Labor History – Class as a Historical Category: Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class. By Xaq Frohlich.*

In *The making of the English working class*, E. P. Thompson examines the history from the failed uprisings of the English Jacobins in the 1790s to the rise of English Radicalism in the 1830s in order to explain what he describes as the formation of a "working class." Up front Thompson warns us that he is "writing against" three other historical orthodoxies (p. 12). He dislikes the Fabian orthodoxy, which depicts the working class as "passive victims," and the empirical economic historians, who describe working people in impersonal terms of "labour force," migrants, or statistics, because both orthodoxies "obscure the agency of the working people." In this sense, Thompson seeks to reveal the active engagement of the working class in popular movements, and the equal importance of politics in shaping their social formation. In this respect Thompson differs from the third historical orthodoxy that he detests – the "Pilgrim Progress" narrative where one reads *post facto* a history of "forerunners" where each "natural" shift in society brings us closer to our inevitable present. Thus, when writing about the introduction of the cotton mill, he warns, "we should not assume any automatic or over-direct, correspondence between the dynamic of economic growth and the dynamic of social or cultural life … too much emphasis upon the newness of the cotton-mills can lead to an underestimation of the continuity of political and cultural traditions in the making of the working-class communities" (pp. 192-193). While Thompson accepts that all three orthodoxies present a partial history, "What has been lost is a sense of the whole process" (p. 196). It is in these fractured histories of "the working classes" that Thompson believes the working-class's origin has appeared politically spontaneous and rooted in economic trends. Instead, Thompson posits that there is a continuity from the near revolution of the 1790s to the reforms starting in the 1930s. The dramatic counter-revolutionary response in 1790s England resulted in a "profound alienation of the classes" that would give rise to the class unrest embodied in the later rise of the working-class.

If the origin of the 1830s revolution is to be found in the 1790, Thompson is faced with a serious challenge: why did the near "English Revolution" (that he documents) not result in an overt political transformation in England in the way that the French Revolution had so clearly done in France? He must overcome "Pilgrim progress" or economic empiricists accounts that the English workers were somehow happier than the French, because of an increase in standards of living brought with the Industrial Revolution. Thompson states "it is quite possible for statistical averages and human experiences to run in opposite directions" (p. 211), disparaging the deceptive (and self-serving) nature of statistical generalizations while promoting the importance of individual voice and narratives in historical understanding. Instead of increasing worker happiness, Thompson shows how the industrial transformations in the work place brought deleterious social transformations. "The mill appeared as a symbol of social energies which were destroying the very 'course of Nature' (p. 189). Blue Books become the "battleground" of a war fought between centralizing "reformers" and "obstructionist" (p. 341). The modern trimmings of industrialization—legibility, efficiency, and *laissez faire* markets—brought with them changes in social structures that not only generated social unrest, but also challenged efforts by the new working-classes at political mobilization.

The concurrence of the Industrial Revolution with the aborted English (political) Revolution was what ultimately undermined the union between reformers and the working people in England that marked its success in France.

Thompson's study of Methodism illustrates this point, as does his study of the evolving rhetoric of reform. For Thompson, examining the role of Methodism with repect to the working-class requires explaining its "dual role as the religion of both the exploiters and the exploited" (p. 375). Though he acknowledges the correlation between economic booms and busts and a fall and rise in Methodism, Thompson rejects Hobsbawn's conclusions that Methodism advances Radicalism. Instead Thompson suggests that Methodism functions as Marx describes it—the opiate of the people—where Methodist "education initiatives" became tools of temperance. An analogous (though more nuanced) shift occurs in the rhetoric of reform. The high egalitarian ideals embodied in Thomas Paine's writings (Rights of Man) resonated with popular audiences during the 1790s. The concept of "progress" that it carried with it, however, changed in the context of the industrial revolution. Progressive reforms increasingly centered on new machines and the restructuring of society, but ignored how such shifts often entailed (state or industrial) centralizing shifts in power. The Luddites' revolts in 1812 and 1813 were thus perceived as "backwardness," representing an antiquated response to new technologies and social reforms. By exploring the power struggles involved in the modern "reforms' and the sophistication with which the working-class obstructed them, Thompson views the Luddites as a form of proto trade unionisms. "Luddism can be seen as a violent eruption of feeling against unrestrained industrial capitalism," that was not simply reactionary (p. 550). The struggle for the vote that arose out of the reforms of the 1830s thus represented a "new way of reaching out by the working people for *social control* over their conditions of life and labour" (p. 828) … "They fought not the machine, but the exploitive and oppressive relationships intrinsic to industrial capitalism" (pp. 832). Considering that E. P. Thompson was a communist, it is interesting to think about how his arguments in this book resonate with the issues he was facing in 1950s England. Communists in England at this time were facing considerable attacks from the right (a mild form of anti-McCarthyism as Michael Bess describes it in his article "E. P. Thompson: Historian as Activist," *American Historical Review*, Feb. 1993), as well as a crisis in identity within their own ranks. Thompson did not like the condescending intellectualism of Lenin, and argued that the Soviet path for communism was false and not commiserate with the ideology's foundation in the working-class. Thompson's revision of early 19th century intellectual reform efforts as centralizing power through rationalization (standardization, mechanization, etc.) could be read as a critique of the social "steering" of the proletariat espoused by Lenin and practiced by Stalin. Similarly, it might be nice to discuss how Thompson's defense of Luddism reflected a post-WW II or Cold War concern with technocratic states.