruly mobs or millenarian

13 Keith Breckenridge and Peter Alexander, contributions to closed gmail forum on Thompson, 2013.
14 Bill Nasson, personal communication to the author, 12 August 2013.
15 Jacob Dlamini, keynote address at South African Historical Society meeting, Durban, July 2012.
movements – it’s a leadership challenge that cannot be met without a grasp of the long run
transformation(s) of communities and how communities responded to them.” And he comments
that “Thompson’s use of ‘precedent’ always appealed to me – e.g. how Thomas Paine’s work set
the contours for Radicalism in Britain a hundred years later”. Mangcu saw Thompson’s ideas as a
useful starting point for thinking about Biko’s context in the history of the Eastern Cape. The
leading non-fiction writer Jonny Steinberg, a Wits student at the height of the social history wave,
cites a number of social historians in his non-fiction works on contemporary South Africa. In his
award-winning book about crime and imprisonment, The Number, Steinberg draws heavily on van
Onselen’s work on the history of prison gangs (Steinberg 2004). It does indeed seem that the
intellectual and cultural influence of South African social history has diffused far beyond the
boundaries of its own academic genre.

I would speculate that one reason for this is that the relatively lucid, story-telling mode of writing
of the social historians provided non-fiction writers with usable literary models. A relatively
accessible style was one of the features of the South African social historians. This came out of
both the stylistic influence of authors like Thompson and Hobsbawm, and the desire to
communicate with a non-academic audience. Many of the History Workshop contributors honed
their popular writing skills on a long series of historical articles for the UDF-aligned paper, the
New Nation in the 1980s. Van Onselen, Tim Couzens, Bill Nasson and Peter Delius are all
exemplary writers in a ‘plain English’ Thompsonian manner. Of course post-structuralists would
claim that their apparent clarity is a discursive snare and a delusion. But the convoluted modes of
poststructuralist self-expression were not transferable into writing intended for a popular
audience, whereas those of the social historians were.

What then can we say of the future of Thompsonian thought in South Africa? For this, we need to
reflect briefly on the state of the nation. Nobody in their right mind would contest that South
Africa is an infinitely better country than it was in the 1970s: the great crime of formalized racial
oppression is gone for good. And yet, South Africa under Jacob Zuma is a profoundly disillusioning
place. Zuma presides over a regime of systematic political and economic corruption. He is the
cheerful front of a government that looks on without a coherent economic strategy as the
country’s industrial base is being destroyed by global competition. The growth of a substantial
black middle class and a small but mega-rich black bourgeoisie has not changed the fact that South
African is one of the most unequal societies on the planet. Civil liberties and the integrity of the
public service are being steadily eroded. On the back roads of KwaZulu and Mpumalanga,
assassination is meted out to those who challenge the local political elite. This shambles is given
left wing ideological cover by Blade Nzimande, the Communist Party leader, who sits in the
cabinet, and declares that his presence there is contributing to the National Democratic
Revolution. When 34 miners were gunned down by the national police force at Marikana in August
2012, Nzimande did not offer an apology, let alone a resignation. Thompsonians may experience a
certain Schadenfreude on learning that Nzimande is the author of a doctoral dissertation based on
the theories of Nicos Poulantzas.

What relevance might a local Thompsonian tradition have in these grim circumstances? I want to
answer this question in a provocative way, by suggesting that the South African social historians

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Xolela Mangcu, personal communication to the author, 4 July 2013.
were and are romantics. This is certainly a label most of them would hate, for they tend to see themselves as drawing on social science and as hard-headed and realistic in their political judgments. But for Thompson, romanticism was not a pejorative term, and indeed marked a quality of mind essential to the practice both of social change and of radical history. Writing of his hero, William Morris, in 1976, Thompson suggested that what had often been seen as romantic failure in Morris was actually a positive alternative to the scientism that the left was to develop. Morris’s romanticism contrasted with mainstream Marxism’s “lack of a moral self-consciousness or even a vocabulary of desire, its inability to project any images of the future, or even its tendency to fall upon the Utilitarians’ earthly paradise – the maximization of economic growth” (Thompson [1976] 2001:254). For Thompson, moral concern and utopianism were crucial values. For all its many undoubted deficiencies and inconsistencies, South African social history has had such profound moral and future-orientated purposes. It has sought to give the people of the past the respect they deserved, and in doing so to help imagine a different future South Africa. Thompson approvingly quoted Morris: “I have heard people miscalled for being romantic, but what romance means is the capacity for a true conception of history, a power of making the past part of the present” (Thompson [1976] 2001). We may now smile at the idea of a ‘true’ conception of history, but the social history tradition endures in South Africa, it may be because it provides just such a way of telling stories about the past which make that vital connection to the present. If South African needs anything now, it is moral dissent from the Zuma circus and a ‘utopian’ envisaging of something different. It is up to a younger generation of South African intellectuals to see whether they can find any resources in the local legacy of E.P. Thompson which could help them in that struggle. Strangely enough, there are just a few signs that they just might just do so.


Lucas Poy

Even though E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* focuses on the formation of the working class in late 18th and early 19th century England, it has exerted a widespread influence on labor historiography extending far beyond those geographical and temporal boundaries. Argentina is no exception: Thompson’s book has become an indisputable reference for almost everyone engaged in labor history —and we may say in social and cultural history as a whole.

That influence, however, was not an immediate one. As we shall see, British Marxist historians’ production, and E.P. Thompson’s in particular, did not reach Argentina until the 1980s. Moreover, that influence has to be assessed taking into account the peculiar context in which it took place. As we will discuss here, while explicitly vindicating the experience of British social history and especially Thompson’s contributions, Argentine social historians of the 1980s assumed a different political position. They were more distant from political activism than the British authors they purportedly took as a reference. The context of its reception led to a peculiar interpretation of Thompson’s work, which stressed some aspects of his thought while subordinating others.

What were the scope and the limits of E.P. Thompson’s influence on Argentine social historiography in recent decades? How were his works interpreted in a context marked by a growing professionalization of the discipline but also by a weakening of the political left? This paper analyzes these questions and provides an assessment on the current situation of labor history in Argentina.  

The background: labor historiography in Argentina during the 20th century

In Argentina, the development of labor history as an academic field took place relatively late. For a long period labor history attracted little attention from scholars and the first works on the subject were written by a handful of authors directly involved in the workers’ movement. As a result, by the middle of the 20th century the major political currents of the Argentine left had produced their ‘own’ accounts of the history of the labor movement. At first, these reflections came in the form of short pamphlets or articles in periodicals, but later several important books were published. Between the 1930s and the 1960s, the anarchist Diego Abad de Santillan (1933), the socialist Jacinto Oddone (1949), the

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1 I wish to thank Daniel Gaido, Omar Acha, Ludmila Scheinkman and Dolores Rocca Rivarola for their collaboration in the writing of this paper.
syndicalist Sebastian Marotta (1960) and the communist Rubens Iscaro (1958) wrote the classic books of what was to be known as a ‘militant historiography’. These books were certainly not pieces of academic scholarship but passionate accounts with political agendas, strongly influenced by an apologetic view of the political current the author belonged to. They represented an extension of political struggle into the historiographic terrain.

As a matter of fact, the whole development of Argentine historiography, and especially of Argentine labor history, should be assessed in close relationship with the uneasy political and institutional scene that marked the country and left its imprint on the context of production of the texts. First of all, it is clear enough that the rise of Peronism as a major political phenomenon in the 1940s had a heavy impact on local historiography. Not only because after 1945 most histories written by leftist parties showed a ‘nostalgic’ character, longing for a return to a past when their influence in the labor movement was stronger, but also because some new approaches to labor history began to be advanced by Peronist historians (Belloni, 1960; Puiggrós, 1965; López, 1971, among others). Most of these studies tended to consider the first stages of the labor movement, when Socialist, Anarchist, and Communist influence was strong, as a period dominated by ‘exotic flowers’, somehow alien to local traditions and badly adapted to the interests of a working class that only found its ‘genuine’ representation with the emergence of Peronism. At first sight, they were the other side of the coin of the classic accounts offered by the leftist organizations, as Peronist historians also developed an outspoken political position. It has to be pointed out, however, that Peronist historiography offered poor-quality historical products. The controversial point against the left currents was certainly made, but analysis of historical sources was scarce and their contribution to labor history was modest. Since they claimed that the labor movement had constituted itself during the Peronist years, they were ill-equipped to assess the complex process that led to the emergence of the working class in a much earlier period.

After the demise of Peronism, a renovation process took place between 1955 and 1966 in universities and academic institutions, and new trends gained ground in the social sciences. Under the impact of functionalism and modernization theories, new research was made in close relationship with other disciplines such as Sociology, Economy and Political Science, which contributed to some progress in what was called the ‘new social history’, whose most well-known figures were historians such as José Luis Romero and Tulio Halperin Donghi. Even though the interest of new researchers was concentrated mostly on discussions about the origins of Peronism, they made some important contributions about the immigration process and the structuring of the working class in the last decades of the 19th century (Germani, 1966; Rechini de Lattes, 1968).

Another military coup, in 1966, led to a new political and repressive intervention in the university leading to the expulsion of several professors and researchers and preventing this academic revitalization from continuing. A few years later, in the context of the political radicalization of the late 1960s and early 1970s, an interest in labor history was certainly to be found —for the most part still marked by the style, intellectual frameworks and concerns of the old ‘militant histories’ (Ratzer, 1970; Godio, 1971; Paso, 1974), even though some scholarly accounts began to appear (Panettieri, 1967; Solomonoff, 1971). After the democratic interregnum of 1973-6, in 1976 a military dictatorship again
interrupted constitutional government and unleashed a bloody repression against the labor movement and the political currents of the left—these were hard times for labor history, and for academic production as a whole. During those years, some contributions came from foreign scholars. Hobart Spalding (1970) had already provided an important compilation of sources in the previous years: during the 1970s some important research was done, comprising assessments of the anarchist movement (Oved, 1978; Zaragoza, 1978), the Socialist Party (Walter, 1977; Weinstein, 1978) but also the living and working conditions of the urban workers and the formation of the city of Buenos Aires (Bourdé, 1973; Sargent, 1974; Scobie, 1975).

As late as the end of the 1970s Argentine labor history seemed alien to currents and trends that had been shaping European and American historiography for at least a decade and a half. In particular, Argentine historians had been for the most part unfamiliar with the production of British Marxist historians. Even though some of Eric Hobsbawm’s books had been translated during the late 1960s and the early 1970s, a Spanish version of E.P. Thompson’s The Making was not to appear until 1977, when it was published in Barcelona under the title La formación histórica de la clase obrera: Inglaterra, 1780-1832. As a result, even among the social historians who tried to introduce new questions and methods into their research during the 1960s, the influence of British historians had been limited. Hobsbawm was certainly read and discussed in the 1970s, but his influence was just one among many others, in a period heavily marked by political debates and still dominated by traditional ways of writing history.

It was not just an Argentine peculiarity, but a Latin American one. Writing a review in 1979, Peter Winn was worried enough to point out that “Latin American labor history is in danger of isolating itself from promising intellectual and methodological currents and confining itself to institutional chronologies and ideological controversies” (1979: 130). Bearing the same concerns in mind, Eugene Sofer wrote a year later that Latin American historians seemed to display “little of the conceptual or methodological innovation that characterizes the work of labor historians of Europe or the United States” (1980: 167).

And yet things were starting to change. During the hard years of the military dictatorship, new trends were being explored. The influence of Marxist British historians, and of E.P. Thompson, was to play a crucial role in the following years.

The new ‘social history’ of the 1980s —and its context

The change took place during the last years of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. Interestingly enough, the scene were not public universities, which felt the impact of the military government and where critical thinking and scientific research were poorer than ever before. As a matter of fact, a new generation of young historians came close to most recent historical and methodological trends in two different contexts. On the one hand, many young historians left the country and finished their graduate studies abroad —

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2 Las revoluciones burguesas appeared in Madrid as early as 1964. Rebeldes primitivos was edited in Mexico in 1968, En torno a los orígenes de la revolución industrial was published in Mexico in 1971 and even republished in Buenos Aires in 1974.
mainly in Mexico, France, Britain or the United States. On the other, small groups of researchers and scholars who stayed in Argentina tried to maintain and develop their studies at new centers linked to small private universities and sometimes financed by foreign foundations. There were links between both contexts, as many researchers returned to Argentina after they finished their studies abroad and started working in the new centers.

Therefore, both in foreign universities and in private and small centers created at home, Argentine historians started to get in touch with new trends in social history. Yet it was not merely a historiographic shift: debates with more profound political and theoretical consequences were going on. And here the context is crucial: the new generation of intellectuals that got in touch with new historiographic trends did so in the context of a transition between the turbulent and radicalized years of the first half of the 1970s and the democratic experience that followed the demise of the military government in 1983. The reception of British Marxism and other influences in modern social history, then, has to be located in the broader context of a political turn that an important group of Argentine and Latin American scholars and intellectuals was going through in the last years of the 1970s. As far as Argentine groups are concerned, we can find a glimpse of the interests of this generation if we take a look at journals and magazines such as *Punto de Vista, Controversia* or *Ciudad Futura*, and a couple of years later even a political-cultural venture as the ‘Club de Cultura Socialista’. They both advanced a critique of leftist organizations and the revolutionary perspectives of the 1970s —which many of them had shared— and vindicated the possibilities of social reform and democratic change in capitalist societies.\(^3\)

This political shift to the right can certainly be placed in the broader context of an international trend. The characteristic trait of its development in Argentina, however, was that this political reorientation of many former leftist intellectuals was directed towards a ‘traditional’ and almost centenary political formation, the Unión Cívica Radical, and towards Raúl Alfonsín, its presidential candidate in 1983. It thus implied not only moving away from the political left but also from Peronism, which many of them had supported during the 1970s and which still maintained a dominant influence on the labor movement.

Alfonsín’s victory in the 1983 presidential elections gave those intellectual groups political strength and meant an important progress in their institutional consolidation. During those years universities and scientific institutions were profoundly reshaped. In this context, many scholars who had been developing their intellectual activity in exile or in small private centers were able to make their way into public universities. Unlike the 1960s or the 1970s, now Peronist or Leftist influence was weak, and they quickly became dominant in university life.

As far as the historical field is concerned, the most paradigmatic case that illustrates this process is that of the *Programa de Estudios de Historia Social y Económica Americana* (Study Program on Social and Economic American History, PEHESA). Composed of historians such as Luis Alberto Romero, Hilda Sabato, Juan Carlos Korol and Leandro Gutiérrez, the

\(^3\) One of the most important intellectuals of that generation, Carlos Altamirano, was later to recall that the Club and its influence “contributed to create a climate of ideas which made more acceptable the idea of a reformist left (…) the idea of a left closely linked to a reform movement, more than to a revolutionary one”.
PEHESA was created in 1977 as a small center for discussion and research linked to a private university and with some funding from the Ford Foundation. They tried hard to get in contact with foreign scholars: between 1980 and 1983 two articles were published in *Latin American Research Review* that promoted the work being done at the Program — Hilda Sabato was later to be appointed as part of the editorial committee. After 1983, its members quickly entered the History Department of the University of Buenos Aires and the Program itself was incorporated as part of the main public university’s academic structure. In a couple of years, a major historiographic renewal had consolidated in university classrooms and in the CONICET (National Council for Research and Development), the main public institution providing research funding.

**The reception of E.P. Thompson —and its uses.**

After 1983, labor history on the pre-Peronist period certainly flourished, and under the impulse of the PEHESA in Buenos Aires, new researchers started to contribute to this renovation in different parts of the country. Analysis of the political and institutional history of the labor movement and the left was now scarce, even though some important works were published, such as Falcón (1984, 1986) and Bilsky (1984, 1985). Strictly economic studies, intended to analyze the industrialization process, were also hard to come by, but the formation of labor markets received more attention, shedding light on how the country’s economic structure oriented towards agricultural production contributed to create a labor market where mobility and temporary work played a key role (Pianetto, 1984, Kritz, 1985, Sabato 1985). The immigration process was another important subject in the research agenda, as well as the mutual benefit societies based on ethnic and national origins that grouped many immigrants before the consolidation of trade unions (Devoto, 1984; Devoto and Rosolo, 1985, among others). Progress was also made in the analysis of urban and living conditions (Gutiérrez, 1982, Armus, 1984, among others) and initial reflections were made in the field of gender studies (Feijoo, 1990).

Despite their differences, this new historiography showed some common features and it represented a renovation in the field of social history, with the PEHESA group at the forefront of academic production. This renewal certainly implied moving away from the institutional and political one-sided history that had prevailed in previous studies and placing Argentine historiography closer to international trends and debates. It also implied, as Emilia Viotti da Costa would later recall, leaving behind ‘structuralist’ approaches and promoting “a history that would move away from the study of leaderships to the study of the grass roots, from the study of unions and political parties to the study of the workers’ culture, from the study of organized labor to the study of the great majority of workers who never joined a union” (1989: 5). Paradoxically, this shift contributed to put into question comparative studies, with a broader perspective in terms of regions or countries—the social labor history of the 1980s was mainly a history of workers *in Argentina*, and mostly in Buenos Aires.

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4 Foreign scholars continued to make contributions on different aspects of Argentine labor history, though it is harder to group them into an identifiable historiographic trend (Sofer, 1982; Munck, 1988; Korzeniewicz, 1989; Adelman, 1992; and, of course, James, 1988; among others).
The influence of British historians on the new social history was indisputable, and E.P. Thompson’s work held a prominent place, as the study of urban workers in the first stages of capitalist development became one of the main topics of interest. It is not surprising that in this context *The Making* rapidly became a key reference for almost every historian that wanted to work on labor history. ‘Traditional’ accounts on the political history of the labor movement and the left were severely criticized, and emphasis was put on exploring aspects previously neglected, from the working and living conditions of the poor to urban development or the immigrants’ communities and associations. Thompson’s concept of ‘experience’ seemed to provide a key to almost every new production.

And yet, as Emilia Viotti da Costa has pointed out, ‘experience’ remains an elusive concept and E.P. Thompson’s reflections are certainly complex and thus can be interpreted from different perspectives. How — and we may say which — E.P. Thompson was read in the 1980s’ Argentina?

The context was undoubtedly a different one: the 1980s were not the 1960s and Argentina is not Great Britain. Thompson had written *The Making* as part of a process that made a generation of Communists break with the party, criticizing the Stalinized version of Marxism the CPGB had developed — history was therefore a battlefield of a broader dispute with theoretical implications. It is well-known that Thompson was engaging in an argument against simplified interpretations that pretended that the formation of the working class was just a matter of economic history. If he was certainly discussing with the Stalinist-oriented perspective which dominated the Communist Party, it must not be forgotten that he remained a political activist of the Left his whole life — moreover, *The Making* was not written by an academic scholar, but by someone who was almost an outsider to academic centers, someone concerned mainly with adult education among labor ranks.

Things were different for the Argentine scholars that appropriated Thompson’s book in the 1980s. First of all, as we have seen, a debate with economists and sociologists was not in the forefront — there was, instead, the aim of building links with the production of the social scientists of the 1960s. Second, there was no discussion within the different currents of the left, but rather a critique to revolutionary organizations set forth by a generation of disenchanted militants closely linked with Alfonsín’s government. Third, the political critique of the revolutionary left was accompanied by a severe judgment of partisan and militant accounts of the labor movement’s history, which implied a vindication of the institutionalization and professionalization of the historian.

In this context, it hardly was E.P. Thompson’s militant activity that was stressed, or his emphasis on the political trends that lay behind the ‘making’ of the working class — the first

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6 A debate between “optimists” and “pessimists”, resembling the British one, did not go beyond some criticism made by Leandro Gutiérrez to the work of “optimists” such as Scobie or Cortés Conde.
part of his book, ‘Planting the Liberty Tree’, is mainly focused on intellectual and political history. That aspect of his work was carefully put aside, and his links with the Marxist tradition were much less stressed than his critique. Instead, Argentine social historians focused on E.P. Thompson’s questioning of the existence of some kind of automatic ‘determination’ between structure and super-structure.

Thompson would certainly have agreed on the need to go beyond both one-sided political accounts of the labor movement’s history and simplified structuralist approaches that argued that class consciousness emerged as a mere consequence of industrial transformation. The way in which economic development and changing living conditions affected the complex process of class formation could not be analyzed without taking into account the ‘experience’ of those workers. Some members of the PEHESA group, however, would go further. The very notion of ‘working class’ as a useful concept was put into question, and the term ‘sectores populares’ (popular sectors) was coined as a more sophisticated and comprehensive term to understand the complexities of ‘subaltern’ groups.

In order to understand this intellectual operation, we need again to take the context into account. As early as 1982, an article had appeared in Punto de Vista, signed by PEHESA, which made clear the political implications of the historical research agenda that was to be unfolded. Despite the troubled political history of the country, marked by institutional instability, weak governments and military coups, there must be ‘nests’ of democracy in the Argentine past—and it was the historian’s task to find them in order to strengthen the democratic experience that was then starting over. Those ‘democracy nests’ could be found, PEHESA argued, in the many social, mutualist, cultural or political institutions that had flourished among the ‘popular sectors’ of the pre-Peronist period. The class character of many of those institutions and organizations—and the presence of class habits, class languages, class discourses and class political programs—was thus overlooked in order to stress the way in which the ‘popular sectors’ showed a somehow persistent ‘democratic’ character. For the argument to make sense, upward social mobility and integration needed to be stressed more than class differentiation and class conflict. Not surprisingly, in this context ‘popular sectors’ was preferred to ‘working class’ (PEHESA, 1982).

Even though from its very title The Making made clear that its objective was to deal with the formation of the ‘working class’—not even ‘classes’, as Thompson pointed out in the Preface—this shift towards the use of ‘popular sectors’ was done without questioning Thompson’s conclusions and perspectives, but rather vindicating it as part of the same tradition. As two of the main historians of the PEHESA pointed out,

We found it necessary to find categories that fit social contexts in which industrial workers were not the hegemonic group among popular sectors. We learned a lot from historians such as Hobsbawm or Thompson. But we were cautious enough to avoid mechanical transpositions of their conclusions, drawn from European societies, to our case. The most notable characteristic trait of Buenos Aires society, its strong social mobility and the even stronger expectations it brought about, conspired against the formation of strong and consistent class identities (Gutiérrez y Romero, 1995: 15).
As Agustín Nieto (2013) has recently noted, a subtle shift was made in three directions: from ‘working class’ to ‘popular sectors’; from ‘consciousness’ to ‘culture’; from ‘class struggle’ to ‘social conflict’. As a result, they borrowed Thompson’s anti-structuralism and his critique of one-sided politically-biased history of the political and institutional organizations of the labor movement, but not his vindication of a compromised history, his defense of the concept of ‘class’ nor the importance he gave to the role of class struggle in the making of that ‘non-deterministic’ history of society, which, as Harvey Kaye has pointed out, was one of the major characteristics of British Marxist historians.

Despite its promising development after 1983, labor history was to lose ground by the end of that decade. The collapse of Alfonsín’s government, that resulted in the ‘neoliberal’ presidencies of Carlos Menem (1989-1999), but also an international context marked by the disintegration of the Soviet Union, are the background against which many historians began to move away from their interest in the history of workers—whatever their theoretical perspectives—and to focus on aspects related to political and intellectual history. If, in the mid-1980s, ‘working class’ had been replaced by ‘popular sectors’, now even the concern with the history of the oppressed was abandoned—some even dared to say, with André Gorz, that a farewell should be given to the working class. If not neglected—they would continue to be read by almost every undergraduate student—British Marxist historians, and E.P. Thompson in particular, would not be as influential as in previous years.

And still, we must one more time take a look at some exceptions. As a matter of fact, it is possible to trace another set of studies in labor history that struggled to make their way in spite of PEHESA’s ‘orthodoxy’. Indeed, during the late 1980s but especially in the 1990s, we find a handful of historical accounts produced by younger historians more closely linked to leftist organizations that also claimed the influence of Thompson’s social history (Pozzi, 1988; Salas, 1990; Camarero and Schneider, 1991; Pozzi and Schneider, 2000, among others). They were concentrated mainly on discussing the post-Peronist period, and especially the political radicalization and labor unrest of the late 1960s and early 1970s, a topic that had been hardly assessed by the Argentine social historians of the 1980s but attracted more scholars after the publication of Daniel James’ *Resistance and integration* in 1988.

Heterogeneous as they were, it is still possible to identify some common features they shared. First, they did not deny their political allegiances with different trends of the left. Second, they spoke of the ‘working class’ and gave a key role to class conflict. Third, they did not neglect an analysis of the political currents of the left. As late as 2001, three important historians of this younger generation addressed Thompson’s influence in their work. They came forward to argue against the PEHESA historians’ notion of ‘popular sectors’ and vindicated the use of ‘working class’ as one of Thompson’s key contributions to social and labor history. Interestingly enough, they stressed an aspect of Thompson’s work that had been neglected by previous scholarship: his political commitment. ‘He forced us’, they argued, ‘to study History and socialism in a different way, placing liberty at the center of any socialist and revolutionary project’. A dispute about the ‘uses’ of Thompson developed, as they criticized the social historians of the 1980s for ‘moving too far away the
boundaries of labor history and dissolving the category of working class’ (Pozzi, Camarero and Schneider, 2001: 201-202).

**Recent trends in labor history**

Pozzi, Camarero and Schneider’s article was published in 2001, a year that was undoubtedly a turning-point in recent Argentine history. In the midst of the worst economic crisis in the country’s history, a massive popular movement—in many ways resembling last year’s unrest in Egypt, Spain, Turkey or Brazil—took the streets against the government, leading to a major political crisis. The years that followed witnessed an upsurge of political activism, especially among the youth. It is not surprising that in this context should flourish studies on the new social movements, especially the organization of the unemployed—or *piqueteros*. As the 1980s new social history, many of the new investigations tried to question traditional categories and stressed the need of using more ‘complex’ theoretical frameworks that went beyond the analysis of the workers’ movement. The context, however, was different: the focus was now not on searching for ‘democratic’ patterns among the ‘popular sectors’ but rather on understanding new ‘social movements’ where working class presence seemed to be just one among others.

If assessments of recent history were common, accounts of previous periods, especially the pre-Peronist years, were now scarcer. Moreover, the study of social movements and conflict seemed to be mainly a subject that attracted sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists, interested in understanding the consequences of the country’s economic and social crisis. The impetus social history had gained during the 1980s was now weakened: political and intellectual history of the elite again attracted major attention—albeit not with the restricted institutional perspective that had been dominant during much of the 20th century. Cultural history, even the ‘linguistic turn’, was also vindicated, although actual research on those topics was modest.

Still, some advances were made. Gender studies, which gained momentum internationally during the 1980s, struggled to make their way during the 1990s and afterwards. Following Joan Scott’s influence, many historians helped incorporate gender relations to ‘Thompsonian’ frameworks —they contributed to show that we may speak of ‘workers’ but without forgetting that such a collective is formed by different kinds of individuals, with uneven access to power and cultural, symbolic and material goods (Lobato, 2007; Bravo, Gil Lozano and Pita, 2008; Andújar, 2009, among others). Many researchers are even moving away from discussing the links between gender and class and giving gender studies a more autonomous place.7

Less progress has been made, however its importance, in including ethnic and racial problems in broader labor studies. As a matter of fact, studies on these subjects are few, and scarcely linked with global assessments on the formation of the working class. In general terms, it confirms what Peter Winn has recently noted in a debate with Marcel van der Linden—that many questions, perspectives and frameworks that shape current

7 The work done by the Instituto Interdisciplinario de Estudios de Género (IIEGE) at the University of Buenos Aires has contributed to new research on this field.
international historiography, especially in relationship with ‘Global Labor History’, are still struggling to develop in many Latin American countries, including Argentina (Winn, 2012). It is possible to find, however, an increasing interest in the political and intellectual history of the left, a subject somehow neglected by the social historians of the 1980s. It has resulted in new accounts on first stages of the labor movement and Communist, Socialist and Anarchist currents (Camarero and Herrera, 2005; Camarero, 2007; Tarcus, 2007, just to mention some of them). The work done by the Centro de Documentación e Investigación de la Cultura de Izquierdas (CeDInCI), a library and archive on the history of the labor movement and the left helped to promote studies on the subject.

In sum, what is the current situation of labor history in Argentina? On the one hand, it must be pointed out that it is an active field of research, with scores of young students and professors dedicated to investigate different topics and regions. At academic events, panels and symposiums on labor history attract the attention of the public and are usually the most attended. On the other hand, it should be noted that it is now hard to find a common trend among different studies. Social history as it was understood in the 1980s has lost ground and political studies on the history of the left and the labor movement are now easier to find—still, they do not represent a return to ‘classical’ accounts on institutional history. Regional studies on the development of the labor movement in different parts of the country are progressing. Gender studies are certainly more common in recent years, but they are still trying to consolidate. Moreover, most recent trends in international historiography, as the reflections on a Global Labor History, remain unknown to many local historians.

E.P. Thompson’s influence is probably weaker today than in the 1980s, even though it is still an unavoidable reference for any scholar. Thirty years ago, as we attempted to show in this paper, his work played a key role in a historiographic renovation that was closely related to political events during the democratic transition of those years. And yet, in a very different context, E.P. Thompson still has something to say to a new generation of students, certainly influenced by the political activism of recent years and by an international context marked by popular movements and workers’ unrest. It is fair enough to believe—and hope—that Thompson’s political commitment will not be neglected and that a rich social history, scholarly, imaginative and engaged with the working class, can make its way in the next years.

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