

E. P. Thompson's Romantic Marxism

Socialist historian E. P. Thompson brilliantly chronicled the ravages of early capitalism — and the fierce resistance it provoked.



The Romantic poets, writers, and philosophers of Western Europe — borne out of the mechanising cauldron of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries — were among the first critics of bourgeois modernity, the civilisation created by the triumph of capitalism. [Romanticism](#) — a “cultural movement” cutting across literature, philosophy, the arts, politics, religion, and history — was characterised by nostalgia for a real or imagined past, and was constituted by both conservative and revolutionary currents and thinkers.

Romanticism took as its shared basis, Brazilian-French sociologist [Michael Löwy](#) notes, the fundamental critique of “the quantification of life, i.e. the total domination of (quantitative) exchange value, of the cold calculation of price and profit, and of the laws of the market, over the whole social fabric.”

With the quantification of life in bourgeois civilisation came the “decline of all qualitative values — social, religious, ethical, cultural or aesthetic ones — the dissolution of all qualitative human bonds, the death of imagination and romance, the dull uniformisation of life, the purely ‘utilitarian’ — i.e. quantitatively calculable — relation of human beings to one another, and to nature.”

This quality of quantification under capitalist social relations expressed itself in

specific ways in the workplace and labour process of the Industrial Revolution. Pre-capitalist handicraft, and its association with creativity and imagination, was replaced by an increasingly strict division of labour, and dull and repetitious toil, in which the worker, losing what made her human, became a mere appendage to the machine.

Marx himself drew with gusto from Romantic novelists, economists, and philosophers, even if the pull of the Enlightenment and classical political economy on his thinking would make it erroneous to label him a romantic anticapitalist.

“Neither apologetic of bourgeois civilisation nor blind to its achievements,” Löwy notes of Marx,

he aims at a higher form of social organisation, which would integrate both the technical advances of modern society and some of the human qualities of pre-capitalist communities — as well as opening a new and boundless field for the development and enrichment of human life. A new conception of labour as a free, non-alienated, and creative activity — as against the dull and narrow toil of mechanical industrial work — is a central feature of his socialist utopia.

While the trajectory of Marxism after Marx’s death has been dominated by a productivist, economic, and evolutionist determinism (embodied in figures like Stalin), Romantic Marxism — a warmer stream that drew both from Marx and the revolutionary Romantic tradition — lived on as a minority presence, insisting “on the essential break and discontinuity between the socialist utopia — as a qualitatively different way of life and work — and the present industrial society . . . look[ing] with nostalgia toward certain pre-capitalist social or cultural forms.”

If the cold stream embraced [Plekhanov](#), [Kautsky](#), and the majority of the Second and Third Internationals, the Romantic Marxists included — in all their variety — [Luxemburg](#), [Gramsci](#), [Lukács](#), [Mariátegui](#), [Benjamin](#), and, of course, [E. P. Thompson](#).

Fifty-two years after its initial publication, E. P. Thompson’s [The Making of the English Working Class](#) continues to afford fresh vantage points on the dialectic of Marxism and Romanticism. Indeed, a utopian-revolutionary dialectic, looking backward to elements of a pre-capitalist past and pointing forward simultaneously to a socialist future, constitutes a connecting thread linking Thompson’s many eclectic lines of argumentation in *The Making*.

Despite his failure to adequately understand race and gender as constituent features of class formation, Thompson’s Romantic Marxism of the incipient working class of eighteenth century England still offers a compelling antidote in the twenty-first century to the sterility of developmental evolutionism and

economic reductionism, which continue to haunt various modes of Marxist inquiry and political practice.

Present at its Own Making

According to political theorist [Ellen Meiksins Wood](#), “There are really only two ways of thinking theoretically about class: either as a structural location or as a social relation.” Static structural pictures may be useful as a starting point for the determining logic of class relations, but there is a very long way to travel in order to identify how a class “in itself” becomes a class “for itself,” to use Marx’s terminology for the movement between an objective class situation and class consciousness, or from social being to social consciousness.

In order to get there, we need to think of class as a social-historical process and relationship. “The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time,” Thompson famously argues. “It was present at its own making.”

Here he is firmly asserting the importance of human agency, however bounded, in the class struggle. Understanding class as a relationship in which the common experiences of real people living in real contexts matter, and which takes place in historical time, means that it “evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and anatomise its structure.”

Thompson has been criticised by Perry Anderson, among others, for neglecting the objective structure of productive relations in favor of a conception of class that centres on consciousness and subjectivity. However, as labour historian David Camfield points out, in Thompson’s framework, common experience, human agency, culture, and subjectivity “are not free-floating. They have a material foundation.” As Thompson argues, “The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born — or enter into involuntarily.”

Yet, Camfield suggests that in Thompson’s schema, “The relations of production are only the point of departure.” “Class consciousness,” writes Thompson, “is the way in which these experiences,” the experiences of being thrust through birth or an alternative form of involuntary entry into a class situation, “are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms.”

Ultimately, class analysis requires looking at real people in real contexts: “Class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is the only definition.” Working classes are not constructed abstractly out of theoretical structures, but rather are formed “out of preexisting social groups whose particular traditions, aspirations and cultural practices — modified by the devastating experience of proletarianisation — will be those of an emergent

proletariat.”

If we take these insights seriously it follows necessarily that any serious approach to class formation requires, according to Camfield, a “profound appreciation of the society in question,” and a deep understanding that “national particularities have real significance.”

Rights and Resistance

Among the central motifs running through Thompson’s oeuvre, and not least in his multiple writings that theorise and historicise different components of class formation, is the utopian-revolutionary dialectic between the pre-capitalist past and the socialist future that Löwy identifies as a hallmark of the Romantic Marxist tradition.

Thompson’s engagement with Romanticism is perhaps most obvious in his book-length treatments of [William Morris](#) and [William Blake](#), but the utopian-revolutionary dialectic is also an under-appreciated theme running throughout *The Making*. Thompson announces in the preface that he is “seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the ‘obsolete’ handloom weaver, the ‘utopian’ artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity.”

They were the “casualties of history,” the casualties of the Industrial Revolution, whose simultaneously backward- and forward-looking visions Thompson hopes to retrieve from the dustbin of a historiography utterly seduced by “economic progress” and “inevitability.”

Thompson begins his meditation on exploitation (in the first chapter of part two of *The Making*, “The Curse of Adam”) with a critique of the economic determinism that dominates much of the extant historiography of the Industrial Revolution. In most accounts, the dynamic of economic growth of the cotton industry in Lancashire determined, more or less automatically, the dynamic of social and cultural life.

Where the classic perspective was in error, in Thompson’s view, was in its emphasis on the economic newness of the cotton mills and failure to adequately appreciate the “continuity of political and cultural traditions in the making of working-class communities.” He sought to foreground the political and cultural features of the making of the working class, against the automatism of popular economic accounts:

The changing productive relations and working conditions of the Industrial Revolution were imposed not upon raw material, but upon the freeborn Englishman — and the freeborn Englishman as Paine had left him or as the Methodists had moulded him. The factory hand or stockinger was also the

inheritor of Bunyan, of remembered village rights, of notions of equality before the law, of craft traditions. He was the object of massive religious indoctrination and the creator of new political traditions. The working class made itself as much as it was made.

Indeed, it was perhaps the violation of persisting pre-capitalist values, customs, and notions of justice, independence, and security, rather than merely bread and butter issues, that account for the scope and intensity of resistance from nascent working-class communities to the spread of capitalism.

Against the prevailing free-market rhetoric of the advancing industrialists, the dissenters mobilised a language of a new moral order, one which drew resolutely from specific customs and values of the past. According to Thompson, “It is because alternative and irreconcilable views of human order — one based on mutuality, the other on competition — confronted each other between 1814 and 1850 that the historian today still feels the need to take sides.”

Exemplifying the Romantic critique of the quantification of life under bourgeois civilisation, Thompson here maps out the possibility for statistical averages and human experiences to run in opposite directions. As per capita increase in quantitative factors may take place at the same time as a great qualitative disturbance in people’s way of life, traditional relationships, and sanctions. People may consume more goods and become less happy or less free at the same time.

Then, shifting registers slightly, Thompson sums up the Industrial Revolution in a way that captures the core of Marxist dialectics: “Thus it is perfectly possible to maintain two propositions which, on a casual view, appear to be contradictory. Over the period 1790–1840 there was a slight improvement in average material standards. Over the same period there was intensified exploitation, greater insecurity, and increasing human misery.”

In the following chapter, on the field labourers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Thompson made his first concerted defence of the logic of machine-breaking, as against “futurist homilies” that painted the breakers as antiquated irrationalists futilely confronting progress.

“While corn ricks and other property was destroyed (as well as some industrial machinery in country districts),” writes Thompson of a labourers’ revolt in 1830, “the main assault was on the threshing-machine, which . . . patently was displacing the already starving labourers. Hence the destruction of the machines did in fact effect some immediate relief.”

Later in the same chapter, the dialectic of past and future arises again, when Thompson explains the “historical irony” of urban workers, rather than rural

labourers, launching “the greatest coherent national agitation for the return of land,” through reference to the “new bitterness of deprivation” they suffered as a consequence of “hard times and unemployment in the brick wastes of the growing towns,” and their associated recalling of “the memories of lost rights” for use in the advancement of novel forms of struggle.

As the plight of the artisans and weavers are taken up, the Romantic problematic of quantification of social life again features centrally, this time in the changing workplace and labour process. Artisanal traditions of craftsmanship were imbued with “vestigial notions of a ‘fair’ price and ‘just’ wage,” Thompson reminds us. “Social and moral criteria — subsistence, self-respect, pride in certain standards of workmanship, customary rewards for different grades of skill — these are as prominent in early trade union disputes as strictly ‘economic’ arguments.”

The advance of large-scale sweat-work, the revolution in factory production and steam, and the growing numbers of unskilled and child labourers in the old trades, weakened the rights of artisans and radicalised them politically. “Ideal and real grievances combined to shape their anger — lost prestige, direct economic degradation, loss of pride as craftsmanship was debased, lost aspirations to rise to being masters” were all moral elements from a time past that fuelled novel contestation for rights, and defensive acts of resistance.

Thompson’s lament for the handloom weavers is similarly burdened with recovering their history of resistance. He eviscerates traditional historiography for its blasé encouragement in passing the reader’s eye over phrases like “the decline of the handloom weavers”

without any realisation of the scale of the tragedy that was enacted. Weaving communities — some in the West Country and the Pennines, with 300 and 400 years of continuous existence, some of much more recent date but with, nonetheless, their own cultural patterns and traditions — were literally extinguished . . . Until these final agonies, the older weaving communities offered a way of life which their members greatly preferred to the higher material standards of the factory town.

Avoiding naive sentimentality, but punching back against the disparagers of the weavers’ tragedy, Thompson notes the “unique blend of social conservatism, local pride, and cultural attainment” that “made up the way of life of the Yorkshire or Lancashire weaving community.” For Thompson, “these communities were certainly ‘backward’” in the sense that “they clung with equal tenacity to their dialect, traditions and regional customs, and gross medical ignorance and superstitions.” But a story that ended there would be too partial and reductive.

The “closer we look at their way of life,” Thompson urges, “the more inadequate simple notions of economic progress and ‘backwardness’ appear. Moreover, there was certainly a leaven amongst the northern weavers of self-educated and articulate men of considerable attainments. Every weaving district had its weaver-poets, biologists, mathematicians, musicians, geologists, botanists,” and so on.

The threat to this way of life encapsulated in the Industrial Revolution drew the weavers into the Lancashire Radicalism of 1816–1820, and contributed to its character and content in myriad ways. “They had, like the city artisan, a sense of lost status, as memories of their ‘golden age’ lingered,” Thompson suggests. But they had, more than the city artisan, a deep social egalitarianism. As their way of life, in the better years, had been shared by the community, so their sufferings were those of the whole community; and they were reduced so low that there was no class of unskilled or casual labourers below them against which they had erected economic or social protective walls.

This gave a particular moral resonance to their protest, whether voiced in Owenite or biblical language; they appealed to essential rights and elementary notions of human fellowship and conduct rather than to sectional interests. Countering casual celebration of industrialisation — and especially the historians who mistake economic growth for human progress — Thompson returns to a dialectical method that can record the tragedy even as it registers the possibility of justification for the obsolescence of their craftsmanship.

If we see the handloom weaver’s work in this light, it was certainly painful and obsolete, and any transition, however full of suffering, might be justified. But this is an argument which discounts the suffering of one generation against the gains of the future. For those who suffered, this retrospective comfort is cold.

Change for Alien Purposes

Over the course of the concluding chapter of part two, on community, Thompson repeatedly gestures at the necessity of striking a balance between the recovery and valuation of specific cultural customs and traditions of the past without descending into sentimental idealisation, or the concealment of pre-capitalist systems of oppression and domination.

At the same time as he praises aspects of William Cobbett and Friedrich Engels’ respective lamentations for the passing of English customs, Thompson is careful to point out that “it is foolish to see the matter only in idyllic terms. These customs were not all harmless or quaint . . . The passing of Gin Lane, Tyburn Fair, orgiastic drunkenness, animal sexuality, and mortal combat for prize-money in iron-studded clogs, calls for no lament.” Similarly, in his overly brief

discussion of gender, Thompson notes that

It is most difficult to draw a balance. On the one hand, the claim that the Industrial Revolution raised the status of women would seem to have little meaning when set beside the record of excessive hours of labour, cramped housing, excessive child-bearing and terrifying rates of child mortality.

On the other hand, the abundant opportunities for female employment in the textile districts gave to women the status of independent wage-earners. The spinster or the widow was freed from dependence upon relatives or upon parish relief. Even the unmarried mother might be able, through the laxness of “moral discipline” in many mills, to achieve an independence unknown before . . . The period reveals many such paradoxes.

The whole of part two ultimately comes back around, however, to a finale that turns on the revolutionary romantic critique of the totality of bourgeois civilisation that capitalist industrialisation introduced through coercion, dispossession, and the abject violation of pre-capitalist social mores, values, institutions, and traditions.

“Any evaluation of the quality of life must entail an assessment of the total life-experience, the manifold satisfactions or deprivations, cultural as well as material, of the people concerned.” When Thompson carries out this evaluation, when he examines the totality of experience, when he looks at the Industrial Revolution and, in Alberto Toscano’s words from another context, “sees it whole,” he cannot escape the thoroughgoing suffering and ugliness it entailed.

“During the years between 1780 and 1840,” Thompson concludes, the people of Britain suffered an experience of immiseration, even if it is possible to show a small statistical improvement in material conditions . . . Some were lured from the countryside by the glitter and promise of wages of the industrial town; but the old village economy was crumbling at their backs. They moved less by their own will than at the dictate of external compulsions which they could not question: the enclosures, the Wars, the Poor Laws, the decline of rural industries, the counter-revolutionary stance of their rulers. Even though “new skills were arising,” and the fact that “old satisfactions persisted,” the overarching sentiment carried away from a close reading of this period is “the general pressure of long hours of unsatisfying labour under severe discipline for alien purposes . . . After all other impressions fade, this one remains; together with that of the loss of any felt cohesions in the community, save that which the working people, in antagonism to their labour and to their masters, built for themselves.”

Resisting Proletarianisation

It is in part three of *The Making*, however, in its vast, qualitative measurement of working-class presence, where we encounter the most suggestive passages on the utopian-revolutionary dialectic of the pre-capitalist past and socialist future. Specifically, we find these insights in Thompson's defence of Luddism as a quasi-insurrectionary movement, which he offers as a substitute for the view that "lingers in the popular mind," according to which Luddism is "an uncouth, spontaneous affair of illiterate hand-workers, blindly resisting machinery." In the Thompsonian framework, the Luddism of the croppers, and above all of the framework-knitters, or stockings, must be understood as "arising at the crisis-point in the abrogation of paternalist legislation and the imposition of the political economy of laissez faire upon, and against the will and conscience of, the working people."

The long transition prior to the crisis point stretches back to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and the stockings' memory of certain ideals of a benevolent corporate state may

never have been much more than ideals; by the end of the eighteenth century they may have been threadbare. But they had a powerful reality, nonetheless, in the notion of what ought to be, to which artisans, journeymen, and many small masters appealed. More than this, the ideals lived in the sanctions and customs of the more traditional manufacturing communities.

What is most crucial in Thompson's portrayal of Luddism is his description of this struggle as a transitional conflict. "On the one hand," Thompson meant by this, "it looked backward to old customs and paternalist legislation which could never be revived; on the other hand, it tried to revive ancient rights in order to establish new precedents." Luddism was "a violent eruption of feeling against unrestrained industrial capitalism, harking back to an obsolescent paternalist code, and sanctioned by traditions of the working community."

Unlike the view that lingers in the popular imagination, Luddism for Thompson was not "blind opposition to machinery," but rather a fight against the "'freedom' of the capitalist to destroy the customs of the trade, whether by new machinery, by the factory-system, or by unrestricted competition, beating-down wages, undercutting his rivals, and undermining standards of craftsmanship."

Viewed through a Thompsonian lens, "one is struck not so much by [the movement's] backwardness as by its growing maturity. Far from being 'primitive' it exhibited, in Nottingham and Yorkshire, discipline, and self-restraint of a high order."

As it drew from the partially imagined and remembered social rights of the past, croppers and stockings resisted their debasement under the advance of bourgeois civilisation, and began to shift offensively to the organised and

disciplined struggle for new rights and social criteria. The Luddite movement, as Thompson resurrects it in all its quasi-insurrectionary form, features the myriad elements of Löwy's utopian-revolutionary dialectic, the cornerstone of Romantic Marxism.

A central feature, covering a fifty-year period, in the making of the English working class was precisely a mass resistance to proletarianisation. "When they knew that this cause was lost," notes Thompson, "yet they reached out again, in the thirties and forties [of the nineteenth century], and sought to achieve new and only imagined forms of social control."

Thompson concludes his exceptional survey of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in England as comfortably at home with paradox and contradiction as he is at its beginning. The years of capitalist industrialisation in Britain were characterised first by tragedy, "not a revolutionary challenge, but a resistance movement, in which the Romantics and the Radical craftsmen opposed the announcement of Acquisitive Man. In the failure of the two traditions to come to a point of junction, something was lost. How much we cannot be sure, for we are among the losers."

But through tragedy Thompson arrives at a partial redemption of the working class, explaining that "the working people should not be seen only as the lost myriads of eternity. They had also nourished, for fifty years, and with incomparable fortitude, the Liberty Tree. We may thank them for these years of heroic culture."