

Introduction

Reading twenty-first-century capitalism through the lens of E. P. Thompson

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Abstract: E. P. Thompson's social history of capitalism has enduring relevance for anthropological analyses of economic crisis, precarious labor, and class struggle today. This introduction provides a synthesis of the ethnographic cases in this theme section by reflecting on several impulses in Thompson's work that both resonate with and challenge current ethnography of political and economic change. Thompson's focus on moments of transition, his conception of human subjectivity as a process of "making," and his view of class struggle as arising from tensions between old and new orders bring history and political economy into the study of emergent social formations. Inspired by Thompson's critique of rigid theoretical models, this introduction suggests ways not only to adopt but also to modify the historian's insights for ethnographic work on contemporary capitalism.

Keywords: capitalism, class, moral economy, social change, subjectivity

Over 50 years have passed since the publication of E. P. Thompson's *The making of the English working class* (1963). This momentous account of the transition to industrial capitalism and of the struggles of working people in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England not only reconceptualized class as a relationship and process.¹ It also introduced questions of agency, subjectivity, and experience into the historical analysis of capitalism and prefigured influential concepts that Thompson would further develop in other works, including time-sense, work-discipline, historical logic, and, perhaps most famously, the moral economy.

This special section of *Focaal* explores what E. P. Thompson's work offers an anthropology of capitalism today. At a time of rising

unemployment and precarious labor, deepening social and economic inequality, and protests critiquing the failures of neoliberal capitalism in various parts of the world, we find Thompson's study of political-economic change and conflict to be newly relevant.² Each article presents an extended dialogue between a specific concept or methodological approach in Thompson's work and an ethnographic account of contemporary economic change. These include the restructuring of the marijuana industry in an economically depressed region of northern California (Keene), temporal experiences and practices among precarious workers in Rio de Janeiro (Millar), and changing forms of political consciousness around race and class in Brazil and the United States (Mitchell). Though each



article finds inspiration in Thompson's thought for an anthropological understanding of emergent economic formations and critiques, they do not merely replicate or recycle his contributions. Rather, the goal of this theme section is to rethink Thompson's historical analysis of capitalism in light of current political and economic transformations.

Thompson and anthropology

As a proponent of socialist humanism, Thompson dedicated much of his work to critiquing the economic determinism that dominated the Marxism of his day. For Thompson, history was a human creation and therefore could not be understood apart from the actions and experiences of everyday lives. His emphasis on norms, values, beliefs, practices, and choices of the English working people whom he studied led him to amass an impressive collection of local newspaper articles, court proceedings, historical writings, pamphlets, petitions, letters, memoirs, and even the odd diary and ballad that would rival the thick description in any ethnography today. Moreover, many of these sources did not come from London, the metropolitan center of power and authority, but rather from provincial sources in the West Riding, where Thompson lived and taught adult education classes to working-class students while writing *The making*.³ By attending to locally produced forms of knowledge and to the lived experience of common people, Thompson placed human action and struggle at the center of historical change. Yet he saw this process as largely unauthored (Soper 1990: 214). Indeed, through the term "making" in the title, *The making of the English working class*, Thompson sought to capture the dialectical interplay between historical conditions and human agency. As he notes in the opening lines of his magnum opus, the English working class was "made" but was also "present at its own making" (1963: 9).

Thompson's close attention to everyday lives in his historical accounts was not only an

intellectual concern but also emerged in part from his own life experiences as a teacher, political activist, and resident of a working-class district in the northern town of Halifax. In the years leading up to the writing of *The making*, Thompson taught small groups of working-class students in villages and towns across the West Riding as part of an adult education program in the Leeds University Extramural Department. Thompson encouraged his students to bring their own knowledge and experience into the classroom and saw his role as a learner as much as a teacher (Palmer 1994). As Thompson put it, "I went into adult education because it seemed to me to be an area in which I would learn something about industrial England, and teach people who would teach me. Which they did."⁴ There was an ethnographic sensibility in Thompson's efforts to learn from the communities whose ancestors included the stockingers, Luddite croppers, handloom weavers, and utopian artists about whom Thompson would later write in *The making*. While conducting research for the book, Thompson even went so far as to acquire a handloom and learn to use it so as to better understand the experience of eighteenth-century weavers (Palmer 2014). Years later, his former students would speak about Thompson's ability to connect with students and attributed this skill, as one put it, "to the anthropologist in him: 'Listen, listen, listen'" (Winslow 2014: 14).

Given Thompson's commitment to learning from the lives of others, his refusal to reduce these lives to economic explanations, and the emphasis he placed on the social construction of capitalism, it is surprising that there has been relatively little sustained engagement with Thompson in anthropology. Noting the dearth of anthropological references to Thompson's work, Marc Edelman compares Thompson to "a specter whose traces are ubiquitous but who remains almost invisible" (2012: 49). One reason why social scientists have rarely drawn upon Thompson, as Edelman and others (see Sewell 1990) have argued, concerns his refusal to offer generalizable, abstract theoretical propositions. Thompson rejected what he saw as top-down

theoretical models that fail to capture the indeterminacy of human experience. In his polemical essay “The poverty of theory,” Thompson attacks Althusserian structuralism for creating “a self-generating conceptual universe which imposes its own ideality upon the phenomena of material and social existence (1978a: 13).” He also cautioned against the use of sociological typologies in historical analysis. While he found concepts from the social sciences potentially useful to think with, Thompson notes that there was danger “at the point where these 17th-century families become The Nuclear Family: where these 13th-century Russian peasants and those 19th-century Irish cottiers become The Peasantry: where these Chartist Plug Rioters and those Communards become Violence in Industrial Society: where, indeed, 18th-century Birmingham and a bazaar in 16th-century Persia and a village in 20th-century Ecuador become assimilated as Pre-Industrial Society” (Thompson 1972: 46). Thompson’s concern was that such categories easily become reductive of specific, complex historical contexts.

This is not to say that Thompson eschewed all theory but rather that his theoretical insights are embedded within his historical accounts of working-class lives, told in rich and sometimes overwhelming detail. Bryan Palmer (2014) has furthermore shown how in the case of *The making*, the very structure of the book—its division into three layers of argumentation that tackled contemporary working-class, reactionary, and leftist orthodoxies, which all sidelined in their own ways the radical potential and experience of working people—constituted the book’s theoretical contribution. In other words, Thompson’s theory is to be found in the way he constructed historical narrative and only rarely in explicit theoretical statements. The six-page preface to *The making*, for example, is the only place in the nearly 900-page tome in which Thompson explicitly outlines his conceptualization of class.⁵

Thompson’s continued emphasis on historical context and process led him to critique the structural anthropology that was dominant in

his time (1994: 211). He was critical of its synchronic analysis and wary of its search for cross-comparative or even universal characteristics of human societies. Yet despite these concerns, Thompson was drawn to what he called the “anthropological impulse” (1994: 201). It was the way anthropologists departed from positivist and economistic explanations of social life and the attention they gave instead to norms, values, rituals, and customs that he saw resonating with his own passion and project. For Thompson, the anthropological impulse was thus felt “not in model building, but in locating new problems, in seeing old problems in new ways” (1994: 201). In many ways, the articles in this theme section engage Thompson’s work in the same spirit. They show that although Thompson may not have proposed a delineated set of theoretical propositions, his work offers methods, sensibilities, questions, and instincts conducive to current anthropological work on political economy and social change. In what follows, I highlight several of these Thompsonian “impulses” that cross-cut the articles, specifically Thompson’s interest in historical transitions, his approach to subjectivity, and his attentiveness to class in multiple dimensions of social life.

The old in the new

In recent years, there has been a tendency to narrate political and economic events in terms of crisis (Roitman 2014). The 2008 collapse of financial markets in the United States and the recession that followed were identified as a global economic crisis. Marxist-inspired accounts interpreted these same events as a systemic capitalist crisis (see Harvey 2011; Panitch and Gindin 2011). Protests against debt, austerity, and declining opportunities for youth in many parts of the world have been perceived as responses to this economic crisis (Theodosopoulos 2013). And the continuing loss of full-time, stable employment has often been called a “crisis of work” (Muehlebach 2011). Indeed, there is a shared sense that we have entered a

different moment in capitalist development, one defined by ongoing crisis or what Lauren Berlant has called “the crisis ordinary” (2011: 9).

Much of Thompson’s work focused on historical moments that might also be thought of as crises but which he more commonly understood as transitions.⁶ In *The making*, Thompson focuses on the struggles of skilled artisans whose crafts and traditions are being transformed by the rise of industrial wage labor. His 1967 essay, “Time, work-discipline, and industrial capitalism,” continues in this vein, looking specifically at shifts in notions of time across generations of workers recently introduced to wage labor. In his study of collective revolts against soaring grain prices in eighteenth-century England (1971), Thompson examines yet another shift—one from long-held customs governing market prices to free market ideologies, or what Thompson calls a shift from a moral economy to political economy. In all of this work, Thompson approaches the English industrial revolution not as a “settled context but a phase of transition between two ways of life” (1963: 418).

Thompson’s focus on moments of transition offers a methodological approach to studying political-economic change that differs significantly from the framework of crisis. In many ways, crisis suggests a rupture, a break with the past, or as Janet Roitman (2014: 19) shows in her incisive analysis of crisis narratives, “a marking out of ‘new time.’” Though both crisis and transition signify historical change, Thompson’s understanding of transitions emphasizes instead the coexistence of the old and the new. “But too often in our histories,” Thompson writes, “we foreshorten the great transitions” (1971: 132). By looking at historical moments—often across centuries—when different value systems, practices, and social institutions are concurrent and competing, Thompson shows how the past tenaciously persists in the present and can generate long, drawn-out struggles. Studying social change through the lens of transition, rather than crisis, requires attention to process. Such an approach furthermore cautions against

tendencies to pronounce present conditions and social formations as always radically new.

Of course, the ethnographic accounts presented in this collection trace very different kinds of transitions from the emergence of industrial capitalism that Thompson studied. The rise of finance capitalism, the shift from Fordist to post-Fordist labor regimes, the marketization of new domains of life, and the failed promises of neoliberal policies at times constitute a deepening of market logics and at other times the unraveling or even critique of particular capitalist formations. Such transformations show that the process of “making” workers and citizens into proper capitalist subjects, a process Thompson documented for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, is not a *fait accompli*. Many precarious workers today, working outside conditions of wage labor, experience time in ways that differ markedly from the clock discipline of industrial capitalism (Millar, this issue). Moral economies have also arisen—not as a remnant of a precapitalist past—but in response to what Sara Keene (this issue) describes as “the social, economic, and environmental *failures* of capitalist political economy.” These moral economies of the present, however, emerge not only against but also alongside the expansion of neoliberal capitalist logics. As Keene shows in her study of the tension between new market-based practices and older countercultural approaches to marijuana production in rural California, moral economies can be both made and unmade. Transitions, Thompson teaches us, do not proceed linearly and rarely unfold without conflict and struggle.

On “making” subjectivities

If Thompson tended to focus on liminal moments of history, it was in part because he was interested in a process he termed “making.” Vehemently opposed to structuralist strands of Marxism, Thompson aimed to understand how consciousness—specifically class conscious-

ness—arose over time as the result of particular lived experiences and relationships. Class was not a rigid structure or pre-given category for Thompson but rather “something which in fact happens” (1963: 9, emphasis mine). This “happening,” furthermore, could not be explained by any social scientific theory or law. Rather, Thompson approached history as always contingent and sought to understand how “real people in a real context” made sense of the conditions and events that shaped their lives. In short, by emphasizing the “making” of class, Thompson’s historical work provides beautifully crafted, humanistic accounts of how new subjectivities come into being.

It is therefore odd that Thompson has largely been overlooked as an inspiration for recent work on the anthropology of becoming. Identified as a central theme in the *American Anthropologist* 2010 “Year in Review” and part of a broader Deleuzian trend in anthropology (Hamilton and Placas 2011), the concept of “becoming” has emerged as a key analytic in numerous ethnographic studies of subjectivity, time, and political formation.⁷ Prompted by João Biehl and Peter Locke’s influential essay in *Current Anthropology*, “Deleuze and the anthropology of becoming,” much of this work has critiqued anthropological frameworks of biopower and structural violence for overemphasizing domination at the expense of meaning, agency, and desire (2010). Conceptions of neoliberalism as all-pervasive and deeply subject-forming similarly leave little space for questions as to how people chart their own lives in and beyond relations of power. In response, the study of becoming has sought to illuminate the indeterminacy of social life. It suggests a different anthropological impulse—one that draws attention to immanence, plasticity, potentialities, and the ways life trajectories can take unexpected paths.

Certainly, Deleuze and Guattari’s work has made the greatest imprint on the anthropology of becoming. Their concept of “lines of flight” that continually escape systems in a multiplicity of directions has proved useful for thinking

through possibility and transformation—how things could be otherwise (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). However, this Deleuzian conception of becoming ignores the importance of history in both singular and collective projects of transformation. To become, for Deleuze, is to leave history behind (1995: 171). In contrast, for Thompson, history is the context in which becoming takes place. This is not to say that history determines subjectivities. In a spirit that would resonate with the anthropology of becoming today, Thompson time and again emphasized the contingency and spontaneity of social life. Refuting the mechanical and formalistic theories of structuralist Marxism, Thompson writes, “For any living generation, in any ‘now,’ the ways in which they ‘handle’ experience defies prediction and escapes from any narrow definition of determination” (1978a: 171). Yet Thompson continually argued that how people experienced and reacted in new ways to their present conditions could not be understood apart from customs, traditions, and intergenerational inheritances. His central argument in *The making* was that class consciousness did not automatically result from uniform exploitative conditions in factories but rather emerged through workers’ struggles to reassert long-held traditions of equity and justice that were being destroyed with the rise of industrial capitalism (Bess 1993). The past, for Thompson, was as much a part of becoming as the indeterminate future.

In part because of such past-present connections, the articles in this collection find Thompson’s frame of “making” a more useful analytic than “becoming” for thinking through emergent subjectivities. Through the concept of making, Thompson sought to capture the interplay between conditioning and agency, historical circumstance and human consciousness. He also aimed to prioritize lived experience in accounts of social and historical formations, conceptualizing experience as the mediating element between making the world, on the one hand, and being made by the world, on the other. Though Thompson never clarified how

exactly conditions link to experience and experience to consciousness (Mitchell, this issue; see also Howell 2014), the word “experience,” in its original sense, indexes not only circumstances, states, or events to which one is subject but also how one reflects on and construes these lived realities (Geertz 1973: 405; Jackson 1996: 8; Williams 1983: 126–128). Or as Thompson put it, experience is never just “raw” but always comprises the “mental and emotional response” to events (1978a: 7).

The seemingly mundane details that fill the pages of Thompson’s histories are testament to his view of experience as the stuff out of which new subjectivities are fashioned. The factory bell that rang at fixed hours or the fines incurred by workers for engaging in any activity not deemed to be work constituted a few of the myriad experiences Thompson saw as profoundly reshaping workers’ life rhythms and inner sense of time. Today, as work shifts to more precarious forms, we might similarly ask how the everyday experience of labor is refashioning ways of being in the world (Millar, this issue). Or, as movements like Occupy Wall Street have helped reveal, we might ask how changing conditions of economic inequality are modifying forms of political consciousness (Mitchell, this issue). These questions, however, can never take experience at face value. As Sean Mitchell argues by comparing explanations of political consciousness in the United States and Brazil, scholars’ interpretations of experience are always shaped by their own conceptions of a better world—or what he calls their own “political utopias.”

Ethnography of class

It is no accident that *The making*, Thompson’s seminal work, begins with a preface devoted to the concept of class. While his writings address a range of questions concerning human subjectivity, experience, agency, historical transitions, and social change, it is Thompson’s interest in class struggle that animates all other dimensions of his work. That is, Thompson sought to under-

stand not only experience but specifically class experience and not only consciousness but class consciousness. Even Thompson’s most heavily adopted concept in anthropology—the moral economy—was primarily concerned with class conflict (Edelman 2012). This term referred to an economy organized not by the model of a natural, self-regulating, free market but by a set of customary duties, rights, and practices of different classes in relation to one another (Thompson 1971). Thompson, furthermore, saw the moral economy as the basis for collective action. It was precisely in moments when long-held principles and conventions were violated (as with the abolishment in eighteenth-century England of fixing the price of grain in times of dearth) that class rebellion ensued.

Historically, the study of class has occupied a relatively marginal position within cultural anthropology in comparison to other topics such as kinship, gender, race, ethnicity, and indigeneity. As late as 1984, the first *Annual Review of Anthropology* article published on social class began by asking if class could be considered an appropriate concept for anthropological analysis (Smith 1984). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that anthropologists who have adopted ideas from Thompson’s work have often ignored their class dimension. As Marc Edelman (2012) has argued, this is especially true for the concept of the moral economy, which anthropologists have often applied in ways that strip the concept of its original significance for understanding conflictual class relations (see also Edelman 2014). However, in recent years, anthropology has increasingly turned to the study of class, prompted by historical transformations in industrial capitalism, the nature of work, conditions of debt, and relations of economic inequality and by social movements like the *Indignados* of Spain, Occupy Wall Street, and youth movements worldwide that have brought these issues to the fore.⁸ Given this heightened attention to class inequality, there is good reason to recover the class content of Thompson’s work that has often been lost in anthropologists’ interpretations.

By depicting class not as a “thing” but as a relationship and process, Thompson offers a class concept that is especially amenable to ethnographic work. To study class, in his view, is to trace its emergence over time in the lived experiences of people in particular historical and cultural contexts. But perhaps even more important for the anthropological study of class today is Thompson’s understanding of class consciousness as originating in a clash between workers’ past experiences and new circumstances to which they are subjected (see also Efstathiou 2014: 411). It was the tension between traditional rhythms of work and the clock discipline of wage labor or between customary practices regarding the buying and selling of grain and the introduction of free market principles that Thompson saw as inciting class struggle in industrializing England. This focus on tensions between old and new orders seems to resonate with recent writings on neoliberalism, precarity, and post-Fordist affect that point to a disjuncture between visions of “the good life” inherited from previous generations and the inability to realize these expectations in the present (Berlant 2011). Whether the betrayed expectations of twenty-first-century capitalism are generating the kind of class-based collective action that Thompson chronicled in his histories is a question that merits further exploration. However, the articles in this collection suggest that indeed, new forms of class politics are emerging even if—in keeping with Thompson—they are arising “never in *just* the same way” (1963: 10).

Finally, the ethnographic accounts of class politics that follow do not merely adopt but also modify in important ways Thompson’s focus on class to capture multiple, intersecting forms of oppression and expressions of political consciousness today. To read conditions of domination either in terms of class or in terms of ethnoracial relations in Brazil, for example, ignores the ways that people experience and interpret their own conditions of inequality as well as the ways in which these interpretations can shift in different historical moments

(Mitchell, this issue). Moreover, what constitutes class politics is not always clear. As Sara Keene shows in this issue, participants in countercultural movements in the 1960s and 1970s who moved to rural areas to live off the land and build intentional communities (back-to-the-landers) failed to engage in overt, confrontational forms of collective action. However, their everyday forms of community life and social provisioning did not just constitute a withdrawal from society but rather forged a form of political activism that Keene calls “situated resistance.” By considering experiences that give rise to political consciousness beyond those of class (such as race, gender, sexuality, and region) and by highlighting the revolutionary potential of nonoppositional forms of collective action, these ethnographic studies push the boundaries of class politics as depicted in Thompson’s histories.¹⁰ Yet I would like to think that Thompson would embrace such extensions of his work. After all, our interest in emergent forms of class politics is in keeping with Thompson’s view that class is a process that is always in the making.

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Notes

1. Note that in his analysis of the eighteenth century, Thompson focused on the customs, rituals, and popular culture of “plebeians.” These were English commoners who—while engaging in forms of symbolic defiance, covert resistance, and direct action—had not yet formed horizontal class consciousness and organization. It was only in the nineteenth century that laboring people, for Thompson, began to constitute a self-defined “working class” (1974; 1978b).
2. By political-economic change, I am referring *both* to the economic and political dimensions of the history of capitalism. In *The making*, Thompson analyzed not only the rise of industrial wage labor and its exploitative relations but also the accompanying state repression of political dissent that helped forge working-class consciousness (Palmer 1994: 95–97).
3. Thompson’s use of local West Riding sources was not only a methodological technique but also constituted what Wade Matthews (2014: 103) has described as Thompson’s “stubborn disregard for the centre, whether defined in terms of power, thought, or value.”
4. Quoted in Palmer 1994: 65.
5. In his jubilarian retrospective on Thompson’s preface to *The making*, David Howell (2014: 519) goes so far as to say that “the most remarkable feature of this statement is its brevity.” For a more extended elaboration of Thompson’s conceptualization of class, see Thompson 1978b.
6. This is not to say that Thompson never used the word “crisis” in his work. He sometimes referred to a discrete moment or situation as a crisis, often when describing riots or other forms of popular agitation. Yet this use is more in keeping with the original meaning of “crisis”

as a critical, decisive moment than with its current meaning in social scientific narratives as a protracted historical condition (Roitman 2014: 2).

7. This literature is quickly growing. For some examples, see Alexandrakis 2013, Biehl and Locke 2010, Hodges 2014, Klumbyte 2014, and Razsa and Kurnik 2012.
8. For a few examples of recent ethnographies focusing specifically on class, see Heiman 2015, Jeffrey 2010, and Walley 2013.
9. For other critiques of Thompson’s treatment of gender and race, see Scott 1999 and Cooper 1995, respectively.

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