

Breadking the Grid, Making Our Class - “One lesson among many we can draw” from E.P. Thompson

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MY FATHER SHIH-LIN Yang died on August 14, 2013. He was born in 1920 — E.P. Thompson’s senior by four years — and, like EPT’s father Edward John, a Christian missionary and minister who cut his historical consciousness in the crucible of war and imperialism (the Japanese military suspected him, a Taiwanese colonial subject, to be an anti-Japanese dissident and imprisoned him for more than a year in 1943-44).

When I first read *The Making of the English Working Class* in mid-1990s Austin, Texas, EPT had already been dead by a couple of years and the Zapatista uprising was underway 1300 miles south of the U.S.-Mexican border.

These two contexts marked my initial encounter with *The Making*, and they are not entirely incidental facts in a single, incidental reader’s reception — for *The Making* was forged deeply in EPT’s own experience and, when read without the weight of its justified status as a contemporary classic in social history, elicits the reader to bring to it his or her own experience in a shock of what Japanese tea masters call *ichigo ichie* (“one time, one encounter”).

In his prolonged argument with EPT, Perry Anderson notes that “counter-revolutionary nationalism” was ideologically more potent in fashioning English class consciousness after 1815 than “the more local and limited phenomenon of Methodism, however hysterical in its manifestations — to which Thompson devotes one of the most unforgettable chapters of his book” (*Arguments within English Marxism*: 38).

Perhaps Anderson is right insofar as a balanced assessment of the ideological climate is concerned — and this well reflects his Olympian analytical equipoise — but *Making* is not cast in the foundry of rigorous balance. Rather, its power derives from its passionate reasoning that inseparably binds historical imagination with a definite commitment to a particular kind of militant class politics.

Transforming Power

The quality of chapter XI, “The Transforming Power of the Cross,” for instance, cannot be understood unless we take into account EPT’s own Methodist upbringing and socialist humanist campaign to democratize Communism first from within the Party, then from outside after the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. The writing thus expresses indelible immediacy.

EPT's attentive parsing of Methodism's bureaucratic ossification under Rev. Jabez Bunting, as it turned into a "desolate landscape of Utilitarianism in an era of transition to the work-discipline of industrial capitalism" (365), calls to mind how such ideological correspondences would recur in later forms of industrial capitalist work-discipline. Examples range from Meiji Japan's state-nationalist recuperation of the emperor in mobilizing industry and war to Leninist calls for "socialist accumulation" under Taylorist labor discipline, to Christian fundamentalist resuscitation of the Protestant work ethics in the United States and elsewhere.

EPT's characteristic verve recaptures what might appear to be a minor chiliastic cult of Johanna Southcott as an intimate kin of Methodist revivalism in absorbing the political despair of the popular movement after the defeat of the revolutionary 1790s. Through the microcosm of local social experience, we thus learn to gauge the totality of a world-historical ideological drift.

Moreover, *The Making* shows that such despairs were temporal and even reversible, as Methodist workers and preachers took to "the different fields of working-class politics" and swelled the rank and file of Peterloo demonstrators and the Chartist movement.

EPT attributed this dialectical reversal to "many tensions at the heart of Wesleyanism," as "repressive inhibitions upon sexuality" could transmute into antinomianism, and its "authoritarian doctrines" into "a libertarian antithesis." He argued that "(n)o ideology is wholly absorbed by its adherents: it breaks down in practice in a thousand ways under the criticism of impulse and of experience: the working-class community injected into the chapels its own values of mutual aid, neighbourliness and solidarity." (391, 392).

As Mike Davis similarly observes of a contemporary phenomenon, "Today (...) populist Islam and Pentecostal Christianity (and in Bombay, the cult of Shivaji) occupy a social space analogous to that of early 20th-century socialism and anarchism" ("Planet of Slums," *New Left Review* 26, March-April 2004: 27).

This lived dialectic of working-class agency, with its power to transubstantiate the contradictory, even reactionary matter of theological-political capture into the revolutionary spirit of new class composition, marks every line of *The Making* like the signature of inextinguishable fire.

Indeed, *The Making*'s very trinitarian arc traces the dialectic of class formation, from the English commoners' primordial idea of the "Liberty Tree" facing the emergent capitalist labor discipline in "Curse of Adam" and yielding from this class antagonism the popular radical synthesis of "Working-Class Presence."

Later, in "Eighteenth-century English Society: Class Struggle Without Class?" (1978), Thompson would echo the global class struggles waged in street riots, prisons, rural and indigenous communities, school, and homes, by those who fell outside or at the bottom of the once hegemonic industrial army of wage-labor. And against the rise of neoconservatism and the Second Cold War, he would put the full weight of his life as an anti-nuclear peace activist.

Marking Historical Turns

*I don't need your organization, I've shined your shoes
I've moved your mountains and marked your cards
But Eden is burning, either brace yourself for elimination
Or else your hearts must have the courage
for the changing of guards.*

—Bob Dylan, “Changing of the Guards” (1978)

The Making signaled the onset of a working-class recomposition, its publication poised between the first Kamagasaki (Japan) riot of 1961 (over the death of a day laborer run over by a car —ed.) and the Watts Rebellion of 1965. Its famous preface argued against conceiving the working class in terms of either a Marxist-Leninist “theory of substitution: the party, sect, or theorist, who disclose class-consciousness, not as it is but, as is it ought to be” or a bourgeois social science’s “static view of class (...) as a component of social structure.”

Both state-socialist and liberal capitalist Homo Economicus treated workers as inert, passive raw materials to be turned into the cannon fodder of accumulation and conveniently forgot that “(c)lass is defined by men as they live their own history,” which was finally “the only definition.”

As Peter Linebaugh critically observes, *The Making* “concerns the period between 1790 and 1832, half of which time England was at war, yet these wars do not receive direct treatment” while the “violence of the mobilization of labor in the Atlantic, the wars in the Caribbean, the conquest of America, of India, are present indirectly” (“One and All, One and All: Edward Thompson (1924-1993)”, *Left History* 1(2), 1993: 92).

Indeed, *The Making* barely sketches the Napoleonic Wars except as a background to a crucial moment of class decomposition, in which the wars and their accompanying establishment of the First French Empire “struck a blow at English republicanism from which it never fully recovered.” (454) Perhaps EPT’s reticence stemmed from his youthful military experience in the Battle of Monte Cassino, as a tank commander who had to dispatch his fellow soldiers to their inevitable death.

The fascists executed without trial his brilliant, multilingual older brother Frank, who had set the familial precedent in joining the Communist Party, in the same war during a Bulgarian expedition. Throughout his life, EPT would maintain that historical materialism could not adequately explain fascism or the Second World War.

Much of the criticism placed at the foot of *The Making* revolve around the indication of such absences, from the narrow national focus that leaves out ethnic and gender composition of the English working class, to the effect of imperial and nationalist ideology on the popular psyche, to the book’s overweening stress on the artisanal class component.

EPT faced such rebukes in the conference circuit, to which he assented readily that “(i)t was all fair stuff” while, in the same breath, did not fail to add his fellow labor historian Herbert Gutman’s “growl” on one such occasion: “They always wanted to show their subjects as victims. They denied them their self-activity” (*Customs in Common*, 460).

We deny our own self-activity as reasoners when we expect *The Making* to do the collective work we must do ourselves. Various works issued from the Warwick School of social history led by EPT have done just that, including Linebaugh’s *London Hanged* that expanded the working class to encompass criminality and the Atlantic horizon, and J.M. Neeson’s *Commoners* that deepened our understanding of the rich, intricate habitus of the English peasantry.

Personal Reflections, Pacific Connections

In July of this past year, when I was in Okinawa and Tokyo delivering talks on trans-Pacific history from below and 1960-’70s radical historiography (at the generous invitation of Tanaka Hikaru, international historian of anarchism; Abe Kosuzu, anti-military scholar-activist who has linked Chicago’s Young Lords to U.S. GIs in Okinawa; and Umemori Naoyuki, historian of modern Japanese

political thought), I was ever conscious of The Making's 50th anniversary.

I partook in a spirited study group of the book — whose Japanese translation appeared in 2003 — in Tsuruhashi, a Korean working-class district of Osaka, with Mochiki Ryota and Ono Mitsuaki, two young scholar-activists of the radical Pacific against the ongoing U.S. military enclosure of Okinawa.

I suggested its continuing relevance as an essential aid in widening the scope of our class, whose trans-Pacific indigenous reverberations I had just heard at the Moana Nui forum on globalization in the Bay Area in the previous months.

I reminded the video interviewee at Moana Nui that this historic congregation was occurring almost exactly 100 years after Japanese socialists and anarchists, such as Henmi Naozo, Ichimatsu Hasegawa, and Kotoku Shusui, were in Oakland and Berkeley.

They were meeting Wobblies and crafting a “congenitally positive” pragmatic activist culture of direct action (Sakai Takashi's phrase in *Tsutenkaku: A New History of Japanese Capitalist Development*, a magisterial work of Japanese radical scholarship that has distinctively adapted The Making's method to the subaltern urban geography of early 20th-century Osaka).

Many other historical congruences and encounters in the long history of the Pacific working class await our rediscovery and reactivation. At the conclusion of “The Grid of Inheritance” (1976), Thompson reminds us that “what is inherited is...the claim of the resources of a future society; and the beneficiary may be, not any descendant of that particular family, but the historical descendant of the social class to which that family once belonged” (Persons & Polemics, 289).

The term “grid” — an abbreviation of gridiron, a medieval instrument of torture by fire — entered the English language in 1839, when thousands of Chartist miners and workers rose up in armed insurrection to free fellow agitators imprisoned at Westgate Hotel in Newport. The Newport Rising was also the signal event that originated the political sense of the word “demonstration.”

Two years earlier in Japan, as more than 100,000 people died from post-famine mass starvation, rice price soared, and peasant uprisings spread, two major armed insurrections for the poor — respectively led by Confucian scholar Oshio Heihachiro and Kokugaku scholar Ikuta Yoroze — occurred, temporarily breaking the grid of Tokugawa feudal class inheritance (and effectively plummeting the price of rice).

Our inherited property hence need not be capital, real estate, or money — none of which my father possessed — but can be “property” in the sense of character, quality, and memory of having, even briefly, broken the grid of class privilege and demanding our rightful commons.

That is one lesson among many we can draw from *The Making of the English Working Class*, which started as nothing more than a single, robust gyre composed and turned from the provincial corner of Yorkshire, “coloured at times by West Riding sources,” spreading its ripples across the Atlantic and the Pacific and bidding us now to recompose our class in historical writing as well as in actuality.

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P.S.

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