

# Commonists of the World Unite!

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E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture*. New York: The New Press, 1991. \$29.95 (cloth).

"In one of the great coincidences of history writing with history making," Jon Wiener has written, "Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* was published in 1963, to be read by students inspired by the examples of SNCC and ready to begin their own movement to challenge corporate liberalism."<sup>1</sup> Marge Piercy wrote of the midwestern graduate students who passed the book from hand to hand in the mid-sixties as an underground text. This is where many found that class was a tool of analysis both of the past and for the future. The English working class was made between 1790 and 1834, that was the argument. Future work was either going to go forward in time to the Chartists or backwards to the eighteenth century. If the former, then it would be the story of the made working class; if the latter, then the history of the unmade class. There has been a tenacious, supple attachment to the particular class composition of 1790–1834 which *Customs in Common* does not relinquish.\*

We are glad to have the book: we may recycle our photocopies now. These essays have had a samizdat existence for more than a decade, for each of them is the product of collective work, and the photocopy has been handed back and forth. Documents thus become part of the give-and-take of conversation. Thompson has many helpers, people who send him examples and suggestions, people from all walks of life. The essays arise from many discussions and arguments—from New Zealand to New Hampshire, from the back-and-forth of seminar to the lanky, theatrical performances at lectures, from the elite corners to the mass university, a generation has heard these researches well before reading them. Al Young remembers the electric atmosphere of the Northern Illinois

\*It should be mentioned that I am a friend, comrade, and colleague of Edward Thompson. He, I, and Douglas Hay edited *Albion's Fatal Tree* (New York: Pantheon, 1975).

crowd as they massed to hear one of these; the Presidential suite had to be used. The essays are the outgrowths of a movement.

Two of them, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century" and "Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism," appeared before in *Past & Present*. They were early and direct results of interests announced in *The Making*. In contrast to "Rough Music" and "The Sale of Wives," whose subject was well enough defined against historical sources (not that these were obvious), and whose antecedents clearly include a friendly continuity with the nineteenth century folklorists, "The Moral Economy" and "Time, Work-Discipline" challenged the historiographic traditions, the reductionist economic history, and the institutionalized labor history which held sway in the 1960s, and they tended to raise theoretical issues that might appear in many different classrooms: economics, history, literature, anthropology, sociology. They quickly became classics and photocopied. Two other essays, "The Patricians and the Plebs," and "Custom, Law and Common Right," originated in a context more defined as eighteenth-century studies. The former essay combines two essays of the 1970s, which arose in social history, and which are self-conscious, and partly indirect, attempts to deal with the "radical history" then gaining a foothold in North America, and the question it asked: What is the working class? "Custom, Law and Common Right" extends interests found in *Whigs and Hunters* (1975), and relies upon and addresses Thompson's collaborators in eighteenth-century legal history.

We may describe some virtues of *Customs in Common*, beginning with the pages themselves. These are not your four-square masses of text; they are instead typographic triptychs: some text composed by Thompson, indented text chosen by Thompson, and footnotes of erudition, wit, and surprise (is Adam Smith, on page 201, note 5, outed?). The three parts of the page thus present the historian, the evidence, and the sources, that is, the goal, the matter, and the method. Or, to simplify further, now, then, and how. I don't know a historian who quotes as often or as effectively. The effect is highly aural; the read is less like a novel and more like a drama with a multivocality exactly as Brian Palmer has appreciated.<sup>2</sup>

The book is theatrical in that it is based on the conflicts, the class struggles, of the time: a crowd of boys seizing loaves at a bakery; villagers stomping over fences in parochial perambulation; tin miners, hungry, coming angrily into town shouting "One and all, one and all;" Mary Collier bawling out Stephen Duck; the 54-year-old Hannah Smith selling off butter at reasonable rates and getting

hanged for her pains. The theater is raucous, ironical, satirical, outrageous, and memorable. Who can forget Judy Cookson, "'Er was said to be the best abuser in the borough, and 'er wud go and curse anybody for thee-ha'pence - that was the fee" (502)? Or, Timothy Bennett, the shoemaker, whose motto it was that he was "unwilling to leave the world worse than he found it" (111)?

Theater is a major theme of the book as well as a mode of presentation. "Rough Music" for instance draws upon the procession, pageant, public exhibition, display of emblems in an "expressive symbolic vocabulary" (478). The forms were turned to the crowd's own uses, sometimes mocking and betimes endorsing official forms of authority. Theatricality, direct action, and anonymity are the three characteristics of the eighteenth-century English crowd that Thompson discovers. In decoding the forms of action, Thompson may neglect the content. He has a page and a half glossing the theatrics of the 1768 sailors' strike, without mentioning the wage dispute that was its cause (78). I think his theatricalism goes too far with hangings. While we understand some similarities with theater (Henry Fielding planned them!), the hanging is not only make-believe or mimesis. One is the quick and the other is dead.

The language of the book is wonderful. This is partly a matter of diction, partly of the subject, of the method, and of conceptualization. On occasion, Thompson takes us to the *OED*, but his lexical passion is Thomas Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary*. We need to know some new words—botes, estovers, turbary, soke, levancy, couchany—because they describe practices unknown to us. Hence their understanding is at the crux of this book. Others fall through the cracks in the demise of ecclesiastical omnipotence into new meanings, essential to parochial culture—commination, advowsons, rogation. Others are regional. Some were once classified by classists as "dialect." The matter of diction may summarize an entire historical period: thus the term "the parish" summarizes the transition to industrialism as its meaning changes from a term of home and security to one suggestive of meanness and shame, as "on the parish" (182). He explains how "delivery" had not acquired its meaning of delivering groceries, and meant powerfully, "to free" (420). Similarly, with the verb "to own," which had not become the verb of possessive proprietorship (mine and thine), but signified recognition and belonging (ours) (489).

Semantics quickly turns to conceptualization, and this is nowhere more evident than in the term "moral economy," which after the publication of the essay quickly influenced studies all over the

world. Thompson refines his definition. He traces it back to Bronterre O'Brien and the anticapitalist meanings of the Chartists. From a term describing a tissue of practices of the eighteenth-century English crowd regarding market practices, it has been used by later historians to include customary practices of production, to entitlement to necessities of life, to those who admit values other than accumulation in economic planning. The term has been extended to Irish, African, Asian studies. "But if values, on their own, make a moral economy, then we will be turning up moral economies everywhere," says the father of the term with exasperation (339)!

The voices are not only of the past, however. Thompson is a listener, a polemicist, a controversialist, and an arguer. One hears him patiently listening to those who might help him: the school mistress in north Yorkshire, the retired engineer and pig keeper, the Somerset man who was rough musicked, gaining their confidence. One hears him chuckle with the uproar his work causes in the staid chambers of academia where the bland lead the bland (18). He tweaks the nose of Professor Hexter. He is impatient with Doctor Williams. He dismisses (firmly) A. W. Coats and (politely) Fox-Genovese ("the arrows flew past my ear"). John Bohstedt is toasted and forgiven. All along through the last two decades, while these essays were written, the forces were gathering to praise the Free Market, and Thompson's mammoth and profound critique may sometimes be furious. It is with Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff ("I do not know what business they have to put me, or the crowd, down"). They had disallowed Thompson's questions, throttling voices that he had labored to have heard again. Thompson's international colleagues in Italy, Germany, and France are gracefully acknowledged, and he opens up dialogue with scholars in India and Nigeria, Burma, and Vietnam. Thompson emerges in these pages generously, acknowledging his debt to some academic workers (Rogers, Neeson, Eley, Brewer, Colley). One feels him restrain his sharpness and strain to listen as a new generation of orthodoxy is formed.

He has great intellectual powers which he exercises in classic English empiricism: preliminary terms are defined, evidence is sought, data is assembled, it is classified, distinctions are made, illustrative cases are described, opposing arguments are weighed, conclusions are reached. This method is seen most clearly in the last two essays. He has a rich but always grounded imagination, as when he describes the eighteenth-century market (318). He is also a

skilled quantifier, though he seriously pretends otherwise (413). His own table of occupations of husband or purchaser of wife sales runs to four pages of prose. He calls this "quantitative gossip." He regards quantities "as literary and impressionistic evidence"! And as for literature, the talent may be quite quantitative. The first two pages of "Time, Work-Discipline" quote Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, Thomas Hardy, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Christopher Marlowe, with further references to French scholarship, and Puritanism.

So *Customs in Common* appears as these incredibly arcane exercises in the craft of the historian, possessing the charm that folklore used to produce, or which science fiction can, as well as the detachment which only events in another country several centuries ago can produce. Thompson is not unaware of these charms, nor should we be.

I want to call attention to some limitations of this interpretation of eighteenth-century capitalism. There is the question of England. Thompson, as he says, writes about "England." "England retained until the 1760s an agrarian profile." And indeed that is the profile he finds in the villages and parishes—Chilvers Coton, Ryton-upon-Dunsmore, Sutton Coldfield, Nook Colliery, Holme-on-Spalding Moor, North Wootton, Hope-under-Dynemore, Kirkby Malzeard, Hucknall Torkard, Barton-upon-Humber, Ottery St Mary, Bishop's-Clyst, and Wootton Bassett; Chudleigh, Henley, Witney, Uley, Fowey, Oakley, Stokesby, Stoneleigh, Ederly, Ansty, Perleigh, and North Bovey; Stockton, Hadstock, Porlock, Culmstock, Montacute, Slinford, Spaxton, and Stogumber; Wychwood, Whitteewood, and Charnwood Hill; Westonbirt, Woking, Wakefield, Wirksworth, Winkfield, West Haddon, and Wye; Clee and Poole—it is not the abstraction of the nation. England is not the United Kingdom or Great Britain.

Furthermore, Thompson adds, "I shall pass over a great deal of what lies in between: commerce, manufacture, London's luxury trades, overseas empire." Passing over leads to difficulties. He has to discuss the national government, which he characterizes as a commercial predator, organizing the imperial merchandizing, and in itself (he mentions the South Sea Bubble) the source of surplus value where "the real killings were to be made" (27). The pun, however, closes discussion just at the point where we wish that it might begin, namely, on the relationship between killing and profiteering, a relationship that surely varied enormously.

"We are habituated," he wrote, "to think of exploitation as

something that occurs at ground level, at the point of production," not in these "higher regions" of commerce in international raw materials. But another "we" of a different habitat has other habits of thought. Walter Rodney and Horace Campbell wrote of groundations—in Jamaica, or Virginia, or Calabar.<sup>3</sup> "This is the century which sees the erosion of half-free forms of labour, the decline of living-in, the final extinction of labour services and the advance of free, mobile, wage labour" (36), and another "we" thinks immediately that "the advance of free" was also an advance of unfree. Why was this? How does it relate?

These are fair questions, and they are urgent. The essay on "Custom, Law and Common Right" will interest environmentalists and legalists especially (attention Al Gore and Hilary Clinton) because the argument posed by Garrent Hardin in "The Tragedy of the Commons" is refuted by that common sense that this book as a whole evokes, now as common law, now as customary practice, even as an "ambience" or (quoting Tawney) as "a matter of feeling." The argument is subtle and depends on sensitivity to oral tradition, the decoding of symbolic behaviors, and a deep respect for the *lex loci*. The law detached the right from the user of the right; it criminalized customary usages, a process that took two centuries in England. From Gateward's Case (1607) to Steele v. Houghton (1788), is a legal evolution of capitalist definitions of property. At the end, law walked hand in hand with political economy, surveying enclosed fields and expropriated people. "I see the little mouldiwarp hang sweeing to the wind," wrote Clare, the poet of the enclosed.

This is powerful as far as it goes. It omits the story of money; it omits the story of wages.<sup>4</sup> It omits that a third to half of the population lived outside the law (40). Hence, readers are left with an overwhelming sense of loss rather than of historical motion or movement. How do we get from the commons to the communism we may find in the 1790s? Tom Paine in *Agrarian Justice*, and Tom Spence, particularly in *The Restorer of Society to Its Natural State* (1801), had to deal with it, didn't they? If we may not speak of communism, perhaps common-ism may be permitted. But here again we have strong warnings. Class has ceased to be in this book. Thus, we have "plebeian." It differs as a tool of analysis from "working class." For one thing there is the absence of the concept of labor power. And the discussion of "value"—formerly the hallmark of the Marxist analysis. For another thing there is the absence of the working class as an agent to bring about the abolition of

private property and inequality. The former is treated solely as *homo economicus*, that is, as the wretched figment of the political economist; while the latter achieves existence, it seems, only for a brief period of history. This omission is consistent with Thompson's other writing in this period, *The Poverty of Theory*, as well as his writing for the nuclear freeze movement, and especially in his theory of "exterminism" in which "working class" was not a term with much, if any, actuality.

"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles," Charles Marks said, "Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guildmaster and journeymen, in a word oppressor and oppressed stood in constant opposition to one another."<sup>5</sup> What are the semantics of this change? How does a Marxist historian suddenly turn to Roman history to express a different class composition? "A plebs is not, perhaps, a working class," writes Thompson. "The plebs may lack a consistency of self-definition, in consciousness; clarity of objectives; the structuring of class organization" (57). What is missing to qualify as a working class? "Only someone who was 'independent' of the need to defer to patrons could be thought of as having full political identity" (56). "This plebeian culture was not, to be sure, a revolutionary nor even a proto-revolutionary culture (in the sense of fostering ulterior objectives which called in question the social order)..." (64).

There is a genealogy to this; it's not the first time. The Ruskin students in 1908 formed the Plebs League.<sup>6</sup> A year later they struck for socialist education. These "impossibilists" were inspired by the American Marxist Daniel de Leon, who in 1903 published *Two Pages from Roman History*, which contained his address "Plebs Leaders and Labor Leaders." His goal in this was to explain and to attack the labor leader of the time.<sup>7</sup> His method was to appeal to the history of the plebeians and the patricians in ancient Rome between 500 B.C., and 400 B.C. He drew on Fustel de Coulanges who begins the story when the plebeians had absolutely nothing, three thousand years ago. After the 6th century B.C. with the appearance of money and private property a revolution was begun that eventually led to the entrance of the plebeians into the city. Servius distributed conquered lands to them. By Cicero's time (he called the plebs wild beasts) a struggle had become functional to imperial expansion.<sup>8</sup>

De Leon, like Coulanges before him, has a highly differentiated notion of "plebeian," which he contrasts with Shakespeare's pre-

sentation in Coriolanus, where the pleb is presented spasmodically, as it were, responding to his belly. To De Leon, the term encompasses three economic classes—large property-holders (the bourgeois plebs), the majority or “a working class,” and those in between. Their grievances vary according to these differentiations; yet they combined against the patricians who alone held political, religious power. Taxation, the uprooting of small holders, and expansion of slavery undermined the existence of the plebeians. De Leon shows how the struggle resulted in renewed, expanded imperial conquests from which were allotted a portion to be left undivided as a “public domain, a common, so to say” where theoretically the whole people were allowed to graze their cattle. The Licinian Law (367 B.C.) thus saved the Roman Republic by some customs on the common.

We might pause at several points in De Leon’s story to draw parallel’s with Thompson’s. I think there are two points of difference to be mentioned. The first is that De Leon, writing in the context of the Phillipine War, wants to understand the relation between class struggle and imperial conquest. *Customs in Common* narrows itself to a degree to exclude this problem of imperial conquest. Hence, the unintended consequence of the struggles of the English plebeians in imperial expansion, go unexamined. There is a rigorous definition that excludes, for instance, the London proletariat, or the seafaring and soldiering proletariat.

The second is that some of the customs that Thompson particularizes to the eighteenth century do not appear quite so antiquarian. It so happens that De Leon quotes Comrade J. A. Leach of Phoenix, Arizona who replied to De Leon’s query about “labor leaders” holding public office. When one of these came to the mining town of Globe, having ridiculed an eight-hour bill in the state legislature, the miners gave him some rough music. They “seized him, put him on a rail, rode him out of town, and ordered him not to return or they would give him another dose of rail-riding.” Thompson argues “the more sophisticated, organized, and politically conscious the movement, the less indebtedness it shows to traditional forms of folk violence.” He refers to lynch law and the KKK (523). But looking at our own days, we cannot so confidently assign theater, direct action, and anonymity to our “plebeian” past. In the streets of Santiago the housewives beating pots and pans helped to bring down Pinochet.

Edward Thompson’s theoretical move to “plebeian” shares less with De Leon than with Shakespeare who, after all, dealt with a

similar problem. In the spring and summer of 1607 huge, tumultuous, and highly visible food riots broke out in Northamptonshire and spread to neighboring counties. The rioters were called "levelers" and "diggers." This was the Midlands Rising. Many were massacred, or hanged. Sir Francis Bacon as solicitor general penned an essay called "Seditions and Troubles" in which he elaborated the Aesopian fable of the belly in revolt against the other members of the body. Two years later Shakespeare went to Roman history, also in response to the Rising, and he wrote the play *Coriolanus* in which the plebeians revolt and are temporarily subdued by Menenius Agrippa who gives them a Baconian lecture on the fable of the belly. The patricians saw the revolt "spasmodically," as of the gut against the head. This is the interpretation of *Coriolanus* and W. W. Rostow, of Francis Bacon as well as Daniel de Leon. But in the play, the plebeians are represented as hungry and thinking.<sup>9</sup> "The leanness that afflicts us, the object of our misery, is an inventory to particularize their abundance; our sufferance is a gain to them," say the plebs. They are thinking historical actors, as Shakespeare hints and Thompson proves. Yet De Leon offers a warning: "the delusion born of the term 'plebeian' ... fastened the oppressed in blind attachment to the oppressor ... it was the transmuting of the Roman people into a professional army of freebooters; the revolutionary pulse was turned into the channels of rapine."

#### Notes

1. Jon Wiener, "Radical Historians and the Crisis in American History, 1959–1980," *Journal of American History* 76 (1989), 413.
2. Brian Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 69–74.
3. Horace Campbell, *Rasta and Resistance from Marcus Garvey to Walter Rodney* (Trenton: African World Press, 1987), 99, 101.
4. Constantine George Caffentzis, *Clipped Coins, Abused Words, and Civil Government: John Locke's Philosophy of Money* (New York: Autonomedia, 1989).
5. Charles Marks is how the name of Karl Marx appears in the English census return of 1851 which is reprinted on page 23 of Yvonne Kapp, *Eleanor Marx, I* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).
6. Jonathan Rée, *Proletarian Philosophers: Problems in Socialist Culture in Britain, 1900–1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).
7. Daniel De Leon, *Two Pages from Roman History* (New York: New York Labor News Co., 1903). I thank John Roosa for getting a copy of this for me to read.
8. Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City: A Study of the Religion, Laws and Institutions of Greece and Rome* (Boston: Lee & Shepard, 1874).
9. Annabel Patterson, *Fables of Power: Aesopian Writing and Political History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 118–26.