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Edward Thompson: The Man, the Scholar, the Activist, Personal Recollections

Melvyn Dubofsky

Just as I was about to sit down and begin writing this paper, the Fall 2013 issue of the journal Labor arrived in my campus mailbox. As I thumbed through it quickly the first thing that caught my eye was a section devoted to evaluating Edward Thompson's Making of the English Working Class on the fiftieth anniversary of its original publication in the United Kingdom. Immediately I sat down and began to read carefully the evaluations of the Making by six distinguished historians. Then I began to think about the millions of words that previously had been written about the book and its author since it was first published in 1963. That body of work even included two books written by a former student of mine, Bryan Palmer, that covered Thompson's personal biography, his copious writings from essays in journals of the left, especially those that presaged the emergence of the British "new left" to his serious scholarly articles, poetry, and lone effort at fiction, The Sykaos Papers, and that focused most heavily on the impact and the scholarly controversies precipitated by the The Making of the English Working Class. And here this weekend we have read and listened to an array of papers that evaluate The Making from myriad perspectives, leaving me much in doubt that I could or should add all that much to reevaluating The Making on its fiftieth anniversary.

In the space and time allotted to me I will probably say more about Edward P. Thompson as person and scholar than about The Making per se. Let me state first that labor history and social history as fields of scholarly study would most likely have taken the course that they did whether or not Thompson had written and published the book. Well before 1963 what became categorized as the “new labor history” or “new social history”

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was taking form in the United States and continental Europe as well as in the United Kingdom. In the United States, David Brody had already published his book on steelworkers in the non-union era, Herbert Gutman had begun even earlier to publish articles about working-class culture and activity in minor historical journals, I had switched my primary field of study from more traditional aspects of nineteenth century U.S. political and economic history to a focus on how working people responded to the industrialization and corporatization of the U.S., the young Stephan Thernstrom, then still a man of the left, was pioneering the use of manuscript census records and city directories to trace ordinary working people who left no written accounts of their lives, and David Montgomery had left the factory floor to pursue a doctorate in history. In Europe the Annales school in France, the writings of Georges Haupt, and the scholarship of Eric Hobsbawm and George Rude more than hinted at the emerging forms that would come to dominate labor and social history.

What, then, made *The Making of the English Working Class* so remarkable a book? Unlike so many aspiring historians here and abroad who first read the book as graduate students and had their eyes opened to new and different approaches to the past by Thompson, I was already a credentialed academic teaching at a university and well into my research for a second book when, if I recall accurately some fifty years later, my interest was piqued by early reviews of the book. I ordered a copy of it immediately and obtained the third printing (1965) of the book by its original English publisher Victor Gollancz. That volume still sits dog-eared, heavily marked, and much thumbed on my bookshelf. Unlike conventional academic or scholarly studies, *The Making* was remarkable not just for its scale and scope (truly a big book with more than 800 pages of text, notes, and bibliography) but also for the brilliance of its language, quite poetical in places, and the power of its narrative. For me it had an impact quite like that of John Dos Passos’ *USA* trilogy or Charles and Mary Beard’s *Rise of American Civilization*, both of which I read and reread cover to cover while still a secondary school student. Or subsequently the writings of Richard Hofstadter whose *Age of Reform* led me as a graduate student away from older and more conventional approaches to the study of history toward an interest in the history of working people, then scarcely even a marginal component of conventional US history. Dos Passos, to be sure, was a novelist not a scholar and the Beards were outside academia when they wrote *The Rise*, all three free to be as unconventional as they desired. Hofstadter, by contrast, was very much a part of academia, comfortably and securely situated within one of the great American universities, Columbia, but still a person who wrote history that was far from conventional. Thompson’s book unlike those of Dos Passos and the Beards incorporated a standard scholarly apparatus in the form of full annotation, and at the bottom of the page to boot. Unlike Hofstadter who also provided annotation but rarely delved into the archives, Thompson dug deeply into buried and obscured sources, sources that he used to save his subjects from the “enormous condescension of posterity.”

One’s initial reaction to the book was awe, of being overpowered by Thompson’s prose and his ability to breathe life into the actions and aspirations of common folk. An awe that was reinforced when asked by a colleague who was then teaching a course in British history to convicts imprisoned at Illinois’s maximum security penitentiary in Joliet to speak to his prisoner students about the impact of the early industrial revolution on the United Kingdom. For my talk, I took *The Making* as my bible, at times reading lengthy passages word for word. Instructors at the prison were allowed to bring with them any written materials that they deemed essential to instruction but prisoners could themselves read
and keep only pre-approved materials. So impressed apparently were my convict students with Thompson’s book, at least the passages that I read to them, that when I finished my talk and prepared to leave Thompson’s book had disappeared from my desk. As the colleague who had invited me to the prison informed me afterward, the prisoner students were adept at sequestering temporarily the written materials that they desired to read more leisurely. He assured me that the prisoners would return the book the following week as mysteriously as it had disappeared. That, in fact, was what happened and my colleague also reported that several of the prisoners had read Thompson cover-to-cover, declaring him the finest and most powerful historian that they had yet to read.

Only after being swept off one’s feet as I was on an initial reading of The Making and were the prisoners, did you come to realize how narrow was the canvas painted by Thompson. He portrayed as the title proclaimed the English working class, not the emerging proletariat of the United Kingdom or Great Britain, no Scottish, Welsh, or Irish workers played prominent roles or merited cameo appearances. Even among his English workers, London and Yorkshire artisans enjoyed starring roles, the sad tale of the handloom weavers, perhaps the first victims of capitalism’s affinity for “creative destruction,” meriting far more attention than the first-generation of factory textile workers or coal miners, the latter subjects of Engels’ Condition of the English Working Class, types far more typical of the emerging working class. Few women merited attention as workers, whether employed in the still quite common proto-industrial household trades or as first-generation factory workers, though Thompson did pay careful attention to female preachers, notably Johanna Southcott, and radical writers among them. And the Empire and its military and merchant seaman ranks drawn heavily from the Kingdom’s periphery among Scottish, Irish, Welsh, and colonial subjects played no role. Neither did patterns of migration and spatial mobility among working people play a significant part in the narrative. Indeed, Thompson ended his narrative well before the United Kingdom/Great Britain became the world’s most urban and proletarian nation. Thompson’s working class had been made by the time of the Parliamentary reform act of 1832, its exclusion of workers from the franchise setting them off as a separate class and in Thompson’s telling presaging the emergence of Chartism as the first national working-class movement. Yet in 1832 and at the peak of Chartism, the United Kingdom remained in its majority a rural nation, industrial workers still a minority among its working class, the largest numbers still employed in agriculture and domestic service, sectors where capitalist wage relations were only partly practiced and forms of paternalism and reciprocity redolent of pre-industrial and pre-capitalist practices still held sway. Indeed, in 1832 and perhaps in 1848 as well much of Thompson’s working class was only partly proletarian. Not until the years, 1870-1914, as Eric Hobsbawm has asserted did a British working class and proletarian nation come into fuller existence.

Other discordant notes began to strike one on second and further readings of the book. Initially, the urge was to use Thompson’s model or more aptly his narrative describing the formation of the English working class and apply it to your own field of study, in my case US labor history. As I tried to do so, a disturbing thought struck me. Ever since my undergraduate studies in history, I had struggled against the tendency then dominant in the United States to define its story as exceptional. The more I sought to apply Thompson’s model of working-class formation or consciousness to the United States, the more I came to realize that he had built his own exceptional case, what he in a subsequent long essay characterized as “the peculiarities of the English.” Only many years later, in fact
only after I came to know Thompson as a colleague and friend, did I realize how powerful was his notion of English exceptionalism not just for Thompson but for others as well in his generation of English communist historians. I had decided to research and write an essay on the two most notable English-speaking syndicalist labor leaders, William D. Haywood, and Tom Mann. In doing so, I turned to what was then the most complete and useful life of Mann, Dona Torr’s multi-volume biography. Torr, of course, was a sort of Mother Superior to the British Communist historians’ group and Mann had ended his long and tumultuous trade union career as the Communist Party of Great Britain’s (CPGB) leading labor spokesman. Although the Torr biography of Mann bore her name as the author, Christopher Hill wrote much of the first volume and Thompson completed the project after Torr’s death. More remarkable still, much of the first volume covered history long before Mann’s birth, Hill writing at length about the origins of the rights of “free-born Englishmen” and the most radical aspects of the seventeenth-century revolution that he would later explicate more fully in his scholarly *The World Turned Upside Down*. Mann, then, as revealed in the Torr biography was the product of the singular, or exceptional development of English citizenship rights. Little wonder, then, that Thompson, in some sense really a child of the Empire (his father having spent and devoted the better part of his life to India and his mother an American), instead stressed and even delighted in the “peculiarities of the English.”

Now I would like to segue from an appreciation and critique of *The Making* to a peek at Thompson as a teacher and a person. In 1965 and 1966 when I first read the book and struggled to adapt its approach to my own research and writing, I had never met Thompson nor corresponded with him. Sometime in the year 1966 I received a note from a friend then studying in London suggesting that I apply for a position that had recently been advertised publicly in Britain, a two-year visiting appointment as a lecturer in American labor history at the newly-established University of Warwick’s Centre for the Study of Social History, headed by none other than Edward P. Thompson. Without a moment’s hesitation, I applied. Sad to say at least for me, the appointment instead went to David Montgomery, who over the next two years together with Thompson, created the Centre’s M.A. Program in Anglo-American Labor History. Having lost my bid for the position, I forgot about Warwick and the Centre though I continued to read Thompson and assign to my students his essays on “Time, Work Discipline, etc.,” “The Moral Economy of the Crowd.” And “Homage to Tom Maguire” as well as large chunks of *The Making*. And then, literally out of the blue, sometime in the fall of 1968, I received a letter from Thompson asking me to succeed Montgomery as the Senior Lecturer in American Labor History at the Centre for the Study of Social History. With scarcely any hesitation, I accepted Thompson’s offer. Thus began my personal association with Edward and Dorothy.

What followed was one of the oddest years in my academic life, a year that also proved especially notable for Thompson for two reasons that I will treat soon enough. The University of Warwick and the Centre for the Study of Social History were not at all what I

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expected. Despite the university's mailing address, it was not actually located in Coventry but some miles from city limits isolated in the Warwickshire countryside, a healthy hike from the closest public transportation. Not only was the institution unlike most in Europe situated in exurbia rather than within a city, its still unfinished state encouraged among students a sense of anomie. The white tiles that lined the façades of its two primary academic buildings continually fell away, necessitating the erection of scaffolding to protect pedestrians from descending tiles. The student union building that housed both the junior and senior common rooms was known by students as the “Airport Lounge” because it resembled most closely the architecture of sterile mid-twentieth century airport terminals and their lounges. The Centre was scarcely a more impressive operation. It consisted of Thompson as its director, me as the visiting senior lecturer in American labor history, and a part-time secretary. We had two offices to share, a seminar room for our classes, and no library of our own. The history department had a full array of faculty but Thompson directed the great majority of doctoral students (in fact, nearly all of them) who chose to associate with the Centre rather than the department and pursued their degrees in the typical British manner, by independent research not course work. In fact, the only course offered by the Centre was a year-long M.A. seminar in Anglo-American Labor History. That year the course members, about a dozen in all, consisted of a mixture of British and foreign students, nearly all of the latter American. The doctoral students who floated in and out of the Centre were mostly British but included several North Americans.

The first term that ran from October through mid-December proceeded like a normal academic term. Thompson and I got to know our M.A. students whom we met with weekly at our regularly scheduled seminar and whom we interacted with more informally around the Centre and in social setting off campus. The readings and subjects that we set jointly for the seminar scarcely strayed far from the conventional topics of labor history as we read and talked about working conditions, worker organizations, strikes, labor leaders, and working-class politics. Readers of The Making would likely have been surprised at the conventionality of the seminar whose subject matter rarely touched on gender (though the seminarians included more women than were then typical in history graduate courses), hardly ever on empire, rarely if ever moved beyond the borders of the U.S. or U.K. and might to many readers of Thompson have even seemed crudely materialist in approach. American readers of Thompson might have been even more surprised at what he chose to teach Warwick history first-degree students as a special subject, the romantic poets, especially Wordsworth and Blake. Back then I suspect that most American readers of The Making were unaware that Thompson had never trained formally as an historian, that his first scholarly book was a crudely Marxist, or should I say Stalinist, biography of the late nineteenth century English radical and utopian William Morris, although they may have been aware of his more political and polemical writings in The New Reasoner and later the early issues of the New Left Review, or the role he played in promoting the early British New Left. Thompson the poet and indeed romantic was a revelation even to me as I grew to know him better in my time at Warwick.

However conventional was our M.A. program and its weekly seminar there was a far different side to the Centre and to Thompson as reflected in the dissertation topics that his doctoral students chose to study, far more in tune with the cultural and social approaches to the past elucidated in The Making. Even more revealing and certainly more stimulating were the fortnightly seminars in which invited guests, including several of the Centre’s doctoral students, explored topics in social, cultural, and agricultural (economic) history.
Among the more notable invited guests were Richard Cobb, Gareth Stedman-Jones, John Gillis, Richard Andrews (a young scholar and student of Richard Cobb who studied the era of the French Revolution but failed to blossom fully as a mature scholar), John Saville. Doug Hay, a Canadian and one of Thompson’s doctoral students, and Peter Linebaugh, an American then a member of the M.A. group and soon to be a doctoral student, each of whom presented a paper on aspects of 18th century British law and crime. After each speaker completed his or her presentation, Thompson as chair would almost immediately enter the intellectual fray highlighting weak or suspect aspects of the presentation, posing difficult questions, and revealing the brilliance of an exceptional mind at work. From these fortnightly meetings and ongoing research by Thompson and his doctoral students emerged two pathbreaking books on crime and punishment in early modern England, *Albion’s Fatal Tree*, a collection of essays by Thompson’s students featuring one by Thompson himself on anonymous threatening letters, and *Whigs and Hunters*, Thompson’s own inquiry into repressive law in 18th century England that showed how far he had moved away from his formerly hard Marxist approach and how fully he had scrapped its base-superstructure model by revealing the degree to which the law had a life of its own independent of society’s economic base and its dominant class. Thompson’s revised life of William Morris republished in 1977 showed the same evolution in its author’s thoughts and beliefs as he stripped from it all its 1950s Stalinist over and undertones.

Otherwise that first term proceeded uneventfully scarcely hinting at what was soon to come. When I returned to campus immediately after the winter break we began the second term as we had the first. Our M.A. seminar met as usual, I picked up the special subject that I had been teaching first-degree students where I had left it, and Thompson scheduled a full array of fortnightly seminars. He also scheduled a series of five public lectures for me, the first of which convened uneventfully. The evening I was to deliver my second public lecture all hell broke loose on campus. As I mentioned earlier the university’s setting and ambience cultivated a feeling of anomic among its students. Student dissatisfaction was further heightened by the sense that Warwick had been turned into a ward of corporate capitalism with its Barclay’s Bank, Pressed-Steel Fisher, Courtaulds, and Rootes Motors professors. The afternoon of my scheduled lecture the France of May 1968 and the Columbia University of Spring 1968 came full-blown to Warwick as students occupied the Vice Chancellor’s Office and other campus buildings and refused to leave. We quickly learned that it was our M.A. students who formed the vanguard of the student occupiers and had seized the VC’s office. Not only had they and their student allies succeeded in shutting down the campus but the occupiers discovered a number of damaging documents in the VC’s files. Several in particular upset our M.A. students, Thompson, and others among the Warwick first-degree students. Among the documents unearthed were a series of letters and reports from executives at Rootes Motors and private detectives that they had hired describing talks that my predecessor, David Montgomery, had given to local trade union and Labour Party groups, suggesting that the university had in its employ a faculty member biased against business. Another series of letters included reports by company-hired investigators that complained about Warwick students circulating radical literature and petitions off-campus, as well as a letter from a school headmaster suggesting that the Vice Chancellor deny admission to a graduate whose political activities rendered him troublesome. To which the VC responded by telling the admissions office to “reject this man.” The Warwick students turned that document into a large poster featuring the VC’s full face, with the words “Reject this Man!” Thus enraged
students, including our Masters’ candidates, refused to relinquish the premises they had occupied, in effect shutting down the university. Not only did my public lecture series end prematurely but the entire second term terminated as well.

This was a situation in which Thompson put his way with words, his oratorical brilliance, and his politics to effective use. Ever the foe of that “great beast” capitalism, he saw the documents discovered in the VC’s files as conclusive evidence of the university’s submission to the “beast.” From the moment of the occupation he hurried to the defense of the student occupiers, stressing to them the urgency and salience of their actions. When our MA students asked that we hold our normally scheduled weekly seminar in the VC’s office, Thompson informed that they had a choice to make, they could behave as graduate students and pursue their studies or they could serve as radical political actors challenging the existing university order. They could not, however, play both roles simultaneously for each demanded total dedication. His message to our students reminded me of what he had said to me some months earlier when a group of young, radical US historians appealed to him to support their effort to capture the American Historical Association in their effort to oppose the U.S. war in Southeast Asia. How quaintly American, he remarked, thinking that you start a political revolution by taking over a learned society. Yet the mini-revolution that he saw occurring on the Warwick campus Thompson considered a true threat to the established order if not quite a revolutionary moment. He devoted his full energies and intellect to defending the student occupiers and their cause. He donned his best suit and spoke a perfect Oxbridge English to colleagues at special faculty meetings in which he demanded that they support the students. He gave interviews freely to local and national newspapers, explaining from his perspective what had led to the student rebellion at Warwick. And he made numerous appearances on BBC radio and television. He also recruited a small group of more radical young faculty to assist him in producing a Penguin educational special paperback in a matter of weeks and that bore the title *Warwick University Ltd, Industry, Management and the Universities*. In it he and his faculty allies skewered the Warwick administration and condemned the growing corporatization of British higher education. For the entire second term Thompson gloried in playing the role of agitator, serving as the contemporary scholar artisan counterpart to the early modern artisan radicals that he had limned so unforgettably in *The Making*.

I could never quite get a grip on who or what was the real Edward P. Thompson. In 1969-70 when I knew him best, like most of his former associates in the CPGB historians, Eric Hobsbawm serving as the most notable exception, his membership in the party was long past, his commitment to core principles of Marxism shaky at best, and I can’t imagine that he would have taken it as a compliment to be lauded for writing “scientific” or “social scientific history.” Around the Centre’s offices he wore sometimes raggedy trousers and tattered sweaters, chatted with students and visitors in a plain-spoken manner, and left his mane of prematurely graying hair uncombed. Yet when we attended the monthly meetings of the university’s Boards of the Arts or the Social Sciences (the history department was only in the former but the Centre was represented in both), he donned jacket and tie, combed his hair, and spoke perfect Oxbridge English, as he also did when he spoke at general faculty meetings. Despite his nominal membership in the Labour Party and earlier lengthy experience teaching ordinary people and trade unionists, unlike Montgomery, I do not remember his ever addressing a Labour Party meeting or a trade union group. I do remember, however, the evening when he and Dorothy invited me and my wife to join them for an evening at our local cinema and Edward and Dorothy turned up at our front door.
clothed impeccably (he in a suit and tie, she in a fashionable dress), an eminently respectable bourgeois couple. Their home in Leamington Spa, a spacious Georgian era town house located on a crescent of like residences, combined bourgeois respectability with English eccentricity (or perhaps “peculiarity” in Thompson’s preferred language). At a time when the British government was offering tax inducements and cash subsidies to people who renovated and modernized classical older residences, the Thompson’s home lacked central heating, modern plumbing, and revamped wiring.

Sometimes I thought that Edward was at war with himself, at times leading the life of a 20th century distinguished British academic and conventional bourgeois citizen and at other times playing the radical agitator, English eccentric, and admirer of pre-modern English ways. It was almost as if his own life was an example par excellence of the human agency and historical contingency that formed the core of his writings about the past. I always wondered whether the decision that he made early in 1970 to resign from his professorship at Warwick resulted from long consideration and thoughtful planning or had in effect been precipitated by the events of the second term, and his realization that British universities had lost their battle to remain beyond the influence of corporate capital. Indeed he had decided not just to resign from Warwick, an obvious instance of higher education’s surrender to the “beast,” but he also declined the offer of a professorship at Oxford. Thereafter the only academic positions that he held were short-term visiting professorships at North American universities. Not that he left behind his commitment and work as an historian for the public political activities that came to consume more and more of his time and energy as he led and served as the voice of European Nuclear Disarmament (END), sought to reintegrate the former Soviet bloc nations in Eastern Europe into a common European community, and pursued world peace. Even during these years, he edited Albion’s Fatal Tree, wrote Whigs and Hunters, The Poverty of Theory, revised his biography of William Morris, and wrote a new one of William Blake published posthumously.

Fifty years from now how will Thompson be remembered and for what? Will scholars and students still read The Making and learn from it? Will his scholarship prove more durable than his politics? Surely, by then, few celebrants, if they still survive, on the hundredth anniversary of The Making will have ever met Thompson or known him personally. To be remembered a half century after a century after publishing one’s “big book” and to have it discussed at two and half day conference by distinguished scholars is far more recognition and honor than any historian or scholar has a right to expect. However much the passage of time has opened The Making and its author to criticism, subjected Thompson’s ventures into “theory” to derision, and questioned his politics, his power to recreate the past and the lives of ordinary people with feeling and empathy remain undiminished.
E. P. Thompson and Japanese Left Wing Intellectuals: Why Wasn't His Major Work Translated for 40 Years?

Hideo Ichihashi

The first Japanese translation of *The Making of the English Working Class* was published in 2003, 40 years after the original appeared in English. Why did nobody translate it into Japanese for such a long time? This paper will try to trace the chequered history of the reception of Thompson and *The Making*, as well as his other influential writing in post-war Japan.

Thompson has many faces in Japan: New Left polemicist, labour and social historian with influential ideas on class and experience, social and cultural historian of the ‘moral economy’, and European anti-nuclear peace activist. These various Thompsons, however, do not seem to have met each other. In this paper, I will examine each of his faces in chronological order, although I regret that this time I have no space to discuss the Japanese reception of Thompson as a peace campaigner.

My paper consists of four sections. Firstly, I will describe the immediate post-war history of Marxism in Japan, focusing on the changing fortunes of the Japan Communist Party (JCP) and its relationship with Japanese left-wing intellectuals. It was against this background that Thompson as a polemicist of the British New Left was introduced in Japan. In the second section, the actual process as well as the reasons why Thompson was eagerly accepted by the Japanese New Left is examined. In the third section, the reception of *The Making* among Japanese historians and intellectuals is explored. In the last section, the reception and spread of the extremely influential concept of ‘moral economy’ among Japanese historians are related.

Although this paper draws mostly on written literature, I did interview several leading historians of different fields.

1. Post-war Japanese Left

1-1. The Japan Communist Party, Soviet Marxism and post-war Japanese left-wing intellectuals

In the immediate post-war period in Japan, Marxism and communists were greatly respected, commanding an unrivalled authority in the intellectual world. Before 1945, the only people who bravely and consistently raised any voice against Japanese militarism and fascism were JCP members. After the war, released from prison, the Japanese Communists re-launched their activities under the strong influence of the Soviet Communist Party. The Soviet Union was the mother country for socialism, as well as one of the ‘Big Three’ which had heroically defeated reactionary German militarism. Against this background, Japanese left-wing intellectuals felt that Soviet political and intellectual authority was difficult to refute. This Soviet-influenced Marxism, according to Norie Ishii, a professor of Soviet history, almost completely dominated new intellectual discourse in the post-war period.

The first dangerous sign of this unhealthy relationship with Stalinism appeared in 1950. Until then, the JCP had pursued the line of Parliamentarism and succeeded in gaining a certain amount of popular support. In the 1949 general election, the number of parliamentary seats (in the Lower Diet) won by the JCP was 35 with nearly 10% of the popular vote. However, in January 1950, Stalin criticised the JCP’s Parliamentarism and caused great confusion and a division of
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opinion among party members. Around the same time, from June 1950, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers, the occupational force in Japan till 1952, tried to destroy the party with its anti-Communist ‘Red Purge’, in which some 13,000 party members and supporters were driven out of their jobs. Then, only a few weeks after the Red Purge started, the Korean War broke out. The popular mood in Japan moved against the JCP. Making matters worse, in 1951, following a suggestion from Stalin, the JCP actually embarked on an illegal armed struggle. This did nothing but help to further dent the popularity of the party.

However, it seems that a belief in Marxism and the Communist Party among Japanese intellectuals was not really shaken, even in the second half of the 1950s. When he visited Japan in 1958 for a lecture tour, Ronald L. Meek, a British Marxist economist, cheerfully observed that ‘there is probably no other country in the world, outside the socialist camp, in which Marxism is as academically respectable as it is in Japan’.

Certainly, left-wing intellectuals still placed their trust in the party as the ‘vanguard of the proletariat’ which was deemed necessary for engineering political revolution. Liberal-Humanists and proponents of the westernized modernization of Japan, too, acknowledged the importance of the JCP. One reason is probably that they regarded the party as an important political organisation to combat increasingly strengthened reactionary political forces. Another reason, perhaps a more crucial one, is that they found it impossible to trust the ability and will of ordinary people to change society. Many Marxist-leaning intellectuals at that time, communists or liberals, seemed to regard ordinary Japanese people as politically regressive and passive, culturally inferior, and economically and socially preoccupied with their own families and immediate daily lives. They were prone to be influenced and manipulated by authority, and the intellectuals would have said that is why Japan had been taken over by the fascists before 1945. The post-war intellectuals did not doubt that they needed the vanguard, the elite, to lead the people into a more civilised new future.

1-2. The birth of the Japanese New Left

Outside the intellectual world, however, the downfall of the JCP in the 1950s was decisive. In the 1952 general election, the party lost all its seats. In order to try to halt this free-fall, in July 1955, it was decided at the JCP’s 6th National Conference (‘Rokuzenkyo’) that the illegal armed struggle would be abandoned and a united leadership was re-established. However, this U-turn upset young student members and workers who had been involved in the armed struggle. Moreover, this change of course was not achieved in a democratic way. It was a top-down decision, a pact agreed among senior sectarian executives.

Then, in February 1956, Nikita Khrushchev made his ‘Secret Speech’, and its contents were quickly translated and widely reported in the Japanese media. The JCP stuck to the line that whilst they condemned the personality cult of Stalin, there was nothing wrong with Stalinist control of the communist state and party. This means that democratically-oriented party members’ hopes for the democratisation of their own party were to be unfulfilled. As did happen elsewhere in the world, it was inevitable that some Marxist activists and intellectuals, especially amongst the younger generation, began to question the Stalinist principles on which the JCP’s policy, strategy and politics were based. The Hungarian uprising of 1956 further deepened their suspicion and doubts about Soviet-type Marxism. With the fact that it was Khrushchev’s government which invaded Hungary it became clear that a denunciation of Stalin himself was not enough. The first generation of the Japanese New Left was thus born.

1-3. The plural New Left in Japan

Although they were united in their anti-Stalinist stance, the first New Left in Japan was
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actually composed of quite diverse currents. First, within the JCP, a small opposition group who
demanded more democratic debate and decision making began to make public their protests
against the Stalinist party leadership. One historian argued that a young communist group from
Mito, a provincial town 120 kilometers north of Tokyo, produced the very first New Left journal in
Japan, *The Critique*, in August 1957. However, their challenge to the party leadership would not
make much impact; they were to be expelled a year later.

Second, ‘revolutionary Marxism’ emerged after the Hungarian uprising. Young Marxists
and Trotskyists, who could be called ‘fundamentalist communists’, were seeking to establish an
alternative anti-Stalinist communist party. Although they started as a small discussion group,
within a decade many sectarian groups sprang from them, to be known as the ‘extreme lefts’,
staging many violent direct confrontations with riot police. They believed in Leninist
vanguardism no less than did the JCP.

Third, another militant student organisation called the Communist League (‘Bund’) emerged in December 1958. It was born out of the Zengakuren, the largest national organisation of university students, once affiliated to the JCP. However, the student leaders took a critical stance towards the JCP after 1955, for they were not convinced by the abrupt top-down abandonment of the armed struggle line. Then, having been expelled by the JCP, they established an independent communist group, the Communist League. They were concerned with direct action and mass movements, claiming that the meaning of their existence could only be found in engaging in on-going mass struggle. Indeed, they were to play a spectacular role in the massive anti Japan-US security treaty demonstration in 1960, beginning with an invasion of the enclosed area of parliament.

Along with these developments of the first New Left, an important Marxist revisionism emerged within the JCP after 1956. The background was the independence of Japan in 1952 and the accelerated economic growth which started in the second half of the 1950s. In their analysis of contemporary Japan, the main enemy was now no longer the U.S. but big business; monopoly capital that supported and was supported by the Japanese government. Borrowing ideas from the theory and vision put forward by the Italian Communist Party and Antonio Gramsci, the so-called ‘Structural Reform’ theory was put forward as a Japanese way to socialism. Although the main thrust of this theory lay in an anti-monopolistic democratic position regarding the economy, it had much wider political, social and cultural implications. According to one observer, this Marxist reformism in Japan meant ‘change through complete implementation of the constitution (peace, independence, democracy), popular participation in politics, and a citizen-worker alliance against monopoly capitalism’. Simon Avenell, an academic of social movements in post-war Japan, claimed that ‘in the late 1950s, the theory found supporters in the JSP, the JCP, and among academics, activists, and even government bureaucrats who apparently saw it as a breath of fresh air after official revolutionary theory of the old left’.

Stuart Hall described the British New Left’s ‘struggle to ground socialism in a new
analysis of “our times” was primary and originating—where the whole New Left project began’. We could see a similar inspiration was shared among Japanese structural reformists. Indeed, as I mention later, it is among the intellectuals who advocated or were attracted to structural reform theory that we can find those who paid most attention to the British New Left.

The first Japanese New Left just described above were a small minority when they were born. For a while, they did not have much effect on the JCP and its membership. However, a much increased number of resignations as well as expulsions could be observed after 1959. The so-called ‘Anpo’ struggle and its failure in 1960 accelerated this trend. Many workers, students and citizens who were against the Prime Minister’s high-handed manner in the renewal of the Japan-US security treaty [‘Anpo’] took part in massive street demonstrations but the established
political leadership of the left, the JCP in particular, was widely criticised for failing to channel the movement’s enormous energy into viable political action. From start to last, the JCP did nothing but denounce the direct actions taken by the Zengakuren students as Trotskyist adventurism.

2. Reception of E. P. Thompson as a Polemicist of the British New Left

It was during these post-Anpo protest years that the British New Left, particularly E. P. Thompson’s view, was anxiously introduced into the Japanese left-wing intellectual world. The enormous energy of the Japanese people expressed against the government and the ultimate defeat of the protest movement made some Japanese Marxist intellectuals re-examine the validity of their own analytical framework for understanding contemporary Japanese society. A new British left-wing journal, *New Left Review*, was launched at this time, just a few months before the Anpo movement came to its end. A few Marxist intellectuals of a progressive and liberal type in Japan immersed themselves in the world of the newly emerging British New Left, looking for new perspectives, vision and inspiration.

As far as my research goes, the first mention of the name E. P. Thompson in Japan can be found in the late spring of 1961, in the introduction to the short-lived New Left monthly magazine, *Gendai Shiso* [Contemporary Ideas]. This magazine was edited by Ikutaro Shimizu, then a Marxist social critic and an influential opinion leader of the Anpo struggle. He wrote that ‘the movements exploring ideas for the New Left had already developed in many countries’. Here, he referred to E. P. Thompson, along with Claude Bourdet in France, saying that Thompson urged ‘the necessity of the independent movement exploring ideas, and placed his hope on the development of the student movement’. Shimizu felt that new thinking for social transformation was acutely needed after the defeat of the Anpo struggle, and observed that ‘in many countries, the same issues and questions exist as do in Japan, and the same movements exist as do ours’.

At almost the same time, a thoughtful introduction to E. P. Thompson’s two articles published in *Out of Apathy*, ‘Revolution’ and ‘Revolution, Again!’, was written by Masao Maruyama (b. 1914), arguably the most important intellectual of early post-war Japan. Maruyama, a distinguished academic in politics and political thought, explained the reasons why he wanted to introduce the British New Left to a Japanese left-wing audience. First, the British case would contribute to and enrich ‘structural reform’ theory in Japan, which, until that time, had only referred to the Italian case. Second, Maruyama was impressed by certain characteristics of the British New Left: its diverse membership, the active and open exchange of criticism among members, and the way in which it challenged the issues and problems presented by post-war new world reality. Maruyama suggested that the New Left in Japan, whose framework of thinking was not updated but was extremely old fashioned and was too often preoccupied just with the idea of building new sectarian organisations, could learn something refreshing from the British example.

In a lengthy dialogue with Noboru Sato (b. 1916), the leading proponent of structural reform theory in Japan who was about to leave the JCP, Maruyama paid close attention to what Thompson and his New Left colleagues aimed to achieve. Maruyama’s reading of E. P. Thompson apparently finds a parallel in his new reading of the post-war affluent society in Japan. Maruyama repeatedly told how Thompson had emphasised that revolutionary breakthrough could become possible in every sphere of society and, thus, affluence and apathy should be recognised not as negative conditions but as opportunities from which a breakthrough, however small or fragmented, could be realised. Marxist intellectuals should try to find and nurture these latent breakthroughs beyond their narrow perspectives of power, human agency (subject), and social change. Often it was the case that conventional Marxist thinking itself contributed to strengthen the existing social order. Ideas and actions, of imaginative, creative and even of a utopian
character should be encouraged.

Maruyama continued to argue that supposedly passive masses could make a political choice, not just from their place of work and the labour movement, but also from their own privatised sphere of daily life and leisure. A TV audience, for example, Maruyama suggested, could practice a critical intervention in the existing social and cultural order by writing their own comments and criticisms to the media.

Maruyama himself placed his own hopes for social transformation of Japan on the possibility of sharing a ‘radical social consciousness’ between organised manual workers, who had been regarded as the genuine proletariat and the agency for bringing out revolution, and the newly emerging and rapidly increasing number of white-collar workers who had been suspected and denounced as a part of the bourgeoisie, and thus the enemy of revolution. He named the organised workers’ shared sense with other people as ‘citizenship’ by which he meant that people bear a responsibility for enhancing democracy. Maruyama suggested that intellectuals and activists in Japan should pay more attention to broaden this kind of shared consciousness of democratic citizenship, and emphasised the importance of the very process of acquiring such a sense. Maruyama said that history itself has always been a process, a dynamic movement of solidarity.

Maruyama and structural reform theorist Sato agreed that Thompson’s ideas were different from those of ‘Trotskyists’, a younger, radical fraction of the Japanese New Left. They criticized the Trotskyist New Left in Japan that while they emphasised their determined radicalism for making revolution, they tended to leave behind the issue of a qualitative transformation of society. Violent revolution itself would not bring about a new society.

Hiroshi Mizuta (b.1919), a Liberal from the pre-war period and a world renowned scholar on the ideas of Adam Smith, also showed great interest in the British New Left. Around the end of 1959, he visited E. P. Thompson’s home in Yorkshire, as well as attended the inauguration conference of New Left Clubs in Glasgow. With this first-hand knowledge, he wrote articles on the early development of the British New Left for both academic and popular audiences.

There is evidence that historians, too, showed some interest in the then much discussed British New Left. The authoritative left-wing historical journal, Rekishigaku Kenkyu [Historical Studies], published a short review article of the recently published Out of Apathy. The review was written by two young promising political scientists, Kawai Hidekazu and Yasuhiro Maeda, although no follow-up comments, criticism or discussion were made.

1961 was, therefore, the year when quite an enthusiasm for the British New Left was observed in Japan. In 1962, a two volume collection of original New Left Review articles was edited and translated into Japanese by another structural reform advocate; and, in 1963, the first New Left book edited by Thompson, Out of Apathy, was translated and published.

In addition, against the background of the rapidly deteriorating Cold War situation in 1961, Thompson contributed an essay to the leading Japanese opinion monthly, Sekai [The World], in February 1962. This essay was specially written in response to a direct request from the magazine, and was probably published only in Japanese. In the essay titled ‘Let’s Cut off the Logic of the Cold War’, Thompson writes that the biggest initiative for the abolition of nuclear weapons must come from non-aligned countries and independent worldwide people’s movements for peace. The CND in Britain was one example of the latter. Although the CND faced grave difficulty in channelling its popular support into a viable political force, Thompson suggested that all political parties in Britain had to take into consideration the increased public sentiment for nuclear disarmament.

Between 1960 and 1963, unmistaken interest in the British New Left, E. P. Thompson in
particular, was shown in the Japanese intellectual world.

3. Reception of *The Making* among Japanese Historians and Intellectuals

3-1. *The Making* and Japanese labour historians

*The Making* appeared in Britain in the same year that the Japanese translation of *Out of Apathy* was published. That was in 1963. However, no full review of *The Making* appeared in Japan. It seems that the first historian who referred to it was Etsuko Yasukawa (b. 1936), a Japanese Marxist historian of British socialist thought and the labour movement. In 1967, she published an article which examined the recent ‘turn’ in British labour history which occurred in the late 1950s and 60s. Yasukawa looked at this turn by focusing on the question of class consciousness: how do British new Marxist labour historians historically explain the contemporary English working-class’s apparent contentment with the capitalist system?

In order to try to answer this question, Yasukawa examined two new, opposing historical understandings of the nature of the English working class, i.e., those of Thompson and Perry Anderson. Anderson’s influential article, ‘Origins of the Present Crisis’ had been translated into Japanese in 1965, and Thompson’s fierce criticism of it, ‘The Peculiarities of the English’, had already appeared in *The Socialist Register*. Yasukawa seemed to generally agree with Anderson’s pessimistic analysis of the English working class as a historical force. With regard to Thompson, while Yasukawa acknowledged his contribution in highlighting a wide range of radical traditions among the English working class, she criticised Thompson for burying himself so much in the radical, democratic tradition of the English labour movement that he ignored structures that defined working class people’s work and lives. Yasukawa, however, was not happy with either Anderson or Thompson. She then introduced the ‘Third Man’ and hailed him as the alternative to culturalist Thompson and Leninist Anderson. According to Yasukawa, who regarded the ‘Third Man’s’ empirical research methods as solid and his argument that in England the ‘radical nonconformist tradition’ of English labour could possibly nurture the Leninist historical agency was more convincing. The ‘Third Man’ was, of course, Eric Hobsbawm. Yasukawa decided that he was the key Marxist labour historian who had turned the historical image of the British working class from ‘the Fabian workers who would try to fix their status quo within the capitalist system, to the self-conscious proletariat who would change and deny the existing social system’.

An article which discussed *The Making* more substantially appeared in 1968. The author, Takehiko Sato, took up four issues: class consciousness, religious questions, the Luddites, and post-Napoleon war radicalism. He rightly acknowledged that the revolutionary spirit of the British New Left was behind *The Making*, and emphasised the significance of Thompson’s cultural understanding of class rather than a materialistic view of it. But Sato, too, casts doubt on Thompson’s assumption that the tradition of English working-class radicalism had the potential for revolutionary social change, again siding with Hobsbawm.

In the 1960s, Japanese left wing historians seemed to find it difficult to give due attention to *The Making* except to admit that it was meticulously researched. Even Masami Kimura (b. 1920), who, in 1957, spoke highly of Thompson’s work, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, saying it began a new phase of interpretation of Morris as a committed socialist, would make no comment on *The Making* ten years later when he surveyed recent research on ‘British Socialist Thought’. Instead, he did introduce articles written by Anderson and Tom Nairn which criticised *The Making*, without referring to any other viewpoints or counter arguments by Thompson himself.

You can find academics who read *The Making* in the 1960s in a less negative light. They were those who were interested in the history of Methodism. Methodism was quoted in Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* as one of the religions which led to the
rise of western capitalism. Modernist Japanese intellectuals would say that until Japanese people learned the spirit of capitalism, the re-building and development of the Japanese state and society was impossible. In the 1960s, because of the relative decline of the popularity of Marxism during the rapid development of post-war Japanese capitalism, this modernist interest became more widespread than ever.

Japanese historians of social thought and religion of Europe, therefore, paid attention to historical works which dealt with Methodism, especially early Methodism or the Wesleyans. ‘Progress of the Industrial Revolution in England and the Spread of Methodism’ and ‘Methodism, Capitalism and Socialism’ are titles of articles published in the late 1960s, and they referred to Thompson’s findings on Methodism in The Making. This kind of historian’s approach to Methodism, however, was to disappear; partly because of the fact that Japan was by then more or less well industrialized without Weber’s Protestant ethics which were supposedly behind European industrialization. By 1979, an American book entitled Japan as No. 1 became a bestseller in Japan.

Let me summarize the reasons why the reception of The Making in the Japanese intellectual world of the 1960s was rather poor. Firstly, as is clear both in the case of Yasukawa and Sato, Japanese labour historians’ ideological stance up to the 1970s was constrained by a Leninist-Marxism view of class struggle, revolution and historical agency. This was the very view that Thompson challenged in The Making, as well as in other writings such as ‘Revolution’ published in the New Left Review.

Secondly, Japanese labour historians’ research interests up to the end of the 1960s concentrated on a later period than that which was examined in The Making. The motive behind this research was to explore the historical logic of British trade unionism, which would serve as a framework by which the contemporary capitalism of Japan could be analysed. Thus, 1960s studies of British labour history in Japan were theory-oriented rather than empirical. We should remember that, however, at least up to the late 1970s it was not easy for any Japanese historians to make full use of unpublished primary sources. Most historians in Japan, who had no chance to visit archives themselves, had to rely heavily on secondary sources.

Thirdly, many topics Thompson took up in his 900 pages-long work were not familiar to Japanese post-war historians, or should I say, they did not seem important to them. Most post-war historians in Japan had been trained in the world of so-called ‘post-war historical studies’. In ‘post-war historical studies’ where Marxists and modernists dominated, the analysis of economic base structures tended to be deemed most important. Thus, it is not surprising that in 1965, Shinichi Yonekawa (b. 1932), a promising young economic historian, translated Perry Anderson’s ‘Origins of the Present Crisis’, and it was published in the influential liberal/left intellectual journal, Shiso [Ideas]. The article is about the history of British capitalism, a topic far more familiar to Japanese historians, and was approached from an orthodox Marxist point of view. All the same, Hobsbawm, who wrote economic history as well as an elaborate general history of modern capitalism, was far more popular among both Marxists and modernists. Japanese historians were not, and perhaps still are not, accustomed to Thompson’s approach and style of writing.

In addition, the ‘post-war historical studies’ school tended to focus only on the ‘progressive’ elements of active human agency in history. They must have been puzzled why Thompson took up such retrogressive topics as labour religion and popular culture. If they had read it they might have wondered if there were any lessons they could learn for a post-war Japan which should supposedly march forward to a rationally modernised future.

3-2. Reception of Thompson and The Making in the wider intellectual world after 1963
When we consider the earlier enthusiastic reception for Thompson as a polemicist of the British New Left, the absence of interest in *The Making* in the wider intellectual world of Japan needs some explanation.

Between 1963 and 1968, the years between the first Gollancz hardback and the second Pelican paperback edition, post-war Japanese society entered another new stage. Immediately after the end of the Anpo struggle, a realignment and renewal of the left movement was much hoped for and sought after. New, updated Marxist theories which could more adequately analyse the affluent contemporary Japanese society and provide a more valid prescription for mass social movements were asked for, and on the way British New Left thinking as well as the Italian communist way to socialism were consulted. However, these hopes were soon dashed. While rapid economic growth continued, the decline, stagnation and fragmentation of the political left, both within and outside parliament became ever more apparent. Labour and social movements too were on the wane.

The structural reform programme inspired by both Italian Communism and the British New Left was no exception: by 1963 it was outlawed and purged by the JCP, and the Japan Socialist Party failed to adopt it as their official policy. Indeed, the Japanese translation of *Out of Apathy* in 1963 could be seen as words of farewell to it.

If the above general description is broadly correct, it should not be a surprise that in the 1960s more attention was paid not to Thompson but to the younger generation of the British New Left, Perry Anderson in particular. In 1968, a collection of New Left Review articles, *Towards Socialism*, edited by Perry Anderson and Robin Blackburn, appeared in Japanese. The renewed, theoretically rigorous British New Left appealed more to the second generation of the radicalised Japanese New Left.

The Japanese second generation New Left flexed their muscles in the late 1960s and early 70s. The background was the Vietnam War. In Japan, the Vietnam War started to be widely reported from 1965 after the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam, and was rapidly perceived by the majority of Japanese people as an unjust war. The U.S. military bases in Japan, especially those in the far south islands of Okinawa, played a crucial role in support of U.S. military action in Vietnam: U.S. soldiers were stationed and trained in Japan on the way to Vietnam, were sent back to Japan for rest and treatment of injuries, and then dispatched to the war front again; bombers, nuclear submarines and aircraft carriers frequently called at various land and sea ports in Japan; and, orders of various supplies such as clothes and food were made to Japanese manufacturers. Many Japanese people could see that not just the Japanese government but also society itself was deeply drawn into the war that was killing the Vietnam people in brutal ways. In areas which had U.S. bases and military facilities and where serious accidents and crimes had repeatedly occurred throughout the post-war years, anti-war direct actions were often organised.

Students who violently revolted on campus from around 1968 radicalised the anti-Vietnam war movement and demonstrations, and inevitably alienated citizens and organised workers who preferred peaceful actions. With hindsight, the ideas of social change of Thompson, who was fairly critical of the ‘Cataclysmic Model’ of revolution, seemed much more in accord with those of citizen anti-Vietnam war activism embodied in Beheiren [Citizen’s League for Peace in Vietnam] movement.

Generally speaking, during these turbulent years, both students and academics could not find much time for their own research. On campus, any person of conscience could not avoid asking themselves what they were studying or researching, and for what and why? It was only in the 1970s when student revolts and the anti-war movement gradually faded away that new types of labour and social history emerged.
4. Moral Economy and Japanese Historians

4-1. The 1970s and 80s: Thompson as a historian of moral economy

In Japan, my impression is that Thompson has been better known as a historian of ‘moral economy’ and ‘rough music’ than as the author of *The Making*. Thompson was perceived as a social and cultural historian of pre-industrial society, rather than a labour and political historian of the early 19th century English working class.

It cannot be denied that Thompson himself shifted his research interests from the 19th century to the 18th century, as well as from class struggle to popular culture. The first major outcome of this was ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the 18th Century’ published in 1971. This was to be his most well-read academic essay in Japan, not just among students of British and European history, but also among those of the history of social movements of Japan.

In January 1973, Kondo Kazuhiko (b. 1947), a then MA student at Tokyo University, published his first long essay on popular movements in 18th century Manchester, in which Thompson’s article on moral economy was referred to, probably for the first time in Japan. Another Kondo article of 1976 which introduced recent trends of labour and social history in Britain very much enlightened Japanese historians. In the article, after introducing Hobsbawm’s 1952 pioneering essay on the Luddites and past activities and the contribution made by the British Society for the Study of Labour History, Kondo moved on to his main target: E. P. Thompson. He summarised the crucial points of ‘The Moral Economy’, placing it in, and comparing it to, other relevant literature from both Britain and Japan. Thanks to the article, Japanese historians, both of older generations and new, were now, perhaps for the first time, able to grasp E. P. Thompson as a historian. Adding to Kondo’s efforts, other academics, too, began to write about recent trends from labour history to social history as well as a newly emerging history movement from below: the ‘History Workshop’ movement.

There are particular societal reasons why, in 1970s Japan, ‘The Moral Economy’ was welcomed and the turn to social history took off. After the defeated student revolts at the end of the 1960s, it finally became clear to everyone on the left that the orthodox Marxist view of revolutionary social change could no longer be convincing. In the last analysis, the direct actions of the students failed to attract wider support even among students themselves let alone ordinary Japanese people. Often, order on campus was restored with violent intervention from the state, without much institutional change or gains for students. People continued to vote for the same old conservative party which happily dominated the government. The majority of Japanese people seemed to enjoy their relative affluence more than ever. In these circumstances, by 1970, a few student activists left the campus behind and started to be involved in wide ranging social movements, such as anti-pollution ones, being fought at a local community level by local residents, fishermen and farmers.

Among left-wing academics, too, it was widely felt that the traditional understanding of social change was awfully inadequate. Historians interested in the study of social movements in particular tried harder than ever to rethink people’s direct action in the past. The ‘Research Group of Social Movement’ which began to take shape in 1971 was a prime example of those young historians. The group was composed of historians of various European societies, mostly graduates from Tokyo University, who were to be leading historians in future Japan. One of their main, common concerns was to try to explore the logic of each social and popular movement from within. They tried to analyse past social/popular movements further by situating them in the daily worlds in which participants actually lived.

This intellectual trend towards people’s lives, culture and rituals pushed historians to look into research findings made outside their own discipline. Across the Japanese intellectual world, the 1970s witnessed a surge of interest in anthropology and ethnography. For historians,
anthropological and ethnographical knowledge about popular culture and rituals, as well as their insights into how social order was structured, was helpful for a historical understanding of the ordinary, daily world of the people. Thompson’s essays on ‘The Moral Economy’ and ‘Rough Music’ show us how historians can usefully make use of anthropology and ethnography.

Increasing access to primary sources also encouraged Japanese historians to rethink frameworks through which popular movements were analysed. A few members of the ‘Research Group of Social Movements’, for example, had opportunities to study abroad for a year or two, exploring archive materials themselves. More detailed, nuanced historical explorations into people’s lives and culture could be made possible.

Moreover, the concept of ‘moral economy’ allows for a much wider understanding of a society. It is a concept similar to that of ‘hegemony’, through which the order of a whole society could be analysed. But it is very much hegemony from below, rather than the Gramscian idea of hegemony from above. Kondo saw the future development of historical study in this direction. He suggested that moral economy is not the key to the understanding of the daily life of the people but of their complicated relationships to the wider society and the state on the eve of the industrialised society.

Michio Shibata (b. 1926), a Japanese historian of modern France and Europe, took Kondo’s line. Shibata published his influential study on modern European history, Modern World and the Popular Movements in 1983. In the book, Shibata, employing the moral economy concept, emphasised that in 18th century English popular movements people’s recourse to force was not resistance to the existing social order but a warning to the authority and power of the local community. Thompson might have agreed to disagree with this particular point, but Shibata’s own insight into moral economy provided an opportunity in which radical historians of Japanese peasant uprisings could re-examine their rather simplistic view that the crux of the study of popular movements only lied in discovering people’s experience of resistance to power. Indeed, for Takao Tsurumaki (b. 1948), a leading historian of peasant revolts in Japan, the concept of moral economy was a catalyst for his critical re-evaluation of his past research findings and perspectives. He suggested that historians were now able to liberate themselves from their own modernist, progressive reading of popular movements, in order to discover the actual historical meanings of popular movements from within.

Tsurumaki was firstly acquainted with the concept of moral economy by reading Shibata’s book. Shortly after that, he encountered two essays written by Yoshio Yasumaru (b. 1934), a leading historian of Japanese social thought, which employed and discussed the idea of moral economy. According to Tsurumaki, Yasumaru was the first Japanese historian who applied the idea of moral economy to the study of popular disturbance in Japan. Tsurumaki also confirmed that a research group of historians of popular movements in Japan discussed Thompson’s moral economy essay in its fully translated but unpublished version. Japanese academics of Japanese history were not creatures who showed much interest in work done abroad. Thus, it is significant that from around 1984 there was a surge of interest in ‘The Moral Economy’ among historians of Japanese popular movements and popular thought.

I mentioned the name, Yasumaru, who deserves special attention. He is a multi-disciplinary minded academic historian, exceptionally sensitive to the latest developments of the intellectual world; a rare creature. When a part of Hobsbawm’s ‘Primitive Rebels’ was translated into Japanese in 1971, he bought the original English edition to find common research interests in it. He also kept in touch with Japanese historians of Europe, and often heard the names of Hobsbawm and Thompson. Yasumaru also told me that he read and was impressed by Kondo’s articles which discussed moral economy.

However, according to Yasumaru, it was his visit to the U.S. which actually made him read
Thompson's work in English. He stayed at Berkeley in 1980 as a visiting academic, and there he got advice from Irwin Scheiner, an eminent scholar of Japanese history, that he should read *The Making*. Yasumaru duly embarked on reading it. Although he could not read it all through for it was too long and the details were too difficult to understand for a non-specialist of English history, Yasumaru accomplished reading the original moral economy essay in English. Then, he made use of the notion of moral economy in his 1984 essay on popular movements in Japan. This is how Japanese historians of Japanese history began to make use of the concept of moral economy.

4-2. 1980s and the social history boom

In 1982 when the idea of moral economy was to make a wider impact on Japanese historians, another influential Thompson article, 'Rough Music: Le Charivari Anglais' which had appeared in the Annales in 1972, was translated into Japanese. From the early 1980s, we witness an increasing number of translations of so-called ‘Annales School’ books and essays, in which Thompson’s ‘Rough Music’ was included. I think this is another turning point in the reception of Thompson in Japan, for this encouraged the view that Thompson was a social historian who specialised in the study of pre-industrial popular culture.

In the world of Japanese practitioners as well as for lovers of history, the 1980s might be called the decade of social history, when many history books and articles appeared entitled as ‘social history’, often in order to try to impress readers that something new was offered. Serious, academic historical studies of social and popular movements were more or less swallowed up in this popular tide. Some academics claimed that social history had become social history with politics left out. To be sure, increasingly, less and less academic interest was being paid to topics such as social class, trade union movements, class struggle and social movements.

5. Concluding Remarks

Kazuo Nimura (b. 1934), an eminent academic of Japanese labour history testifies that the very existence of labour history itself began to be questioned in the 1980s. Yoshio Yasumaru, too, told me that since the 1980s the study of peasant uprisings had been disappearing. He referred to one promising student of social disturbances in Japan who was returning to a structural analysis of society, economy and politics, quietly leaving behind a moral economy perspective. Yasumaru observed that the young man seemed to have changed his mind about research, regarding a structuralist analysis of society as more solid and reliable.

It is true that this kind of shift of research interest, from a micro analysis of daily life and popular struggle to the scrutiny of social order and structure, in which people’s lives and struggles were embedded, was extremely productive. In a society in which ever more sophisticated methods of governing our daily lives are constantly renewed, a more rigorous analysis and knowledge of social order is needed.

At the same time, however, we equally need to shed new light on human agency of the past. The appearance of the ‘Precarious Proletariat’ onto the street seems to have given historians further stimulus to conduct a deeper enquiry into less strong historical human agencies, as well as their complex meanings. Takahiko Hasegawa (b. 1963), a historian of the generation which started research in 1980s Japan when social history was booming, observed increasing interest among historians in the topic of ‘precarious’, ‘feeble’ human agency. He admitted that although this recent revival and widening of interest in human agency has not yet made much impact on Japanese historians it does indicate that one of the most important aspects of E. P. Thompson’s ideas as a Marxist historian is still relevant and continues to inspire us.
Meeting the Hard Line.
British Marxism, “The Making” and the Communist Historiographies of East-Central Europe

Rudolf Kučera

In the summer of 1948, the inhabitants of the Austrian city of Salzburg may have made some very unexpected encounters. In the still badly damaged town, which lost nearly half of all its buildings during the American bombings in 1944, an academic summer school in American studies organized by Harvard University took place. Teachers from the US, led by the renowned sociologist Talcott Parsons, lectured over 170 doctoral candidates and young post-docs from all over Europe. For six weeks, young scholars from Germany, Austria, Italy or England met with Poles, Czechs or Hungarians, and listened to lectures on different topics from American culture, politics and history.

Mutual contacts were forged as well as closer, long lasting transnational friendships. As one of the participants of the summer school, Josef Polišenský, the 32-year-old rising star of Czechoslovak historiography also enjoyed the free academic exchange of ideas and sympathies. As he himself noted in his memoirs, the most interesting person for him was “… the English historian [George Albert] Shepperson, Cambridge graduate… hard-line Marxist, disciple of Maurice Dobb, who significantly broadened my knowledge.” Polišenský was not the only Czechoslovak participating in the conference. The group of Czechoslovaks consisted of about ten young historians, literary scholars or translators, whose travel and accommodation costs were fully covered by the communist government of their home country, which came to power after the political coup d’ état only a few months earlier, in February 1948. Thus, Polišenský and his fellow Czechoslovak academics were granted the opportunity to become part of the international scholarly networks that started to emerge on the devastated post-war intellectual landscape of Europe, and which in many cases transcended the political East-West division.

Throughout the 1950s and 60s, these and other selected members of the East-Central European academia were able to maintain and broaden such networks, integrating their home countries into the transnational scholarly and cultural dialogue. Although not entirely free in choosing the venues for participating in this dialogue, and often under the very close observation of the state, some East-Central European scholars in the humanities were nevertheless able not only to maintain basic contacts with the West, but also to import significant pieces of research and research methodologies, and to integrate them into the local scholarship. Large international scholarly congresses were regularly attended by selected historians from East-Central Europe, where they formed an integral part of the transnational dialogue.

It is not surprising that, at least in the field of history, the main partners for such a dialogue and exchange of ideas were looked for, and found, in the broad milieu of the western European Marxist historiography, predominantly in Great Britain and France. As early as 1950, for example, one of the most prominent and also politically most exposed topics of Czechoslovak historiography of the 1950s, the research on the Hussite rebellion during the first half of the 15th century, developed under the strong influence of British Marxist historiography. As, once again, Polišenský recalls in his memoirs “…in 1950 I got an invitation to the International Congress of Historical Sciences, which was to be held in Paris for the first time. In the end, the responsible ministry chose Václav Husa, who brought me a book on the crisis of feudalism in the 14th century from my friend Rodney Hilton from Birmingham.”²⁴ Polišenský, who was not a scholar of the medieval period, subsequently passed this book on to his colleagues Josef Macek and František Graus, who both incorporated the main theses of Hilton’s writings in their own works on the Hussite rebellion and general history of feudalism, which constituted one of the most seminal and influential historical writings of 1950s Czechoslovakia.⁵

Czechoslovak communist historiography’s main point of contact in the 1950s was the British circle of Communist historians formed precisely around Rodney Hilton, Christopher Hill or Eric Hobsbawm. Many books written by the British Marxists were reviewed or noted in the main journal of Czechoslovak historical writing, the Československý časopis historický (Czechoslovak Historical Review),⁶ and some of them were even translated into Czech or Slovak.⁷ So, for example, the Czech translation of the book “The English Rising of 1381” by Rodney Hilton and Hyman Fagan appeared in 1952, only two years after the publication of the original, and was supplemented by a new introduction, written by the authors specially for Czech and Slovak readers. The close connections between British Marxist historians and Czechoslovakia were mentioned very extensively: “Nowadays English workers and intellectuals are finding great inspiration in the Czechoslovak effort to build socialism – inspiration for their own struggle for emancipation and peace. British Marxists, coming to Czechoslovakia, are realizing that they think in the same way as their Czech and Slovak comrades...Those of us who had the luck to exchange experiences with Czech and Slovak Marxists are eager to continue in this collaboration. This book constitutes just a small contribution from the British side, which is to encourage such cooperation.”⁸

³ See for example the overview of the Czechoslovak participation in international congresses of historical sciences from the late 19th century: Bohumil Jiroušek (ed.), Czech and Czechoslovak Participation in International Congresses of Historical Sciences, České Budějovice 2006.
⁵ See for example: Josef Macek, Tábor v husitském revolučním hnutí I.-II. [Tábor in the Hussite Revolutionary Movement], Praha 1952-1955. František Graus, Dějiny venkovského lidu v Čechách v době předhusitské. Od poloviny 13. stol. do roku 1419 [History of the Rural People in Bohemia in the Pre-Hussite Era. From the Half of the 13th Century until 1419], Praha 1957. Particularly Josef Macek stood for the embodiment of the new, revolutionary historiography of communist Czechoslovakia. Besides his many influential writings, he also served as the main advisor to the monumental movie trilogy about the Hussite rebellion, which was produced between 1954 and 1957.
⁶ For the basic overview of the most prominent East-Central European historical journals, see: Frank Hadler: Szásadok - Kwartalnik Historiczny - Český časopis historický. Drei konstanten Ostmitteleuropäischer Historiographie, in: Matthias Middel (Hrsg.), Historische Zeitschriften im internationalen Vergleich, Leipzig 1999, pp. 145-159.
⁷ See, for example, the unauthored review article on the newest British literature on labor history, Československý časopis historický 1953, No. 4, pp. 565-567.
Czechoslovak historiography was probably the one most connected to, and influenced by, the British Marxist circle in East-Central Europe. After all, Czechoslovakia was the destination for several hundreds of British migrants in the 1950s, most of them communist academics and intellectuals, and the main flagship of British Marxist history, the *Past and Present* journal, featured the already mentioned Josef Polišenský as one of the “international advisers” to the editorial board. Polišenský himself profited from these entanglements, not only in terms of intellectual exchange. As he himself later conceded with an anecdotic undertone, without close ties to people like Eric Hobsbawm he would never have discovered the Rolling Stones.

However, official Polish and East-German historians maintained similar contacts. With East-German historiography mainly focused on the study of 19th century industrialization and contemporary 20th century history, Eric Hobsbawm played a prominent part in mediating British historical writing. When, for example, one of the renowned East-German historians, Walter Markow, published a short review of the German translation of Hobsbawm’s “*Primitive Rebels*” in the main East German historical journal *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* (Journal for Historical Science), he mentioned that the author of the essays does not have to be introduced to the East German readership. Indeed, in 1962, when the translation was published, Eric Hobsbawm had already delivered several guest lectures at the Humboldt University in East Berlin, and was widely known among GDR historians.

Polish historiography, on the contrary, was more interested in French scholarship than English-speaking Marxists. Maintaining traditional close ties with French academia, Polish historians in the 1950s and 60s entered into an intensive dialogue about the interpretation of the French Revolution. The recent writings of the French Marxists, particularly by Albert Soboul, were closely surveyed and discussed. Polish relations to the French revolutionary regime were looked for, and Polish historians generally welcomed the clearly formulated class analysis of the causes and course of French history at the end of the 18th century. Soboul’s works in particular were praised as “...a model of historiographical clarity,” and translations of his shorter journal articles repeatedly appeared on the pages of central Polish scholarly journals.

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10 Polišenský, Historik, p. 206.
14 See, for example, the extensive review article on the recent French scholarship dealing with the French Revolution: Andrej Zahorski, Trzy Syntyze Wielkiej Rewolucji Francuskiej [Three Overviews of the French Revolution], Przegląd Historiczny 1964, No. 1, pp. 22-45.
15 Andrej Zahorski, Review of Albert Soboul’s "Précis d’histoire de la Revolution Francaise" (Paris 1962) and "La Revolution Francaise" (Paris 1965), Kwartalnik Historiczny 1965, No. 4, pp. 979-980.
16 See for example: Albert Soboul, Opis i Miara W Historii Społecznej, Kwartalnik Historiczny 1966, No. 2, pp. 277-290.
However, as Polish historiography was probably the most open and receptive towards western scholarship, British Marxist writings were also well known among Polish historians. In fact, it was Polish scholarship that was the first to engage not only in overtaking some of the main arguments for its own work, such as in the case of Czechoslovak medieval studies, but also to closely critique and enter into a dialogue with some of the British writings.

In the field of modern history, it was “The Age of Revolution,” by Eric Hobsbawm, published in 1962 that sparked the first critical remarks by Polish historians. While Hobsbawm’s Marxist approaches, as well as the extraordinarily wide geographical span, were generally praised all across East Central-Europe, the book was tackled from a conceptual standpoint. Deploying what was later to become one of the main starting points of the postcolonial critique of the Atlantic historiographical tradition, Polish reviewers heavily criticized what they called the “Anglo-French” perspective of the book, manifested in the depiction of European development in the first half of the 19th century as only driven by the English industrial and French political revolutions. Regions east of Rhine thus appeared, according to the critique, as merely passive objects only reacting to the economic, social and political dynamics brought to them from England and France.

These examples illuminate that in the 1950s and early 60s the historiographies of East-Central European countries were not cut off from western scholarship. Seminal works of British or French historians were registered, read and discussed, and some of their arguments even found their way into local writings. When, in 1963, as Eric Hobsbawm recalled, E. P. Thompson’s “… erupting volcano of 848 pages [exploded], which was immediately accepted as a major work even by the world of professional historians,” it is not surprising that the blaze of this volcano was spotted even behind the Iron Curtain. However, if we look more closely at the reactions to Thompson’s major piece, it appears that this blaze shone differently in each of the countries in East-Central Europe, and generally with lower intensity than in some other parts of the world.

The Czechoslovak scholarly community effectively ignored “The Making” throughout the whole 1960s. Not a single review, discussion, or even a footnote found its way into any of the scholarly journals or monographs on modern labor history. When, for example, in 1966 one of the leading Czech labor historians, Arnošt Klíma, was selected by the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences to represent Czechoslovak historiography at the International Congress of Social and Economic History in West Berlin, he delivered a lecture entitled “The Formation of the Working Class and the Beginnings of the Labor Movement in Bohemia.” In front of an international audience, Klíma reviewed the recent trends in Czechoslovak labor history, spoke about the leading role of the textile industry, the foundations of the first bigger industrial enterprises and about the formation of the Czech organized working class, which, according to him and to the widely shared Czechoslovak consensus, emerged as an objective phenomenon, stemming from the dialectics of industrialization. In what was supposed to be “the best

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export goods” of Czechoslovak historiography of the mid 1960s, presenting the most recent developments in the field, Thompson remained entirely omitted. While generally giving credit to the work of British labor historians, particularly Eric Hobsbawm, Czechoslovak historians consistently ignored “The Making” and its key concepts.

In the GDR, Thompson’s volcano was observed more closely. As early as in 1964, a comprehensive overview of British labor history written by probably the most influential historian in the state and the head of the Institute of Economic History of the GDR Academy of Sciences, Jürgen Kuczynski, mentioned Thompson’s work as the most recent contribution to the understanding of machine breaking in early industrialization. Although before 1990 “The Making” was never actually reviewed or mentioned in the central journal of GDR historical scholarship, the Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft, it, differently from Czechoslovakia, found its way very quickly into mainstream East German scholarship.

Kuczynski and other GDR labor historians made frequent remarks on “The Making” throughout the 1960s, incorporating it quite organically into the Marxist traditions of writing history. For them, “The Making” constituted a significant piece of what was perceived as a wide current of “progressive historiography,” which, according to GDR historians, could have existed and was to be welcomed anywhere in the world. Thus, when Kuczinsky was reviewing the late 1950s and 1960s literature on labor history, he could construct a coherent stream of admirable writings, emerging east and west of the Iron Curtain alike: “An intensive interest regarding the questions of the industrial revolution can be observed in the lands of the socialist camp. These are above all works by Gyula, Lederer and Sandor (Hungary), Klíma and Purš (Czechoslovakia) and W. Kula (Poland)... the most recent and very important work dealing with the topic was published by E. P. Thompson in 1963 with the specific title “The Making of the English Working Class,” Kuczinsky stated, for example, in 1967, presenting eastern and western scholarship as one homogenous stream of research.

Symptomatic for the GDR, the reflection upon “The Making” constantly stressed Thompson’s fresh view of Ludism. Other concepts of Thompson’s piece, such as that of the key role of the specific “artisan culture,” or the completely different perception of the very working class, remained rather untouched, and “The Making” was referred to, and praised, predominantly because of its innovative interpretation of machine breaking. This was actually also the easiest way to incorporate “The Making” into existing

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22 See, for example, the acknowledging references made to Hobsbawm’s work by the influential Czechoslovak historian of industrialization, Jaroslav Purš, Československý časopis historický 1964, No. 5, p. 776 and 779.


28 Ibid., pp. 587-588.
communist narratives. In the first half of the 19th century, similar waves of breaking the newly introduced machines occurred not only in England, but also in Germany and the Czech lands. To reinterpret them as the workers’ general refusal of the newly emerging capitalist labor relations, instead of a mere hatred towards new technologies, could have done little harm to the already existing communist interpretations.29

If Czechoslovak historians consistently refused to reflect upon “The Making” in any way, and GDR scholars tried to circumvent its methodological challenge by simply putting it on the same level as the most recent communist writings and “cherry picking” those concepts and findings, which were easy to accommodate into already existing explanations, Polish historiography confirmed its position as the most open and liberal one in the region. One of the two most prestigious Polish historical journals, the “Przegląd Historiczny” (Historical Review), established in 1905, published a detailed review of Thompson’s book already in 1964.30 The reviewer praised the extraordinarily wide heuristics and the geographical scope of the book, which comprised not only the prominent industrial centers of England, but also smaller towns. He saw “The Making” primarily within the context of specific British writing of labor history, and greeted the fact that Thompson presented decisive arguments to dismantle the older works of G. D. H. Cole.

However, the most striking feature of the book for the reviewer was the perception of the English working class not as an abstract theoretical structure, but as a particular historical phenomenon, emerging in a certain historical context and forged by real people. Here, the review actually identified the main challenge that Thompson issued to the East-Central European labor history. The departure from hardcore economic determinism and the perception of the working class as an active subject of its own making had the biggest potential to question some of the local labor historians’ main presumptions. The obvious difference from existing Marxist-Leninist interpretations, which saw the local working classes as mere objects that emerged from the impersonal structures of industrialization, made it hard to accommodate “The Making” into any existing communist stream of scholarship. Thus, the reviewer concluded, the work is “extremely suggestive” and “unprecedentedly innovative,” which makes it “a lasting contribution to the study of class culture.”31 The reviewer, Henryk Katz, was one of the very few historians in East-Central Europe who openly expressed the obvious challenge that Thompson’s work issued to the local scholarship. Thompson’s attempt to “humanize” labor history stood in stark contrast to the dozens of communist writings produced in the 1950s and at the start of 1960s, which cast the emergence of the local working classes as a depersonalized, objective historical process without paying much attention to the experiences of the actual historical agents.

However, Thompson’s major work was first published in a time of destalinization, when some significant shifts within the intellectual landscapes of the East-Central European humanities in general, and historiographies in particular, were starting.32 Moreover, the second revised version published by Penguin books appeared in 1968 at

31 Ibid, p. 701.
the peak of the Prague Spring reform movement, and in the general context of the Czechoslovak intellectual and political thaw of the late 1960s. Younger historians, who had already completed their studies after the war, were raising their voices in Czechoslovakia, refusing the “Cult of Personality in history writing.” “Plain Marxism” was criticized, which tried only to fulfill the prefabricated interpretations forged not in the field of history, but by ideological party apparatchiks.33

In the first half of the 1960s, a search for a new comprehensive narrative of Czechoslovak history was declared.34 Indeed, in the second part of the 1960s, Czechoslovak historians reformulated almost all of the previous standpoints of the hard-line Marxists, and formulated a complex historical narrative of the “specific Czechoslovak way of socialism,” which subsequently served as one of the main legitimizing pillars of the Prague Spring reform movement.35 This shift within the Czechoslovak historiography manifested itself basically on two levels. First, it encompassed a wide-reaching change in the perspectives, interpretations and topics of historical writings. Second, it was carried out primarily by the youngest generation of historians, who received the necessary party support in approaching the archives, acquiring foreign literature and participating in the exchange with foreign colleagues.

The result of the first aspect was a strong turn to topics from contemporary history, and the writing of more or less classical national history.36 The reformist narrative generally started with the foundation of Czechoslovakia in 1918, went on further by stressing the democratic traditions of the interwar Czechoslovak communist thought and reached its climax in the history of the communist anti-Nazi resistance during the Second World War and in the postwar system of the National Front. Older topics, such as that of industrialization and the early labor movement, or that of the Hussite rebellion, were of course studied continuously as well, but they did not enjoy comparable state support and interest from younger historians. Secondly, the generational offensive of younger scholars pushed their older colleagues, who maintained very intensive contacts with British historiography in the 1950s, such as the already mentioned Josef Polišenský, into the defensive. Paradoxically, the more Czechoslovak historiography freed itself from its Stalinist traditions, the more it lost its contacts with the West. So, when in the second part of the 1960s the interpretative frameworks of Czechoslovak historiography were probably the most open towards the approach and arguments of “The Making,” there was very little interest in the history of early industrialization, let alone British inspirations. At that moment, which was from an intellectual point of view seemingly most suitable for the broader reception of Thompson’s work, there was no one to carry it out in Czechoslovakia.37

Thompson’s work thus remained almost entirely omitted in the Czechoslovak historical writings of the 1950s and 1960s, and the situation changed only very little

33 For a very similar generational clash in Czechoslovak sociology, see: Michael Voříšek, The Reform Generation: 1960s Czechoslovak Sociology from a Comparative Perspective, Prague 2012.
35 Ibid., pp. 344-347.
37 Sommer, Dějepisectví, pp. 253-316.
after the suppression of the Prague Spring. With the humanities constituting one of the main legitimizing pillars of the reformist movement, the university history departments, as well as the respective institutes of the Academy of Sciences, were subjected to ferocious personal purges. Over 140 historians were purged, and those who assumed their positions had a very limited space to look for any inspirations behind the Iron Curtain. Being partly under strong ideological pressure, and partly exerting this pressure themselves, Czechoslovak official historians in the 1970s and 80s gave up on any methodological innovations, let alone western inspirations, and confined their work to the safe ground of empirical economic history, depicting the history of industrialization more or less as a set of numbers and statistics.

In the GDR during the 1960s, a similar closing of the local historical scholarship can be observed, although driven by completely different dynamics. As Matthias Middel has shown in his extensive analysis of all the 37 pre-1990 years of the main GDR journal Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft (founded in 1953), the biggest share of foreign articles and reflections upon foreign scholarship was to be found in the 1950s and early 1960s. A big part of the journal’s internationalization consisted of a very lively exchange with historians within the Eastern Bloc. Studies by Czechoslovak, Polish and Soviet historians were frequently translated, foreign communist journals were abstracted and the number of international conference reports attests to a broad exchange with many colleagues predominantly from the socialist camp. However, attention was also paid to what was perceived as communist comrades on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Thus, in 1956 for example, the journal published a translation of Hobsbawm’s critique of the existing English “bourgeois historiography,” and in 1963 the editorial board approved the publication of an article by Albert Soboul on the “National Problem and Social Relationships during the French Bourgeois Revolution.”

However, this article appeared already during the GDR historiography’s gradual closing off from international impulses and, similarly to Czechoslovakia, during its subsequent turn to the classical national history narrative, unfolding during the 1960s. This was pushed forward by a reconstruction of the editorial board of the Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft in 1958 and 1959, which resulted in a steep decline in articles authored by non-GDR historians, and in very frequent direct interventions of the SED Party into the content of the journal. When in 1968 the most visible figure of GDR labor history, Jürgen Kuczynski, retired, even those references to “The Making” that could be hitherto found, vanished.

With GDR historiography’s progressing provincialization during the 1970s, there was little space for revisiting thompsonian categories or concepts. The Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft made, for example, no reference to “The Making” throughout the whole 1970s and 80s. Although in the late 1980s the intellectual horizons of GDR historiography began to expand again, the legacy of the Iron Curtain remained a significant factor in shaping the historical discourse of Eastern Europe.

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40 Middel, Autoren p. 276.
historiography seemed to be partly reinvigorated by the growing possibility to access and discuss the main pieces of research produced by West German historians and some West German translations of English, French and other foreign literature, without Jürgen Kuczynski and his colleagues from the generation of the 1950s, E. P. Thompson’s work seemed to be a forgotten inspiration.\footnote{44}

It was the German translation of “The Making,” published in 1987 (co-translated by Thomas Lindenberger), which sparked the second wave of interest in Thompson’s work in the GDR.\footnote{45} However, with only three years remaining, the GDR historical scholarship did not have much time to profit from the widened possibility of reading it. So, “The Making” made it onto the pages of the Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft as late as 1990, when it was discussed in a short review written by Editha Kross. The more we look at the pages of the journal in the 1970s and 1980s, the more anecdotic this review appears, starting with the assertion that “...seldom has a book been discussed with such intensity and controversy as in the case of the monograph by E. P. Thompson, published in New York in 1963.”\footnote{46} What was perceived as an “erupting volcano” by Eric Hobsbawm was thus rather a distant star to GDR historiography, observable only under very specific circumstances.

Poland, as we have already mentioned, observed the eruption of Thompson’s volcano most closely out of the three historiographies discussed. However, as fast and close as this observation was, it nevertheless proved to be quite short-lived. Polish historical writing no doubt remained the most open towards western inspirations throughout the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Major works of French as well as English scholarship were read, reviewed and discussed, starting with Braudel’s renowned work on material culture in the late 1960s,\footnote{47} and encompassing a lasting interest in British Marxist medieval and early modern history, which served as a constant inspiration for Polish historiography from 1950s until the late 1980s.\footnote{48}

But “The Making” did not persistently enter the discourse even of the most open historiography of the region with steady and lively contacts with the various currents of western scholarship. The reasons were partly the same as those of Czechoslovakia or the GDR, but also partly different. Although the overall intellectual climate of Polish historical scholarship provided probably the best preconditions for “The Making” to be reflected upon, and for some of its main arguments to serve as a starting point for further discussions, the very topic of the book rendered it rather unattractive for Polish scholars. Although Henryk Katz, mentioned above, identified Thompson’s work as a “lasting contribution towards the study of class culture,” it was symptomatic that he saw the main importance of Thompson’s book solely in the context of English labor history. As a matter of fact, there was no parallel to the extensive and traditional study of the history of work and the working class in Poland as there was in England, Czechoslovakia or the GDR.\footnote{49} Given the political history of Poland, great investments were made into the

\footnote{44} See, for example, the numerous reviews of the works of Klaus Thenfelde, Ute Frévert, Jan Lucassen, Garreth Stedman Jones, George Duby or Lucien Febvre in the 1986-1990 issues of Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft.

\footnote{45} Edward P. Thompson, Die Entstehung der englischen Arbeiterklasse, Frankfurt am Main 1987.


\footnote{47} See, for example, the discussion of Braudel’s book in: Przeglad Historiczny 1967, No. 4, pp. 691-696.


construction of the Polish national narrative in the 1950s and 1960s, which, however, was based rather on the history of rural emancipation or the urban intelligentsia. Due to the very low level of Poland’s industrialization in the 19th century, and Germany’s undisputable influence on the Polish industrial landscape, it was very hard for Polish historians to accommodate labor history into the general framework of the emancipatory “forward march of history” in the same way as their Czech or GDR colleagues did. So, while Polish historical writing proved itself very receptive towards western conceptual innovations in the fields of intellectual history or the economic history of the rural areas, where it interfered heavily in the ongoing international debates, the very discipline of labor history remained rather marginal. So, although Thompson’s importance was recognized in Poland very quickly, the very field of Thompson’s study seemed too distant for Polish historians to reflect more upon his key concepts and arguments. Thus, “The Making” was seen as a major breakthrough only in the context of a very specific English way of writing social history, which hardly provided any significant inspiration for solving problems the Polish historians were confronted with when uniting the communist and the national narratives.

Looking back on the East-Central European receptions of “The Making,” we can conclude that the shine of this “historiographical volcano” was spotted even behind the Iron Curtain. However, the internal developments of the local historiographies made it very hard for Thompson’s work to become a steady point of reference for local social historians. The moment of its first publication, i.e. 1963, was already past the peak of the proclaimed, and partly also practiced, communist internationalism. While in the 1950s and early 60s British communist historians were seen as natural allies for many East-Central European Communists, and their work was thus sympathetically received, the dismantling of Stalinism had the paradoxical consequence of gradually turning East-Central European historiographies towards more closed national narratives. This was the case in the reformist and relatively liberal Czechoslovakia, which needed to stress the singularity of the Czechoslovak historical path in the 20th century, but also in the much more constrained historiography of the GDR or in the traditionally open academic environment of Polish historical writing. Although the very content of these emerging national narratives, and the national traditions they stressed, differed across East-Central Europe, the ongoing loss of interest in the transnational dialogue transgressing the East-West division made it hard for Thompson’s work to enter the local academia.

Czechoslovak historiography, with its long tradition of writing social and labor history, effectively ignored Thompson’s work even when its own perspectives shifted more to E. P. Thompson’s “new left” positions. Although his constant emphasis on human agency, experience and the democratic traditions of English workers and artisans actually in many respects overlapped with the emerging Prague Spring narrative of Czechoslovak democratic socialism, the topical and geographical perspective of the Czechoslovak reformist historians prevented “The Making” from becoming a significant point of reference. After the suppression of the Prague Spring, the possibilities for reflecting on any western thought were closed for official historians.

In the GDR, the reception of Thompson’s work was the most persistent. With labor history constituting one of the most common fields of research for local historians, “The Making” was often inserted into the local tradition of the labor history of the 1960s,
but with no particular respect to the challenges it issued to it. The only arguments of Thompson that were elaborated on were those, which were fairly easy to accommodate within already existing interpretations. Unlike Czechoslovak historiography, GDR's never experienced a comparable generational struggle in the 1960s. Many labor historians, most visibly the already mentioned Jürgen Kuczynski, continued their work until the late 1960s, and reflected not only on “The Making,” but also on other British writings continuously. However, with the retirement of Kuczynski and his generation Thompson's book slowly disappeared from the horizon of GDR social history, only to reappear shortly before German reunification, as a consequence of the book’s German translation in 1987.

In Poland, the reception of “The Making” proved to be much more thorough than in the GDR, but on the other hand also quite short-lived. Thompson's work was spotted practically immediately after its publication, reviewed and discussed with respective attention to some of its most innovative approaches and arguments. But the weakness of Polish labor history made it hard to build upon them further. Thus, it was placed solely within the context of British historiography, and, as such, greeted as an innovative piece, however with only very limited importance for the actual questions of Polish historical scholarship.

Let us come back to the Czechoslovak historian Josef Polišenský and his gratitude to the circle of British Marxist historians, who allegedly broadened not only his academic, but also musical horizons. It is certainly safe to conclude that British Marxism played a much more important role among East-Central European historians than just promoting British rock music. However, E. P. Thompson’s share in this was quite limited.
Only of historical relevance? The German reception of *The Making* and its actuality reassessed from a (post) Cold War perspective

Thomas Lindenberger

Preliminary remark:
Unfortunately I could not develop the argument of my paper in written form as intended (see ‘paper proposal’ below) due to an accident with my right hand. I therefore decided to submit a translation of two parts of an earlier text of mine about the problematic reception of *The Making* in Germany until appr. 2000. I has been published in a volume about transfers and exchanges between British and German historians during the 20th century.

In my conference presentation I will try to develop this argument further with regard to more recent, post-Cold War perspectives of historiography about capitalist development informed by a reading *The Making of the English Working Class*.

Paper Proposal:

Only of historical relevance? The German reception of *The Making* and its actuality reassessed from a (post) Cold War perspective

When *The Making of the English Working Class* was published 50 years ago, German scholars on both sides of the Iron curtain did not take note of it for several years. 25 years later, social and cultural history including class history had become a respectable specialty among West German historians, and a tiny-little-bit-less-dogmatic obligatory exercise among their East German colleagues, so that that a first essay about failures, misunderstandings, and some merits in the German reception of the ‘empirical idiom’ in Thompson’s working class history could be written (Lindenberger 1988, cf. expanded version Lindenberger 2003). Only one year later, the political utopianism inherent in Thompson’s concept of working class history seemed to lose all its plausibility when millions of workers in East Central and Eastern Europe opted against their own ‘happening’ as a class and in favor of capitalism *tout court* (including Thatcherism in some instances) instead – an ‘end of history’ of sorts.

Another 25 years later, working class historiography in Germany has made significant progress, not the least in connection with research about the first ‘socialist workers-and-peasant-state on German soil’, the German Democratic Republic. Thompson’s ideas and propositions about working class formation were informing these works rather indirectly, as counter models derived from early capitalism contrasting the more recent processes of un-making of the working class in welfare states of late modernity, East and West. The recent return of ‘regular’ crisis cycles in capitalist reproduction, however, increasing social inequalities and ‘the making’ of new categories of marginalized social groups such as a ‘migrant underclass’ and the ‘precariat’ of young qualified people all
over Europe have amply shown, that the history of class formation might not have come to the historical end as envisaged by some proponents of triumphant capitalism.

Departing from my experience as one of the German translators of *The Making*, and as a social historian for the 20th century in Germany, my paper will lay out the continuities and ruptures in the reception of EPT's *opus magnum* in Germany, and discuss its potential for a historical understanding of today's processes of transnational and post-Cold War class formation.

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“In essence, the reception of *The Making* in German historical scholarship can be summed up as follows: readers were impressed by the empirically rich and exceptionally well-written 800-page-book that goes to the heart of the political, social, and cultural history of England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In particular the author’s empathy with individual actors, which he does not merely profess, but demonstrates in numerous concrete accounts, conveyed an understanding of what was “new and different” about social history from below. First and foremost, Thompson's book was a counterpoint to the widespread practice among social historians to posthumously squeeze their “heroes” into theoretically deduced categories and concepts of development; to define them as politically “immature” or “mature” in relation to production and ownership structures and hence force them into the Procrustean bed of a historical-philosophical master plan. This anti-reductionism and anti-economism, which *The Making* demonstrates in various individual examples, addressed a problem-awareness that German social historians of the late 1970s were certainly familiar with. This generally positive assessment was in many cases followed by an objection: there was no “theory.” For many years, “lack of theory” remained the major criticism, especially when it came to drawing conclusions from a book like *The Making* for one’s own historiographical practice. Some considerations by Dieter Groh, one of the most productive social historians researching the history of the German Labor Movement at the time, serve to illustrate this point. In 1980, he published a volume entitled *Plebejische Kultur und moralische Ökonomie* (Plebeian Culture and Moral Economy), which comprises German translations of various articles by Thompson and a comprehensive introduction by Groh himself. In the introduction, he sums up the strengths of Thompson’s approach:

Thompson’s contribution, among other things, is that he demonstrated in his empirical studies how to avoid the dilemma of economic reductionism: by decoding behavior against the backdrop of cultural reference systems that follow a specific logic. This sort of reconstruction can contribute to our understanding of
seemingly incomprehensible, “spontaneous,” and disorganized phenomena such as “food riots” or “setting the price riots.” This way, we can analyze these events in a way that not only elucidates the experiences and expressions of the actors, but also reveals their underlying meaning.

Perhaps it is in the nature of the matter that any attempt to summarize the conceptual implications of a historiographical text is necessarily more “theoretical” than the text itself. Certainly Thompson would not have described his work with these words. He was known (and in some cases feared) for his unpretentious, but at times highly polemical theoretical argumentation. But Groh’s description is nevertheless a successful attempt to explain the specific potential of Thompson’s approach to German readers, who were in most cases shaped (or deformed) by academic Marxist or Weberian ideas. In many ways, Groh’s assessment is still relevant. He then goes on to formulate the main points of criticism:

This achievement comes at the price of a mirror-inverted reductionism, which can be called subjectivist. “History from below” is reduced by the empathetic and patiently “listening” historian to the reconstruction of perception modes and the behavior of individuals within their horizons of experience. This way, it is reduced to the intentions of the protagonists. Structural constraints of action as well as motivations and motives that—for whatever reason—are displaced or desymbolized are lost to this view.

However, Groh does not leave his readers and the subjectivist reductionism to their own devices; he rather introduces a sure formula with which the unknown “treasure” of Thompson’s historiography can be lifted after all: Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of “social practice.” This theory, according to Groh, is particularly well suited to analyze the dialectic of economy and moral values without stepping into the trap of the intentionalist reductionism he describes.

I will refrain from presenting evidence to the contrary and showing that Groh does not do Thompson justice at this point. Thompson does analyze “objective” facts and lets them “speak.” He does not pursue history only from within. In the British discussion, various “Thompsonians” have defended The Making against similar objections, not always benefitting its cause. The question must also remain unanswered whether any such attempt at transmitting or translating the products of other scientific cultures necessitates this sort of theorization. However, assuming for the moment that it is necessary, i.e., that it is possible to reconstruct Thompson’s conception of the emergence of the working class using his own presumptions, this sort of joy in theoretical combination can in retrospect turn out to be quite useful. After all, Dieter Groh was one of the first prominent West-German social historians to recognize the tremendous potential of another West European “giant”—long before the “cultural-historical” “Bourdieu-for-historians” medleys that have become en vogue lately under the banner of a supposedly “new” cultural history.

2 S. Lindenberger, Idiom, S. 174-176 (Anm. 7).
3 S. #####in: ### (Hg.), Kulturgeschichte heute, Sven Reichardt##, in: ##Welskopf## (Hg.), Geschichte zwischen Gesellschaft und Kultur.
Let us note that Groh was not the only German social historian to interpret Thompson in this manner. Thompson's account was often praised as empirically and conceptually fascinating, but theoretically deficient. In order to make it fit the German demands, something had to be added: a meta-concept, a “grand theory” of society, economy, and culture in the era of industrialization and modernization. And *The Making* was in some cases “augmented” in this way. The first, and for a long time only, scholar to embark on such an endeavor was actually not a historian, but a sociologist, Michael Vester. He—for lack of a better term—mutilated *The Making* and turned it into an account of “The Development of the Proletariat as a Learning Process,” a bildungsroman with various “learning cycles” borrowed from economic history. However, this work did not have any repercussions in social history.

Ten years later, *The Making* finally also became well-known among German social historians—albeit on detours, via its great resonance and broad reception among British and American social historians. Jürgen Kocka merely referred to *The Making* en passant, parenthetically, which reveals his wish to distance himself from Thompson. Initially, Thompson was apodictically excluded from the circle of serious reference literature: in his introduction to the special issue on “Arbeiterkultur” of the journal *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* in 1979, Kocka argues: “It [The Making] does not contain a clear classification of cultural phenomena or a neat definition of the working class, which leaves the social substance of this working class culture more or less in the dark. These difficulties have to do with Thompson’s extremely subjectivist definition of class (preface), which, to put it bluntly, defines the working class as working class culture.”

This brief indication of the “preface” refers to the much-cited introduction of *The Making*, in which Thompson develops his concept of a processual and relational definition of class in contrast to Ralf Dahrendorf’s structural-functionalist understanding (see below). Three years later, this sort of brusque brushing aside of Thompson’s work no longer seemed appropriate. In the meantime, many people had read not only the famous preface with its famous “passages,” but also the rich “rest” of the book. Now the assessments were more generous: “Ultimately, [Thompson] pays the price of neglecting the systemic character of the society he is studying for his analysis of the dimensions experience and agency. As an influential forefather of the history of experience and culture, he anticipated not only many of its strengths, but also some of its weaknesses.”

Many strengths, some weaknesses—that is certainly an improvement. However, Kocka neglects to specify them. In 1983, he published his comprehensive social history of the emergence of the working class in Germany. Hidden in a lengthy footnote on various East and West German dogmatic Marxist definitions of class, one stumbles upon a positive reference to Thompson: “One of Thompson’s great achievements is that he recognized, abandoned, and criticized this value-based assessment [of the historical emergence of social classes by historians] between the two poles ‘avant-garde of the proletariat’ and ‘false consciousness.’ However, he did not entirely abandon class analysis informed by Marxism.” Citing the main points of criticism from 1982 outlined above, he still maintains, “Thompson’s definition of class has other weaknesses that make it


inadvisable to adopt it.” Interestingly, in the main text Kocka goes on to outline the agenda of historically reconstructing “wage labor and the emergence of class” by introducing and combining various topoi and problems that The Making introduced into the historiography of the working class in the first place. However, his analysis follows the Weberian distinction between economic, social, and political classes, which brings the teleological constitution of a “class” “in” and “of” itself back into the argument. This is the very traditional Marxist notion which Kocka starts out by criticizing, praising Thompson for his decisive rejection of this approach.

There were many contradictions and inconsistencies in the West German debate, which was initially strongly shaped by structural history. This explains to some degree the reactions of German scholars to the new theories and issues Thompson introduced into the international writing of social history. Since then, they have succeeded in resolving and overcoming many of these difficulties through their “own” means. Although not all of them are based on a direct reception of Thompson, various approaches united under the umbrella “Alltagsgeschichte” are today more or less recognized in social history (broadened to also encompass aspects of culture). Some have moreover attained international recognition. Particularly thanks to the work of Alf Lüdtke and Hans Medick at the Max-Planck-Institute in Göttingen, the term “Alltagsgeschichte” has even become common in English academic jargon. In this sense, the largely failed reception of Thompson in West Germany can be regarded as a small episode in German social history. Fortunately, it did not create any damage in the long run. But, as a small aspect of the European history of humanities, it is worthwhile to scrutinize its causes. It appears symptomatic of the self-understanding of West German social history in the 1970s and 80s, particularly of its self-understanding as a political discipline.

[...]

Social history and post-Fascism

If we call to mind the intellectual and social situation of the Federal Republic of Germany in the late 1960s and early 70s, focusing in particular on the subject history, it becomes apparent why The Making did not have the same impact in Germany as it did in Britain—in contrast to the reception of the work in other national expert communities (USA, Italy, France). There are various factors that account for this difference. For one thing, a political culture in which dissident leftist intellectuals talked about national history to a broad audience, thereby also indirectly addressing pressing issues of the present, was constitutive for a work like The Making. However, German political culture was quite different at the time. What is more, the combination of comprehensibility for a broad audience and a compassionate writing style in the explanation of highly complex historical issues has never been a great strength of the German academic tradition. The newly emerging sub-discipline within West German social history that liked to refer to itself as “social science history” could not and would not understand the “empirical idiom of the British” which allowed Thompson to unfold a theoretically rich, historical


argument. It appears to me that its proponents lacked the ability to discern anything beyond the crude facts that they detected at the surface of this text, which appeared to lack a coherent theoretical framework. In the tradition of the “German theoretical idiom,” this social history itself had only just stepped into the arena to fundamentally criticize conventional political history by reexamining and renegotiating its theoretical presumptions and political self-understanding in an explicit way.

Besides this contrariety in academic traditions, the horizon of collective political experience that shaped these different social history “agendas” seems even more important to me. Only since the late 1990s has there been some discussion about the origins and emergence of West German social historiography in the 1960s. One important issue in this discussion is the relationship of the young generation of the 1960s (Kocka, Wehler, the Mommsen brothers, Groh, ... ) to their overwhelming mentors, among them most prominently Werner Conze and Theodor Schieder. The results of an interview project conducted by Konrad H. Jarausch* that were published online in 1999 offer some preliminary explanations of why West German social historians of the late 1960s and 70s were not primarily interested in historical accounts in the style of Thompson. While Thompson and his generation of leftist, in part (formerly) communist non-conformists tried to stir up the stasis and relax the internal confrontation between the different political blocs in their societies, the political objectives of young West German social historians were entirely different. These scholars could not attempt to recover and revive a legacy of “socialist humanism” deeply rooted in the political and intellectual culture of their country. Their prime concern was to finally break with the antiliberal traditions within German intellectual and political culture, which had contributed not only to the establishment of the Nazi dictatorship, but also to the “community of silence” that marked the early Federal Republic. Their access to an intellectual background of experience such as the one their British counterparts could draw on had historically been severed already in 1933. The anti-Fascist internationalism of the 1930s and 40s had certainly not been the world of German middle-class intellectuals. Their surviving memories and individuals where almost monopolized in a discrediting way by Stalinism and the communist dictatorship in the other part of Germany. For the new generation of West German intellectuals, the primary concern was to investigate the emergence of class, milieus, and the labor movement from the perspective of the time before 1933, i.e. from a perspective of the epochal and catastrophic failure of popular democratic struggles. The results of those who—for good or ill—shared the horizon of experience of this time were tested, discarded, or further developed. Among them were famous émigré historians and social scientists such as Hans Rosenberg as well as those “forefathers” of West German social history (Conze, Schieder) who tried to discretely “come to terms” with their successfully veiled involvement in National Socialism by means of a decidedly liberal-democratic understanding of scholarship. The generational experience of National Socialism and the German Cold War thus provided the worst imaginable pre-condition to receive, understand and embrace the Anglo-Saxon variant of a compassionate social history firmly rooted in a pluralistic anti-fascist and left-wing tradition. They were better suited for concepts of modernization or technocratic approaches, for history in the style of structuralist social sciences.

In conclusion, the following example may serve to illustrate the resulting asymmetry in the possible transfers between the academic cultures of Great Britain and post-Fascist West Germany. Ralf Dahrendorf’s sober and poignant observations about

9 S. http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/beitrag/intervie/interview.html
the Federal Republic as the successor society of the “Third Reich,” which in many ways built on the latter’s ambivalent modernization projects, but also his theory of class struggle in industrial society were much more in line with the German dictate to evaluate developments in an analytical and matter-of-factly way. The rather romantic attempt to historiographically do justice to the hopeless struggle of the Luddite machine destroyers has its origins in an entirely different tradition. Dahrendorf, the son of a German resistance fighter persecuted by the Nazis, who traveled back and forth between different bourgeois worlds, ultimately reached the peak of his career in Great Britain, where he taught as a professor at various universities and was awarded the title of a baron. Edward P. Thompson, who in the preface to *The Making* attacked none other than Dahrendorf as a proponent of a structural-functionalist class theory, for a long time remained exotic and marginal among German social historians.