

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

### Abstract

*As well as a recovery of the past, The Making was written as a strategic intervention in wider political debates of the late 1950s about working class consciousness, identity, agency and organisation, and as a sustained expression and application of 'socialist humanism' to historical subjects. This essay situates the book within these debates, moving between The Making and Thompson's writings within the New Left, to show how the characteristic themes of his work – moral choice and agency, the complexities of working-class consciousness and culture, the role of intellectuals and of an 'organised minority' – were developed through both. This provides us with a richer context for understanding both the moral sensibility that animates the book and key elements of its historiographical standpoint.*

*Keywords: Edward Thompson, New Left, socialist humanism, Marxism, affluence, class*

'I am writing my book like stink', wrote Thompson to John Saville in mid-1961. 'And enjoying it. (Would like to bury the N.L.!)'.<sup>1</sup> Later, in his preface to the 1980 edition of *The Making*, he again noted the coincidence of his work for the book with the period of his involvement within the New Left, professing himself 'puzzled to know when and how the book got itself written'.<sup>2</sup> *The Making* was completed in a remarkably short period, less than four years separating its publication date from Thompson's signing of the contract for his 'bread and butter' textbook with Gollancz in late 1959, though he was able to draw on research begun several years earlier.<sup>3</sup> This research and writing was undertaken alongside intense political activity. During these years Thompson broke with the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), after fourteen years of active membership, in the aftermath of the Khrushchev speech and Soviet invasion of Hungary, first to found an unofficial internal discussion journal, the *Reasoner*, that became the *New Reasoner* once he and John Saville, his closest collaborator of the period, resigned from the Party. Outside the CPGB, Thompson became a pivotal figure in what came gradually to be known as the New Left, a lively activist and intellectual current that brought the dissident communists around the *New Reasoner* together with a younger group of independent socialists who produced the journal *Universities and Left Review*, to try and found a 'movement of ideas' to counter 'apathy', and 'make socialists', while also reworking the theoretical content of socialism to define a third space on the post-war left between Stalinist communism and Labour social democracy. A prime mover of the New Left's efforts to become a serious alternative political force,

Thompson was deeply involved in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), in the running of the innovative Left Clubs network, and in the electoral efforts of the Fife Socialist League, a New Left affiliate, which put ex- communist miners' leader Lawrence Daly up as a candidate for the Scottish constituency of West Fife in the 1959 general election. In addition to his editorial and activist work within the New Left, Thompson was also one of its most prolific and prominent writers, authoring some sixteen substantial pieces for its journals between 1956 and 1963, as well as the key essays in its 1960 collection *Out of Apathy*.<sup>4</sup>

Political activities were not of course the only, nor a new, claim on Thompson's time, and his earlier book on Morris - like *The Making*, a book of formidable length - was also completed amidst the competing pressures of routine party work within the CPGB (he served as a member of the Yorkshire District Committee, and as Chair of the Halifax Peace Committee) and the job he took on in 1948 as an extra mural tutor at Leeds University, teaching both literature and history in evening classes for the Worker's Educational Association (WEA).<sup>5</sup> What changed between the two was the transformation of the relationship between his political and intellectual work wrought by his break with official Communism, encapsulated in his own later declaration that he 'commenced to reason' in 1956.<sup>6</sup> The critical shift to which he referred was not in his basic intellectual preoccupations, which in fact show a remarkable degree of continuity between the pre- and post-1956 periods, but in the opportunity he felt to 'reason' more fully and freely, to bring his political and intellectual work together and to fuse them in the project that came to be called the New Left.

Thompson's role within the New Left has been well documented.<sup>7</sup> The intensity of his commitment to the milieu and its importance as a context for his masterwork is also widely acknowledged, from Hobsbawm's immediate placing of the book as 'post Suez' to Geoff Eley's more recent characterisation of it as 'laden with its own moment'.<sup>8</sup> Yet, with some notable exceptions, the linkages between the political and ethical commitments he developed within the New Left and the key themes of his historical work are more often alluded to than actually explored.<sup>9</sup> Several factors are involved here. Lack of access to his personal papers remains a major obstacle to any authoritative attempt to illuminate the interplay of influences between different parts of Thompson's work. With regard to this period, the coincidence of the early New Left's decline with the publication of the book, and the more or less immediate impact of the book in terms of establishing Thompson's reputation as a historian beyond

doubt, may also have contributed to a tendency to treat Thompson the activist and Thompson the historian rather separately, with the two seeming to speak to and be claimed by separate audiences.<sup>10</sup> A key factor too is that, since Perry Anderson, in retaliatory mode following Thompson's famous polemic against the so called 'Nairn-Anderson theses', drew an 'astonishing contrast ... between the brilliance and richness of his imagination as a historian and the poverty and abstraction of his intelligence as a political analyst' Thompson's reputation as a political thinker has lagged behind, and in some eyes at least has positively undermined, his reputation as a historian. 'Wandering subjectivism ... inflated rhetoric ... maundering populism. The categories of this thought are so vacuous and simplistic that it is difficult to credit that they are those of the same man who could write such overpoweringly concrete history'.<sup>11</sup> In a later critique that upholds the essence, if not the tone, of Anderson's judgment, David Eastwood, surveying Thompson's oeuvre a few years after the latter's death, puts it thus: 'the problem with Thompson's work is that the whole is less than the sum of its parts ... Thompson's historical and political writings are of a piece in their thin readings of the state, their denial of the real power of formal political processes, and their sometimes bold, sometimes sentimental celebration of dissent'.<sup>12</sup> Though recent reassessments offering contrasting interpretations of Thompson's career have shifted the grounds of argument somewhat, the poor reputation of his more directly political writings of this period has tended to persist.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, this period of Thompson's political activism in the period between his break with the CPGB and the exhaustion of the early New Left remains an indispensable context against which to interpret the themes, the purpose, and the limitations, of the project he pursued in *The Making*. Despite his protestation to Saville, an exasperated reference to the growing difficulties of their struggle to revive a New Left project already in 1961 half-buried by internal dissension and organisational muddle, the fate of the milieu mattered to Thompson intensely. It was the carrier of his hope that a new kind of independent political movement, grassroots and democratic, might take forward the values of the libertarian communist tradition with which he identified. Its failure to sustain this vision was a bitter blow he never ceased to regret. As well as a recovery of the past, *The Making* was written as an intervention in Thompson's present, for (but also partly against some tendencies within) this New Left, as a strategic intervention in wider political debates of the late 1950s about working class consciousness, identity, agency and organisation, and as a sustained expression and application of 'socialist humanism' to historical subjects. In this essay I situate the book

within these debates, moving between *The Making* and his writings within the New Left, to show how the characteristic themes of his work at this time – moral choice and agency, working- class consciousness and culture, the role of intellectuals and of an ‘organised minority’ – were developed through both.

### **Socialist humanism: communist dissent and the ‘moral imagination’**

‘the humanist Gods of social liberty, equality, fraternity .. remain on the Communist side. That is why - although I have resigned from the Communist Party – I remain a Communist.’<sup>14</sup>

That *The Making* remains so apparently inexhaustible as a source for discussion is perhaps due in part to the relative paucity of sustained conceptual analysis within the book itself. Thompson’s exploration of the interaction between social being and social consciousness, between agency (or desire) and structure (or necessity) in class formation, is an achievement of imagination and of argument more than of theory. Thompson was both drawing on the Marxist tradition and seeking to augment or transform it by placing the emphasis very much on the first term of the agency/necessity couplet. But his challenge to Marxism is expressed rather obliquely. More explicit in this regard are Thompson’s early New Left essays articulating the position he described as socialist humanism. First set out at length in a 1957 *New Reasoner* essay, this is the theme that dominates and unifies all Thompson’s political writing, certainly of the period of the New Left but also arguably also before and after that time.<sup>15</sup> As presented in the immediate wake of Thompson’s break with the CP, it was an attempt to rescue Communism from Stalinism by asserting an alternative and more authentic Communist humanist and libertarian tradition that could find justification in Marx but that was most fundamentally inscribed in ‘a warm, personal and humane socialist morality’ to be found in rank and file militancy everywhere. It drew (political more than theoretical) inspiration from anti-Stalinist revolt in Eastern Europe, and was intended first as a kind of programme or rallying point for reform of Communism, then for a broader recombination of socialist energies outside the Party. It was viewed by Thompson as the unifying principle of the British New Left, drawing ex-communist militants together with the moral protest of CND anti-nuclearism, and as the basis for a potential socialist foreign policy of ‘positive neutralism’.<sup>16</sup>

In theoretical terms socialist humanism entailed (in Thompson's presentation) an interpretation of Stalinism as an aberrant ideology ('of a revolutionary elite ... degenerated into a bureaucracy'), alongside a critique of longer run tendencies toward economism and dogmatism in Marxist interpretation. Base –superstructure, intended by Marx as a metaphor for the dialectical interaction of social being and social consciousness, had been used by Stalin 'not as an image of men changing in society but as a mechanical model, operating semi-automatically and independently of conscious human agency'. Thompson instead insisted on the centrality of conscious human action to Marx' own conception of historical change. As well as drawing on Marxist sources, Thompson tried to rework the base-superstructure metaphor by introducing the concept of experience as a mediator between social being and social consciousness: 'it is of first importance that men do not only 'reflect' experience passively: they also think about that experience; and their thinking affects the way they act. The thinking is the creative part of man, which even in class society makes him partly an agent in history, just as he is partly a victim of his environment.' His critical move was to assimilate the humanist content of Marxism with the moral consciousness of the English Romantic tradition, especially as represented by Morris. Thompson accorded special weight to the 'moral imagination' of the artist, in educating this 'moral consciousness' by 'responding to the real quality of the life about him, evaluating this beside past culture, ordering his responses into forms which operate upon men, change their attitudes and their moral being in their turn'.<sup>17</sup> This function he was later to call 'the education of desire' (desire standing for agency/moral choice as opposed to historical necessity).<sup>18</sup>

A good deal has been written about the limitations of Thompson's socialist humanism, in terms of its problematic relationship to Marxism, its sidestepping of historical analysis of Stalinism in favour of moral condemnation, its 'theoretical flaccidity' and underdevelopment of key concepts, its isolation from other currents of Marxist humanism, its romanticism, utopianism and 'moralism'.<sup>19</sup> Some of this criticism is well-founded, although we may also note some robust defences and developments of Thompson's perspectives.<sup>20</sup> The purpose here is not to reopen these discussions but to give some less familiar perspective on the sources and the purpose of socialist humanism, which in turn illuminate aspects of the project of *The Making*. In keeping with Thompson's view of 'theory as provisional' and as polemic, socialist humanism is better viewed less as a fully articulated position than as a polemical and provisional starting point, as an ethical sensibility rather than a theory. The

term for Thompson described the developing project that he said ran through all his work, an attempt to recover and claim for socialism a ‘lost vocabulary’ of agency and moral choice. He pursued this through his histories (including of course *The Making*) through what he later described (in theoretical terms) as an investigation of the dialectic of interaction between economics and values.<sup>21</sup> But he also pursued it in other ways and registers. A key element of socialist humanism was an attentiveness to the role of artistic and literary production (for which Thompson most commonly evoked Morris and Blake).<sup>22</sup> Thompson made exactly these points in 1963:

I doubt whether socialist humanism can be usefully defined, but the attempt must be made again and again. If reduced to a set of propositions it becomes at once abstract and utopian. If we abandon the effort for one moment we fall victims to the realpolitik of determinism. It reveals itself as much in the form of a fruitful quarrel between agency and determinism, aspiration and context, people as they are and as they might be, as in any systematic theory. It postulates the validity and importance of *forms of perception and of moral growth which have not hitherto been successfully formulated in Marxist schema*. As a position in the world today it is most evident as a critique of other alternatives.<sup>23</sup>

It is important to note that both *The Making* and Thompson’s work within the New Left developed a perspective that he had forged well before his break with the CP. Thompson started out considering himself a poet and writer rather than a historian, and it is often in his poetry that we can see the themes of his work distilled most succinctly. A poem he wrote in 1950 ‘The place called choice’ closes with the following lines:

I declare that man has choice  
Discovered in that place  
Of human action where  
Necessity meets desire  
And moors and questioning wind  
Water, stone and air  
Transfigured in the soul  
Can be changed to human fire  
Which man, becoming whole

Will order and control.<sup>24</sup>

That Thompson habitually invoked 1956 as a watershed in his own intellectual development, while simultaneously claiming an essential continuity to his work, should direct our attention to a consideration of the tension he undoubtedly experienced between public loyalty to the CP and his private misgivings. His poetry demonstrates, in a more direct way than his published work while he remained in the CP, the extent to which his thinking was characterised by a somewhat unorthodox (in Marxist or communist terms) and critical ethical sensibility considerably before 1956. Later, Thompson identified himself within what he described as a partly sublimated tradition within British communism that presented an oblique resistance to the didacticism and economism of official strictures and structures.<sup>25</sup> Associated with the somewhat looser intellectual discipline and populist imperative of the Popular Front period, the main representative of this ‘muffled’ or ‘premature’ revisionism is often thought to be the CPGB Historians Group, in whose histories can be seen a more sophisticated interrogation of social being than ‘orthodoxy’ strictly permitted, and Thompson’s socialist humanism has been most extensively treated within this context.<sup>26</sup> Thompson, however, attended Historians’ Group meetings less often than those of the Writers’ Group, bringing him into contact with a slightly older milieu of Communist writers, poets and literary theorists that included Edgell Rickword, Alick West, Christopher Caudwell, Ralph Fox, and Randall Swingler. He would later cite ‘A handbook of Freedom’, a 1939 collection of English radical texts edited by Rickword and Jack Lindsay (and regarded with some suspicion by the party hierarchy), as a key influence, and in sensitive reflections on the work of Caudwell and Rickword, would use the work of this group to demonstrate the existence of a strand of ‘creative Marxism’, an ‘incipient heresy’ within the intellectual culture of British Communism, that challenged, though not always directly, the ‘correct pabulum offered as “Marxism”’.<sup>27</sup>

This ‘nationally accented mode of dissident marxism’, existing furtively amid and through the surprisingly participatory artistic and intellectual milieu documented by historians of the Party’s cultural history in the Popular Front period is of key importance in tracing the development of Thompson’s thinking and the sources of his socialist humanism.<sup>28</sup> Owing, as Stuart Middleton demonstrates in the preceding article in this collection, a large debt to non-Marxist traditions of English literary modernism, the project of this group of Communist writers and literary theorists as pursued through publications such as *Left Review*

and *Our Time*, was to recover (and claim for Communism) a popular radical cultural tradition, inscribed in working class ‘experience’ but requiring elucidation by exemplary committed intellectuals to bring it to full consciousness.<sup>29</sup> Thompson’s work on William Morris, with its subtitle ‘From romantic to revolutionary’, and pursued with the blessing of the Party, was very much within this project. That he later felt it necessary to reissue the book, not only shorn, as he put it, of its ‘Stalinist pieties’, but with a long postscript that significantly rebalanced the argument, again highlights the intellectual constraints under which he worked at this time.<sup>30</sup> If publicly restrained, private correspondence with the poet Randall Swingler, whom Thompson much admired, in the years leading up to 1956, makes it clear that both regarded themselves as part of a ‘cultural opposition’ within the Party. (‘Emilism’ was the shorthand they used for their enemy, in a reference to Emile Burns, seen as the Zhdanov of the CPGB).<sup>31</sup> Amongst the first friends Thompson consulted on his idea for an inner party journal (originally mooted under the title ‘anti-monolith’), Swingler’s letters use ideas and language strikingly similar to Thompson’s own. ‘We have so much rehabilitation to do in our own minds, so much rediscovery of imprisoned ideals and enthusiasms, reaffirmation of forgotten socialist and humane values’, he wrote in October 1956, and following the invasion of Hungary, he drafted a proposal for a new society, a sort of ‘Fabian society meets Left Book Club’ envisaged as taking the best elements of the Communist tradition into the Labour Party, that might have been a blueprint for the Reasoner side of the New Left.<sup>32</sup>

Thompson’s socialist humanism drew heavily on this pre-existing ‘cultural opposition’, and literary sources remained highly prominent. His 1950 poem, begun during a visit to Swingler’s home, already shows powerfully his deep assimilation of Morris and the radical romanticism of Blake, and contains an implicit critique of Marxist orthodoxy. Partially suppressed before 1956, these themes were liberated in the *New Reasoner*. Taking its name from a shortlived nineteenth century radical publication begun by former secretary of the London Corresponding Society John Bone, it was subtitled ‘a journal of socialist humanism’ and took as its motto a quote from Marx (via Hyndman) ‘to leave error unrefuted is to encourage intellectual immorality’.<sup>33</sup> It is to the whole project of the journal rather than to one specific essay that we need to look to appreciate the contours of socialist humanism and of Thompson’s political and ethical concerns at this time. Continuing the project of the Writer’s Group, but now free of the constraints of ‘Emilism’, the NR paid extensive attention to literature (poems by Tom McGrath and Tibor Dery, fiction by Doris Lessing and others, a



Blake bicentenary supplement). Socialist humanism was also expressed through coverage of promising movements and currents abroad (Yugoslav workers' councils, African independence movements, Keralan communism, to name a few), in an absolute commitment to the cause of nuclear disarmament, and in the direct, accessible and non-academic style that Thompson described as 'attack', and which he associated with the politico-cultural journalism of Swift and Hazlitt.<sup>34</sup> These were all essential elements in the project of the journal, described in an early editorial as fighting for a 'rebirth of socialist principle'.

Also central was the journal's ambition to bridge the gap perceived to have opened up since the 1930s between intellectuals and the labour movement. In a sometimes heated discussion within the newly established *Universities and Left Review* around the role that socialist intellectuals could and should play politically, Thompson came down firmly in favour of 'commitment', identifying a 'retreat from humanism' as the 'most striking feature of our intellectual life today'. Declaring that he no longer felt that 'joining anything' was enough, his impassioned call was for the intellectuals of the late 1950s to resume the task of 'helping people to become aware of the vast human potentialities ... denied or frustrated within capitalist society'.<sup>35</sup> Though aspects of this (especially his positive portrayal of the communist intellectuals of the 1930s from which some in the ULR circle dissented) were controversial, the theme of commitment struck a chord with the younger group of non-aligned, mainly student socialist intellectuals that formed the other wing of the nascent New Left. Socialist humanism, expressed here in terms of a reaffirmation of essential socialist values, of a faith in the 'revolutionary potentialities of man', and as seeking to unite the 'realism of the sociologist' with the 'realism of the poet' was in Thompson's early ULR essays advanced as a kind of rallying call for this emerging milieu.<sup>36</sup> However, while taking up the term enthusiastically, this other wing of the New Left contested key aspects of Thompson's elaboration of it and drew somewhat different conclusions about the priorities for intellectuals. Charles Taylor, in an especially noteworthy critique, denied the compatibility of communism and humanism, found Thompson's reflections on the causes of Stalinism too limited, and argued that a humanist commitment required a far more extensive revision of Marxism than Thompson had offered.<sup>37</sup> The interest of these younger intellectuals in socialist humanism was emphatically not for its promise of a rehabilitated Communism, but rather because it spoke directly to their tentative exploration of the possibilities of an expanded politics, a 'socialism at full stretch ... relevant only in so far as it is relevant to the full scale of man's activities'.<sup>38</sup> For them, socialist humanism gave theoretical justification

for an experimental (and cross class) form of grassroots organising that began to pioneer a novel ‘politics of culture’ and whose conception of intellectual commitment was rather different.<sup>39</sup>

Thompson was unsympathetic to some of these emphases. However over time the balance of his own emphasis between the different sources and inspirations that made up socialist humanism shifted somewhat, no doubt partly as a result of these early discussions within the New Left. It is interesting to note that whilst rebutting most of his critics, he readily conceded to Taylor’s argument that Marxism could be at best only an ‘incomplete humanism’ (though he was careful to separate this from the libertarian communist tradition with which he continued to identify and to regard as a key source for socialist humanism).<sup>40</sup> This perhaps chimed with and brought into focus his own developing reservations. In a lecture on Morris in 1959, he was already speaking of a ‘degree of incompatibility’ between Morris as a ‘great moralist’ and the Marxist tradition which made the latter ‘incapable of absorbing the great enrichment of the ethical content of Communism which was Morris’s unique contribution’.<sup>41</sup> The predominance of literary and artistic sources in shaping Thompson’s ethical thought became gradually clearer. If in 1957 Thompson was convinced of the compatibility of humanism and Marxism, by the late 1970s he had revised his views to offer a more thoroughgoing critique of Marxism as unable to accommodate Morris’ ethical concerns, saying: ‘Morris can never be assimilated to Marxism, not because of any contradiction of purposes but because one may not assimilate desire to knowledge, and because the attempt to do so is to confuse two different operative principles of culture. So that I have phrased the problem wrongly, and Marxism requires less a re-ordering of its parts than a sense of humility before those parts of culture which it can never order’.<sup>42</sup>

It is in this sense, as an ethical sensibility, that socialist humanism retained its importance as a touchstone for Thompson’s thought, a sense best summed up in ‘Agency and Choice’ a reply to critics of his 1957 essay, in which he talked of the ‘vindication of the right of the moral imagination to project an ideal to which it is legitimate to aspire, and the right of reason to enquire into the means and ends of social arrangements, irrespective of questions of immediate feasibility’.<sup>43</sup> This is the sensibility – imaginative, solidaristic, an expression of Thompson’s own commitment as an engaged intellectual and ‘great moralist’ - that underlies and animates the treatment of working class experience in *The Making*, and can be seen so clearly in his commitment to rescuing, as he famously put it, the ‘losers’ of history, the

marginalised and defeated, ‘the blind alleys and lost causes’ whose struggles nevertheless were valid in their own terms and times.

### **Class consciousness and organisation in the ‘affluent society’**

*‘I just do not know where this notion of working people as unresponsive to anything except direct economic motivations came from; it certainly does not come out of the history of the British working class’*<sup>44</sup>

The centrality of opposition, objection, and dissent to Thompson’s thought has been well demonstrated.<sup>45</sup> Thompson thought and wrote *against*, and *The Making*, famously, is animated by arguments against different opponents and pursued at different levels. The ‘double sided critique’ that structured the book and that Thompson made explicit in his 1980 preface was directed at conservative schools of economic history on the one hand and Marxist orthodoxy on the other, two sides of an economically reductionist argument that produced the simplistic equation ‘steam power plus cotton mill = new working class’ that Thompson set himself to counter, in the process forcing, as Palmer notes, an ‘unmistakable rupture’ in the historical literature such that ‘class formation could no longer be posed, by radicals and reactionaries alike, as a mechanical reflection of economic change’.<sup>46</sup> But Thompson had other opponents in mind too. His argument was also with those social democratic ‘revisionists’ of the late 1950s Labour Party, at the time exhibiting their own brand of economic determinism in the uncritical welcome they extended to post-war ‘affluent capitalism’, as well as with those colleagues within the New Left whom Thompson thought in danger of capitulating too easily to the ‘mythology of prosperity’ and of missing the political opportunities of the period. The bulk of the writing for *The Making* was undertaken at the same time as Thompson, following the merger of the two original journals as NLR and the apparent success of the growing Left Clubs network, sought to shape the agenda for a New Left, open, activist and non-sectarian, that he hoped could begin to make good Morris’ ambition to ‘*make Socialists ... cover the country with a network of associations composed of men who feel their antagonism to the dominant classes, and have no temptation to waste their time in the thousand follies of party politics.*’<sup>47</sup>

A critical context for this broader emerging milieu, and especially for the ULRers, was the discussion around post-war ‘affluence’ and its implications for working class consciousness and political agency in the 1950s and ‘60s. Much energy was devoted to rebutting the Croslandite prospectus for a (Labour) socialism reoriented around the ‘ends’ of welfare and equality in which the ‘means’ of nationalisation was rendered economically irrelevant by the triumph of the mixed economy and the much vaunted ‘separation of ownership and control’, and electorally unpopular by the emergence of a more prosperous, aspirational and less class-conscious Labour electorate.<sup>48</sup> Thompson, not surprisingly, was among Crosland’s most trenchant critics. But he was also wary of the interest of the younger theorists of ULR in the potentially depoliticising effects within the working class of ‘affluence’ and the ideological concepts associated with it, such as consumer choice (‘you’ve never had it so good’) and social mobility (‘the scholarship boy’, the ‘status ladder’). This interest owed much to Richard Hoggart’s elegiac portrayal of a distinct working class culture threatened by ‘mass’ culture (extensively debated in New Left circles), and to Raymond Williams’ vision of culture as ‘a whole way of life’.<sup>49</sup> The series of essays Thompson wrote in New Left publications between 1959 and 1963, most notably ‘Commitment in Politics’ in ULR; ‘At the point of decay’ and ‘Revolution’ (both appeared in the 1960 collection *Out of Apathy* but are far less well known than ‘Outside the Whale’ in the same volume); ‘Revolution Again’, and ‘The Long Revolution I and II’ (his review of Williams’ book of that name), form an extended companion-piece to *The Making*, drawing extensively on his historical researches, rehearsing and forming the arguments he would pursue there, but applying them to the immediate problems of his own time and of the New Left.

‘Commitment’, published in Spring 1959 as discussions about a merger of the two journals proceeded, continued, as the title suggested, the ongoing debate about the role of socialist intellectuals. In a sharp polemic, ostensibly touched off by an impressionistic ULR piece which had described in sections of working class life a ‘population jaded beyond redemption’, Thompson inveighed against a wider tendency he detected among the younger cohort ‘to view working people as the *subjects* of history, as pliant *recipients* of the imprint of the mass media, as *victims* of alienation, as *data* for sociological enquiry’.<sup>50</sup> Warning his ULR colleagues not to slip into the patronising, self-isolating, and ultimately ‘anti-working class’ attitudes of the middle class intellectual who bemoaned the ‘materialism’ of the ‘affluent worker’, he insisted that a ‘sense of history’, a sense of the dialectics of social change, must be brought to bear on the contemporary debate on working class agency and

consciousness. A historical perspective showed, for instance, that distrust of materialism and fears about embourgeoisement and moral decline among the working class were nothing new; that the 1850-1880 period saw 'a striving for status within the working class as sharp as any to be found today': that what 1950s theorists called the 'status ladder', was equivalent to the Victorian notion of 'self-help'; that working class culture had survived earlier onslaughts ('the propaganda of church and squire .. the sentimental mush of the Sunday School and the orthodox Methodist pulpit, as debilitating and degrading in their way as anything offered today').<sup>51</sup> And in an early outing for a key argument of *The Making*, he asked 'are working people to be allowed no consciousness of themselves, no power of moral reflection, no agency in shaping industrial society?' What about 'Luddism and Peterloo, trade union experiments and Owenism, the ten hour movement and Chartism, and the proliferation of popular religious, educational and cooperative societies'? Working class history, he insisted, (against Hoggart, though his argument was also applicable to Williams), was the record not of a coherent or singular 'way of life' but of a way of struggle: 'this way of struggle, against class rule above and between competing moralities within the working class, has never been a blind, spontaneous response to objective economic conditions. It has been a conscious struggle of ideas and values all the way'.<sup>52</sup>

These arguments were developed in succeeding pieces, achieving their most extended expression in 'Revolution Again'. Here, Thompson argued that the widespread contemporary belief that traditional forms of working class consciousness were being eroded, weakening the basis for socialism, rested on a 'static concept' of the working class as a 'given entity with a "fixed" characteristic consciousness which may wax and wane but which is essentially the same thing'.<sup>53</sup> He proceeded to rehearse in some detail the arguments of *The Making*. Aligning himself with 'the Marxist concept of class ... as an *historical concept*, which bears in mind the interaction of objective and subjective determinants', he distanced himself from the tendency within it (for which he cited Engels) to see 'the origin and growth of working-class consciousness as 'a function of the growth of large scale factory production whose inevitable tendency must be to engender a revolutionary consciousness'. 'Factories do not explain Peterloo', he insisted, pointing to the fragmentary and divided nature of the working class in the period between 1780 and 1850, a period whose class politics were to be understood not as a 'revolt *for* anything approaching socialism, but as a revolt *against* industrialism'. Thus the working class movement that did emerge by the mid-1800s, though 'fueled by economic grievances' was in form and direction 'decided by political and cultural

influences', its consciousness 'made, not "generated" ... with the constant day to day work of the Chartist leader and organiser to weld together the most disparate elements – weaver and factory worker, artisan and Irish – and to discount divisive sectional interest in the common interest of the class'.<sup>54</sup> The forty years after 1848, he suggested, was a period characterised (like the 1950s) by the 'erosion of affluence', when 'a combination of political defeat and of economic recovery led to the erosion of Chartist consciousness into all the disparate elements that had been contained with such skill within it'. This fragmentation, while facilitating the rise of the more accommodationist political consciousness of 'Lib-Labism' (a process of 'bourgeoisification' that Thompson directly analogised with the 1950s "'corruption" of the skilled workers by "affluence"' also laid the basis for another kind of working class consciousness around the mines, factories and docks, producing the characteristic institutions and culture of the modern Labour movement.<sup>55</sup>

The lessons to be drawn were obvious. The problems of "affluence" were not new: 'divisive, sectional and adaptive pressures have always been found in working class experience'. If such pressures had accelerated in the post-war period (as Thompson conceded they had), the issue to be confronted was not a disintegration of class consciousness but its mutation into new forms. Which forms Thompson stressed depended at this time on who he was arguing with. Against some adversaries, (Hoggart, and elements within the 'old left') he rejected any nostalgic celebration of particular and historically specific forms of working class consciousness, whose 'narrow, impoverishing features' must be registered along with their virtues.<sup>56</sup> Against the far left tendency to arraign the New Left for its failure to produce 'working class ideas' or 'conform' to Marxism, he stressed the necessity of facing certain 'contemporary facts' in working class consciousness: the 'permeation of an acquisitive ethic into the centres of working class life, and the enfeeblement of the ethic of community. The evident corruption of the traditional institutions of the labour movement ...'<sup>57</sup> And against the ULRers, whom he thought in danger of over generalising from their own political formation in an era of 'apathy', he emphasised the toughness of working class oppositional culture, its diversity and creativity, the extent to which daily class experience, 'the dogged tradition of the British commoner' remained a vital and active resource.<sup>58</sup>

All this resolved itself into an impassioned argument for commitment and, crucially, political organisation. 'Revolution Again' was Thompson's reply to critics of 'Revolution!', 'his short conclusion to *Out of Apathy*, in which he had rather impressionistically sketched out

the possibilities for a British ‘democratic revolution’ based on an accumulation of ‘unrelenting reforming pressures in many fields’.<sup>59</sup> This spoke to another of the New Left’s characteristic preoccupations, the question of how any transition to a socialist society was to be achieved. Attempting to bypass both ‘evolutionary’ and ‘cataclysmic’ models, Thompson insisted that socialism must and could be built up from below, using and developing existing working class and democratic institutions and processes, a model of ‘countervailing power’ for which he used the metaphor of a rabbit warren (British capitalist society, he suggested more than once, was ‘warrened’ by working class activity and organisation).<sup>60</sup> Responding to charges of ‘utopianism’, Thompson now sought to answer his critics, whose main question he paraphrased as ‘how can we assume anything so ridiculous as a revolutionary working class consciousness within an affluent society?’<sup>61</sup> Since history prescribed no easy correspondence between working class militancy (or its absence) and the economic situation, and since class consciousness was a process of active ‘making’, a product of ‘political action and skill’, the urgent task for socialists in 1960 – and here he saw the New Left as making a key contribution - was to endeavour to define and ‘fix’ a new class consciousness, to identify and nurture those promising and oppositional elements within it, on as broad a basis as possible. Otherwise, Thompson foresaw a scenario in which the “‘working class” (in its epochal connotation)’ might divide into ‘old’ (holding to its traditional forms and values, but confined to the industrial heartlands) and ‘new’ (in non-traditional occupations and suburbs, accepting ‘the ideology of “classlessness”’). The New Left, of course, could not provide the agency that was required to avoid this scenario, but it could help to articulate and precipitate a new consciousness around a ‘broadening concept of the common good’, lending support to those elements within existing labour movement institutions capable of pushing for far reaching transformation of their leadership, policies and structure, as well as appealing to the ‘newer’ elements. Here Thompson again stressed the importance of what he had in ‘Commitment’ referred to as the ‘politically active minority’ within the working class, those who could provide ‘the kind of leadership which is in there with the people ...taking up their grievances, articulating their aspirations, knitting together one aspiration with another in a general popular strategy .... If only the Labour Party were to be transformed into a Party capable of giving *this* kind of direct leadership, without the elitist manipulation or the suspects strategy of the Communist Party, then the problem of agency would be solved’. If it could not be so transformed, ‘then new organisations will have to be created’.<sup>62</sup>

Thompson's counsel of hope was also a call to arms, a deliberate counter to what he saw as a prevailing mood of economistic fatalism affecting even friends such as C. Wright Mills, whose call for his colleagues in the British New Left to abandon 'the labour metaphysic' he strongly resisted.<sup>63</sup> 'Socialism must commence with living people, it must be built by men and women in voluntary association'.<sup>64</sup> The job of the intellectual in unpropitious circumstances could not then be to 'write off' the working class, but to look for the new growing points. If this extended at times to the kind of extravagant claims for the possibilities for the New Left that his NLR successors would find risible, he was largely unrepentant. 'It is always the business of the left to foster the utmost aspiration compatible with existing reality – and then some more beyond.'<sup>65</sup> Thompson saw in the emergence of the New Left, outside existing orthodoxies and outside of the traditional top-down forms of party organisation, a chance for the creation of a new style of grassroots socialist political formation with potential to bridge gaps between older and younger generations, 'new' and 'old' working class, and between the labour movement and intellectuals. The rich historical detail of *The Making* would extend and deepen the arguments on which this analysis depended - that the effects of social and economic change at the level of consciousness were not pre-determined, and that the complexity and paradox of working class historical experience provided as many reasons to hope as to despair. By the time the book appeared, however, the New Left as a movement had disintegrated, and those who took the helm of NLR had quite other views.

## **Conclusion**

'Laden with its own moment': the further we are away from Thompson's times, the easier it becomes to see *The Making* as a product of those times. But it is not, of course, unproblematically or merely so. A BBC radio discussion of the book in its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year posed the question of whether it could now be seen as an elegy for a defeated working class in a moment of developing consumerism. This is too reductive. As the historian Miles Taylor, a contributor to the programme, pointed out, the method of *The Making* transcends its times.<sup>66</sup> That Thompson took sides, unambiguously, that he wrote the book partly to inspire radicalism in his own time, to oppose and to challenge dominant orthodoxies, is evident. That he managed to balance this with a scrupulously careful attention to the 'discipline of historical context', handling his sources with a deftness and sensitivity, an alertness not just to contexts but to their meanings for the actors themselves, that remains exemplary, is also



evident, though always worthy of re-emphasis, given that the idea (or ideal) of overtly politicised, 'committed' or 'engaged' history is still apt to provoke strong responses.

Clearly, the book stands above and beyond its time. At the same time, the political essays Thompson wrote during this period serve as an illuminating companion-piece, shedding light on Thompson's own political and intellectual development and on central themes of the book itself. This was a transformative, in some ways defining period for Thompson: understanding its significance involves reaching back before 1956 and attending to his own negotiation of his break with official Communism. From 1956 onward we see him bringing more explicitly into his political and historical work his acute literary and ethical sensibilities and interests, attempting to foster an open dialogue between the libertarian communist tradition and the romantic and literary heritage exemplified by Blake and Morris. His writings in this period also show the relative weight of those sources and inspirations changing over time. With regard to our understanding of *The Making*, attention to the detail of his articulation of socialist humanism illuminates the ethical sensibility that pervades the book and that gives it both its moral force and its rich literary texture and breadth of allusion. It also gives some useful context against which to assess the status and significance of the book as 'theory', furnishing, perhaps, some necessary counter to treatments that have inclined to a focus on the limitations of the concepts and categories deployed, at times to the detriment of a broader understanding of its meaning.<sup>67</sup>

Reading *The Making* alongside Thompson's simultaneous political writings shows clearly how the themes and arguments animating the former were developed and tested within the political imperatives of late 1950s, and how those imperatives shaped the historiographical standpoint of the book. Class consciousness as an active process, not given by economic circumstance but made, involving choice and conscious action. The vital role of political skill, of the most class conscious active minority in creating and sustaining class consciousness, and of exemplary intellectual figures in shaping the raw material of consciousness through moral example, art and imagination as well as through direct political appeal. *The Making* is an extended refutation of the economic fatalism that characterised this period, an assertion of imagination and desire over necessity. Thompson's immersion in this political and intellectual moment also gives the text that sense of political and intellectual possibility, of urgency, that so pervades it and contributes so much to its enduring appeal across national and historical contexts. Finally, reading Thompson's political essays of this period alongside *The Making* can perhaps help us avoid another kind of reductionism,

recalling the complexity of the politics of class in this period, and reminding us that its historical meaning is not fixed. After all, as Thompson liked to remind his colleagues, we are not at the end of history ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to John Saville, undated, 1961. I am grateful to Richard Saville for providing me with a copy.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson, *The Making*, 1980 edition preface, 14.

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<sup>3</sup> Before committing himself to Gollancz Thompson had planned to follow his 1955 political biography of William Morris with a social and industrial history of the people of the West Riding of Yorkshire, where he was then based as an extra mural tutor at Leeds University. It seems that the two projects – the textbook and the social history – became conjoined, and *The Making* was the result. See Goodway ‘E. P. Thompson and the Making’, 134-5.

<sup>4</sup> Thompson’s major New Left essays are soon to be usefully republished in a forthcoming collection edited by Cal Winslow, *E.P. Thompson and the Making of the New Left*.

<sup>5</sup> For Thompson and adult education, see Goodway, ‘E.P. Thompson and the making’; Croft ‘Walthamstow, Little Gidding’; Searby ‘Edward Thompson as a teacher’. Goodway notes the extent to which a syllabus for a 1959 class designed by Thompson resembled an early outline for *The Making*, 137.

<sup>6</sup> Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, foreword, i.

<sup>7</sup> Lin Chun, *The British New Left*; Kenny, *The First New Left: Dworkin, Cultural Marxism*; Newman, ‘Edward Thompson’.

<sup>8</sup> Eley ‘Working class agency’; Hobsbawm ‘Organised orphans’.

<sup>9</sup> The most notable exception is Palmer, *The Making of EP Thompson*. See also Bess, ‘E.P. Thompson: The Historian as Activist’.

<sup>10</sup> A phenomenon noted by Eastwood ‘History, politics and reputation’, 640.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson ‘Socialism and Pseudo Empiricism’, 34.

<sup>12</sup> Eastwood ‘History’, 653.

<sup>13</sup> Recent reassessments are Hamilton *Crisis of Theory*, Matthews ‘E.P. Thompson in the Provinces’. It is worth noting also that even as he retracted some of his charges against Thompson, Anderson continued to see these writings as amongst the weakest he ever produced, *Arguments*, 157.

<sup>14</sup> Thompson ‘Socialism and the intellectuals’, 31.

<sup>15</sup> Thompson ‘Socialist humanism’. On continuity see Soper ‘Socialist humanism’, 90.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Positive neutralism’ envisaged unilateral renunciation of nuclear weaponry and British withdrawal from NATO, to be succeeded by alternative alliances with other ‘actively neutral’ nations, especially in the Third World, to break the grip of superpower politics.

<sup>17</sup> Thompson, ‘Socialist humanism’, 113

<sup>18</sup> He borrowed the term ‘education of desire’ from Miguel Abensour: see his postscript to the 1976 edition of *William Morris*.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Theoretical flaccidity’ is referred to in Eastwood, ‘History’, 638. For critiques, see Anderson, ‘Socialism’, 33-36; Chun, *British New Left*, 33; Kenny, *First New Left*, 82-3.

<sup>20</sup> See especially Soper, ‘Socialist humanism’, 89–126; Meiksins Wood, ‘Falling through the cracks’, 125–152, and her *Democracy against capitalism*, especially Chapter 3, ‘Class as process and relationship’.

<sup>21</sup> Merrill, ‘An interview’, 20-21.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

<sup>23</sup> Thompson, ‘Where are we now?’

<sup>24</sup> Thompson, ‘The place called choice’ in Inglis (ed) *EP Thompson: collected poems*, 55.

<sup>25</sup> Thompson ‘Christopher Caudwell’ and ‘Edgell Rickword’.

<sup>26</sup> See Johnson, ‘Edward Thompson’, McClelland, ‘Some comments’, also Schwarz, ‘The “people” in history’.

<sup>27</sup> Thompson, ‘Edgell Rickword’ 237.

<sup>28</sup> The quote is from Harker, “Communism is English”, 40, see also the essays collected in Croft, *A Weapon in the Struggle*, especially Behrend, ‘An intellectual irrelevance’.

<sup>29</sup> Although a similar sort of inverted Leavisism was also a strong influence on Raymond Williams, who had not been a CP member.

<sup>30</sup> Thompson, *Morris*, 1976 postscript, 769.

<sup>31</sup> For their correspondence see Croft’s biography of Swingler, *Comrade Heart*. Croft was given access to Thompson’s letters to Swingler by the former’s widow Dorothy Thompson but requested not to quote from them, see Chapter 14 note 7, 277.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 230-1.

<sup>33</sup> The *New Reasoner*, 1957-1959. Thanks are due to Henry Hardy and Terrell Carver for help in tracking down the source of the masthead quote in Hyndman, *Record of an adventurous life*, Ch XVI.

<sup>34</sup> Letter, Thompson to Saville, 9 January 1957, Saville Papers, Hull History Centre.

<sup>35</sup> Thompson, ‘Socialism and the intellectuals’, 34.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

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- <sup>37</sup> Taylor, 'Marxism and humanism', 96-7.
- <sup>38</sup> Editorial, *Universities and Left Review* 4. 1958: 1.
- <sup>39</sup> For ULR's interpretation and use of socialist humanism see Davis, 'Reappraising British socialist humanism',
- <sup>40</sup> Thompson, 'Agency and Choice', 96.
- <sup>41</sup> Thompson, 'The Communism of William Morris', 6 - although responsibility for this shortcoming in the Marxist tradition was at this point chiefly ascribed to Engels.
- <sup>42</sup> Thompson, *William Morris* postscript, 798-9.
- <sup>43</sup> Thompson, 'Agency and choice', 91.
- <sup>44</sup> Thompson, 'Revolution Again', 30.
- <sup>45</sup> Palmer, *EP Thompson*, and less sympathetically, Eastwood, 'History'.
- <sup>46</sup> Palmer, *EP Thompson*, 94.
- <sup>47</sup> Thompson, 'Communism of William Morris' – though Thompson did not share Morris' uncompromising anti-parliamentarism.
- <sup>48</sup> Crosland, 'The Transition from Capitalism', *The Future of Socialism*. On the New Left critique of Crosland see Davis, 'Arguing Affluence', also Black, *Political Culture*.
- <sup>49</sup> Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, Williams, *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution*. The outstanding ULR contribution on the ideological changes associated with affluence was by Hall 'A sense of classlessness'.
- <sup>50</sup> Thompson 'Commitment' 51. The article against which Thompson took aim was Redfern, 'The real outrage' ULR 5 Autumn, 1958.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.
- <sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, 52.
- <sup>53</sup> Thompson, 'Revolution again', 24.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 27
- <sup>57</sup> Thompson, 'The New Left', 12.
- <sup>58</sup> Thompson, 'Revolution', 9.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.
- <sup>60</sup> Thompson 'At the point of decay'. He also used the warren metaphor in 'Peculiarities'.
- <sup>61</sup> Thompson, 'Revolution again', 23.
- <sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, 29-30.
- <sup>63</sup> Wright Mills, 'Letter to the New Left, 21-2.
- <sup>64</sup> Thompson, 'The New Left', 10.
- <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.
- <sup>66</sup> BBC radio 3 'Nightwaves', 'Landmarks: the making of the English Working Class', broadcast on 8 April 2013, accessed 10 December 2014, available at [http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b01rr8ng/Night\\_Waves\\_Landmarks\\_The\\_Making\\_of\\_the\\_English\\_Working\\_Class/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b01rr8ng/Night_Waves_Landmarks_The_Making_of_the_English_Working_Class/)
- <sup>67</sup> For an argument that aspects of *The Making* as not to be taken too literally, see Goode, 'E.P. Thompson and "the significance of literature"', 182.