

E. P. Thompson and the Discipline of Historical Context

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THE great English historian E. P. Thompson died this past year. Arguably the most important founder of “the new social history,” he was a transformative influence on and an inspiration for two generations of historians. His work held up to changing fashions, making sense as much to readers who grew up with the “new cultural history” of the late 1980s and 1990s as to those more concerned with labor and social organization twenty years before. Thompson helped to offer “marxism with a human face” to a New Left anxious to break out of the orthodoxies (and scientism and factional quarrels) of its predecessors. Founder of the *New Reasoner* (NR) and (after the NR merged with the *Universities and Left Review*) original editor of the *New Left Review*, he was a powerful critical voice for four decades; he helped to maintain the immensely intellectually productive and sometimes politically important borderland between academic scholarship and public activism—and always, I think, regretted the way this borderland had been attenuated by the increasing capacity of universities to absorb and domesticate intellectual discourse. One of the key figures in Britain’s nuclear disarmament movement, a public opinion poll in the 1980s once found him to be the second most trusted public figure in England (after the Queen).

Fiercely and equally committed to politics and history, Thompson must have delighted in his discovery of an apt

connection between his lifelong historical inquiries into English popular politics and culture and the anti-nuclear movement for which he felt obliged to interrupt them. That “‘a regularly organised mob of many hundreds of the most abandoned and dissolute characters’ threw down an encloser’s fences ‘with most terrific hooting and abuse’ on Newbury’s commons in 1842,” Thompson found recorded in a four page printed broadside addressed “To the inhabitants of Newbury” and signed by R. F. Graham, who resided in the municipality by whose name we now know the commons, Greenham. Exploring customary law and common right, Thompson reported on the lengthy struggles of English people against the enclosure of common lands and the reduction of traditional land tenures to mere private property. The broad textbook generalizations tell us that this popular struggle was a failure, that enclosure went ahead, and often add the editorial comment that resisting it was just a matter of short-sighted (if economically needy) traditionalists standing in the way of progress. But as Thompson reports, the matter was not so simple and the failure not so complete.

London and its environs would have no parks today if commoners had not asserted their rights, and as the nineteenth century drew on rights of recreation were more important than rights of pasture, and were defended vigilantly by the Commons Preservation Society. We owe to these premature “Greens” such urban lungs as we have. More than that, if it had not been for the stubborn defence by Newbury commoners of their rights to the Greenham Common, where on earth could NATO have parked its Nukes (Thompson, 1993a, p. 126).

Though Thompson was the author of *The Poverty of Theory*, a vitriolic attack on Althusserian marxism, he was an important influence on social theory as well as social history. He brought the term “moral economy” into contemporary use, paving the way for a wide variety of inquiries into the relationship of

“traditional” economic and political culture to various forms and regimes of market economies;¹ he redefined much thinking about class by challenging structural rigidities with the notion of “class as a happening” and paving the way for the flowering of studies of class formation.² In the present essay, I want to honor E. P. Thompson’s legacy to social history and to social theory not by trying to review the enormous volume and range of his work but by drawing attention to one of his enduring and informative themes, one explicitly methodological but also implicitly substantive, that tells us much about Thompson the historian. It also helps us to grasp better the enduring problem of what it means to come to an understanding of people or ways of life very different from our own. I will concentrate not on Thompson’s best known earlier works but on some of the studies of the eighteenth century that he pursued for the last thirty years of his life, although they were not published until the year before he died.

One of the most frequent and telling questions E. P. Thompson put to his empirical evidence was “what is the right context for understanding this fact?” Thompson was a master of historical detail and richness of interpretation. Readers have appreciated his remarkable reconstructions of past social practices, ways of life, and political cultures. His topics ranged from the Black Act that protected landowners and hunters against plebeian poachers, to the great English socialist William Morris, the radical poet William Blake, changing regimens of time and work-discipline, and the connections between Wesleyanism and workers’ activism. He described his extraordinary book, *The Making of the English Working Class*, as an attempt to rescue “the poor stockinger,” “the deluded follower of Johanna Southcott,” and a range of other late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century characters, “from the enormous condescension of posterity” (Thompson, 1968, p. 13). Or as he put it later, in another context, “These women (and these men) were for themselves and not for us: they were proto-nothing”

(Thompson, 1993a, p. 320). Yet there was a sharply analytic moment to Thompson's reconstructions. He was not just describing; by placing in context, he was finding the appropriate meaning for customs, organizations, beliefs, and political actions.

Thompson would gather evidence for decades, seeking innumerable sources and pondering their significance, before he arrived at a conclusion. He was a model of the historian's attentiveness to the nature of the source before him. Did it come from a court or the inquiries of a local historian or the biography of a self-made man? What implications did this hold for its interpretation as evidence about a handloom weaver, an agricultural laborer, or other worker? If some action of an ordinary worker seemed significant enough to warrant space in *The Times* or another organ of polite society, Thompson rightly and probingly wondered not just how the printed report might be biased by interpretation but to what extent it reflected not generalizable customs but an unusual departure from more typical patterns of action. This was one of the sources of Thompson's longstanding annoyance with attempts to quantify historical evidence. It was not enumeration or more complex statistics as such that bothered him, though he was troubled when economic historians sought to reduce the meaning of something like hunger or the standard of living to mere numbers.³ Thompson's most basic grievance was that the statistics were commonly collected from sources poorly understood, with little attention paid to the ways the sources might bias the numbers themselves or the categorization of what was reported and, above all, with an inadequate sense of the contexts from which the individual cases were torn.

Thompson's study of the sale of wives, conducted over many years (mostly in the 1960s and '70s) but not published until it became part of *Customs in Common*, is a case in point. Historians had occasionally noted but for the most part made little of reports of husbands selling their wives in markets or public

houses. The practice seemed especially common in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Thompson gradually collected some three hundred cases, meanwhile mulling over their meaning and his interpretation. One of Thompson's frequent moves was already in play: he sought to recover a part of popular culture that was either invisible to later scholars or which they tended to dismiss or derogate—in this case as merely a barbaric survival. As it happened, before Thompson finished his study, a book was published that seemed to deal with the matter of wife sale in adequate depth. Its author, Samuel Pyeatt Menefee, had amassed a comparably large sample of cases from around England and even conducted a quantitative analysis of them (Menefee, 1981). Though Thompson could see some merit in Menefee's study, he also saw a gratuitous lumping together of different events and a failure to take seriously the specifics of each case. Menefee received a rebuke that summed up some of Thompson's primary historiographical values: ". . . his knowledge of British social history and its disciplines was elementary. As a result he has little understanding of social context, few criteria for distinguishing between sound and corrupt evidence, and his fascinating examples appear in a jumble of irrelevant material and contradictory interpretations" (Thompson, 1993a, p. 407).⁴

Thompson returns to the issue and probes the various examples of wife sale, identifying different regional patterns, an apparent (but somewhat uncertain) pattern of spread and decline, and different elements of ritualization by which the practice was elevated out of the seeming casualness and brutality that the label evokes. Contemporary middle-class and elite observers had seen late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century wife sales as evidence of the lack of civilization among the poorer sort (even though Thompson's cases include Henry Bridges, Second Duke of Chandos). One representative of enlightened nineteenth-century opinion saw it thus: "A remarkable Superstition still prevails among the lowest of our Vulgar,

that a Man may lawfully sell his Wife to another, provided he deliver her over with a Halter about her Neck" (Brand, 1993, p. 411).

Interpretations like this not only mislocated the practice in the class structure, they mistakenly assumed that any such primitive behavior must be a survival from a more ignorant past, and they viewed it as a unilateral market transaction revealing both a lack of appropriate tenderness towards spouses and a simple understanding of a monetary transaction. Thompson shows, however, that such views are mistaken. "It is now clear . . . that we must remove the wife sale from the category of brutal chattel purchase and replace it within that of divorce and re-marriage" (Thompson, 1993a, pp. 427-28). This was clearly a practice that placed men in the center of marital relations and treated wives humiliatingly as property, but it did require consent of the wife. Moreover, Thompson shows that prices were typically extremely low and largely symbolic, that the ritual was understood by participants to be legally binding, and that purchases were often arranged in advance and only symbolically ratified by public auction. Indeed, in at least some cases, the "sale" involved a husband who removed himself from the scene in favor of a lover his wife had taken, or tenants of poor-law housing seeking to avoid challenges from the authorities. Most basically, Thompson's detailed re-examination and recontextualization of the cases shows that wife sale was a form of divorce and remarriage that afforded autonomy to working people for whom the institutions of established church and formal legal process offered few options for remedying problems in their personal lives. "The wife sale was one possible (if extreme) move available in the politics of the personal of eighteenth century working people" (Thompson, 1993a, p. 463).

Thompson articulated some of his views about the importance of specific context to good history-writing in a 1972 review article (Thompson, 1971, pp. 41-55).⁵ Taking up two

historical studies that drew explicitly on anthropology, Thompson sketched a view of what made an effective and analytically persuasive historical reconstruction. The first point was that it ought to take into account the whole of a way of life: "Only when the evidence is studied within its whole historical context—the rules and expectations of inheritance, the role of influence and interest, the norms and expectations not of 'society' but of different social groups—can it bring fruitful results" (Thompson, 1971, p. 45).

Thompson was quite happy to look to anthropology for a strong sense of this holistic approach to another way of life (and implicitly for a sense of the respect—and therefore interpretive modesty—entailed in studying a different way of life). But he was worried by an approach, like Macfarlane's, that seemed to draw on anthropological theory and the substance of anthropological studies from widely dispersed settings to try to inform a moment (and a document) in English history that had not been adequately placed in its immediate local and historical context. He complained, for example, that just as twentieth-century historians are apt to impose twentieth-century categories on seventeenth-century material, Macfarlane's borrowings from anthropology may impose categories from wholly different cultures.

The problem is all the more acute where the method is not the systematic and careful comparison of two (or some other small number) of cultures but the appropriation of an idea or category from each of a variety of studies of widely varying cultures: Nupe, Sherpa, Greek. Macfarlane draws, for example, on J. K. Campbell's study of Greek mountain shepherds (Campbell, 1967). But Thompson stressed the difference between the original anthropological study and the historical study that borrowed from it: "Campbell's work succeeds not because he has isolated this or that facet of his shepherd community, but in so far as he shows how all the parts relate to each other in a coherent and internally consistent cultural and social system" (Thompson, 1971, p. 43).

Campbell's study is a fine exemplar of the great structural-functional tradition of British social anthropology; Thompson is appropriating a holism associated with that tradition, and his notion of a whole way of life shares much with it. It is worth noting, however, that Thompson recurrently stressed the internal heterogeneity of cultures, and not only the extent of their regional and class variation but of contestation over them. In calling for a holistic view, he recognizes the ways in which "the very term 'culture', with its cozy invocation of consensus, may serve to distract attention from social and cultural contradictions, from the fractures and oppositions within the whole." Even the plebeian culture on which Thompson focuses, and whose rationality he reconstructs, "was not self-defining or independent of external influences. It had taken form defensively, in opposition to the constraints and controls of the patrician rulers" (Thompson, 1993a, pp. 6-7).⁶ In general, Thompson wrote in mild rebuke to some of the versions of anthropological thinking of culture appropriated by recent historians,

a culture is also a pool of diverse resources, in which traffic passes between the literate and the oral, the superordinate and the subordinate, the village and the metropolis; it is an arena of conflictual elements, which requires some compelling pressure—as for example, nationalism or prevalent religious orthodoxy or class consciousness—to take form as a 'system' (Thompson, 1993a, p. 6).

Likewise, Thompson suggested, the historian needed to understand his facts in close relationship to the rest of the cultural setting within which the fact was produced. This meant: (a) other apparent facts of the same kind in the same or nearby settings, (b) the other aspects of the way of life of the people who produced the fact, and (c) the conditions of recording and preservation of the fact. "The discipline of history is, above all, the discipline of context; each fact can be given meaning only within an ensemble of other meanings" (Thompson, 1971, p. 45).⁷

It should not be thought from this that Thompson was an opponent of comparative history or social science. On the contrary, he explicitly praised it (though he also offered warnings about the need for context-sensitivity in its practice), and his famous work on “food riots” and moral economy was begun as part of an unfinished French-English comparison with Richard Cobb and Gwynn Williams as collaborators.⁸ Indeed, some of the most exciting points in *Customs in Common* come as Thompson makes connections and comparisons between his own studies in English history and certain related phenomena that occurred in India under British rule.⁹ He is not afraid of theory any more than comparison, and even proves himself happy to draw on worthy exponents of the economics profession with which he spent most of his life in battle—in this case Amartya Sen’s important studies of famine. Thompson sets out to show how much of a difference context makes—and *inter alia* to demonstrate the fallacy of relying on direct extrapolation of data on harvests or prices to try to explain public confrontations over food. “There is not one simple, ‘animal’, response to hunger” (Thompson, 1993a, p. 266). Thus, as the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal reported on the scarcity of 1873–74, at one place the line of carts bringing the famine-struck from villages to a main road where they hoped for food relief stretched for twenty miles. At first there was screaming from the women and children and begging for coin and grain. Later, the people were “seated on the ground, row after row, thousand upon thousand, in silence . . .” (Temple, 1993, p. 265). But, as Thompson points out tellingly, they did not riot. “Riot is usually a rational response, and it takes place, not among helpless or hopeless people, but among those groups who sense that they have a little power to help themselves, as prices soar, employment fails, and they can see their staple food supply being exported from the district” (Thompson, 1993a, pp. 264–65).

Riots are not evidence simply of dearth, then, but of the intersection of dearth with certain customs, certain empowering

solidarities of common people, and certain shared values that incline elites to respond with charity or at least temperance rather than outright and unmitigated violence. The real object of understanding is not just that structured by the term "food riot" but political culture itself. More generally, this illustrates for Thompson an important methodological point: "Comparative study of food riots has been, inevitably, into the history of nations which had food riots" (Thompson, 1993a, p. 262).¹⁰ Much the same is true, despite occasional clarity about the importance of approaches to comparative history that do not "select on the dependent variable," of most comparative studies of revolutions, wars, nationalism, and a host of other phenomena.

Critics have sometimes misunderstood Thompson's famous argument about the importance of "the moral economy of the crowd," taking him to have described an anti-market traditionalism which resisted all forms of penetration of the market into village life. On the contrary, what Thompson showed was how people whose lives were firmly anchored in market economies, who lived by the market and wished to continue to do so, objected to certain forms of action in relation to markets—like engrossing, forestalling, and generally manipulating the supply and price of food to personal advantage even when it meant that others starved. Traditions of public conflict over entitlement to food in the market sought to regulate the way markets worked (and as a cluster of essentially local traditions, sought literally to regulate local markets in the plural, rather than to trust to the overall efficiency of an emerging national market).¹¹ Like any historical change, the gradual emergence of a national market in food gave many actors opportunities to benefit at the expense of others—regardless of whether it was in the long run more efficient or effective in averting famine. What was inevitable, therefore, was not simply that there would be an increasingly integrated national market, but that there was necessarily a politics—and an opportunity for what Thompson would like us to see as class struggle—over the nature, course, and regulation of this change. The collective

actions of English villagers (and sometimes urban workers) tempered the introduction of the national market and, together with traditions of charity and the poor laws, protected the English poor from the full force not just of that market but the ideology of political economy that counseled complete non-interference in the putatively natural market. The Englishmen who ruled India were influenced by the same political economy but untempered by more humane shared traditions with those who suffered from famine. The result was that they refrained from offering the short term help of food aid in favor of waiting for the long term beneficence of the increasingly capitalist market even when faced with the astonishing depredations of the 1860 famine, where in Orissa alone famine deaths exceeded 1.3 million.

In pursuing historical context, Thompson sought not only to get the best academic grasp of what was going on, but also to restore something of the rationality of customs and practices that other analysts too easily dismissed. In this way, he sought both to restore human dignity to those whose practices they were and to make them truly meaningful. He sought also to show that history did not make sense only in the terms of its victors, those whose courses of action fit the eventual outcomes, but also in terms of those who sought to have things go another way. He objected, thus, to the treatment of old customs as mere survivals of obsolete ways of life (thereby denying them both rationality in their contexts and the possibility of pointing to alternative futures: "If nineteenth-century folklore, by separating survivals from their context, lost awareness of custom as ambience and *mentalité*, so also it lost sight of the rational functions of many customs within the routines of daily and weekly labour" (Thompson, 1993a, p. 3).

Academic specialization and categorization reinforces tendencies to see history in the terms of its victors and, accordingly, to misunderstand many of its protagonists. Thus, in his splendid book on William Blake, Thompson shows

among other things how overly academic assumptions about the nature of learning lead scholars to represent Blake as the product of various high cultural trends, like neo-Platonism or readings in esoteric texts, like the kabbala, rather than in the context of the popular culture in which he actually lived and worked; indeed, they fail to recognize the extent to which the influence of such larger traditions might be mediated or entirely affected by transmission through a variety of smaller traditions. Theosophists, Behmenists, and Philadelphians transmitted a great many hermetic and kabbalistic ideas in their own writings and their own continuing traditions or the traditions of those many other sects they influenced. Blake, of course, read widely and seriously, but the typical academic view both exaggerates the importance of reading and equates reading with the academic practices that employ reading; it likewise underestimates the impact of immediate oral and practical context. "We tend to find that a man is either 'educated' or 'uneducated', or is educated to certain levels (within a relatively homogeneous hierarchy of attainments); and this education involves submission to certain institutionally defined disciplines, with their own hierarchies of accomplishment and authority" (Thompson, 1993b, pp. xiii–xiv). Blake was not, however, simply closer to or more distant from the leading Oxford and Cambridge minds of his day. His intelligence—like that of Franklin, Paine, Wollstonecraft, Cobbett, and many other important thinkers of the day—was forged in other contexts. In particular, historians have greatly underestimated, according to Thompson, the importance of a range of anti-rationalist, counter-Enlightenment traditions, including, above all, religious antinomianism. He seeks to make Blake more intelligible and the late eighteenth-century world of artisans, craftsmen, and small traders more meaningful by resituating Blake in this heterogeneous context of many traditions, each with its genuine intellectual content, rather than some presumed general flow of intellectual history. "We are dealing, not with a Great Tradition of a few scholars and

mystics, but with several little traditions, some with literary attainments and some without, all of which employed a vocabulary of symbolism familiar to Blake" (Thompson, 1993b, p. 40).

The heart of antinomianism is rejection of the reduction of religion to law. It is an attack not only on the intrusions of secular concerns within an established church but to a whole ecclesiastical tradition of grasping Christianity as a matter of strictures on behavior and ideas like salvation by election rather than free grace. Antinomians took from the Gospels and the letters of Paul, by contrast, the message of the power of faith and belief. There are, as Thompson stresses, very narrow limits within which one can talk about antinomianism in general rather than a range of antinomianisms all opposed to a certain religious legalism but espousing a variety of different positive doctrines. "Antinomianism, indeed, is not a place at all, but a way of breaking out from received wisdom and moralism, and entering upon new possibilities" (Thompson, 1993b, p. 20). The late eighteenth-century antinomians included Swedenborgians, Muggletonians, and Universalists, among dozens of other sects. Most, including Blake, were powerfully influenced by antinomian ideas that flourished alongside leveling doctrines in seventeenth-century England: "the doctrine of justification by faith, in its antinomian inflexion, was one of the most radical and potentially subversive of the vectors which carried the ideas of the seventeenth-century Levelers and Ranters through to the next century" (Thompson, 1993b, p. 5).¹² The political moment was seldom absent, though many academic readers of Blake have refused to see its importance (or to see antinomianism as the right context in which to understand both Blake's mysticism and his politics). Yet, Blake himself wrote not only that "Christ died an Unbeliever" (Thompson's epigraph) but that Christ:

His Seventy Disciples sent
Against Religion & Government
(Erdman, 1993, p. 20).

Thompson's point, of course, is not that Blake can be reduced to antinomianism any more than to any other of the many sources that influenced him. Rather, he seeks to show the extent to which this set of religious (and political) traditions forms the most important context within which to understand Blake and his work. Blake is also a crucial part of the context in which we may best understand Thompson. As Thompson himself reports, in 1968 he gave a lecture at Columbia University, "at a time of excitement when some sort of campus revolution against the Moral Law was going on, and I startled the audience by acclaiming William Blake as 'the founder of the obscure sect to which I myself belong, the Muggletonian Marxists'" (Thompson, 1993b, p. xxi).¹³

Thompson's marxism always drew on impassioned indignation and strong sources of cultural commitment as well as political-economic analysis. It is also much like Thompson to see marxism in a continuity with previous traditions of political and economic criticism, not as a leap into science but as an addition of insight and grasp of new historical conditions to critical perspectives already adequate in many ways to their original historical contexts. In the same sense that Blake was not merely an eccentric within English Dissent or the Enlightenment intellectual and aesthetic traditions but rather was able to draw confidence and assured reference from the popular antinomian traditions, Thompson was not just an eccentric within marxism and the largely rationalist Left; he drew sustenance and conviction from the traditions of popular political culture and from figures like Blake whose genius transcended them, even while it remained rooted in them.¹⁴

One of the ways in which later historians have misunderstood the many antinomian and counter-Enlightenment traditions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is to make too sharp a separation among them. Various different sects were in close communication with each other; individuals and families moved from one to another; congregations split; neighbors debated in public houses. Of course, each group

that split from another spared no vitriol in its attacks on the heresies of the first. But as Thompson suggests, “an intense sectarian dispute is often the signal of an *affinity*” (Thompson, 1993b, p. 66). Future historians may have the same trouble with marxism and the Left generally that our contemporaries have with Ranters, Quakers, Behmenists, Philadelphians, and Muggletonians.

All these versions of Dissent retained an intense intellectual engagement—devoted largely to doctrinal disputes—that contrasts (despite some other affinities) with the raw or confessional emotionalism of Wesleyanism and the Evangelical revival (Thompson, 1993b, p. 79).¹⁵ To be counter-Enlightenment—for example, by focusing on the return to a theology of grace—did not mean precisely to be anti-intellectual (though it might mean opposition to most of what intellectualism meant in the polite society of the day). The antinomians often regarded temporal reason (as distinct from the pure reason of the angels) as corrupted, and they praised the insight and truth that was more basic than reason, but in this they did not condemn thinking so much as distinguish among its moments, condemning especially the kind of codified “knowledge” associated with the law.

The treatment of Reason as binding, constraining, or corrupting life is one of Thompson’s four main evidences for the affinity (and possibly very direct connection) between Blake and the Muggletonians. Reason entered the human race through the Fall, the Muggletonians argued, and sang:

Reason’s chains made me to groan;
Freedom, freedom then unknown
(Quoted in Thompson, 1993b, p. 95).

In the same vein, Blake later wrote, “Reason once fairer than the light till fould in Knowledges dark Prison house” (Erdman, 1993, p. 95). The other three convincing similarities that Thompson offers are the repudiation of the Moral Law in the antinomian tradition, the prominence of Serpent-symbolism,

and the idea that when God was incarnated as Jesus Christ, he ceased to have any other existence save as Christ. This is not the place and I am not the scholar to weigh Thompson's evidences. The important point is to see the way they work, the way reconstruction and recontextualization serve to change the way we read an individual author, the way we understand an epoch and a specific socio-cultural milieu, and the way we analyze the sources of popular radicalism.

Blake thought in a not unrelated way. He wrote about Good and Evil and other enormous and ineffable qualities and forces. Yet he wrote about them through images of very concrete realities and settings. "Prisons are built with stones of Law, Brothels with bricks of Religion" is not simply a universal comment but a comment on England in the late eighteenth century. "Bring out number weight & measure in a year of dearth" was written to reflect on a specific context of dearth and the selfishness and social antagonism by which specific Englishmen dealt with that more general phenomenon. The impulses or instincts that are universal to human nature can only be accepted, not moralized (as the Moral Law attempts). "They become 'innocent' or Fallen according to context, and the societal context is exactly that in which the contentment of one is the misery of another. It is this context which pollutes innocence, generates negations and turns contraries into opposites" (Thompson, 1993b, p. 220). In other words, the context is that of capitalist England.

Similarly, Blake's great poem "London" and the stanzas from "The Human Abstract" that anticipate it are often interpreted with primary reference to Biblical allegories. These are not without significance, but as Thompson shows, the question cannot be addressed adequately by looking simply at verbal similarities; it is necessary to consider the cultural context of the poems' production.

'London' is not about the human condition but about a particular human condition or state, and a way of seeing this.

This state must be set against other states, both of experience and of innocence. Thus we must place 'London' alongside 'The Human Abstract' . . . and in this conjunction 'London' (when seen as hell) shows the condition of the Fallen who lie within the empire of property, self-interest, State religion and Mystery (Thompson, 1993b, p. 192).

There souls of men are bought & sold
 And milk fed infancy for gold
 And youth to slaughter houses led
 And beauty for a bit of bread¹⁶

What Thompson is bringing to our attention in his analysis of Blake, as in much of the rest of his work, is nothing less than the dynamics by which popular cultures resist the hegemony of powerful elites:

. . . if we accept the view that in most societies we can observe an intellectual as well as institutional hegemony, or dominant discourse, which imposes a structure of ideas and beliefs—deep assumptions as to social properties and economic process and as to the legitimacy of relations of property and power, a general 'common sense' as to what is possible and what is not, a limited horizon of moral norms and practical probabilities beyond which all must be blasphemous, seditious, insane or apocalyptic fantasy—a structure which serves to consolidate the existent social order, enforce its priorities, and which is itself enforced by rewards and penalties, by notions of 'reputability', and (in Blake's time) by liberal patronage or by its absence—if we accept this mouthful, then we can see that these antinomian sects were hegemony's eighteenth-century opposition (Thompson, 1993b, p. 109).

If Gramsci was the great theorist of hegemony, then Thompson was perhaps the most persuasive explorer of the concrete ways in which anti-hegemonic thinking developed and sometimes took root in popular political culture.

Part of the secret of the discipline of historical context is that it keeps open the possibility of an anti-hegemonic stance, of uncovering the ways in which those who, like the Muggletonians, were not among history's winners, nonetheless struggled against its apparent course and often not without effect. Like

the Muggletonians, who did not wish to be among history's winners so much as to preserve and hand down the divine vision (Thompson, 1993b, p. 90), the historian's business is not to ratify the outcome of the battles but to recover the "field-of-force" and the competing visions that shaped them. The historian, too, has an obligation to witness, even "against the beast." This may sometimes mean preserving for posterity better moral visions than those of the victors. It always means addressing human beings in their concrete and specific contexts—their cultures, their relations of power and exploitation, inclusion and exclusion, solidarity and separation—not simply the abstractions of human nature.

Notes:

¹ Thompson's classic essay on "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century" is reprinted in *Customs in Common* together with a review of the history of that concept since he revived it.

² The crucial source is Thompson, 1968.

³ Throughout his career, Thompson remained troubled by the reductionism entailed in the construction of most statistics and, indeed, even non-statistical compilations of cases:

To boil down 20 instances to a line or two apiece must, after all, entail much selectivity and the suppression of much attendant evidence. The reader must still place his confidence in the historian who has decided that this feature only (and not all those others) of the evidence shall be singled out for remark: although he is not as much a victim as he is before the gross reiterative impressionism of a computer, which repeats one conformity *ad nauseam* while obliterating all evidence for which it has not been programmed (Thompson, 1971, p. 50).

Likewise, "Bohstedt is a careful scholar who sometimes remembers the limitations of his evidence. But in general his history becomes less credible the more he surrenders to his own figures and the further he gets away from 'literary' and contextual sources" (Thompson, 1993a, p. 307).

⁴ Lawrence Stone, a historian for whom Thompson has more respect, is also challenged. Stone had used published sources to reach the conclusion that "fewer than three hundred cases of wife-sale occurred in all England during the peak seventy years from 1780 to 1850" (Stone, 1990, p. 148). But what this reveals is not so much "the facts," Thompson suggests, as the filtering of popular practices by the respectable press. "Professor Stone underestimates the opacity of plebeian culture to polite inspection (including his own)" (Thompson, 1993a, p. 412). In general, Thompson soundly suggests, the good historian is not only sensitive to context but critically aware of alternative interpretations of evidence. When we find, for example, that men outnumber women eight to one in certain indictments after a food riot, "do these figures indicate differential gender behavior or differential practices in policing and prosecution?" (Thompson, 1993a, p. 235); Thompson is questioning John Bohstedt's tacit assumption of the former alternative in Thompson, 1988.

⁵ The books which Thompson reviewed were Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic* and Alan Macfarlane's *The Family Life of Ralph Josselin*: "An interesting—if sometimes tedious and provoking—book from Dr. Macfarlane, and an immensely important and stimulating book from Mr. Thomas!"

⁶ Just as Thompson was always keen to regional variations in English culture, he rightly notes that this is a study of a highly specific and at least somewhat unusual society within Greece, not, as Macfarlane implies, a study of Greece or Greek society as such.

⁷ Thompson went on:

. . . while sociology, let us say, may put many questions to historical material which historians had not thought of asking, it is most unlikely that any 'sociological concept' can be taken, raw, from 20th-century suburbia (or from Melanesia) to 17th-century England, since the concept itself must be modified and redefined before it will appropriate to the ensemble of 17th-century meanings. . . . In some eyes, the 'systematic indoctrination' of historians 'in the social sciences' conjures up a scene of insemination, in which Clio lies inert and passionless (perhaps with rolling eyes) while anthropology or sociology thrust their seed into her womb. But the encounter between partners is going to be a good deal more active than that; and it is difficult to believe that the complacency of some anthropological and (in particular) sociological typologies will not be as much shattered by historical examination as the reverse.

Thompson shared a surprising amount—and a relationship of

mutual respect—with Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu is obviously in many respects a social theorist, but his disdain for “theoretical theorists” (including, notably, Althusser) could have been expressed in virtually the same terms and with the same vehemence as Thompson. It is worth recalling here Bourdieu’s arguments about how social facts may be “won”; see Bourdieu, Chamboredon, and Passeron, 1991.

⁸ Thompson did oppose the idea that the main task of history or social science should be seeking human universals (through the comparative or any other method). “The principles which can be taken across from one society to the other are few, although large in significance” (Thompson, 1971, p. 47).

⁹ Part of the interest comes from knowing that Thompson’s father (who turns up among his sources) was a prominent and critical historian of British India.

¹⁰ Likewise, “generalisations as to the universals of ‘popular culture’ become empty unless they are placed firmly within specific historical contexts” (Thompson, 1993a, p. 6).

¹¹ Similarly, Thompson argues in regard to the customary law that stood behind fights over enclosures: “Common right is a subtle and sometimes complex vocabulary of usages, of claims to property, of hierarchy and of preferential access to resources, of the adjustment of needs, which, being *lex loci*, must be pursued in each locality and can never be taken as ‘typical’ ” (Thompson, 1993a, p. 151).

¹² Indeed, one of the tasks Thompson set himself in his range of works on the eighteenth century was to show that it was not the simple reversal of the seventeenth-century struggles that historians have commonly made it seem, not just a peaceful interlude between two centuries of turmoil, and not without importance as a source of continuity between the seventeenth-century radicals and their heirs in the 1790s and the nineteenth century.

¹³ Thompson does indicate that “as the years have gone by I have become less certain of both parts of the combination,” but his book reveals that neither his sympathy for Blake nor his sense of being in the company of a comrade in struggle have attenuated.

¹⁴ On this aspect of Blake, see Thompson, 1993b, p. 62.

¹⁵ Wesleyanism and the Evangelical revival are also, on Thompson’s analysis, crucial aspects of the counter-Enlightenment; see Thompson, 1971, p. 54 and especially Thompson, 1968, pp. 46, 388–440, 917–23.

¹⁶ This is a fragment left over from the composition of “The

Human Abstract" that offers, in Thompson's analysis, a "synopsis of the argument in 'London'" (Thompson, 1993b, p. 191). The fragment is quoted from Erdman, 1973.

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