

After Two Decades:

The English Model and the American Context

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In 1960 E. P. Thompson presented a bold, even revolutionary, reassessment of the history of English workers:

. . . It is just not true that our working-class history shows a series of struggles around bread-and-butter issues. This history is, in fact, far more to be understood as a continual enlargement of popular demands, a broadening concept of the common good. From bread riots to agitations for the vote, for the humane treatment of the poor, for the working conditions and living conditions, for the education, health and amenities of the people.¹

And then he wrote a book to make his point. That book, *The Making of the English Working Class*,² written with what Eric Hobsbawm has called Thompson's "Ancient Mariner's capacity to hold the reader,"³ proved to be the "landmark" study that Hobsbawm had predicted,⁴ provoked debate as much political as historical, and promised to revolutionize the study of workers in the United States as well as in England. Indeed, Thompson's admonition in 1960 about the heritage of an English working class could have been made in the United States also

¹E. P. Thompson, "Revolution Again!" *New Left Review*, No. 6 (1960), 30.

²E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1963, 1964). I have used the Pantheon edition for all references.

³E. J. Hobsbawm, "Shadow of the Gallows," *New Society*, October 2, 1975, p. 30. This is a review of Thompson's *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* (New York, 1975), and Thompson, *et al.*, *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in 18th-century England* (New York, 1975).

⁴E. J. Hobsbawm, "Organised Orphans," *The New Statesman*, November 29, 1963, pp. 787-788. This is a review of *The Making of the English Working Class*.

“against the weight,” as he said, “of prevailing orthodoxies.”⁵ But as it swept England it also took hold in the United States. By 1969 Paul Faler compared “the dead hand of the past” in labor history, the labor economists, to Thompson’s “provocative,” “rich,” and “compassionate” “model of scholarship.”⁶ It was partly due to the influence of Thompson’s work that five years later Eric Hobsbawm could say that “. . . labor history today is flourishing in most countries as never before,” although he was quick to distinguish quality from quantity in that effort.⁷

Historians had moved in a grand way from the analysis of trade union conventions and strikes to address cultural and broadly political concerns and had in the process awakened new interest, illuminated aspects of history long neglected, and included vast new groups of people in the legitimate scope of historical inquiry. Perhaps the central perception in Thompson’s approach that guided historians as their profession shifted was his often quoted sentence: “. . . There is no such thing as economic growth which is not, at the same time, growth or change of a culture; and the growth of social consciousness, like the growth of a poet’s mind, can never, in the last analysis, be planned.”⁸ In that sentence lies the germ of a larger model of historical inquiry that holds enormous implications; that model provides a classic statement of social theory, political

⁵Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 12.

⁶Paul Faler, “Working Class Historiography,” *Radical America*, 3 (1969), 57.

⁷E. J. Hobsbawm, “Labor History and Ideology,” *Journal of Social History*, 7 (1974), 371.

⁸E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism” *Past and Present*, No. 38 (1967), 97.

commitment, and historical context.⁹

It would not be fair either to Thompson or to those others who participated in the formulation of this general model to focus only on *The Making of the English Working Class* even though that is the single volume that symbolized the potential of the change in historical perspective.¹⁰ Indeed, the richness of the model can in some ways be measured by the

⁹The articulation of a political statement has formed an important part of E. P. Thompson's contribution to this model. While it is impossible to separate the political and historical analysis that he has presented because of their theoretical connections, some of his writing does focus more on the modern political implications of this approach than on the past itself. Among the most pertinent of these statements in addition to those cited elsewhere in these notes are: E. P. Thompson, "Socialism and the Intellectuals," *Universities and Left Review*, No. 1 (1957), 31-36; Thompson, "Commitment in Politics," *Universities and Left Review*, No. 6 (date missing; ca. 1958), 50-55; Thompson, "Socialist Humanism," *The New Reasoner*, No. 1 (1957), 104-143; Thompson, "Agency and Choice," *The New Reasoner*, No. 5 (1958), 89-106; Thompson, "The New Left," *The New Reasoner*, No. 9 (1959), 1-17. Thompson, "A Pessay in Ephology," *The New Reasoner*, No. 10 (1959), 1-8; Thompson, "Revolution," *New Left Review*, No. 3 (1960), 3-9; Thompson, "Countermarching to Armageddon," *New Left Review*, No. 4 (1960), 62-64; Thompson, "The 'New Left' In Britain," *The Listener*, March 2, 1961, pp. 378-379, 410 and his response to criticism of that piece in *The Listener*, April 6, 1961, 623-624; Thompson, "Caudwell," *The Socialist Register 1977* (New York, 1977), 228-276; two essays by Thompson, "At the Point of Decay," and "Outside the Whale" as well as a reprinted version of "Revolution" appear in Thompson, ed., *Out of Apathy* (London, 1960); two collections of his essays are Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York, 1978) and Thompson, *Writing By Candlelight* (London, 1980).

¹⁰*The Making of the English Working Class* is obviously a self-substantiating and sufficiently argued book and can stand by itself. Some of the assumptions and implications have been developed by Thompson at other points. Aside from those pieces that I am drawing upon at other points in this essay, these statements of argument and extensions of analysis include: Thompson, "God & King & Law," *The New Reasoner*, No. 3 (1957-1958), 69-86; "'Sons of Poverty Assemble'," *The Listener*, December 10, 1959, pp. 1031-1031; Thompson, "Homage to Tom Maguire," in Asa Briggs and John Saville (eds), *Essays in Labour History* (London, 1960); Thompson, "Working-Class Culture—The Transition to Industrialism," [paper abstract] *Bulletin of The Society for the Study of Labour History*, No. 9 (1964), 4-5, and discussion summarized on 6; Thompson, "Postscript," a response to critics in the 1968 Pelican edition of *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1968); Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present*, No. 50 (1971), 76-136; Thompson "'Rough

provocative studies Thompson drew upon and stimulated. Eric Hobsbawm's work established the penetration of capitalism and the varied responses to the changes generated by that penetration as among the crucial forces of modern history.¹¹ George Rudé's focus on the development of popular movements sowed fruitful seeds in an area previously considered only with condescension.¹² C. B. Macpherson's analysis of the ideology, and its relationship to the social structure, of market society provided a brilliant example of the exploration possible when conducted in a tight and systematic manner.¹³ The list goes on with Raymond Williams and a

Music': Le Charivari Anglais," *Annales*, 27 (1972), 285-312; Thompson, "Patrician Society, Plebian Culture," *Journal of Social History*, 7 (1974), 382-405; Thompson, "Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?" *Social History*, 3 (1978), 133-165; Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London, 1955; revised, New York, 1977), Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* (New York, 1975); Thompson, "The Crime of Anonymity," in Thompson, Douglas Hay, Peter Linebaugh, John G. Rule, and Cal Winslow, *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth Century England* (New York, 1975); and Thompson, "Mayhew and the *Morning Chronicle*," in Thompson and Eileen Yeo (eds.), *The Unknown Mayhew* (New York, 1971). Assessments of E. P. Thompson's broader significance include: Alan Dawley, "E. P. Thompson and the Peculiarities of the Americans," *Radical History Review*, 19 (1978-1979), 33-59; Paul Buhle, "E. P. Thompson and his Critics," *Telos*, 49 (1981), 127-137; and Bryan D. Palmer, *The Making of E. P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism, and History* (Toronto, 1981).

¹¹In addition to the specific works cited above and below, see especially E. J. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labor* (New York, 1964); Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York, 1959); Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (New York, 1969); and Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries: Contemporary Essays* (New York, 1973).

¹²George Rudé's most relevant works for this model include especially Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England* (New York, 1964); and Rudé with Eric Hobsbawm, *Captain Swing* (New York, 1968).

¹³C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (New York, 1962).

host of others¹⁴ contributing explicitly and implicitly to the formulation of a model of analysis that remains, like Thompson's work itself, at once historical, theoretical, and political.

Three special focal points dominate the perspective of this English model. (These focal points correspond, incidentally, to the organization of *The Making of the English Working Class*.) The first effort is an examination of the social structure and cultural patterns of those people who ultimately become involved in the process of change to an industrial market society, especially those people who perform the labor and who pay the costs demanded by the transformation. The traditions and ways of life of a pre-market, pre-industrial society possess a separate purpose, a distinctive routine, a contrary set of assumptions and priorities and values, and an opposing conception of justice and polity that mark such life as not just different from but opposed to that social structure that attempts to gain ascendancy. Secondly, the English model suggests a variety of new contours evident in the process of change to an industrial capitalist society and then the costs generated by that change. Two developments are especially relevant here: one is the expansion and penetration of market relationships where previously had been social relations based on deference, obligation, or even love and respect; the other is the calculation of the consequences of the rise of such a system—especially the destruction of older, valued, ways of life, and the issues and tensions generated by that annihilation. The third

¹⁴Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (New York, 1961); Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (New York, 1958); Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York, 1976); Keith Thomas, "Work and Leisure in Pre-Industrial Society," *Past and Present*, No. 29 (1964), 50-66; Keith Thomas, "Work and Leisure in Industrial Society," *Past and Present*, No. 30 (1965), 96-103; Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (Boston, 1957). One should also consult the extensive commentary on *The Long Revolution* by E. P. Thompson in his two part review, "The Long Revolution," *New Left Review*, No. 9 (1961), 24-33, and *New Left Review*, No. 10 (July-August 1961), 34-39.

element of the English model concerns the responses to this process of change. Whereas the initial temptation is to seek out formal, articulate statements of policy of specific institutions regarding particular issues in the process of change, these historians have argued that more often those responses will be detected only in an investigation of patterns of collective behavior which reflect community values, disciplines, and unspoken assumptions about the proper purpose and organization of society. Just as the demands of this new industrial market society were not limited to economics, neither were the responses.

In reflecting on this model, it quickly becomes obvious how revolutionary and provocative insights at the time now seem almost jaded, even tedious if not banal. Most obviously the model provides a way of focusing on the industrial revolution that possesses an incredible breadth, that turns a frequently pictured *economic* experience into a *social* transformation. It does this by acting upon a central and crucial insight: there is a consistency of purpose connecting the institutions that a group of people builds, the values it develops, the discipline it respects, and the activities it sanctions and encourages. Religion, economics, politics, literature, and family life do not lead separate and conflicting roles in the life of the individual or group but together form a unified whole that gives meaning to each.¹⁵ Raymond Williams called it a consistent “structure of feeling,” a *whole* way of apprehending the world.¹⁶

¹⁵Perhaps the closest American articulation of this notion and one that adds to the English formulation is that of Robert Coles in his discussion of “the simple yet revolutionary psychoanalytic tenet that all behavior, however discrete or frivolous, makes sense, and is likely to express something more (or other) than what is apparent.” Coles, *Children of Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear* (Boston, 1967), 39.

¹⁶Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 48-71; this is also evident however, in his related

Eric Hobsbawm called it “fitting together.”¹⁷ Whatever the label, this way of viewing life and society is filled with far reaching implications. The experiences and consequences and the responses to the process of the growth of industrial capitalism can never again be reduced to a matter of dollars and cents or, as others would have it, nickels and dimes, once this perception is granted. With this approach historians are not talking about *things* or *objects* anymore; they are talking about people.

This perspective also gives new meaning to old concepts of exploitation and alienation. Sometimes defined in ways that permit the costs of industrialization to be mathematically calculated, usually in some kind of debate over the standard of living, the consideration of alienation is one that was not made obsolete but was transformed. As Thompson observed, “The issues which provoked the most intensity of feeling were very often the ones in which such values as traditional customs, ‘justice’, ‘independence’, security, or family-economy were at stake, rather than straight-forward ‘bread and butter’ issues.” “. . . Alternative and irreconcilable views of human order—one based upon mutuality, the other on competition—confronted each other”¹⁸ What was involved was the loss of, or a challenge to, a way of life. Or, put differently, this same phenomenon accounts for the widespread resistance to change, the powerful negative connotation attached to change in pre-capitalist societies—the overwhelming

discussions of hegemony, culture, and society in *Keywords*.

¹⁷E. J. Hobsbawm, “From Social History to the History of Society,” *Daedalus*, 100 (1971), 38, 44 (n. 19).

¹⁸Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 203, 206.

rejection of what some economists point to as “progress.”¹⁹ This loss, this cost, to those economists is of course incomprehensible since their own coterie of values derives directly from the premium they attach to capital accumulation and the repression it requires.

This reformulation also bears upon the response to such exploitation. If the experiences and consequences of industrialization proceed along cultural and social and political paths, so too will the responses. If the problem is substantially larger than the issue of wages and hours the response sought must also be substantially larger. The response, in other words, from this analysis involves the entire reorganization of society. E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, and George Rudé showed how workers have created within their own ranks the institutions, the theories, the values, and the discipline appropriate to that new society and how, moreover, they have sought to extend such relationships to the larger structure of power. The central concept here is class. To the horror of sociologists who specialize in the game of drawing “objective” lines across human lives these historians rejected the exclusive categorical, static, and arbitrary meaning often given the notion of class. In its place they offered an historical meaning that emphasizes the expression of shared experiences and values, that grows, that becomes more focused.²⁰ Indeed, one of the great contributions is the demonstration of growth from what

¹⁹This rejection of modern capitalist social change provides the leitmotif for Hobsbawm’s *Primitive Rebels* and finds sustained expression in John Womack, Jr., *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (New York, 1968).

²⁰Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 9-12; E. J. Hobsbawm, “From Social History to the History of Society,” 37; Hobsbawm, “Karl Marx’s Contribution to Historiography,” in Robin Blackburn (ed.), *Ideology in Social Science: Readings in Critical Social Theory* (Suffolk, 1972), 270, 280; Hobsbawm, “Class Consciousness in History,” in Istvan Meszaros (ed.), *Aspects of History and Class Consciousness* (London, 1971), 5-21; Raymond Williams, “Class,” in *Keywords*, 51-59.

Hobsbawm and Rudé would call pre-modern or pre-political or “primitive” resistance and protest to a movement with an articulate ideology and discipline. Thompson, as usual, expressed it poignantly: “It is . . . this collective self-consciousness, with its corresponding theory, institutions, discipline, and community values which distinguishes the 19th-century *working class* from the 18th-century *mob*.”²¹

The historical evidence drawn upon by the formulators of this approach to the past is conspicuous in its conventional nature. The footnotes to *The Making of the English Working Class* are replete with references to biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs, with citations of court records and other legal documents, with lengthy quotations from political and religious tracts, with arcane references to the archival matter in the Home Office, and with large bodies of work from newspaper reports, travel accounts, literature, ballads and other popular culture vestiges, organizational records, and secondary sources, especially local histories. Thompson even makes slight use of quantitative sources although his point in that use is mainly to demonstrate the kinds of phenomena such data mask.²² The distinctive qualities in this treatment of sources lie not so much in the novelty of the information he mines as the breadth, and that breadth derives from the broad questions he asked. Many historians are familiar with many of

²¹Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 424.

²²Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 322-331; elsewhere Thompson lampooned the quantitative approach in parody: “It took a large team,” he wrote, “. . . much arduous statistical fiddling to get this result. However, summarised on the back of an envelope it can be seen that . . .”; Thompson, “A Pessay in Ephology,” 4. Thompson has updated his assessment by poking at “techniques which would deliver to us ‘history’ packaged and untouched by the human mind, through the automatic ingestion of the computer.” Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, 28.

these different bodies of information, yet few are accustomed to exploring them all at the same time. Certainly the breadth of the source materials is far greater than the American labor historians who had been concerned with the issues surrounding collective bargaining were in the habit of consulting. Moreover, it is less what kind of sources Thompson cited that matters than how he used the information contained in them. By placing each source into a context that emphasized both the limits of the observer and the special vantage and sensitivity of that observer, Thompson was able to bring new light to bear on what he called an “opaque” world.

One final note about this model: this model is a framework, a structure suggesting a large pattern of change and a conception of historical *context*. Again, E. P. Thompson speaks to the issue: “The discipline of history is, above all, the discipline of context; each fact can be given meaning only within an ensemble of other meanings. . . .”²³ And the context that has been suggested in this model is capable of providing ways to reach new ideas of the significance of events that have long been known but ignored or interpreted to have other meanings. It can also direct attention down paths that previously lay unexplored. It suggests ways in which apparently discrete phenomena can be put together into a meaningful pattern. It does not, however, provide a mold into which American history (or English history, for that matter) can be forced, nor does anyone pretend otherwise. Certainly E. P. Thompson knew better: the danger, according to Thompson, is that “the moment at which a model is made explicit it begins to petrify into axioms.” There must be a dialectic, a quarrel between the model and the historical actuality.

²³E. P. Thompson, “Anthropology and the Discipline of Historical Context,” *Midland History*, I (1972), 45.

“This,” explained Thompson, “is the creative quarrel at the heart of cognition. Without this dialectic intellectual growth cannot take place.”²⁴ The result may well be that in the quarrel the model is subject to change, even to a radical restructuring.

The question then becomes, Does this model hold any relevance for the American experience? How have American historians used it and contributed to it? Has it, after this passage of time, outlived its usefulness as a framework for the exploration of American history? The size of this inquiry is intimidating. If it is difficult to generalize about the work of several generally agreed historians of English workers but who are nonetheless individually brilliant and provocative, then it becomes all the more hazardous to attempt a similar level of generalization about one of the richest and certainly a burgeoning field in American history in the last four decades.²⁵ But the signs of the progress and the innovations in American worker history are evident and can be seen in several ways. One indication would be the sheer quantity of studies produced in this field. More significantly, the actual substance of these studies seems to have shifted. No longer do chronicles of strikes and organizational activities that are relevant only to their particular contexts bear the weight they once did. Few are content with calling the simple growth of economic institutions a social movement. But perhaps the most encouraging sign was

²⁴E. P. Thompson, “The Peculiarities of the English,” in Ralph Miliband and John Saville (eds.), *The Socialist Register 1965* (New York, 1965), 350; see also in this regard E. J. Hobsbawm, “Labor History and Ideology,” 375, 379: “If we do not formulate questions first and look for the material in the light of these questions, we risk producing merely a leftwing version of antiquarianism . . .”; but, he warns, as we formulate those questions, it must be clear in our minds “what our model is.”

²⁵The single best effort to put together the various threads of this renewed enthusiasm in the history of the worker is David Montgomery, “To Study the People: The American Working Class,” *Labor History*, 21 (1980), 485-512.

the large, though by no means universal, effort of historians to move in the direction that E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, and George Rudé outlined with their model.

While historians have often moved in dramatically different directions to employ this model, it is possible to see the formulation of a general response to the model just sketched. It is now clear, for example, that contrary to what an earlier generation of American historians liked to believe, there have been significant numbers of Americans (even if there is no general agreement on exactly which ones) who have not as a matter of course assumed the legitimacy and propriety of the relationships and values of industrial capitalism. Just as many studies have established the persistence of pre-industrial cultural attributes among specific racial and ethnic groups so too have others reminded us that the native-born often shared similar values and apprehensions. Perhaps some of the most exciting work in this regard concerns debates over the nature of paternalism in the slave South, a set of relations identified by some with pre-capitalist society.²⁶

Many of these studies have been engaged by examining the structure and relationships and values of societies in the process of transformation by focusing large questions on the microcosms of particular communities. The potential of such studies, which may not be so great in the pursuit of other inquiries, derives especially from the possibility of examining the *whole* of society—the horizontal and vertical relationships to which Eric Hobsbawm has directed

²⁶While considering other issues as well, the debate has become most specific in Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1974), and Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (New York, 1976). See also Dawley, “E. P. Thompson and the Peculiarities of the Americans,” 45-50.

attention.²⁷ At that level, where the scale is smaller and more manageable and where the relationships are more immediate, it is possible to move, again as Hobsbawm has urged, “from social history to the history of society.” The advantages are substantial inasmuch as such a focus allows more precise attention to identifiable individuals and collective entities, allows a sensitivity to pressures and opportunities obvious in local life but less evident on broader fronts, and permits greater controls, thus minimizing the temptation to fuse, or confuse, separate patterns of development. Most pointedly, the potential of the community studies is that of understanding more precisely the context in which specific developments take on larger meanings. It may well be doubted that the sum total of a multitude of such communities will ever yield a satisfying national picture. That national picture, should it come, will less likely be based on the study of any determinate number of community studies, each of which is unique, than on a lesser number of studies of communities that exhibit common connections to the broader region and nation.²⁸ And it is indeed the more doubtful that a composite will emerge

²⁷Hobsbawm, “From Social History to the History of Society,” 37. The point is more than the incidental selection of focus or boldness of generalization since the “resolutive-compositive method,” which may be quite appropriate for physical science applications as it breaks the whole into parts for examination and then reconstructs those parts, holds mechanical implications for social inquiry. See especially Macpherson, *Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, 30-31, 101.

²⁸The establishment of these connections between local and national levels presents significant problems. When E. P. Thompson developed a national picture of English workers he did so by seeking and identifying common experiences and *cultural* manifestations in various communities and demonstrating thereby a national growth. In the United States, however, the tendency has been much more to focus on the national institutions that represent a *structural* set of connections. See especially Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order 1877-1920* (New York, 1967). The assumptions and weaknesses of this modernization framework in American labor history and community history have been explored in Michael J. Cassity, “Modernization and Social Crisis: The Knights of Labor and a Midwest Community, 1885-1886,” *Journal of*

from the studies that ignore or minimize patterns of change and behavior at the level of the people in their everyday lives in favor of issues as defined and mediated by various kinds of centralized institutions and representatives. But a shift in focus to the local scene guarantees no fulfillment of the promise of the English model for American historians; that effort requires a conceptual precision and sensitivity to the relationships of different elements in which the total is much more than the sum of the parts.

The substantive promise of that community focus and its ability to move well beyond the realm of “local history” as traditionally conceived and beyond the realm of labor union history as traditionally practiced became evident in the 1960s as Herbert Gutman began presenting the argument that those who possessed the alien values, those who were the outsiders and who lacked popular legitimacy were not the workers who found the changes in their society suspect but the promoters of economic growth themselves. The capitalists were the interlopers.²⁹ This

American History, 66 (1979), 41-61, and Daniel T. Rodgers, “Tradition, Modernity and the American Worker: Reflections and Critique,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 7 (1977), 655-681. A second and less fundamental concern emerges from the ambivalent meaning of community itself, something that has been used to signify both a set of inherited relationships, often geographically determined, and a self-creating set of harmonious relationships. The study of workers in their two-fold communities has been able to benefit from this ambivalence. See especially, Thomas Bender, *Community and Social Change in America* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1978).

²⁹See especially Herbert Gutman, “Class, Status and Community Power in Nineteenth-Century American Industrial Cities: Paterson, New Jersey: A Case Study,” which has been reprinted in Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York, 1976), and Gutman, “The Worker’s Search for Power: Labor in the Gilded Age,” in H. Wayne Morgan (ed.), *The Gilded Age: A Reappraisal* (Syracuse, 1963). The standard assessment of this contribution is accurately expressed by Robert H. Zieger: Combined with *The Making of the English Working Class*, Zieger writes, “Gutman’s work reoriented Labor History, shifting its focus from labor institutions and organizations toward working class traditions and value systems.” Zieger,

perception laid the groundwork for the development of the history of the American worker in a way that could fulfill, conceivably, the potential suggested by the English model. The implications were significant. First and perhaps foremost it invigorated the languishing notion of conflict in American society. While Gutman's work in this regard was not isolated, it took the conflict outside the realm of disputes over material rewards and into the basic conflict over the proper organization of society. In other words the conflict was as fundamental as it could be. It also suggested, as in the example of the small town that would be unified behind the workers in their conflict with employers, that a unified public was being undermined by the new industrial order. It presented, moreover, the distinct possibility that values diametrically, even dialectically, opposed to those of industrial capitalism and the primacy of economic growth have been harbored not just by some group sinister in language and appearance and goals but by the American people.

With this breakthrough others could move backward and forward in time (as Gutman himself was fond of doing) to explore the pre-industrial cultures and the social responses to the industrial revolution. When they launched these forays, however, they generally remained close to Gutman's pivotal point—the experiences, the challenges generated by the transformation to industrial market society. Even so, the prime lever for understanding those experiences and

“Industrial Relations and Labor History in the Eighties,” *Industrial Relations*, 22 (1983), 62. Sean Wilentz, “Gutman: Historian of the Working Class,” published originally in the *Village Voice* and reprinted in *In These Times*, August 7-20, 1985, p. 15, is a moving personal and scholarly obituary that suggests that “almost singledhanded, Gutman shook up the drowsy field of American labor history and thereby changed the way we think about American history.” One should also, however, consult, the only sustained critical assessment of Gutman's work: David Montgomery, “Gutman's Nineteenth-Century America,” *Labor History*, 19 (1978), 416- 429.

challenges was imported directly from England. E. P. Thompson's celebrated study of time and work-discipline provided an analytical knife that cut right to the core of an experience designed to discipline the individual, to reshape and transform the worker from a human to a part of a machine.³⁰ This concept, used widely in a variety of contexts, from a reinterpretation of the "starving times" of Jamestown³¹ to a new understanding of what W. E. B. DuBois called a black work ethic,³² especially informed American efforts to comprehend the shock encountered by people entering this new system from artisan or rural backgrounds and habits and at the same time has made plain enough to even the most jaded that the modern system of punctuality, precision, and coordination has its origins in a specific organization of the economy and society that indeed transformed American life—and life in the world. It came even as a metaphor, "a place of the most far-reaching conflict."³³ It is a debate over time. It is a debate over work. It is a conflict over the division of labor into isolated and meaningless tasks and the separation of labor from life. It is a conflict of two ways of life. It is this conflict, almost Rousseauian, that lies at the heart of a wider understanding of alienation, something that goes well beyond the separation of the laborer from the product of his work.

³⁰Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism."

³¹Edmund S. Morgan, "The Labor Problem at Jamestown, 1607-18," *American Historical Review*, LXXVI (1971), 595-611.

³²Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, 285-324.

³³Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," 93- 94. See also Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine: Volume One, Technics and Human Development* (New York, 1966), especially 286.

The elemental nature of this conflict has made the very analysis subject to criticism for its romanticism or nostalgia.³⁴ Despite the tendency of such critics not to subject similar wistful yearnings of others—for more money or growth instead of for an earlier, lost way of life—to similar skepticism, one historian in particular, aware of this vulnerability, added a significant dimension to the debate that keeps it based in historical analysis instead of a debate over biases. David Montgomery, in the process of developing an approach to move the history of workers beyond traditional limits, has been especially sensitive to the issue. This is evident, first, in his consideration of what the debate is all about—the debate between those who, as he says, emphasize “‘hard facts’— that is, economic growth, wages and hours, upward mobility, organizational development, and other subjects which fit comfortably with a utilitarian conception of the world,” and the historians who would focus instead on the habits, values, and relationships of people who had a much different view of the world and their lives within it. Montgomery points as well, in terms of weight of evidence, to Herbert Gutman’s ability to demonstrate popular resistance to acquisitive individualism and the connection of that tradition of resistance to the development of articulate labor political ideology. But most importantly, Montgomery’s conceptualization of the problem goes to its source, the too neat dichotomy presented by “industrial” versus “pre-industrial.” Observing that there are many types of pre-industrial societies, that such a dichotomy “obscures the historical development of capitalist

³⁴There is nothing new in this suggestion of romanticism. When Gerald N. Grob argued in 1969 that the Knights of Labor’s opposition to the wage system in the 1880’s reflected a romantic, utopian and “unrealistic” view of labor relations, he spoke with much authority and within the mainstream of American labor history. Grob, *Workers and Utopia: A Study of Ideological Conflict in the American Labor Movement, 1865-1900* (Chicago, 1969).

work discipline before the rise of the mechanized factory” and suggests the elimination of conflict once “adaptation” to the new ways is complete, and that this dichotomy disguises the exploitation and domination and social tensions within “pre-industrial” society and the nature of the transformation underway, Montgomery has both locked horns with sympathetic historians and has demonstrated a way to avoid an unnecessary vulnerability.³⁵ He also reached a position that E. P. Thompson reached about the same time, in which Thompson cautioned, like Montgomery, against “becoming prisoners of the assumptions and self-image of the rulers.”³⁶

It may be that Montgomery articulated the limits of the English model in the conceptualization of social transformation, that the change is never neat and clean, that it is too easily reduced to a caricature that bears little resemblance to real life. Instead, however, of using that as a vantage from which to dismantle the English model or argue for its inappropriateness, Montgomery shifted the focus so as to strengthen the model. As an alternative to an analysis that focused upon the pivot point between these two separate ways of life, Montgomery devoted much attention to the issue of workers’ control, some of it explicit and some of it only in the shadows of other themes. The significance of this notion is too often understated. “Workers’ control,” Montgomery says, “was not a condition or state of affairs which existed at any point in time, but a struggle, a chronic battle in industrial life which assumed a variety of forms.” When

³⁵Montgomery, “Gutman’s Nineteenth Century America,” 424-426; on the internal tensions of a “pre-industrial” pattern of society and work, see also Merritt Roe Smith, *Harpers Ferry Armory and the New Technology: The Challenge of Change* (Ithaca, 1977). Daniel T. Rodgers develops a similar critique examining the modernization assumptions of this work, including that of E. P. Thompson as well. Rodgers, “Tradition, Modernity, and the American Industrial Worker.”

³⁶Thompson, “Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?” 150.

he writes, as he does so pointedly, “of powers which working people have lost in this century, of popular values antagonistic to acquisitive individualism which have been snuffed out, of workers’ regulation of hiring, work arrangements, and dismissal which have been vanquished in the name of progress, and of continuing traditions of working-class struggle, which have been far broader in scope than the union bargaining sanctioned by government and ‘public opinion’,” he writes of a system of control that is economic, political, educational, psychological, and social.³⁷

He writes of the same challenge that E. P. Thompson described that was presented to the weavers at the end of the nineteenth century in England, the challenge by factory owners “to stand at their command,” a challenge which Thompson maintains “was the most deeply resented indignity.”³⁸ The challenge to worker control has come in the form of standardization of tasks and the impulse toward Taylorism, in the process of laborers becoming machine tenders, and within the trade unions themselves.

And the cost demanded has been the loss of agency. To turn over to the state, to the company, to the union, control of the product or the workplace, meant a loss of autonomy. What Montgomery added was a different perspective on the same sense of alienation that Thompson described. Indeed, time and work-discipline could be effectively considered *within* the

³⁷David Montgomery, *Workers’ Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (New York, 1979), 10, 153-4 and *passim*. That this focus is not the narrow “economism” charged in Jean Monds, “Workers’ Control and the Historians: A New Economism,” *New Left Review*, No. 97 (1976), 81-100, can be seen in the larger potential of the concept as suggested in Montgomery’s collection of essays and also in his “The Past and Future of Worker’s Control,” *Radical America*, 13 (1979), 7-23.

³⁸Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 306.

framework of worker control. Both have implications that reach well beyond the workplace. Worker control has one especially distinct quality: it transcends the distinction sometimes made between industrial and pre-industrial. The issue of worker control, once raised, as it clearly was in the nineteenth century, retains a relevance and importance beyond the initial shock of the factory system, as the issues become deeper and more sophisticated the closer one moves to the present.³⁹

In this work of two of the real pioneers of the “new labor history” and with the general inspiration and with analytic tools, conceptual reformulations, particular insights, and new sensitivities to relationships important to workers that reach beyond economics derived from and parallel to the English model, “the dead hand of the past” was indeed lifted from the corpus of American labor history.

In the consideration of the challenges to workers and of the responses of American workers to those challenges American labor history bears little resemblance to what it was four decades ago. While American historians have managed to move beyond the chronicling of the growth of trade unionism, the development of what Montgomery has accurately and bluntly termed “an immobile and isolated aggregation of legally certified bargaining agents,”⁴⁰ and have thereby transformed labor history, they have not, however, produced a study, or a body of work, equal in breadth and focus to that of “the English model.” While attention has shifted away from

³⁹Some of the implications of this process have been developed by Thompson in “Agency and Choice,” and by Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York, 1979).

⁴⁰Montgomery, *Workers’ Control in America*, 171.

the strike and the purely episodic and institutional and while a prodigious amount of scholarship has shed new light on neglected areas of worker history, the result has not conformed to early expectations. Paul Faler, who stands out for his translation of the meaning of the ideas associated with the English model to Americans in 1969 and for his optimism that American labor history was about to be revolutionized, wrote in the preface of one study that “We seem further away from an American version of Thompson’s work on England than we were a decade ago.”⁴¹ David Brody was even blunter: “. . . for all we have learned from Thompson and his English colleagues,” Brody wrote in 1978 and 1979, “we cannot expect to develop a new synthesis of American labor history on the lines of *The Making of the English Working Class*.”⁴² Thus it was too that Eric Foner could report from a 1984 conference on labor history that the mood “was anything but self congratulatory.” And the reason for that may well be, as Foner observed of the cultural work in the new labor history, that “it has failed to provide a coherent overview of labor’s historical development.”⁴³ Or put differently, American labor history changed, generated a wealth of new information, explored new facets of worker life, yielded multi-dimensional views of workers, and upset long-held conventions of worker history as the history of industrial relations, but it still did not and does not resemble the inquiry which inspired its reformulation.

⁴¹Paul Faler, “Working Class Historiography,” Faler, *Mechanics and Manufacturers in the early Industrial Revolution: Lynn, Massachusetts 1780-1860* (Albany, 1981), xii.

⁴²David Brody, “The Old Labor History and the New: In Search of an American Working Class,” *Labor History*, 20 (1979), 124.

⁴³Eric Foner, “Labor Historians Seek useful Past,” *In These Times*, December 12-18, 1984, p. 11.

One possible way of viewing this development is not as a failure but as a difference, especially a difference that derives from the inappropriateness of the English model for the American experience. Where Thompson argued that English working class history was substantially more than struggles around bread-and-butter issues, some American historians who have attempted to explore similar questions among American workers have concluded otherwise. Some have examined the intense conflict involved in the transformation to industrial capitalism and then located the response, ultimately, to that transformation in an abrupt or gradual acceptance of the new system, in what Alan Dawley called an effort “to improve their condition”⁴⁴ and what Daniel Walkowitz referred to as “a pragmatic economism: pure-and-simplism.”⁴⁵ Others like Herbert Gutman suggested that the distinctiveness of the American labor experience lay in the *repeated* industrialization of whole cultures. As David Brody correctly observed, “Class is, in fact, wholly jettisoned from Gutman’s analysis.” Brody himself expressed doubts about the possibility of discovering among American workers a “basic consistency of outlook” and a “distinctive . . . way of life.”⁴⁶ Parts of Thompson’s analysis may be relevant to the American experience, the suggestion runs, but the larger model bringing those

⁴⁴Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), 226,233: the issues mobilizing the defense of worker traditions focused on “their rights to join a labor organization, to withhold their labor power, and to obtain an equal voice in setting wages, hours, and working conditions.” “. . . the overwhelming evidence from Lynn is that the city’s industrial workers looked mainly to collective action to improve their condition.”

⁴⁵Daniel J. Walkowitz, *Worker City, Company Town: Iron and Cotton Worker Protest in Troy and Cohoes, New York, 1855-84* (Urbana, 1978), 252-253.

⁴⁶Brody, “The Old Labor History and the New,” 124, 123.

parts together does not bear on that experience.

Especially limiting the English model's relevance to America, it has been argued, is the complexity and diversity of American workers. David Brody developed this point most articulately when he suggested that one of the obstacles to the construction of a new synthesis of labor history is "our acute sense of the complexity and variety of working-class experience, in which all lines of inquiry—family, ethnicity, mobility, technology and so on—converge into an intricate web of connections."⁴⁷ This argument, however, assumed in many examinations of narrow portions of working life, runs into conceptual problems inasmuch as it implies that the experience of American workers has been substantially more complex than the experience of English workers. While it is customary to think of the English as "settled" and "homogenous" with an industrial revolution that intruded upon people's lives in the same way at the same time, E. P. Thompson himself encountered the challenge of a similar diversity and lack of chronological equality in the impact of this social change on the various groups in terms that sound embarrassingly familiar:

Such diversity of experiences has led some writers to question both the notions of an "industrial revolution" and of a "working class". The first discussion need not detain us here. The term is serviceable enough in its usual connotations. For the second, many writers prefer the term working *classes*, which emphasises the great disparity in status, acquisitions, skills, conditions, within the portmanteau phrase. . . . the Sunderland sailor, the Irish navy, the Jewish costermonger, the inmate of an East Anglian village workhouse, the compositor on *The Times*—all might be seen by their "betters" as belonging to the "lower classes" while they themselves scarcely understand each others' dialect.

Nevertheless, when every caution has been made the outstanding fact of the period between 1790 and 1830 is the formation of "the working class". This

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 122.

is revealed, first, in the growth of class-consciousness: the consciousness of an identity of interests as between all these diverse groups of working people and as against the interests of other classes. And, second, in the growth of corresponding forms of political and industrial organisation.⁴⁸

It would be especially appropriate to make use of Thompson's example, it would seem, since he dealt closely and revealingly with the agricultural workers, something that American labor historians seldom made the gesture to include until recently despite the fact that American socialism reached some of its greatest moments in the rural areas.⁴⁹ The diversity of the producers and the cultural complexity involved in their lives is not unique to America.

What David Brody called a "strategic retreat from Thompson's basic formulation" probably has less to do with the subject under examination, American workers, than it does with the perspectives and inquiries generated by American historians on that subject. In the "retreat" from that formulation, American historians offered an alternative formulation that is not just different from Thompson's; it in fact fractured the very sense of historical context that made the English model attractive. The "old labor history" was broadened to include new phenomena, but

⁴⁸Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 193-194.

⁴⁹The exception that perhaps does not prove the rule but does reveal the core of an unspoken orthodoxy in American labor history is James R. Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest 1895-1943* (Baton Rouge, 1978). There is still no comparable study of the formation of worker consciousness equal to Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Movement in America* (New York, 1976); the fact that Goodwyn derived some of his ideas directly from E. P. Thompson should give labor historians some cause for introspection. Moreover nobody has yet confronted Goodwyn's assertion that as of 1892 "the American labor movement was simply not yet ready for mass insurgent politics." Why? Because ". . . it had not developed, through its own institutions, a working-class culture of economic and political consciousness essential to the maintenance of an insurgent posture in the presence of the continuing cultural influences of the corporate state." (p. 308) At the least, labor historians should be willing to take up the challenge.

at the same time Raymond Williams' "structure of feeling" and Hobsbawm's "fitting together" were shattered into separate, isolated fragments that do not fit together. The source of this may lie in pluralistic assumptions of the American past or in the effort to reduce a large subject to manageable proportions, but its contours have been evident not just in the "fractured time" which Gutman presented but also in the fractured horizontal and vertical relationships Hobsbawm cautioned against. Sometimes considered a "balkanization" process, this approach has produced deeper and more detailed attention to the discrete communities of workers, to their varied cultural identities, to the spectrum of their work experiences, and to those subjects at different times. Important details, important insights about the particulars, the fruits have been substantial, but they have come at the expense of the broader meanings of each of those elements, indeed at the expense of any large sense of historical context.

One dimension of that fracturing is evident in the area where it seemed that the sense of context was most likely to be grasped: the community focus generated in the new labor history. It is in this focus that the fracturing is also the most literal. Instead of viewing workers through the framework of regional or national institutions or with an economic reduction to categorical relations, the effort emerged to examine workers in the directness of their own lives both at work and in the larger society. Yet a brief enumeration of some of the important studies at the end of the 1970s and 1980s, when arguably the "new labor history" reached its peak, of those workers in their communities indicates the general consequence: the demise of crafts, with attendant cultural consequences, in Newark and Philadelphia,⁵⁰ the relationship between manufacturing

⁵⁰Susan E. Hirsch, *Roots of the American Working Class: The Industrialization of Crafts in Newark, 1800-1860* (Philadelphia, 1978); Sharon V. Salinger, "Artisans, Journeymen, and the

and revivalism in Rochester;⁵¹ the political activity of the Knights of Labor in a variety of cities;⁵² the solidification of ethnic and class alignments in Steelton, Pennsylvania;⁵³ the variety of worker cultures in Philadelphia;⁵⁴ the standard of living in late eighteenth century Philadelphia and of workers in early twentieth century Pittsburgh;⁵⁵ the formation and decline of worker protest in Troy and Cohoes, New York;⁵⁶ political activity among skilled workers in Baltimore;⁵⁷ and the transformation of leisure among workers in Worcester.⁵⁸ Instead of a sharper, more coherent view of the American working class emanating from the community study approach, a kaleidoscopic view emerged, one that alters, that becomes more complex, but

Transformation of Labor in Late Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 40 (1983), 62-84.

⁵¹Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York 1815-1837* (New York, 1978).

⁵²Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana, 1983).

⁵³John Bodnar, *Immigration and Industrialization: Ethnicity in an American Mill Town, 1870-1940* (Pittsburgh, 1977).

⁵⁴Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800-1850* (Philadelphia, 1980).

⁵⁵Billy G. Smith, “The Material Lives of Laboring Philadelphians, 1750 to 1800,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 38 (1981), 163-202; Peter R. Shergold, *Working-Class Life: The “American Standard” in Comparative Perspective, 1899-1913* (Pittsburgh, 1982).

⁵⁶Walkowitz, *Worker City, Company Town*.

⁵⁷Charles G. Steffen, *The Mechanics of Baltimore: Workers and Politics in the Age of Revolution 1763-1812* (Urbana, 1984).

⁵⁸Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for what We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (New York, 1983).

that does not become more coherent with each new study. The isolated themes and insights are often significant and revealing, yet they often remain more informative about the history of the various communities than about the history of American workers.

But it is not just a problem of generating studies of workers in different communities at different times. Lynn, Massachusetts was explored in three major studies of worker life and activity. The shoemakers of Lynn received sustained and careful attention over a century and a half by three different modern historians: Paul Faler, Alan Dawley, and John Cumbler.⁵⁹ While it would distort their conclusions and research to dwell on the differences of the studies, for there is substantial chronological and conceptual overlap and congruity, the alternate emphases reflect a larger division among historians of American workers. In this single community, as in the nation, structural and economic formulations are never reconciled with cultural and ideological patterns. Especially evident in the discussion of the class consciousness of these workers, whether the class awareness was evident, though ultimately absorbed, in the political system or whether it was manifest more in union militancy, the perspectives on the workers in that city reveal not just a division among historians but a tension within the conceptualization of the problem and indeed suggest a division within the conceptualization of the historical context of American workers. Culture and structure remain disconnected, at least in a theoretical sense, or lack any specified relationship that recognizes difficulty and complexity. Thus two alternate contexts for the analysis of American workers coexist that focus on the economic and material

⁵⁹Faler, *Mechanics and Manufacturers in the early Industrial Revolution*; Dawley, *Class and Community*; John T. Cumbler, *Working-Class Community in Industrial America: Work, Leisure, and Struggle in two Industrial Cities, 1800-1930* (Westport, 1979).

structure of the lives of workers and alternatively on the cultural manifestations of those workers' lives. Both contexts have been explored fruitfully but separately and the linkages between the two seldom find articulation.

The understanding of material life, of work itself certainly took off in new directions in this regeneration of inquiry into the history of American workers as historians conducted a sophisticated and penetrating analysis of the organization and reorganization of the productive process and the related material circumstances attending to economic life from colonial times to the twentieth century. While traditional labor history had, with the passage of time, become increasingly reluctant to stray too far from the issues associated with the matrix of "industrial relations," the recent work of labor historians has broadened that concern with an elaboration and sophistication that extends a previously narrow focus to questions of labor processes, structure, and purpose. If there is a central theme in the evolution of those work relations and experiences it would probably be one close to the subtitle of Harry Braverman's study: the theme of "the degradation of work"⁶⁰ or alternatively as another recent study has suggested, the segmentation

⁶⁰Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1974). The importance and influence of this perspective, indeed of this single work, are indicated by Robert Zieger's reference to it as "already a classic" and by John Womack, Jr.'s observation that Braverman's study constitutes "a virtual handbook for research on recent working-class history." Zieger, "Industrial Relations and Labor History in the Eighties", 67 and Womack, "The Historiography of Mexican Labor," in *Labor and Laborers through Mexican History, Proceedings of the Fifth Congress of Mexican and American Historians of Mexico* (Tucson, 1979), 752-753. At the same time, Womack's suggestion, if taken too literally, out of the careful context he develops, risks what E. P. Thompson referred to as "the danger of the reduction of ideas and political struggles to a work-based sociology." Thompson, "The very type of the 'respectable artisan'," *New Society*, May 3, 1979, p. 277.

of labor.⁶¹ From the origins of the decline of the crafts in either capitalism or industrialization, through the sophistication of the machine processes, through scientific management, to the post World War II subjugation of work via automation, a continuous process of change in the structure and conditions of work has been chronicled.⁶² It is possible now to see much more precisely than ever before in academic studies exactly what work was, what tasks were performed in the production of goods in the industrial process. It is possible also to see labor moving from industry to industry, from occupation to occupation, from decentralized, local, and small workplaces to the vast impersonal relations of the modern corporation. And this perception is critical since, as John Womack, Jr., expressed it, “the human engagement with machinery gives both labor and the machine their meaning,”⁶³ a perception that did not often characterize previous studies of workers on the shop floor. Moreover, alongside this concern with the production process has emerged a new concern with structure of the workers’ organizations themselves, though no single study seems to equal Nelson Lichtenstein’s examination of the CIO in World War II not just as an expression of the interest of workers but as an instrument of control of those workers in the larger political economy.⁶⁴ Workers as

⁶¹David M. Gordon, Richard Edwards, and Michael Reich, *Segmented Work, Divided Workers: The Historical Transformation of Labor in the United States* (New York, 1982).

⁶²In addition to the Braverman and Gordon, et al. works, see especially David F. Noble, *Forces of Production: A Social History of Industrial Automation* (New York, 1984).

⁶³Womack, “The Historiography of Mexican Labor,” 751.

⁶⁴Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor’s War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (New York, 1982).

workers, with a variety of pressures and opportunities, with distinctive working conditions, with active roles in the historical process of the transformation of the structure of work, and not workers as members (or potential members) of a trade union alone, are now visible. Despite the broader sympathy and the awareness of and the attention to the political and economic implications for the structure of power, however, there is a limit that has become visible at the same time that the workers themselves have become visible. The analysis of worker culture and the non-economic sources of political commitment characteristic of the English model remains largely absent from these studies.

What also makes this severing of the work experience from other parts of life and history noticeable is the abundance of recent studies examining those other parts. With E. P. Thompson as direct inspiration and his name commonly invoked in the studies, the cultural life of workers has been plumbed with diligence as their customs and values have been explored in religion, work habits, recreation, and politics. Much of this has been in regards to ethnicity. As one of the “subcultures” apparent in the search for a working class culture, this phenomenon has proven both crucial to an understanding of the lives of the urban ghetto inhabitants and simultaneously contributed to a competition between ethnicity and class identities as an unwritten agenda in the exploration of those lives. Many are the studies in which ethnicity powerfully overshadowed experiences and expressions of class; many more are the studies in which the two concepts became confused or conflated. Nonetheless, it seems increasingly clear, as Paul Buhle expressed it, that “ethnicity reinforced class and created the institutions that gave social causes their human

sustenance.”⁶⁵ In addition to the role of ethnicity in the working class, and rarely the nexus of class and race and gender, the realms of leisure, religion, and politics have also been brought into the discussion of working class life, but significantly they have seldom entered the discussion at the same time.

Of these elements, it is politics, in one form or another, that gives direction to the most sustained explorations of working class culture. Addressing other problems as well, though not with the same emphasis, the central question of these works is the hoary one to which Eric Foner noted “nearly every work on American radicalism and labor explicitly or implicitly proposes an answer . . .”: Why is there no socialism in the United States?⁶⁶ This question may be the ultimate question historians ask; or this question may suggest a chimera. This question has meant, though, at a minimum, that historians have been preoccupied with explaining why workers have not done what they should have or with explaining how, actually, they have done so but we have not noticed it. So far, at least, it appears that the sacrifices made in such investigations have been greater than the fruit borne by them. The question contains a tunnel-like framework with, as Sean Wilentz suggested, “a woefully stylized impression of class consciousness abroad”⁶⁷ that has restrained the historical imagination in too many of the efforts to understand workers on their own terms.

⁶⁵Paul Buhle, “Urban ethnics and the swinging doors,” *In These Times*, April 25-May 1, 1984, pp. 12-13.

⁶⁶Eric Foner, “Why is there no Socialism in the United States?” *History Workshop Journal*, No. 17 (1984), 58.

⁶⁷Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York, 1984), 16.

This is not to suggest that the efforts to explore worker political culture represent a barren field. Indeed the focus on ideology has definitely revised conventional views about the role of workers in a capitalist consensus. Several provocative themes emerge from these studies. Leon Fink is not alone in finding a worker movement that “helped to sustain a debate over the social implications of industrial capitalism” in tangible political forms.⁶⁸ Bruce Laurie, Sean Wilentz, Alan Dawley, Daniel Walkowitz, Charles Steffen, and others have addressed the same question. That political activity is one theme. The fate of it is another. Chief of these explanations would be Faler’s and Dawley’s argument in which the political system’s very openness dooms class consciousness, an argument which finds acceptance in other studies in varying degrees.⁶⁹ Another theme is the origin of such activity with an increasing tendency to locate that origin in the ideology of republicanism especially in the pre-Civil War years despite the profoundly conservative uses to which that ideology would later be put in the shaping of an order characterized by possessive individualism.⁷⁰ Yet another theme, less frequently expressed, would be the discernment of the lack of uniformity of worker political activity, whether in the varieties of explicit political causes of the Knights of Labor in different cities suggested by Fink,

⁶⁸Fink, *Workingmen’s Democracy*, xiii.

⁶⁹The contours of the arguments are evident enough in the separate works of Faler and Dawley, but the explicit formulation of the thesis is succinctly developed in Faler and Dawley, “Workingclass Culture and Politics in the Industrial Revolution: Sources of Loyalism and Rebellion,” *Journal of Social History*, 9 (1976), 466-480.

⁷⁰Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*; Wilentz, “Artisan Origins of the American Working Class,” *International Labor and Working Class History*, No. 19 (1981), 1-22; Steffen, *The Mechanics of Baltimore*; Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York, 1976).

or in the ideologically separate cultures of “revivalists,” “traditionalists,” and “radicals” pinpointed by Bruce Laurie.⁷¹ Aside from the particular merits of the individual studies, these specific themes remain both valuable and debatable, valuable at least because of the questions they raise and the answers they suggest, and debatable because of their broader relevance as well as their contradictory implications. A more troubling tendency evident in this examination of the political life of workers, however, is that of disconnecting, explicitly or by assumption, political activity from the institutions, values, and assumptions, of everyday living and working. The temptation is simply to view politics as the overtly political dimension of unionism, a vehicle which conveniently allows the re-connection of industrial relations and political practice but at the expense of the larger worker culture and experiences. Even when the connections are suggested they wind up being ideal types. Working class consciousness has along the way become separated from the precise material concerns evident in other studies and has become a phenomenon unto itself, institutionalized, unambiguous and tied down as a discrete, separable phenomenon disconnected from real life. Thus Eric Foner’s 1984 conclusion that “the ‘culturalist’ approach now appears inadequate as either a definition of class or a substitute for it.”⁷²

Drawing attention to the limits of the studies produced in the surge of research in the history of workers is not to suggest that the field is worse off for their presence. On the contrary, one vast conclusion is possible in assessing the contribution of that work: An American working

⁷¹Fink, *Workingmen’s Democracy*; Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia*.

⁷²Foner, “Labor historians seek useful past,” p. 11.

class has a visibility in American history not apparent only a few decades ago. And the weakness is not the weakness of any one study but a limit that becomes evident when they all are taken together to form a single picture of that working class. The picture does not come together. It lacks coherence. And that characterization can, in fact, be generalized to the broader study of American social history. In the mid-1980s Bernard Bailyn observed that since the dramatic developments in American social history over the previous fifteen years, “social history has been going off in many different directions. It has generated a lot of new information, but it has also contributed significantly to the incoherence of the whole historical picture. Instead of a general picture of how the present situation has emerged out of the past, we have a lot of highly technical histories.”⁷³ So it was and is with the history of American workers. If the history of the American worker stands out as especially disappointing in this “incoherence of the whole historical picture” it is because the English model stimulated precisely such a search for coherence.

A reckoning, and then a narrowing, of the conceptual distance separating Thompson’s original “basic formulation” from efforts to replicate such an approach on this side of the Atlantic requires a consideration of assumptions on both sides. One crucial assumption, where differences may be found, has to do with the concept of class. Class constitutes the object of investigation in much of the new work probing the history of workers. And class lends itself to both an economic and a cultural formulation by historians. And while it could, therefore, provide a bridge between those separate lines of inquiry it has instead become something

⁷³Bernard Bailyn quoted in “Major Trends in Research: 22 Leading Scholars Report on Their Fields,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 4, 1985, p. 12.

concrete and identifiable, either in cultural terms or as an economic formation. When class has been so conceived, the cultural and economic linkages fundamental to the coherence of those activities and important to a sense of context have been set aside. Why this has happened is understandable. In conventional terms class has often been little more than a category, albeit a category with sometimes radical implications. And when Thompson reformulated the concept of class in the preface of *The Making of the English Working Class*, in words that have since been quoted to legitimize widely varying applications, it assumed cultural dimensions but remained a category or, more precisely, a definable identity or ideal type. It came to be a radical culture, often quite static, tied to specific moments in time. This is not, however, what Thompson originally conceived with the notion of class:

When, in discussing class, one finds oneself too frequently commencing sentences with “it”, it is time to place oneself under some historical control, or one is in danger of becoming the slave of one’s own categories. Sociologists who have stopped the time-matching and, with a good deal of conceptual huffing and puffing, have gone down to the engine-room to look, tell us that nowhere at all have they been able to locate and classify a class. They can only find a multitude of people with different occupations, incomes, status-hierarchies, and the rest. . . . When we speak of *a* class we are thinking of a very loosely defined body of people who share the same congeries of interests, social experiences, traditions, and value system, who have a *disposition to behave* as a class, to define themselves in their actions and in their consciousness in relation to other groups of people in class ways. But class itself is not a thing, it is a happening. . . . To reduce class to an identity is to forget exactly where agency lies, not in class but in men.⁷⁴

Eric Hobsbawm posed the same question from another perspective in his consideration of the contribution of social science theory to the inquiry: “Are we in danger of forgetting that the

⁷⁴Thompson, “The Peculiarities of the English,” 357-358.

subject and the object of our researches are people? We ought not to be,” he said, “since people—not ‘labor’ but real working men and women, though often ignorant, shortsighted and prejudiced men and women—is what our subject is about. For many of us the final object of our work is to create a world in which working people can make their own life and their own history, rather than to have it made for them by others, including academics.”⁷⁵ Yet Hobsbawm’s concern with the reductionism of historians and Thompson’s similar admonition about the reduction of class to an identity notwithstanding, that is exactly what has happened among the Americans.

This suggests a larger part of the problem: the model itself has contributed to such reduction. Rich, compassionate, and well argued history, *The Making of the English Working Class* is organized with carefully integrated subdivisions and attentions; as literature it

⁷⁵Hobsbawm, “Labor History and Ideology,” 381; see also his discussion of the phenomenon of class in Hobsbawm, “From Social History to the History of Society,” 37. Or consider Raymond Williams’ comment:

Class feeling is a mode, rather than a uniform possession of all the individuals who might, objectively, be assigned to that class. When we speak, for instance, of a working-class idea, we do not mean that all working people possess it, or even approve it. We mean, rather, that this is the essential idea embodied in the organizations and institutions which that class creates: the working class as a tendency, rather than all working-class people as individuals.

Moreover, he warns that we must not “reduce humanity to an abstraction.” And at the same time that he reminds us that “to pretend that there are no collective modes is to deny the plain facts.” Williams, *Culture and Society*, 326-327. It should be readily apparent, as E. P. Thompson admitted in 1976, that “any differences between myself and Williams have (I think) diminished over the years . . .” Thompson, *William Morris*, 813-814. See also his earlier comments on Williams’ analysis (as well as his previously cited review of Williams in *The New Left Review*) in *The Making of the English Working Class*, 423.

approximates epic literary form; it has thus proven attractive to scholars with diverse motivations and perspectives and interests. These enormous strengths however, have made the English model more likely to be imitated in particular themes, arguments, and details than to be used in a new intellectual conception of the historical problem. Impossible to be applied *in toto* elsewhere without serious distortion either of the original model or the subject on which it might be imposed, the strengths of the model have made it, ironically, a weakness for others. One can borrow the particulars, but not the whole. Yet since it is that wholeness, the coherent arrangement of parts, that gives the model its essence, the model is lost in the process. It is almost as if its precious quality has deprived it of value outside the immediate circumstances for which it was developed.

American historians need not feel alone in this quandary. The dilemma has also plagued the English historians themselves. After all, once the English working class was made, around the 1830s, where does the historical investigation focus? The English model, it seems, did not speak beyond the process of industrialization and the response of workers to it. It certainly provided no neat model for application late in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. A caesura had been created. With still more irony, however, it was in a direct confrontation with that caesura that the full richness of the model could at last be perceived and the larger relevance of the English model beyond the immediate social and temporal limits implicit in the examination of industrialization become apparent. The occasion for moving beyond the concrete study itself into the assumptions of the model can be seen in the discovery of Gareth Stedman Jones as he explored the Chartist period of English labor history and beyond. His insight represented a genuine breakthrough: as Jones explains, he “mistook Thompson’s

strength for his weakness.” In that “mistake” Jones was “situating and tying down more precisely, as an ideology, what Thompson portrayed as working-class consciousness around 1830 . . . ,” and it was because of this static configuration or reification of class relations and its components that Jones ultimately acknowledged “the radical inadequacy of this approach,” terming the effort to understand Chartism through the concept of ideology “a blind alley. As a category it turned out to be inert and unilluminatingly reductive.”⁷⁶ Rethinking the approach and the assumptions beneath it, Jones moved in a less concrete and reductive way to explore the *remaking* of the working class at the end of the nineteenth century by probing the relationship between social being and social consciousness, especially by using linguistic theory to understand the way language mediates the two. When Gareth Stedman Jones did this, he confronted a problem similar to that facing American historians.

This represented, as Jones implied, not so much a reformulation of Thompson’s approach and assumptions as a recognition of a dimension that had already been there. That dimension and that strength lay, in fact, in the sense of context that E. P. Thompson had brought to the study of English workers. This was the same perspective that prompted his break with the Communist Party and that informed his battle with Stalinist theory in the years after 1956. In that arena, the battle was much the same. In 1958 when he attacked orthodox “Marxist

⁷⁶Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History 1832-1982* (New York, 1983), 17-22. The pre-eminent result of this “rethinking” was Jones’ essay “Working-class culture and working-class politics in London, 1870-1900: Notes on the remaking of a working class,” which originally appeared in the *Journal of Social History* in 1974 and which is reprinted in *Languages of Class*. A similar argument can be found in Eric Hobsbawm’s essay “The Making of the Working Class 1870-1914,” in Hobsbawm, *Workers: Worlds of Labor* (New York, 1984).

determinism” with a “re-assertion of the concept of human agency which has ossified within the latter day Marxist tradition” and when he rejected at the same time the dictates of expediency dominant in the West because of their similar reduction of people to subjects of forces rather than active agents of change, he was suggesting this context.⁷⁷ That context then infused *The Making of the English Working Class* and was still his concern two decades after that original articulation. In 1976 he assessed his own contribution to worker history as one involving “a vocabulary of agency and moral choice” which had been pushed out of “mainstream orthodox Marxism” and which in Western capitalist ideology “got completely lost.”⁷⁸

As this leitmotif of Thompson’s political, theoretical, and historical criticism suggests, if there is an irreducible core to that sense of context it would be the notion of agency. In its historical applications the concept has found its articulation in two related discussions. One involves the Marxist approaches to the past that Thompson found to be deterministic and inflexible. Instead of the power and force of historical change and growth emanating from class or capitalism, dragging individuals along with it, Thompson saw people making choices, accepting or rejecting courses, and creating options for themselves. Nothing mechanical or automatic remained in the process itself once he examined it. Insisting that this economic reductionism was a gross caricature of Marx’s actual intent, he engaged in a sustained debate those who expressed political commitments of orthodox Marxism as well as those who accepted

⁷⁷Thompson, “Agency and Choice,” 90, 103.

⁷⁸Interview with E. P. Thompson in Henry Abelove, Betsy Blackmar, Peter Dimock, and Jonathan Schneer [MARHO: The Radical Historians Organization], eds., *Visions of History* (New York, 1983), 21.

the economic conceptions of life within Western capitalism.⁷⁹ In a second way, though, he sharpened his concept of agency by enlarging it beyond the traditional discussion of historical materialism and determinism. He directed his focus at the more prevalent but equally disabling hubris of the intellectuals. A more subtle reductionism seemed often at work in this regard since academics would frequently borrow concepts and categories and ideal types from other disciplines and try to apply them to the past. Such constructs as class, capitalism, and ideology especially took on hard, static meanings when lifted from the synchronic disciplines that were unaccustomed to finding such phenomena promiscuously in human patterns over a period of time. When such concepts were applied in a synchronic way, rather than in a diachronic approach, the result was both a halting of the historical processes at key moments determined by the intellectual device's definition and a reduction of the aspirations and efforts of people in history to those intellectual formulations. The static terminology of the historians thereby caused as many problems as it remedied.⁸⁰

While one response to the obstacles identified by Thompson would be a reversion to a positivistic approach in which the events of the past lacked larger conceptual meaning, Thompson used the concept of agency as a concept to allow a diachronic approach to the past and a more historical conceptualization of the terminology that could be useful in understanding processes at work in the past. In Thompson's hands the concept of agency became not a

⁷⁹In addition to "Agency and Choice," see especially, Thompson, "Commitment in Politics," and "Socialist Humanism."

⁸⁰MARHO, *Visions of History*, 20-22; Thompson, "Folklore, Anthropology, and Social History," *Indian Historical Review*, 3 (1978), 260-261; Thompson, "Revolution Again!" 29-30.

specified pattern of behavior but a sensitivity to the varieties of human behavior, to choices people have made, to beliefs they have held, to popular activities, to popular participation in the making of history. In those activities and aspirations, class could be found but it would not be uncovered in conformity to an ideal type, but in “an examination of repeated patterns emerging over time.”⁸¹ It was a context thus in which people “act, experience, think, and act again.”⁸² Or, in different language pressing the same point, Thompson argued that class should be used as “*a historical category, describing people in relationship over time, and the ways in which they become conscious of their relationships, separate, unite, enter into struggle, form institutions and transmit values in class ways.*”⁸³ With the perspective of agency the concepts applied to the past become evolutionary rather than static, flexible rather than rigid, and broad and imaginative rather than narrow and literal.

With central concepts like class and capitalism and ideology considered as historical processes instead of static categories and with the core perspective of the notion of agency, a more complete notion of historical context begins to emerge. One final element, that of dialectics, suggests the pattern of relationships in that context. The dialectics that emerge in Thompson’s work, however, range far from the conventional structural contradictions that the term often suggests. “I am asking,” Thompson wrote in the late 1950s, “not only for a sense of

⁸¹MARHO, *Visions of History*, 20.

⁸²Thompson, “Socialist Humanism,” 113.

⁸³Thompson, “Folklore, Anthropology, and Social History,” 264-266.

history, but for a sense of the dialectics of social change.”⁸⁴ In these dialectics that battle is joined on a number of fronts. The point of departure for Thompson and the English model is the rejection of the deterministic nature of the dialectics, a rejection which fuels his debate with structuralists, whether Marxist like Louis Althusser or anti-Marxist like Neil Smelser. In place of that determinism he envisions a “*dialogue* between social being and social consciousness,” without priority given to one or the other; they each give meaning to the other; they each limit the other.⁸⁵ The same tension becomes manifest in another light when Thompson says that he is “examining the dialectic of interaction, the dialectic between ‘economics’ and ‘values.’”⁸⁶ And when he argued that working class history has been “*a way of struggle* between competing moralities” he argued that the dialectics are at work *within* that class as well as between working class and ruling class.⁸⁷ And the dialectic involves the historian as well. Thompson found a dialectic, as noted above, between historical actuality and the models used to understand that actuality, a “dialectic,” a “quarrel” necessary to intellectual growth. So powerful was that dialectic that Thompson even rejected his own earlier use of the term “model,” presumably because of its static implications. Thus more than a concrete model of the past, Thompson has suggested a sense of context in which human agency, historic processes of class, and powerful

⁸⁴Thompson, “Commitment in Politics,” 53.

⁸⁵Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, 9; Thompson, “Folklore, Anthropology, and Social History,” 264-266.

⁸⁶MARHO, *Visions of History*, 21.

⁸⁷Thompson, “Commitment in Politics,” 52.

dialectics instead of fixed patterns of relationships and change are dominant.

In considering the relevance of this approach to American worker history the temptation is to indicate ever the more precisely how historians should look at the past and to define carefully the framework that should be employed in that examination. Then one may resume the jaded admonition to follow that example. Or one may lift parts of that work for application elsewhere, a practice which runs the risk of distortion, rigidity, and the inference of mechanical relationships. And while other possibilities are available, including the suggestion of a single, specific interpretive framework for the understanding of American workers' history, the underlying peril remains much the same: to reduce the historical context of the American working class to a group of components that can be enumerated is to reduce that context to the literal, the concrete, the mechanical, or the artificial. Which is to miss the point of identifying historical context altogether.

The beginning point for the consideration of the relevance of this approach to American worker history, indeed for the articulation of the historical context of an American working class, is not a grand model of intricate relationships. It is instead a sensitivity to the ambivalence of the evidence, and of the past itself, to the susceptibility of events, movements, and ideas to meanings that derive from the circumstances in which they were born, in which they happened, and to which they gave consequence. Whether a political activity in the formal, explicit sense, the song and rowdiness of the saloon, the piety of the workers' church, the experiences on the shop floor with other workers and with management, or the pressures and circumstances of race and gender and ethnicity, the significance of any one contributes to and derives from the total significance as patterns of values, disciplines, institutions, and assumptions congeal over time and as the

precursors of such relationships and their inheritors are considered together to illumine a single moment or event. The “wholeness” will always be elusive, but it can be approached only through the most deliberate effort. What Paul Buhle observed as Thompson’s “decisive blow to the theory of ‘base’ and superstructure” is precisely the point beyond the Marxist debate in which it was formed: the “analysis that takes historic circumstances in their totality and tries to reason out the contradictions from the evidence at hand” is the analysis that operates with a sense of context appropriate to a historical understanding of workers and the meanings they attached to their own lives and the society and relationships of which they were part.⁸⁸

The specific patterns in American history that will provide the literal contexts for the understanding of an American working class will be those that penetrate the organization of life and the relationship, the dialectic, of people with that organization over time. The prodigious research in the last several decades indicates both the frustration and the vitality in such a search. Again, Eric Foner perceived most articulately that this is a problem and opportunity that reaches beyond the history of workers: “If the process of redefinition threatens to mark the end of labor history as conventionally understood, it also opens the prospect of a broad new vision of American history, with the experience of working people at its center.”⁸⁹ Ultimately, that is what the problem of context is all about. It may come in the pursuit of the question of workers’ control raised by David Montgomery and in the directions he suggests—inquiries that link the shop floor and the world outside the factory and the “forms of political struggle that come out of

⁸⁸Buhle, “E. P. Thompson and his Critics,” 132.

⁸⁹Foner, “Labor historians seek useful past,” p. 11.

the everyday lives of working people.”⁹⁰ It may come in the effort to extend the inquiry into broader areas encompassing the connecting relationships and tensions of life. Ultimately, however, it will be an exploration of the choices and commitments people make as they make their own world and their own history. For this context is above all a history of those choices and the growth of social consciousness they reflect, a history which can be understood only in terms of relationship to social being. And that history, to borrow from Thompson, “like the growth of a poet’s mind, can never, in the last analysis, be planned.”

⁹⁰Interview with David Montgomery in MARHO, *Visions of History*, 180.