

Edward Thompson, Social History and Political Culture: The Making of a Working-class Public, 1780–1850

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I

There is very little tradition of explicit theorizing about state formation and political development among historians. Most political historians seem happy with a narrowly conceived category of the political, a highly institutional notion of the political process and a narrative mode of analysis, concerned mainly with elections, parties and parliaments. Basic theoretical questions receive much shorter shrift. From the character of the State and its relations with economy and civil society, through processes of interest articulation and the formation of social blocs, to the balance of coercion and consent in the governing system, the potentials for conformity and opposition, and the bases of cohesion of the social order, the specific features of national political culture are rarely dealt with as such.

British historians are no better and no worse than others in this respect. The best discussions of British political development in the 1960s – such as the famous exchange between Edward Thompson and Perry Anderson/Tom Nairn – came from outside the profession, with little impact on the self-enclosed discourse of British political history.¹ Instead, energy has

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been directed to more particularized controversies much less threatening to the conventional boundaries of disciplinary discussion, such as the nature of party in the early eighteenth century, the conflict between *laissez-faire* and State intervention in the mid-nineteenth century or the origins of the welfare state. Here the enormous growth of social history has been of little help, because most social historians have been conspicuously indifferent to the same range of concerns: an interest in the extension of government (as in the Poor Law, education or the criminal law) has rarely graduated into more systematic reflection on the forms of state power. Again, contributions have tended to come from non-historians by immediate professional affiliation.²

At the same time, the social history of the late 1960s released an important potential in this respect, notably, an expanded appreciation of the place of 'the political' in social life, which pulled analysis away from the institutional arena of parties and other public organizations towards the realms of 'society' and 'culture'. At the time, this was linked to ideas of alternative life-styles and radical subjectivity, and to the popularity of deviancy theory, the idea of alienation and readings of the young Marx, while over the longer term they gave space for feminist analysis, the flourishing of cultural studies and the appropriation of Gramsci and other cultural theorists. Potentially, this grounded politics more deeply in a social context, investing social relations and everyday life with new political meanings. Politics became inscribed in the texture of the everyday. Our understanding of power, domination and authority – and of the possible sources of resistance thereto – was transformed by this sort of reasoning. Social history was engendering a radically de-institutionalized conception of political process, whose impact on political history was potentially enormous.

So far, such possibilities have had a limited impact on the practice of social and political historians. But one way of making the connection for the eighteenth century is via the concept of the public sphere. As proposed by Jürgen Habermas, this is 'a sphere which mediates between society and state, in which the public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion'.³ It originated in the later eighteenth century with the widening of political participation and the crystallizing of citizenship ideals, a consequence of the struggle against absolutism (or, in the British case, for a strengthening of constitutional monarchy) and an attempt to transform arbitrary into rational authority, subject to the scrutiny of a citizenry organized into a public body beneath the protection of the law. It was linked to the demand for representative government and a liberal constitution, together with the basic civil freedoms before the law (speech, press, assembly, association, conscience and religion, no arrest without trial, and so on). Socially, it was borne by the aspirations of a

successful and self-conscious bourgeoisie, whose economic functions and social standing implied a cumulative agenda of desirable change.

The public sphere in this sense derived only partly from the conscious demands of reformers and their articulation into government. More fundamentally, it presumed the prior transformation of social relations, their condensation into new institutional arrangements and the generation of new social, cultural and political discourse around this changing environment. In this sense, conscious and programmatic *political* impulses emerged most strongly where underlying processes of social development were reshaping the overall context of social communication. The public sphere presupposed this larger accumulation of socio-cultural change. It was linked to the growth of provincial urban culture as the novel arena for a locally organized public life, to a new infrastructure of social communication (including the press and other literary media, the rise of a reading public, improved transportation and adapted centres of sociability like coffee houses, taverns and clubs) and to a new universe of voluntary association. At the same time, these new conditions were accompanied by a revival of parliamentary politics, dating initially from the 1760s and gathering pace in the next two decades.⁴

The rise of a public sphere in this way required a transformation of authority relations. To put it another way, the reconstitution of authority through the institutional and ideological modalities of the public sphere also implied the supplanting of something else, which in eighteenth-century British terms meant a prior structure of gentry paternalism. Moreover, if one structure of hegemonic relations (gentry paternalism) was in decay, to be gradually and unevenly replaced by another (a parliamentary political culture, organized around a new set of relations between central and local government and the social power of the dominant classes), then how were the masses to be re-integrated on a new basis? What were the consequences for political order? What was the balance of repressive and conciliatory means? How was the labour of ideological renewal conducted? What were the resources of the popular classes and how successfully were they mobilized for resistance?

Keeping these questions in mind, I want to use the work of Edward Thompson to build an argument about some aspects of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British political culture. First, I shall indicate Thompson's own contribution to this question by combining and juxtaposing his eighteenth-century work with the earlier *Making of the English Working Class*. Then I shall develop an argument about certain features of Chartism as a national popular movement, which reflects critically on the view of working-class formation proposed by Thompson for the pre-Chartist time. In particular, the latter requires a much clearer attention to the forms of national political organization and to the role of

politics in shaping a sense of class collectivity. I shall close with some general remarks on the problem of working-class consciousness and formation.⁵

II

Superficially, Thompson's work has been concerned with 'popular culture' in a generalized and soft, neo-anthropological sense, which sacrifices discussion of political questions to the sustained pursuit of 'history from below', and this, together with an alleged neglect of economics, led during the 1970s to the charge of 'culturalism'.⁶ However, in both his earlier and later work, Thompson pays careful attention to both these dimensions – the political and the economic – and while his chosen conceptualizations leave plenty of room for debate, it is quite wrong to accuse him of simple neglect. In particular, his exploration of eighteenth-century customary practices has become progressively located in the analysis of a decomposing tenurial economy, constituted by 'a dense socio-economic nexus' of 'coincident use-rights' – 'the inheritance customs, the actuality of what was being inherited, the character of the economy, the manorial bye-laws or field regulations, the poor law'.⁷ Indeed, it is exactly one of Thompson's achievements to have insisted that in concrete societies the 'cultural' enters directly into economic and market relations, or rather that productive activity is inserted into a dense tissue of customary practice. Though his first forays into the eighteenth century no doubt too easily conflated the particularities of a transformed agrarian capitalism with an ideal-typical notion of a paternalist traditional economy, this is no longer a reasonable criticism.⁸

Moreover, on this analysis of the advancing logic of capitalist agrarian practices is predicated a challenging and innovative argument concerning the nature of the eighteenth-century state. Proceeding from the partial and uneven dissolution of a locally specified legitimate authority – 'the old paternalism at a point of crisis' – and in the absence of a strong bureaucratic state on the continental model, Thompson suggests that political domination became 'located primarily in a cultural hegemony and only secondarily in an expression of economic or physical (military) power'. Lacking a centralized military or police apparatus, with the Church badly blunted as an instrument of conformity, the ruling class had little choice but to tolerate a certain popular ebullience when it came to crowd actions. In *Whigs and Hunters* and the associated essays Thompson argues forcefully that the medium of hegemonic domination was the rule of law, not as a mere instrument of class power but as a relatively autonomous and complex unity of *contradictory* functions, at

the same time coercive, instrumental and mystificatory, but also constraining, equitable within certain limits and therefore legitimizing:

The hegemony of the eighteenth-century gentry and aristocracy was expressed, above all, not in military force, not in the mystifications of a priesthood or of the press, not even in economic coercion, but in the rituals of the study of the Justices of the Peace, in the quarter-sessions, in the pomp of the assizes and in the theatre of Tyburn.

This was a specific legacy of the seventeenth century, which simultaneously defended the rights of property against arbitrary royal intrusions, and by that very virtue delivered a means of potential redress for the more humble, i.e. the 'propertyless' who none the less enjoyed 'petty property rights or agrarian use-rights whose definition was inconceivable without the forms of law.'

This has enormous implications for our understanding of the eighteenth-century state, for on this basis the functions of state power had become displaced from a central apparatus on to an unstable reciprocity of half-free labour and part-paternalist gentry, of 'patrician society' and 'plebeian culture'. Such a reciprocity of gentry-crowd relations was permitted – was *determined* in that sense – by the weakness of the state. The latter was expressed in 'an incapacity to use force swiftly, in an ideological tenderness towards the liberties of the subject, and in a sketchy bureaucracy so riddled with sinecurism, parasitism and clientage that it scarcely offered an independent presence'. 'The licence of the crowd' was, in effect, 'the price which aristocracy and gentry paid for a limited monarchy and a weak state'. It provided 'the central structural context of the reciprocity of relations between rulers and ruled'. Thus the nature of the political system cannot be grasped without penetrating beyond the corridors of Westminster to territory normally left happily to a 'depoliticized' social history. The eighteenth-century political historians ignore this context at their peril. As Thompson says: 'To define control in terms of cultural hegemony is not to give up attempts at analysis, but to prepare for analysis at the points at which it should be made: into the images of power and authority, the popular mentalities of subordination.'⁹

The importance of Thompson's work for our current concern may be summarized as follows. First, as already intimated, Thompson is proposing a radical revision in our understanding of the political process. Though his own formal focus may be 'culture', this is expressly motivated by concern for both the social dislocations of capitalist development and the changing forms of State power. Indeed, his work has consistently breached the older disciplinary boundary between 'political' and 'social' history, being mainly concerned with the changing bases of political