

Women in *The Making of the English Working Class*

The *Making of the English Working Class* still stands as a classic text for labor historians, some twenty years after its publication. It at once prescribes and exemplifies a Marxist social history that conceives of class as a relationship (not a structure or category), of class consciousness as a cultural as much as an economic creation, of human agency as a crucial element in the making of history, and of politics as the central meaning of that history. The narrative E. P. Thompson constructs not only incites admiration for the dozens of heroes who move through his pages (rescuing them "from enormous condescension of posterity"),¹ but it also inserts its readers into what Fredric Jameson calls the "unity of a single great collective story . . . the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity."² If we are stirred by Thompson's comments about the outrages of child labor, we are also meant to share his endorsement of the politics of the artisans in the London Corresponding Society and of the Luddite "army of redressers" in the Midlands and industrial north. The artisans exemplify the possibility of an authentic humanist politics in the English working-class tradition; a tradition fundamentally rooted in the rank and file.³

The book makes little pretense of neutrality, despite Thompson's occasional claims to it (he is, he suggests, more objective than either

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the Hammonds, who confuse "history with ideology," or "some economic historians," who confuse "history with apologetics"); indeed, much of its excitement lies in its avowedly political purpose.⁴ In 1963 it provided historians like myself with a model for writing socially relevant history. For us, *The Making of the English Working Class* embodied a scholarship that fit a New Left purpose: it exposed the workings of capitalist political economy and demonstrated (what Thompson had elsewhere described as) the virtues of "purposive historical commitment" and the possibilities for "the redemption of man through political action."⁵ The timing of the book and its articulation of a socialist humanist position provided an intellectual alternative within Marxism to the frozen categories of Stalinist history. Thompson's emphasis on dynamie processes and on the culturally and historically specific experience of class formation opened the way for more contextualized readings of workers' collective action in the past and for a more flexible and imaginative contemporary politics. His insistence on the agency of ordinary people provided inspiration and confirmation for advocates of grass-roots organizing. In the United States, "history from below" was the academic correlate of the participatory democracy of Students of a Democratic Society (SDS). Activists who bridged the worlds of the university and the community made Thompson's text required reading in courses and study groups. In this way, *The Making of the English Working Class* achieved a kind of instant canonical status as the model for and expression of "the new labor history."

If Thompson's book provided a model for writing history, however, it was not meant to become a dogmatic text. Indeed, Thompson's insistence that he (like Marx) is not a Marxist—not committed to a fixed set of definitional categories that must be applied to historical events in the same way every time—has led some of his more literal-minded critics to deny him a place in the fellowship of the faithful. Yet the theoretical premises of the book sit comfortably within a quite orthodox Marxist tradition: ✓

. . . class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born—or enter involuntarily.⁶

The shared interest that constitutes class is somehow immanent in productive relations; it is the articulation of the experience that varies

according to culture, time, and place.⁷ The orthodoxy of Thompson's theoretical scheme now seems apparent, but when the book was written it introduced an important historicity into debates among Marxists in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Its concerns and emphases spoke to issues in that debate having to do with definitions of class, class consciousness, and class politics. *The Making of the English Working Class* was written to counter "economistic notations of Marxism" and to provide another way of thinking about the development of class consciousness than the one that posited the inevitable conversion of workers in factories to a proletarian class identification the terms of which could be assessed by some prior standard of political correctness. For Thompson, human subjects were active agents in the transformation of history. He explained that his purpose was

to show the existing plebian consciousness refracted by new experiences in social being, which experiences were handled in cultural ways by the people, thus giving rise to a transformed consciousness. In this sense the questions being proposed and some of the theoretical equipment being brought to answer them arose out of that distinct ideological moment.⁸

In addition, the book sought to create a historical tradition of socialist humanism, to instill in the memory of Left politics a connection to an authentic, indigenous nineteenth-century worker radicalism.

My own work for many years had been as a tutor in adult education, teaching evening classes of working people, trade unionists, white-collar people, teachers, and so on. The audience was there, and the audience of the Left also, of the labor movement and the New Left. I was thinking of that kind of reader when I wrote the book.⁹

Thompson's appeal to this audience was aimed against Leninist vanguardism, and against the notion that there would have been no popular revolts "if intellectuals had not dropped the seed of maladjustment in underprivileged soil."¹⁰ Instead he sought to prove that workers were capable of formulating and acting on revolutionary ideas, that there was some basis in past history for a belief in participatory democratic politics.

Thompson's argument with his contemporaries had to do with the question of origins. Where had the idea of class come from? How had class consciousness taken shape? Class itself, as a set of conceptual terms for collective identity and political action, was not sub-

jected to critical examination. For Thompson did not present himself as an analyst outside the historically situated discourse; instead he spoke from within it as an advocate. Positioning himself as the carrier of historical memory, Thompson brilliantly captured the terms of working-class discourse. He did so by using concepts of class that had been formulated by the nineteenth-century movement and used in the twentieth century. *The Making of the English Working Class* endorsed and reproduced a particular concept of class. As such, it can be read as a double historical document: it gathers rich evidence about how class became understood in the past and it incorporates those meanings in its own construction of working-class history. Analyzing the contents and the textual strategies of *The Making of the English Working Class* thus gives insight into the historical operations of a particular idea of the working class.

In this connection it is revealing to note the absence in the book (and in the preoccupations of the audience to whom it was addressed) of questions that have since become troubling for some labor historians; these are questions that were posed by the feminist movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s (well after the publication of Thompson's book) about the historical roles of women. When one rereads *The Making of the English Working Class* now, one is struck not by the absence of women in the narrative but by the awkward way in which they figure there. The book illuminates some of the reasons for the difficulty and frustration experienced by contemporary feminist socialists as they tried to convince themselves and their colleagues that there ought to be a place for women in the narrative of class formation and in the theory of politics that narrative contains. As such, Thompson's text, although it was not written within the new context created by feminist politics, must nonetheless be read as a precondition for the socialist-feminist discourse. It represents a crucial element in that discourse, for it articulates the assumptions of the tradition within which feminist socialists were located and which they had to confront as they formulated critical perspectives and wrote histories of their own.

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"Class is defined by men as they live their own history, and in the end, this is its only definition."¹¹ Thus did Thompson refute the sociologists and politicians who reified a historically specific idea. The key to explaining the origins of the idea lay in an analysis of "the productive relations into which men are born—or enter involuntarily—"

ily."¹² But the meaning of class could only be grasped by studying cultural and social processes "over a considerable historical period."¹³ This suggested to Thompson the notion of a life history (in contrast to the identification of repeated appearances of an inert "thing") and so he likened his narrative to a kind of "biography of the English working class from its adolescence until its early manhood."¹⁴ Although the book is hardly as coherent as most individual life histories, the analogy is nonetheless revealing. It suggests that Thompson conceives of the collective movement in the same unified terms he conceives of individual subjects. This kind of singular conceptualization has difficulty incorporating diversity or difference. So although "man" may stand for a neutral or universal human subject, the question of "woman" is hard to articulate or represent, for her difference implies disunity and challenges coherence.

In *The Making of the English Working Class*, the male designation of general concepts is literalized in the persons of the political actors who are described in strikingly detailed (and easily visualized) images. The book is crowded with scenes of men busily working, meeting, writing, talking, marching, breaking machines, going to prison, bravely standing up to police, magistrates, and prime ministers. This is preeminently a story about men, and class is, in its origin and its expression, constructed as a masculine identity, even when not all the actors are male. For, of course, there are women in *The Making of the English Working Class*. Women are identified by name, they are given a certain agency, and they are not all of one type. Indeed, the range is from Mary Wollstonecraft and Anna Wheeler, who spoke out for women's rights, through Richard Carlile's radical female followers, to religious visionaries like Joanna Southcott. Yet the organization of the story and the master codes that structure the narrative are gendered in such a way as to confirm rather than challenge the masculine representation of class. Despite their presence, women are marginal in the book; they serve to underline and point up the overwhelming association of class with the politics of male workers. A closer look at Thompson's women will provide some insight into how the concept and political meanings of class are established in the text.

The book begins with a dramatic scenario. The home of the radical shoemaker, Thomas Hardy, was ransacked in 1794 by officers of the King. The Hardys watched as their papers and clothing were strewn about; Mrs. Hardy "was pregnant and remained in bed." The officers then arrested Mr. Hardy for high treason and eventually sent him to Newgate prison. While he was there "Mrs. Hardy died in childbirth as a result of the shock sustained when her home was besieged by a 'Church and King' mob."¹⁵ The immediacy of the de-

scription and its vivid impact evoke the entire story that will be told in the following pages: powerful forces invade the personal domain, the very life of the independent artisan. Hardy, the craftsman, resists in the name of the rights of the independent, freeborn Englishman. His wife and unborn child are the innocent victims of state repression. In subsequent pages, capitalism will wreak similar havoc, its dehumanizing operations ravaging families and disrupting the customary sexual divisions of labor. Men, rooted in historic traditions, will defend and claim their rights, while the distortions of women's traditional domestic experience will express the full measure of capitalist brutality.

This association of women and domesticity crops up even when the subject is women workers, even, that is, when women's experience is referred primarily to relations of production. Take, for example, Thompson's treatment of women textile workers, whose situation is discussed sympathetically and who are presented as the products of the new industrial system. "The mother who was also a wage-earner often felt herself to have the worst of both the domestic and the industrial worlds."¹⁶ Their new status as wage-earners moved women to political action—to trade unions and Female Reform Societies. But, says Thompson, their unions tended to address immediate grievances and were thus less political than were the artisanal organizations that challenged the entire moral and political system. (Although this seems to have been the case for all industrial unions in the 1820s and 1830s, Thompson stresses the point in reference to the women's groups.) Furthermore, he says, the Female Reform Societies had no independent political status. "Paradoxically," says Thompson, the radicalism of these wage-earning women was an expression of nostalgia for a pre-industrial domestic economy. The women mourned the "loss in status and personal independence" of a "way of life centered on the home."¹⁷ Instead of granting this as a valid political position (complementary to, indeed an aspect of, the artisan's longing for a return to his independent status), Thompson depicts it as "paradoxical" and links it to a subordinate status of women in the emerging radical movement. "Their role was confined to giving moral support to the men, making banners and caps of liberty which were presented with ceremony at reform demonstrations, passing resolutions and addresses, and swelling the numbers at meetings."¹⁸ These women foreshadow "Carlile's womenfolk," described in later pages as those who "underwent trial and imprisonment more out of loyalty than conviction."¹⁹ Since women's independence is cast in terms of a prior domesticity instead of work, their claims and political activities had less weight in the "making" of the

class. In a sense, the domestic sphere operates as a double foil: it is the place where a presumably natural sexual division of labor prevails, as compared to the workplace, where relations of production are socially constructed; but it is also the place from which politics cannot emanate because it does not provide the experience of exploitation that contains within it the possibility of the collective identity of interest that is class consciousness. Domestic attachments, it seems, compromise the political consciousness even of women who work, in a way that does not happen (or is not seen as a problem) for men. Because of their domestic and reproductive functions, women are, by definition, only partial or imperfect political actors.

This perhaps implicitly explains a problem that is not directly addressed in *The Making of the English Working Class*: the absence of full or separate attention to the impact of industrial capitalism on women who did work. Except for textile workers, there is very little attention to working women in these pages. Women are referred to without comment as cheap labor used to substitute for men in the fields, workshops, and mills. The focus here is on capitalism's impact on male workers, not on the reasons for women's lower status and lower value in the labor market. Women artisans are also neglected, although, like their male counterparts, they had long traditions of independent economic activity that were disrupted by new capitalist practices. Women are not on Thompson's frequent listings of artisan trades (shoemakers, cabinetmakers, tailors, and the like), although sources he used such as Ivy Pinchbeck's *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution* (and more recent studies that have gone over the same late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century evidence) indicate milliners, seamstresses, lacemakers, tailoresses, and others forming a significant skilled labor force.²⁰ There are references in *The Making of the English Working Class* to female benefit societies and a long quotation describes a procession of the members of one such society in 1805. Thompson says that such societies were made up predominantly of artisans, but we are never told what trades the women belonged to. Indeed, while he stresses the formative influence such societies had on male artisans' political traditions, he discounts their influence on women. "In the last years of the eighteenth century female benefit societies and female Methodist classes may have given experience and self-confidence. . . . But it was in the textile districts that the changing economic status of women gave rise to the earliest widespread participation by working women in political and social agitation."²¹ It may be that the absence of female artisans in movements of protest led Thompson to neglect them in his discussions of work. But this then raises a serious question about the im-

manence of class in relations of production. For the absence of artisan women from politics—if they were absent—confounds the theoretical premise that organizes the book. At the very least we need an analysis of the different relations of production experienced by male and female artisans to show why class was immanent in one set of relationships and not in the other. That such an analysis is not offered can be explained, I think, by the attribution to women of domestic associations that somehow discount them from full immersion in the economic relationships that give rise to the articulation of worker interest as class consciousness.

There is another explanation for the invisibility of women artisans, of course. That is that women artisans did participate in politics, but that Thompson felt there was no reason to signal the fact. This would follow from his assumption that the notion of class was a universal, comprehensive idea and from his principled commitment to a policy of equality between women and men. In a 1960 essay, "Outside the Whale," published in the New Left Books collection, *Out of Apathy*, Thompson lashed out against the forces that had led to quietism and resignation in the 1950s. "Custom, Law, the Monarchy, the Church, the State, the Family—all came flooding back. All were indices of the supreme good—stability."²² Particularly significant was the fixing of human behavior in terms of functions and roles, the attribution of inevitable (because natural) sexual difference: "Sociologists, psychologists and husbands discovered that women are 'different'; and, under cover of talk about 'equality in difference,' the claim of women to full human equality with men was denied."²³ Thompson's (appropriate) refusal of functionalism carried with it a denial of any significant operation of difference; one could, after all, acknowledge that social processes involved the construction of gendered subjects without believing that the categories were natural and the meanings assigned to them fixed and inevitable. But his position seems to have been that singling out gender would introduce a presumption of natural difference that was discriminatory. A separate examination of artisanal women would have suggested a different (hence unequal) standard for their political behavior. Thompson's ideological commitment to equality ruled out special attention to sexual difference as a subject for discussion. At the same time, however, his egalitarianism was undermined by a textual strategy that depended on allusions to sexual difference to convey its meaning.

Thompson offered several varieties of female political behavior in *The Making of the English Class*. These were organized and evaluated according to a gendered scheme, a scheme that employed masculine and feminine symbols to identify the positive and negative poles

✓ came of course, as JHc 81. 25

of working-class politics. Indeed, if women are fleeting actors in the pages of the book, the feminine is a central figure in the representation of working-class politics. In the narrative of working-class political choices the masculine construction of the (universal) concept of class becomes clear and some of the confusions surrounding women's place in the story become more apparent.

Politics, the form of expression of class consciousness, is a cultural and historical product, according to Thompson, and it is politics that makes impossible any static definition of the meaning of class. The intersection of objective relations of production and available modes of political expression give distinctiveness to each appearance of class consciousness. "Consciousness of class arises in the same way in different times and places, but never in *just* the same way."²⁴ In Thompson's account, nineteenth-century working-class politics are traced to movements of eighteenth-century English rationalism and radicalism. The line is a direct one; the rights of freeborn Englishmen inform the claims of nineteenth-century workers. Somehow, this secular tradition is most appropriate to the "interests" of workers immersed in the emerging capitalist relations of production. There is an implication of immanence in this account, despite Thompson's call for history. He depicts rationalist, secular politics as the only possible form of class consciousness, thereby making its appearance natural or inevitable, instead of the product of struggle and debate. He achieves this effect not simply by endorsing particular movements but also by offering a negative contrast, depicting religious uses of sexual imagery as the antithesis of politics, the crazy strain in working-class discourse.

Orthodox Methodism represents the repressed side of this strain; its associations of sin and sexuality constituted a "perverted eroticism," which identified Satan with the phallus and Christ with feminine love. The unorthodox variant led by the poor working woman, Joanna Southcott, is characterized as frenzied and hysterical; unlike Methodism, it was almost exclusively a "cult of the poor." Marked by apocalyptic fervor, Southcott's preaching evoked a riot of lurid sexual imagery in which at times, Thompson says, "all tissue of sense disappears."²⁵ That Southcott had a following long after her death is undisputed; indeed, the least attractive aspects of Robert Owen's utopian messianism constituted a direct imitation of her: "Mr. Owen, the Philanthropist, threw the mantle of Joanna Southcott across his shoulders."²⁶ The evocation of a society in which there would be marital affection, sexual freedom, economic mutuality, and a balance between opposing forces—intellectual and physical power, city and country, agriculture and machinery, man and woman—marked

Owen's millennial vision. Its impracticality (there is no strategy other than conversion for effecting social change) leads Thompson, quoting Marx and Engels, to question its political efficacy.

Instead, Thompson distinguishes Owen's utopian claims from the political Radicalism of his Owenist artisanal followers expressed in cooperative societies, trade unions, and labor exchanges. Similarly, he distinguishes the religious contents of Southcottianism from the oath-swearing rituals that echoed into the Luddite movement. Indeed it is the practices—of community solidarity in Methodist churches, of lay preaching in independent sects, of cooperation of Owenism—that are transferred to working-class politics; according to Thompson, the contents of the religious teaching was not. "Southcottianism was scarcely a form of revolutionary Chiliasm; it did not inspire men to effective social action." Rather it was a psychic consequence of counter-revolution, "the Chiliasm of despair."²⁷

Yet Eric Hobsbawm has argued exactly the reverse, that apocalyptic movements coincided with heightened revolutionary activity, indeed that religious and revolutionary movements often informed one another. Barbara Taylor has recently and brilliantly shown that the sexualized language of these visionary religious sects could be used to express profoundly radical critiques, and could lead women as well as men to participate in social action. The masculine imagery for Satan might translate into an attack on capitalism (depicted as aggressive, energetic, and manly in the middle-class rhetoric of the day). The feminine alternative projected a nonalienated, loving, cooperative social order. In another study, Deborah Valenze links traditions of "cottage religion" (presided over by female as well as male preachers, whose teachings offered a similar positive projection of feminine traits) to the household economy's resistance to the new industrial order. Sexualized imagery, with its insistence on affective and spiritual relationships in the household and the community, directly challenged the materialism and individualist values and practices of the new political economy. Taylor suggests, moreover, that the positive assessment of the feminine opened the way for the inclusion of women in Owenite movements. Clear connections were drawn in theory and practice among idealizations of the feminine, claims for women's rights, and plans for a new socialist order.²⁸

The lines between political and religious critiques, between the language of politics and the language of sexuality, seem not to have been as clear as Thompson would have them. His insistence on drawing those lines singles out a particular strand of early nineteenth-century politics as the only example of working-class politics. This follows not only from his preference for rationalist politics but also from the

implicit associations his theory makes between producers and effective political action. Although, as we have seen, he recognizes that all producers were not men, in fact in his scheme most are and, more important, production is represented as a masculine (if not exclusively male) activity. In this connection, a kind of symbolism attaches to certain characters in the narrative. Tom Paine is the quintessential political expression, the citizen of democratic revolutions. Paine appropriately provided, in his *Rights of Man*, a founding text of the working-class political movement. Joanna Southcott is the antithetical figure. Deluded, yet charismatic, she evoked in her utterances the lures of sexuality and religion; fantastic prophecy was her mode of expression, in her hysterical pregnancy one sees the sterility of her revolutionary appeal. Written into the narrative in this way, Paine and Southcott stand for the positive and negative possibilities for working-class politics; that they are man and woman simply underlines the power of the contrast between the masculine and feminine emphases of their respective appeals and of Thompson's emphatic endorsement of rationalist politics.

To be sure, all women in *The Making of the English Working Class* are not presented as frenzied prophetesses or domestic housewives. There are also women, like Mary Wollstonecraft, whose writings are linked to political traditions of radical individualism, and others, less well-known, who like her were fitting partners for Radical men. Susannah Wright, a Nottingham lace-mender, is described as "very different" from most of Richard Carlile's female volunteers. Prosecuted for selling one of Carlile's addresses, she defended herself in court, interrupted her appeal to suckle her infant, received thunderous applause from the spectators when she did so, and survived a stay in prison for her crime. While the press attacked her as the symbol of the shameless vulgarity of radicalism, Carlile wrote of her that she was a woman "of very delicate health, and truly all spirit and not matter."²⁹ (The issue of how political threats are represented as sexual threats by the conservative press and how radicals are forced to defend their reputations on this score might provide an important perspective on the ways women are portrayed by working-class movements and on gender relationships in those movements. Thompson clearly finds the issue of press commentary worth noting, for he does so several times, but he does not pursue this line of analysis.)³⁰

Another heroine is Susan Thistlewood, wife of the doomed Cato Street conspirator, Arthur Thistlewood. She was, Thompson tells us, "not a cypher" but a "spirited Jacobin in her own right, with a cold and intellectual manner and a readiness to take an active part in [her husband's] defense."³¹ As in the description of Susannah Wright,

Thompson distinguishes Susan Thistlewood from most other women. She was "not a cypher" and the implication is that most other women were. Whether it is Thompson who thinks other women were cyphers or whether he assumes his readers believe that fact, the examples serve the same end. They show that exceptional women are capable of a type of political behavior most often practiced by men. Thompson's heroines serve to confirm the Paine/Southcott contrast by underscoring the fact that it is possible for women to understand and act according to the politics that exemplified English working-class consciousness in the 1820s and 1830s. When they eschew expressivity and act in rational ways, these unusual women can attain class consciousness.

[II]

Thompson placed *The Making of the English Working Class* in the context of the labor movement whose history he sought to write. The book's language and symbolic strategies constructed meanings in terms meant to be familiar to the constituents of that movement. Work, in the sense of productive activity, determined class consciousness, whose politics were rationalist; domesticity was outside production, and it compromised or subverted class consciousness often in alliance with (religious) movements whose mode was "expressive." The antitheses were clearly coded as masculine and feminine; class, in other words, was a gendered construction.

The expressive/rational contrast is a recurrent one in Thompson's political vocabulary. In a 1976 interview, for example, he compared the "expressive activity" of the "second New Left" to an earlier "more rational and open political activity":

This New Left had elements within it that could be seen at once by a historian as the revolting bourgeoisie doing its own revolting thing—that is, the expressive and irrationalist, self-exalting gestures of style that do not belong to a serious and deeply rooted, rational revolutionary movement.³²

Here the contrast is about class and politics, but it nonetheless resonates with the gendered meanings established in *The Making of the English Working Class* and at the same time adds a worker/bourgeois dimension. This gains additional significance when we remember that, in the 1890s, the dominant voices in the labor and socialist movements designated feminism as a bourgeois movement. The claim

that women's interests constituted a definable political and social agenda was often dismissed as individualist, self-indulgent, and middle class, a distraction from the egalitarianism and the true needs of the working class as a whole. To the extent that, in the 1960s, feminism emerged in the context of the "second New Left," it could eventually (though not immediately) be perceived as antithetical to the (manly) political tradition with which Thompson identified.

All of this would be fairly straightforward to argue if Thompson held a simple rationalist position. In fact, however, much of his work lovingly embraces decidedly nonrationalist, romantic themes. One of his heroes, after all, is the Romantic socialist William Morris, about whom he wrote a major biography in 1955; another is William Blake, with whose "muggletonianism" he has declared himself in sympathy and with whose words he begins and ends *The Making of the English Working Class*. In that book Blake provides a crucial link between "the Romantics and the radical craftsmen" in their common resistance (in the years 1790–1830) to "the annunciation of Acquisitive Man": "After William Blake, no mind was at home in both cultures, nor had the genius to interpret the two traditions to each other."³³

Blake embodied the possibility of poetry and politics, romantic yearning and rational resistance in a single movement. Similarly Morris offered a way to explore the limits of (romantic) utopian thinking, to distinguish between those utopias that can coexist with rational politics and those that are merely expressive. According to Thompson, utopias that permit critical assessment of the present in terms of some deep moral commitment and unleash imaginative longing for a particular kind of future are compatible with, indeed necessary for, practical politics. Hence his first interest in Morris had to do with Morris's ability to articulate what Thompson dubbed in 1955 a "Scientific Utopia." This involved an analysis of the motors of change, "mastery of historical process, understanding of the economic and social basis of Communism."³⁴ For Thompson the initial fascination of Morris was his appeal "to the moral consciousness as a vital agency of social change."³⁵

In his 1976 postscript to the Morris biography, Thompson qualified some of his earlier attempts to write Morris fully into an orthodox Marxist tradition. But he maintained the distinction that concerns us here. While deemphasizing his initial insistence on science and stressing instead the importance of creative imaginative projections, Thompson still held to his original criteria for utopias: "To vindicate Utopianism does not . . . mean that *any* utopian work is as good as any other. . . . There are disciplined and undisciplined ways of 'dreaming,' but the discipline is of the imagination and not of sci-

ence." The important point still was that Morris had offered an analysis of the direction of historical change, imbued his analysis with moral conviction, and indicated a preference for the best way to get there. His indications, moreover, were "placed within a firm controlling historical and political argument."³⁶

Henry Abelow has offered an insightful way to read Thompson in the context of the post-1956 critique of Stalinism that sought a more open, democratic socialism. He points out that Thompson's stress on creativity and flexibility challenged the rigid "scientific" materialism of the British Communist party; his discovery of such imaginative play in earlier (British) socialist movements gave historical support to his endorsement of those values in the present. Poetry stood for deeply inspired action, informed by feelings that art could best express. The poet was crucial to revolutionary politics, for he could articulate the longings that, along with practical programs, inspired men to act.³⁷ It is important to note that the contrast being created here opposes the imaginative to the scientific, the poetic to an overly determined practicality. There is no suggestion that poetry is "spiritual" in opposition to materialism; rather it is included as a component of politics and material life.

At the same time Thompson's critique of democratic centralism required proof of the inherent rationality of working people. *The Making of the English Working Class* showed that they could be counted on to come up with a politics appropriate to the pursuit of their interest. The Luddites, after all, had maintained a certain grim, inventive humor as they carefully aimed their revenge at the appropriate targets: carriers of individualism and utilitarianism. Thompson's genius in the Luddite chapters was to identify the strategic thinking, the collectivist and mutualist motivation, the shared leadership (the participatory democracy) that informed what contemporary officials had (mistakenly) depicted as uncivilized, if not anarchic, behavior. Here the need to rule out "expressivity" was important as a way of correcting the evidence (most of it contained in law enforcement files) and as a way of insisting that secular, rational politics did not have to be imposed from above. Instead, left to their own invention workers were capable of great creativity. There was a wonderful kind of poetry evident to Thompson in the rational political movement developed "from below."

The role of poetry, according to Thompson, is to leaven politics with imagination, not to undermine it with undisciplined spirituality. In this careful definition, Abelow reminds us, Thompson's own sense of purpose is at stake. Thompson apparently wanted to be a poet; the title of *The Making of the English Working Class* plays on the

old English term for poet, which was maker. "Making means poetry writing as well as building, achieving." In Abelow's words, "*The Making of the English Working Class* names both what Thompson has done and what the English working people have in struggle achieved for themselves."³⁸

Thompson's work constantly examines the political role of the poet. In "Outside the Whale" he condemns W. H. Auden's defection from political struggle and insists that it is not the necessary path for anyone, least of all an artist.³⁹ For Thompson, there must be a middle ground between what Abelow calls disenchantment with perfectionist illusions and complete apostasy. That ground is the demanding, yet creative place of continuing aspiration, and it holds the most promise for political/poetic articulation.⁴⁰ The other alternatives are fruitless. Politics is mechanical and lifeless without poetry. Without politics, poetic aspiration is stillborn; it deteriorates into self-indulgent expressivity. The key to Morris, after all, was that his utopianism was "placed within a firm controlling historical and political argument." It was, in other words, the capture of romantic utopianism for socialist rationalism that made Morris appealing to Thompson.

In Thompson's representation of this relationship, the creative impulse was disciplined and directed to rational ends. Expressivity on its own was ruled out; but rational politics could be softened and enriched by the "vocabulary of desire," the directed play of socialist imagination. Indeed, without this kind of longing aspiration, rationalist politics would become sterile and incapable of stimulating human action for revolutionary social change. Although Thompson seemed to insist on a kind of organic complementarity (politics needs poetry and poetry needs politics), it is not a marriage he has in mind. Poetry is instead incorporated into politics to create a more perfect (masculine) activity. This merger is achieved conceptually by defining poetic politics in opposition to the subversive possibilities of (feminine) expressivity. The gendered contrast secures the masculinity of poetry by locating femininity in an excluded negative position. It is the integration of poetry into politics in this way that Thompson represents as the great political achievement of William Morris, William Blake, and himself.

Thompson's vision of politics is far more inclusive than the "economistic" notions against which he wrote. It makes imagination, art, moral passion, and intellect an inherent part of political struggle, vital for its well-being and success. The incorporation of these elements is achieved by a redefinition or enlargement of the definition of politics and by an extension of the notion of labor to include artistic

creation (making intellectual productivity manly work), and by refining the gendered representation of politics and class. These retain their masculine coding; indeed, Thompson makes art acceptable by including it in the masculine, in opposition to a set of unacceptable, excluded terms—the domestic, the spiritual, the expressive, the religious, the undisciplined, and the irrational—all of which are coded as feminine. There might have been other ways to make this same appeal—by insisting, for example, on a notion of art that remained coded as feminine and was genuinely complementary to (masculine) politics—but Thompson's choice recognizes the powerful meanings already attached to class and politics in the tradition for which he writes, and he does not call these into question.

My point here is not to denounce Thompson's political vision in the name of some higher feminine expression but rather to uncover its reliance on gendered representations to convey its meaning. For it is in addressing these representations that we discover the subtle and central presence of gender in conceptions of working-class politics. Such an analysis ought to lead us not to condemn Thompson, for there is much in his conception of politics that is vital and relevant still. Rather, through the kind of analysis I have attempted, we can gain some sense of the enormity of the problem feminist socialists encountered. In trying to work within the boundaries set by canonical texts such as Thompson's, they faced a tradition that held to a universalized definition of class, the meaning of which was nonetheless constructed in gendered terms; a tradition committed to a literal egalitarianism that dismissed as reactionary any recognition of the stubborn complexity of sexual difference; a tradition that promised equality, but did not acknowledge its own uses of difference.

[III]

The power of this tradition has been difficult to challenge for it rests on the presumed social "reality" of the "working class." Historians like Thompson have depicted themselves as documenting that reality rather than as helping to construct it; in that way, they have precluded questions about the role of politics and of written history in the creation of concepts such as class. Yet the efforts of socialist feminist historians illustrate that we must, finally, raise such questions, interrogating both the meanings of fundamental categories and the politics of history itself. Such an interrogation recognizes the need not only to take sides in an ongoing class struggle but also, more radically, to understand the role of written history in the creation of

individual and collective identities—identities of gender as well as of class.

The earliest efforts of feminists working in the Thompsonian tradition stopped short of radical reconceptualization of the terms of history itself. As a result, they were unable to produce the theoretical work that could explain and rectify the marginal place of women in the history of English working-class formation. The first of these attempts sought to include women in working-class history by collecting evidence about their participation in economic and political activities. These studies accepted class as an unproblematic sociological category and assumed that women had simply been ignored or neglected by earlier labor historians without asking how such neglect had occurred.⁴¹ They assumed, as well, that a narrative parallel to the existing story of the working class would readily be incorporated into it, even with variations that included discussions of problems specific to women, such as childrearing and household responsibilities. In fact, however, this has not been the case. Instead, women either continue to be excluded from working-class history, or to be awkwardly included as special examples of the general (male) experience, or to be treated entirely separately. Women remain a particularized subject; their history has neither attained the canonical status of Thompson's, nor has it accounted in new ways for the making of the entire working class. Such an incorporation or revision will not be achieved until the troubling question raised by women's history is confronted: if women did work and engage in politics, how explain their invisibility, the lack of attention to them in theories of class formation and in the historical record?

Part of the answer lies in how the meanings of class itself were constructed; another part lies in how the history of class has been written. Thompson assumes there is one story of working-class formation; that is the point of his analogy to individual biography. Triumphant political visions become, in his account, the singular and necessary expressions of class consciousness, the only ones worth writing about in any detail. This kind of history is ultimately teleological because it assumes both a certain inevitability and a single, continuous link between present and past. Barbara Taylor has challenged the unitary view of working-class politics by introducing a discussion of competing traditions within the labor and socialist movements. Her work suggests a more complicated story, a struggle for hegemony among conflicting visions of a new society. Taylor argues that feminism was central to utopian socialism, to its most imaginative and radical designs, and she links the disappearance of feminist concerns and female voices to the displacement of utopianism

by rationalist, "scientific socialism." Taylor's documentation of alternative attempts to define working-class politics aimed to legitimize contemporary feminist critiques by establishing their historical precedents.

Socialist-feminists look back to the Owenites, then, not out of nostalgia for a transition long past but as a way of tracing the beginnings of a democratic-communist project which is still very much our own and with which we are still struggling to redefine the ends of modern Marxist movements. For, after, all, what count as Utopian answers depends on who is raising the questions.⁴²

This approach signaled a far-reaching critique. For if evaluations of the meaning of political programs varied depending "on who is raising the questions," then not only Thompson's story but his theoretical premises needed revision. If class consciousness was inherent in certain relations of production, what could explain the fundamentally different expressions it had found? How could diversity and disagreement be introduced into the unified narrative Thompson had constructed?

Among socialist feminists several kinds of answers to these questions have been proposed, one based on psychoanalytic theory, another on a variation of Marxism, and a third on post-structuralist theories of discourse. The first two of these rewrite working-class history as a conflict not only between classes but between the sexes. They take class as an established fact and add another complicating strand—gender—to the story of working-class formation. The third, more fruitfully it seems to me, subjects the category of class to analytic scrutiny and rewrites its history from the perspective not of teleology but of (what Foucault, echoing Nietzsche, called) genealogy.⁴³

Feminist historians have used psychoanalytic theory to address the question of diversity within the working class in terms of gender and to posit conflict between women and men as a fundamental fact of human experience and modern social organization, as fundamental as relations of production and conflicts of class. In addition, psychoanalysis insists on the importance of the unconscious as a factor in human behavior and so provides a powerful critique of the premises of rationalism and liberal egalitarianism. The historian Sally Alexander, for example, has opened a serious theoretical breach by introducing Lacanian notions into analyses of social behavior.⁴⁴ Too often, however, the premise of enduring sexual antagonism has been rendered literally, as the inevitability of conflict between real women and men. The complicated arguments of Freud and Lacan about the

processes of construction of gender identification and the bisexuality of the individual subject are reduced to sociological discussions about objective differences of experience, interest, attitude, behavior, and political choice between women and men. "Men" and "women" are assumed to be fixed categories of identity, with historically variable (but inherently conflictual) needs. In fact, as Thompson's and Taylor's books show, clear-cut differences are not consistently evident. In the early nineteenth century women heroically engaged in rationalist politics, while men eagerly shared the delusions of the ranting Mrs. Southcott. If masculine/feminine is an enduring cultural opposition, men and women have not always been on opposite sides. How then account for the emergence of political movements with different programs addressed to the relations between the sexes; with different ways of expressing the meaning of class; with different representations of sexual difference encoded in their language?

An indirect answer to these questions addresses the connection between gender and class from the perspective of "dual systems" analysis. Patriarchy, in this approach, is a social system said to parallel and intersect with capitalism. Each system has its organization and relationships, its dynamic, its history, and its own distinctive ideology. Most often, the "origins" of patriarchy are located in family and kinship systems, including relations of household production and reproduction. Capitalist relations develop around the means of production and involve economic practices that are (in theory at least) "sex-blind" or impervious to gender.⁴⁵ The advent of capitalism, in this analysis, involved the application of patriarchal "gender ideology" to economic practices, the importation, as it were, of ideas from one realm (where they could be explained by material relationships) to another. Dual systems analysis avoids some of the more obvious pitfalls of psychoanalysis because the sometimes similar behavior of both women and men can be explained as a function of a mystifying "gender ideology," but it begs the questions of why that ideology so powerfully persists, how it relates to the articulation of class interest, and why different political strategies (involving the relations between gender and class) emerge within a sociologically similar group. It is a kind of mechanical solution framed within the logic of materialist analysis, which allows "gender ideology" to be introduced as an independent variable in analyses of capitalism while at the same time retaining the sociological imperative—the need ultimately to account for that ideology as the direct product of social/material organization.

Different as they are, dual systems and psychoanalytic theory have been used in the same sociologized way by feminist labor historians

and so they have not addressed questions about politics such as those Barbara Taylor's work poses: What are the sources of different political programs articulated by workers? How explain the different ways in which class interest was expressed and defined? How account theoretically for the existence of different traditions, different "consciousness" among similar types of workers? Not by simple sociological correlations between social existence and political thought; not by holding to ideas about the immanence of consciousness in social experience; not by conceiving of class as a unified movement, rooted in a shared and singular perception of interest. Not, in other words, by remaining within the analytic frame of Thompson's history, but by problematizing all the connections it so readily assumes. How can that be done?

The direction has been at least indicated in some recent discussions of discourse and ideology by feminist historians. Thus Jane Lewis carefully documents the influence of "gender ideology" (whatever its origins) on workers' policies and she calls upon feminist historians to attend to "the way gender and class are constructed together," implying a conceptual reciprocity that defies the dual systems approach.⁴⁶ Alexander's deft summary of Lacan points to the crucial role language plays in the child's coming into consciousness; indeed, it suggests the need to rethink notions of consciousness as they have been used in recent labor history. For consciousness, this rethinking substitutes concepts of discourse and rhetoric, inserting into the connection between the objective reality of existence and the subject's perception of it the problems of representation and the contingency and variability of meaning.

Among British feminists, Denise Riley has perhaps historicized this approach most fully. In her book on feminism and the category of "women" she offers a discussion that might fruitfully be applied to the study of "women" in the "working class," or for that matter of any category whose origin has been located in nature or in objective social relations:

To put it schematically: "women" is historically, discursively constructed, and always relatively to other categories which themselves change; "women" is a volatile collectivity in which female persons can be very differently positioned so that the apparent continuity of the subject of "women" isn't to be relied on; "women" is both synchronically and diachronically erratic as a collectivity, while for the individual "being a woman" is also inconstant, and can't provide an ontological foundation.⁴⁷

If the same can be said for being a worker or a member of the working class, the question turns away from consciousness to the organization of representation, to the context and politics of any specified representational system. Identity becomes not a reflection of some essential reality but a matter of political allegiance. Feminist history approached this way changes Thompson's story. It refuses its teleology and retells it as a story of the creation of political identity through representations of sexual difference. Class and gender become inextricably linked in this telling—as representation, as identity, as social and political practice.

[IV]

In the preface to *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson elaborated a unitary definition of class: it was a historical relationship not a category or a thing; its meaning inhered in oppositional relationships and in the definitions men gave to those relationships. For Thompson the question was one of timing and context—when and under what circumstances was the common working-class identity discovered? The interests and the common experiences giving rise to such identity, he suggested, existed apart from class consciousness; they preceded it and structured the nature of men's perceptions. Class consciousness was the cultural expression of men's experience of productive relations and, although it might vary from place to place, it was an identifiable phenomenon. If we were to attend to discourse rather than consciousness in this account, we would open new interpretive possibilities. First, we would ask how categories of class were formulated through representation at specific historical moments, looking at once for the similarities that constituted the limits of linguistic possibilities as well as for different kinds of expression, different definitions, contests about definition: affirmations, negations, and repressions. We would attend to the processes by which one definition emerged as dominant, looking both for explicitly stated and implicitly structured political relationships. The result is not a unitary concept of class, not history as teleology, but a concept of class as a field that always contains multiple and contested meanings. Second, we would ask how appeals to sexual difference figured in the process: how did the exclusion or marginalization of that which was constructed as feminine, for example, work to ensure acceptance of masculine codings for particular ideas of class? How did gender "naturalize" particular meanings of class? How in turn did visions of class as a set of relationships naturally following from

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economic conditions set in place certain notions of gender? Third, we would ask how and in what ways conceptions of class organized (perceptions of) social experience. Rather than assuming an exact fit between material life and political thought, between experience and consciousness, this approach disrupts that fit, refuses the opposition between them. It argues that articulation, definition—the construction of meaning—must be analyzed as a set of events in itself. Thompson's gestures to traditions of English radicalism account for certain thematic influences or continuities in working-class political expression, but they do not address the cultural, subjective, and textual processes by which such themes acquire meaning.

Thompson insisted that the terms used to express the idea of class were relative to time and place, but he did not ask *how* the meaning of the concept itself was constructed. It is that task of "deconstruction" that some feminists have undertaken in an effort to solve the riddle of women's invisibility, marginality, or subordination in the histories of the working class. If we start by examining how class was represented, however, we relativize assumptions so embedded in our traditions, so naturalized, that they seem to be self-evident even across political and ideological lines. From that relative vantage, canonical texts become particularly valuable targets because their appeal rests, at least in part, on their ability to embody and express those "natural" assumptions, sometimes in new ways, sometimes in comfortably familiar ways. Through analysis of such texts we understand better how a notion such as class operates to construct its own conceptual field and how a text like Thompson's history operates to establish that conceptual field on detailed empirical (and so seemingly incontestable) ground. While the critique of detail with new empirical evidence is important (the addition of new information about women, for example), the concepts that establish the field itself must also be interrogated.

There have been many criticisms among feminist historians of the attention to such interrogations of "traditional" histories because they often focus on men's writings and seem to neglect the importance of establishing women as historical subjects. While there is merit to the argument that we must attend to women in our writings about class, there is also merit to the point that such attention at once takes too much for granted and is necessarily incomplete. Can we write about working-class women without examining the ways the feminine is used to construct conceptions of class? Can we write about any women without asking how their culture represented what they were, as well as how they defined themselves? Can we assume there was no connection between cultural representation and self-definition? How can

we construe that connection? Can we assume a pre-existing common self-understanding on the part of all women, or of all women of the same class? Was there an objectively describable working-class women's "interest" in nineteenth-century England? How did politics and the appeals of particular political movements figure in the definitions of such interest?

We cannot write about class without interrogating its meanings—not only its terminology and the content of its political programs but the history of its symbolic organization and linguistic representations. All of this is to say, I think, that in order for feminist labor historians to add women to stories like *The Making of the English Working Class*, we must first figure out how such books work as they are written. That kind of analytic operation makes it possible to theorize a different kind of history of working-class politics, one that recasts our knowledge about gender and class.

III

GENDER

IN

HISTORY

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