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Spatial Relations, Histories From Below and the Makings of Agency: Reflections on *The Making of the English Working Class* at 50.

Abstract

In this paper we propose a conversation between work in labour history and labour geography, in part centring on the formative contribution of E.P.Thompson. We contend that the commitment to multiple and political forms of agency, working class experiences and the positioning of class as process, which are lasting contributions of *The Making of the English Working Class*, offer resources for re-invigorating debates on agency within labour geography and beyond. The paper scrutinizes the spatial politics at work in Thompson's account of agency and experience through drawing on critiques of Thompson by feminist and post-colonial scholars. The paper explores the significance of Thompson's work for asserting a spatial politics of labour and argues for attention to the diverse agentic spatial practices shaped through labour organising and struggles. The paper concludes by setting out some key aspects of the terms of a conversation between labour geographies and labour histories.

Key words:

Labour geography; labour history; agency; antagonism; experience; New Left.

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1. Introduction

E.P.Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (hereafter *Making*) was foundational to the historical and intellectual movement which became characterised as 'history from below'.¹ Published in 1963 it has been much critiqued, debated and utilised ever since. 2013 was the fiftieth anniversary of this key text; this anniversary and some of the debates it has engendered make this a fitting time to revisit Thompson's work and the geographies and spatial imaginaries it articulated.² In particular we seek to use interpretations of Thompson's work as a starting point to think about the terms of discussion between labour history and labour geography. While there have always been cross-overs and engagements between work in labour history and labour geography there has been relatively little systematic discussion of the relations between these two sub-disciplines (see also Ellem and McGrath-Champ, 2012). Here we argue that a conversation between work in labour history and labour geography, in part centring on the formative contribution of E.P.Thompson, can stimulate attempts to rethink the relations between labour, space and agency.

Recent reviews of work by labour geographers have questioned the ways in which labour geography positions labour and constructs working class agency (Castree, 2007, Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010a, 2010b, Tufts and Savage, 2009, Mitchell, 2011). In this paper we contend that the commitment to multiple and politicised forms of agency and the positioning of class as process, which are key contributions of the *Making*, offer resources for re-invigorating debates on agency within labour geography and beyond. The first section uses Thompson's work as a way in to thinking about different accounts of the relations between agency, space and labour; the second section considers the ways in which Thompson navigates tensions between structure and agency; the third section explores the significance of Thompson's work for asserting a spatial politics of labour and the fourth section explores

¹ In the following paper we use the text of the 1968 edition, which was slightly revised from the original and included a typically spirited response by Thompson to key criticisms of the book. We use the term 'histories from below' to signal the diverse approaches that shape work in this tradition, see Bressey, 2014.

² This paper takes Thompson's *Making* and geographers engagement with it as its key focus and for reasons of space it does not engage in depth with Thompson's other work. His work on customs/commoning/moral economy, in particular has been influential in debates on agrarian/ rural resistance. For a useful critical engagement with this work in the context of the Captain Swing risings, see Griffin, 2012.

the diverse agentic spatial practices shaped through labour organising and struggles. We conclude by setting out an agenda for key elements of a conversation between labour history and labour geography.

2. Labour Geography, Thompson and Questions of Agency

Labour geography has been grounded upon an enduring commitment to foregrounding ‘the manipulation of space by workers and unions’ (Herod, 1998a: 5) and has produced accounts which have established labour as significant ‘geographical actors’ (Castree, 2007: 855, Coe et al, 2004). As Don Mitchell argues, it has sought to ensure that ‘workers’ agency is right at the heart of any analysis of the ongoing historical geography of capitalism’ (Mitchell, 2011: 565). Central to this project has been a concern with diverse forms of labour agency as a counter to ‘capital-centred’ accounts of the production of space and place. Thus, for Jamie Peck, labour geography has declared ‘simultaneous commitments to labour’s agency in the abstract, in normative terms, and in methodological practice’ (Peck 2013: 109).

There are significant resonances between these claims and the central contributions of Thompson’s *Making* which famously argued that class needed to be thought of as a ‘historical relationship’, as a process and not as a ‘thing’ (Thompson, 1968: 9-10). The foregrounding of the ‘agency’ of working class actors in the text both inspired historians (and others) in many parts of the world and gave rise to rigorous critique (e.g. Anderson, 1980, Epstein, 2001).³ Thompson notes that he adopted the term ‘making’ in the title ‘because it is a study in an active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning’. The ‘working class’, he avers, ‘did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making’ (Thompson, 1968: 9). This engagement with agency and with a diverse sense of working class ‘experience’ was an intervention in an existing field of labour history which was dominated by a rather arid sense of official trade union histories and a focus on living standards.

The book was also a decisive political intervention which was shaped by Thompson’s role as a key figure in the anti-Stalinist New Left after his departure from the Communist Party in 1956 (see Featherstone, 2012, Kenny, 1995). Thompson had been a leading intellectual presence in both the Communist Party Historian’s Group and the dissident Communist

³ The detailed debates over materialism and the linguistic/cultural turn in history which were in part prompted by and in part a reaction against Thompsonian social history are beyond the scope of this paper, for a useful summary of these debates, see Epstein, 2001: 1-9 .

opposition focussed around the *Reasoner* and then *New Reasoner* which he co-edited with John Saville. This political formation shaped a critique of ‘the mechanical theory of human consciousness’ that Thompson saw as central to Stalinism (Thompson, 2014: 44). As Bryan Palmer notes, the ‘great achievement’ of the *Making* was the ‘unmistakable rupture it forced in the historical literature, where class formation could no longer simply be posed, by radicals and reactionaries alike, as a mechanical reflection of economic change’ (Palmer, 1994: 94).

These anti-Stalinist political commitments were integral to Thompson’s detailed reconstructions of labourers’ struggles, worldviews and political activity. While many theoretical accounts of labour and agency remain frustratingly abstract Thompson’s approach was grounded in a direct engagement with the ‘lived experience’ and struggles of differently placed workers; though London and the West-Riding of Yorkshire loom large in his accounts. Such a placed analysis of working class formation, however, often belied the significant claims and imaginaries that were worked through the text (Sarkar, 1997). Thompson, as Jacques Rancière has noted, ‘chose as the inaugural scene in the “making” of the English working class’ a ‘modest event’: ‘the January 1792 meeting, in a London tavern, of nine honest and industrious workers seized with the singular conviction that every adult person in possession of reason had, as much as anyone else, the capacity to elect the members of parliament’ (Rancière, 1994: 91-92). For Rancière ‘[n]othing here seems out of the ordinary. And nonetheless it is heresy, the “separation” constitutive of the modern social movement that is declared’.

In this regard, it is useful to position the *Making* as a text which is about challenges to the constitution of the political (Rancière, 1994). Thompson’s work produces an account of the formation of working class movements which takes them seriously as *political* actors. Thus Rancière positions Thompson’s engagement with the term ‘Members Unlimited’ in the opening chapter of the text is a significant ‘rupture in the symbolic markers in the political order’ (1994: 92). He argues that the ‘modern social movement has its place of origin in this pure rupture or pure opening, which the political practices of incorporation and the modes of objectification of social science will apply themselves to warding off: it is that of a class that is no longer a class but “the dissolution of all classes”’ (Rancière, 1994: 92). Rancière’s reading of the opening to the *Making*, then, sees it as an emblematic moment where the political is reshaped; where what he terms the ‘part that has no part’ is included- and in so doing reshapes the ‘partition of the sensible’ (cf Rancière, 1999).

There have, however, been more critical readings of the founding of the LCS which question whose agency and whose experience is foregrounded in Thompson's account. Thus Thompson analyses the role of the LCS primarily through the life of its first secretary, the Scottish shoe maker, Thomas Hardy. Thompson's account of Hardy, however, arguably leads to an account which downplays intersections between class, race and gender. Joan Scott (1999) has commented on the relative invisibility of women within the text and observes that those who are present remain largely confined to domesticity. She contends that historians should not be bound by 'the analytic frame of Thompson's history' but instead seek methods that problematise 'all the connections it so readily assumes' (Scott, 1999: 87, see also Clark, 1995).

A key challenge to the analytical frames and geographical limits of Thompson's work is Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker's account of the motley resistances of the 'Atlantic working class' in their *Many Headed Hydra* (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000). While very much influenced by the tradition of Thompsonian social history they recast the LCS as part of Atlantic circulations of revolt and forms of political organisation, rather than as part of a sealed tradition of the rights of 'freeborn Englishmen'. They note that Thomas Hardy was influenced by 'the organizational and intellectual innovations of the motley crew (the committees of correspondence [from the American Revolution] and abolitionist literature)' (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000: 337). In contrast to Thompson, Linebaugh and Rediker foreground the friendships between Thomas Hardy, Lydia Hardy and the ex-slave, abolitionist and writer Olaudah Equiano which they position as central to some of the political exchanges and intersections in the formation of the LCS (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000: 337-9 see also Linebaugh, 1986). Hardy drew on his friendship with Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) to facilitate linkages between activists working for political reform in London and Sheffield, relationships which locate the formation of the LCS as part of the 'irreducible social heterogeneity and transnationalism of the cultures of anti-slavery' (Fischer, 2004: 226, see also Gilroy, 1993: 10-11, Featherstone, 2008). This emphasises the need to think critically about who in the excluded 'part' becomes recognised as political actors and suggests that it is necessary to consider how labour is politicised, through what spatialities and on what terms.

This emphasis on the organising experiences of workers links to labour geographer's work which seeks to politicise the spatial activities of labour. Cumbers et al (2010: 55) have argued that 'Thompson's reminder of a perspective from below that seeks to understand capital

accumulation as an unfolding and open dynamic of class struggle, not a 'script' being played out according to some abstract laws of capital' has important implications for labour geography. They position Thompson's work as a useful counter to 'capital-centred' accounts of the production of space which were an early target of labour geographers. Thus Herod argues that although Harvey (1982: 412) suggested that 'his analysis allowed us to think about 'how capital and labour can use space as a weapon in class struggle', in practice his efforts to theorize how the geography of capitalism is made principally focused on the former' (Herod, 2001: 29).

In this regard, the dynamic character of Thompson's intervention in considering how working class traditions are invoked, articulated and politicised was largely missed in early interventions in labour geography which tended to reduce Thompson's work to the assertion of a historical tradition of labour in particular places. Thus, writing in *Organizing the Landscape*, an edited collection that shaped the terms of early debates in 'labour geography', Andy Herod positioned Thompson's work as part of the 'examinations of working-class traditions related to union organizing' which 'have tended to emphasize how the cultural practices that represent and exemplify such traditions are reproduced historically'. For Herod such approaches are limited as they 'have paid less attention to their spatial aspects, except in the narrow terms of delineating the locations in which these traditions predominate' (Herod, 1998b: 124). In similar terms Jane Wills contended in the same volume that while Thompson's work was central to shaping the 'idea that the workers can make and shape their own history' he constructed class relationships as 'historical ones' (Wills, 1998: 132). She contends that 'understanding geographies of trade-union organization involves more than looking at the historical development of class in particular places' (Wills, 1998: 132).

Such caution about reducing labour to a limited sense of 'place-based traditions' is well founded. The reworking of capital's spatial fix to include workers spatial strategies was integral to labour geography's agenda of critically reformulating economic geography (Herod, 2001). Indeed as Andy Herod has noted he wanted to 'take from Thompson a more "agentic" view of working-class people but to use it to develop explicitly an understanding of labor's spatial politics' (Herod, pers comm.). While the *Making* does not explicitly engage with spatial politics, it nonetheless engages in creative and productive ways with the ways in

which diverse geographies of working class political activity emerge.⁴ There is, for example Thompson's powerful sense of the scepticism of northern workers to London-based radicalism which explores the contested relations through which such politics were constructed (see Thompson, 1968: 711-713). This was a broader theme in Thompson's work and political activity; his 1960 essay on the Leeds radical and Independent Labour Party activist Tom Maguire opens, for example, with his scepticism about the dismissal of 'provincial events' as 'shadowy incidents or unaccountable spontaneous upheavals on the periphery of the national scene' (Thompson, 1994:23). Such a perspective was arguably informed by being part of the 'impromptu gatherings' of communists at Leeds' station waiting to hear what had happened at the Party's executive committee. In 1956 following the Soviet invasion of Hungary, for example, 'rows and arguments' were to take 'place on the station platform itself' (Kettle, 1997: 181).⁵

Thompson's work and political activism, then, was alive both to the contested relations of agency, space and labour and some of the ways in which such relations were conditioned and structured. Such themes have been central to recent critical appraisals of labour geographies. Thus Jamie Peck has critiqued the 'privileging of agency' within labour geography and suggested that this has led to 'a (new) kind of structure-agency binary, in order to locate the project unambiguously on the side of unbounded political possibility' (Peck, 2013: 109-110). Neil Coe and David Jordhus-Lier have responded to such concerns by arguing that 'the notion of agency needs to be further conceptualised and fleshed out in terms of its multiple geographies and temporalities, and that the potential for worker action should always be seen in relation to the forms of capital, the state, the community and the labour market in which workers are incontrovertibly yet variably embedded' (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010a: 213). To engage with such 'multiple geographies and temporalities' of labour agency Coe and Jordhus-Lier advocate a 'return' to questions of 'structuration', the body of work most obviously associated with the work of the sociologist Anthony Giddens, which they suggest 'provides a nuanced language for describing the relationship between actors, institutions and structures' (ibid, 215). The next section explores these relations between structure, agency and the political.

⁴ For suggestive remarks on how different Thompson's account of work-discipline might have been if he took space seriously as an analytical category as well as time, see Harvey 1985:11.

⁵ The disjuncture was shared. Stuart Hall talks about the shock of travelling to Halifax for early New Left Review editorial board meetings (Akomfrah, 2013).

3. Contested Spatial-Temporal Constructions of Structure and Agency

William Sewell Jr has noted that there are strong affinities between Giddens's account of structuration and Thompson's account of agency. Indeed Sewell Jr argues that 'Giddens's notions of agency and structure provide a better theoretical pivot for Thompson's account of class formation than Thompson's own amorphous concept of experience' (Sewell, 1990: 65, see also Giddens, 1987). For Sewell Jr, Giddens's work 'provides a theoretical vocabulary capable of accounting for what Thompson actually achieves in the text of the *Making* a portrayal of English workers as structurally constrained and endowed agents whose experience and knowledgeable action produced, in interaction with other agents operating under different structural constraints and endowments, a self-conscious working-class' (Sewell Jr, 1990: 66).

Derek Gregory goes further remarking that 'Thompson is no calligrapher illuminating the archives for the sake of some higher aesthetic; his whole project arises from definite political commitments and in turn entails definite political consequences, which spiral through what Anderson calls the "basic duality of the forms of historical determination" and which I have identified here as structuration' (Gregory, 1982: 15). Such readings of Thompson's text challenge critiques by writers such as Perry Anderson which associated his work with a 'voluntaristic' conception of agency. Thus Anderson argues that '[t]he jagged temporal breaks, and the uneven spatial distributions and displacements, of capital accumulation between 1790 and 1830 inevitably marked the composition of character of the nascent English proletariat. Yet they find no place in this account of its formation' (Anderson, 1980: 34). While Anderson offers an interesting and productive spatial imaginary here, he positions workers' agency as being articulated within these jagged breaks and uneven spatial distributions rather than having the potential to disrupt or reconfigure them.⁶

In opposition to Anderson, Renate Rosaldo argues that the *Making* 'sketches structural determinants and integrates them into a study of human agency' (Rosaldo, 1990: 114). Thus Thompson's (1968: 575) treatment of how the Combination Acts, enacted in 1799 and 1825 to repress nascent forms of collective organising, were negotiated through the activity of working class politics and combinations, provides a nuanced account of such 'conditioning',

⁶ Thompson's (1978) own theoretical defence of his position in his polemical assault on *Althusser in Poverty of Theory* was not, however, particularly useful in conveying the nuances of his handling of agency and experience (see Hall, 1981, Sarkar, 1998).

not least through a sensitivity to the spatial variation in the operation of the Acts. There is a direct sense of how these Acts both limited action and were circumvented, but also how they were challenged and reworked through working class activity. The Acts are thus brought into contestation rather than functioning as a fixed or finalised back drop to political activity.⁷

This concern with the political allows a reading of the *Making* which is less about a sense of contained, confined, structured action as implied by structuration theory and more about the ways in which new antagonisms and articulations of political community and agency were shaped and generated. This is a significant challenge to the landscapes of structuration theory which have little space for thinking about the political. To do so, however, arguably involves engaging with the processes of bringing spatial relations and unequal power relations into contestation which are rather elided by ‘structuration’ theory. As Bob Jessop has argued Giddens’s account of structuration relates ‘structure and agency in a rather mechanical fashion’ and brackets off structure and agency in ways which reinforces this dualism ‘despite its ritual reference to recursivity’ (Jessop, 2001: 1223). Further in his account there is ‘little, if any, recognition (let alone explanation) of the differential capacity of actors and their actions to change different structures’ (Jessop, 2001: 1223).

This has implications for Coe and Jordhus-Lier’s ‘constrained agency’ position. For Coe and Jordhus-Lier ‘agency always needs to be ‘grounded’ or re-embedded in the space-time contexts of which it is a constituent process’ (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010a: 218). Their notion of constrained agency is largely framed through the connections and tensions between trade unions, the state and ‘local communities’. Whilst identifying important links between the productive and reproductive spheres of working class lives, we argue that this more discrete framing of the engagement limits the possibilities for what counts as a spatial politics of labour. As a result Coe and Jordhus-Lier appear less engaged with the generative practices through which such antagonisms are brought into contestation in multiple and diverse ways and by doing so reproduce the rather narrowly economic lens adopted by some labour geographers.

While Giddens’ ‘theory of agency’ positions time-space relations as ‘*inherent in the constitution of all social interaction*’ his account tends to flatten out experiences of space and time in constituting social processes (Giddens, 1979: 3, emphasis in original). There is

⁷ Thompson was to develop his engagement with the law in more analytical depth in his study *Whigs and Hunters: the Origins of the Black Acts*.

therefore a need to consider how factors such as labour time are experienced differently by different workers as Thompson (1967) made clear in his work on capitalism, time and work discipline. Such understandings can be integral to opening up more differentiated accounts of whose agency and experience is shaped through the activity of labour and social movements. As Partha Chatterjee has argued in terms which invoke Thompson 'time is heterogeneous, unevenly dense', noting that 'even industrial workers do not all internalize the work-discipline of capitalism, and more curiously, even when they do, they do not do so in the same way. Politics here does not mean the same thing to all people' (Chatterjee, 2004: 7). His understanding facilitates more open accounts of antagonism and agency and in doing so more flexible understandings of constrained agency.

This usefully suggests some of the different ways and spaces through which labour can be articulated politically. Thompson's attentiveness to the terms on which agency is articulated offers a simultaneously less abstracted and more politicised account. While asserting the importance of the relational contexts is important, there is a significant risk here of treating the 'constraints' on agency as given rather than constantly renegotiated, reworked and politicised in different ways as in Thompson's account. In particular his work evokes a powerful sense of the ways in which agency is constructed through particular struggles and antagonisms, which are often over the right to shape economic and political landscapes and communities (see also Mitchell, 2011). Thompson predominantly viewed such agency in temporal terms; arguing, for example, of the fear 'evoked by the evidence of the translation of the rabble into a disciplined *class*' (Thompson, 1968: 748, emphasis in original). There is, however, an uneasy articulation in the text of the ongoing process of class formation with attentiveness to uneven, differentiated and contested practices of struggle.

For other Marxist historians, such as Eric Hobsbawm, the problem with Thompson's analysis was not so much his sense of class making as a finished process, but his periodisation with Hobsbawm arguing that the 'working class is not 'made' until long after Thompson's book ends' (Hobsbawm, 1984: 196). Thompson's attentiveness to the differentiated and multiple forms of agency and to specific political trajectories⁸, however, resonates with challenges to accounts which locate agency as part of abstracted and temporalised processes. In this regard, read together with Doreen Massey's account of space as an unfinished process, the *Making* allows a more open sense of the making of agency and social relations (Massey, 2005). It can

⁸ This was asserted most directly in his critique of the Nairn Anderson theses in his essay *The Peculiarities of the English*.

usefully open up an explicit focus on the spatial politics of labour which shifts beyond the often rather narrowly economic lens adopted by labour geographers. The following section explores the implications of this approach for thinking about a 'spatial politics of labour'.

4. A Spatial Politics of Labour and the 'Working Class Presence'

Writing in 'An Army of Redressers', the chapter of the *Making* which chronicles the 'quasi-insurrectionary' politics of Luddism, Thompson writes that '[a]nyone who knows the geography of the Midlands and the north [of England] will find it difficult to believe that the Luddites of three adjoining counties had no contact with each other'. He continues that it 'requires an exercise of mental agility to segregate Luddism in our minds, as a purely 'industrial' movement, totally unconnected with 'politics' at a time when disaffected Irish were coming in hundreds into Lancashire, and when people celebrated the assassination of the Prime Minister with triumph in the streets' (Thompson, 1968: 631). Thompson's account dramatises the assertive 'working class presence' shaped through the Luddite rebellions and handles the relations between labour politics and protest in dynamic fashion. He refuses a 'narrow' construction of the luddites as a purely 'industrial' movement rejecting the economic logic which structures Eric Hobsbawm's account of machine breaking as a form of 'collective bargaining by riot' (Hobsbawm, [1952], 1998: 9). He also explicitly rejected the teleology of Hobsbawm in constructing 'workers' such as machine breakers as 'pre-political', 'primitive rebels' (Hobsbawm, 1959); 'nor will it do', Thompson avers, 'to describe Luddism as a form of 'primitive' trade unionism' (Thompson, 1968: 593).

Thompson positions Luddism not as a knee jerk reaction to 'immediate economic and industrial grievances' (Thompson, 1968: 529), but as a set of struggles over the terms on which place and community are produced and articulated. For Thompson, rejecting the condescension of most accounts of Luddism, their 'demands looked forwards, as much as backwards; and they contained within them a shadowy image, not so much of a paternalist, but of a democratic community, in which industrial growth should be regulated according to ethical priorities and the pursuit of profit be subordinated to human needs' (Thompson, 1968:601). He evokes the importance of Luddism as a set of struggles which connected the workplace and broader community and relational contexts. As Katrina Navickas has recently argued, Luddites were 'defending the 'task-scapes' of their workplaces but they learned their tactics from longer running forms of resistance in the 'task-scapes of commons, woods, and moors' (Navickas, 2011: 63, see also Griffin, 2012, Randall, 1982). Thompson constructs and

facilitates accounts whereby particular organisations, working class publications, reading groups and meeting places become politically significant in their own right. This methodology allows Thompson to consider the multiple and contrasting forms of what he describes in Part 3 of the *Making* as a ‘working class presence’.

The spatial practices through which the Luddite movement sought to construct a working class presence and agency are integral to Thompson’s account. Thompson’s engagement with place in terms of the West-Riding is central to his engagement with the modalities and techniques of organising that shaped Luddism and his understanding of ‘class formation’ and agency (Navickas, 2013, see also Roberston, 2013). Thompson’s account is sensitive to the spatial practices and forms of territorialisation mobilised by the Luddites. Thus he notes that ‘the Luddites moved with immunity’ through the ‘bridle paths and old packhorse tracks’ of the West Riding and were able to evade the ‘well-known’ ‘movements of the cavalry’ (Thompson, 1968: 670). His account is also attentive to some of the uneven geographies of Luddism, and as his engagement above with the Irish suggests, to the production of such communities in relation to flows and networks of working class movements. He signals the importance of oaths and the influence of forms of Irish subaltern political organisation on the Luddites (Linebaugh, 1992, Wells, 1983, Featherstone, 2013).⁹ For Peter Linebaugh adding an ‘Atlantic optic’ to the ‘insular lens’ through which Thompson views Luddism allows us to see that what was ‘quietly underground in one part of the world may erupt in fury in another part’ (Linebaugh, 2014: 94-5).

Thompson’s account of Luddism, then, may not have always been explicit about its engagement with the movements’ spatial politics, it nonetheless dramatises some of the generative uses of space that shaped Luddism. It is also shaped by a commitment to thinking about the productive intersections of labour struggle and the makings of the political. In this vein Geoff Mann’s work on the wage as a ‘political relation’ has made a significant contribution by creatively utilising Thompson’s thought to position the wage relation as a cultural symbol of working class experience. In particular he draws upon Thompson to argue that class is ‘all these other politics, culture, and subject positions’ not an ‘orthodox “Second International” Marxian terms where all workers’ interests are identical’ (Mann, 2007: 156). This approach stresses the importance of maintaining the significance of the political element

⁹ The shorter section on ‘The Irish’ in the *Making* is less satisfactory in developing spatially sensitive accounts of labour identities and in contrast provides an account which categorises political action in an unhelpful manner.

of labour struggle as well as the economic. By opening up questions around the political Mann's account usefully goes beyond some of the rather undifferentiated sense of labour mobilised in some variants of labour geography. As Routledge and Cumbers assert through their work on *Global Justice Networks*, approaches which consider agency and networking as 'political praxis' can address the 'lack of detailed scrutiny about these 'movements' components parts, their operational networks and their spatial dynamics, strategies and practices' (Routledge and Cumbers, 2009: 17, see also Cumbers et al, 2008).

By foregrounding the multiple antagonisms and experiences forged through struggles over the wage Mann's account destabilises placeless articulations of the capital versus labour antagonism. Thus he compares Marx's abstraction of the wage relation in *Capital* to the freedom experienced by Frederick Douglass (the freed African American slave who was to become a major abolitionist figure) on his being paid a wage. His comparison speaks to the ways in which the wage 'as a social and economic relation, is not an ahistorical pecuniary exchange. Its politics are historically generated and culturally charged' (Mann, 2007: 2). The weight given to these broader understandings of the wage relation and the political and cultural aspects of wage based struggles is directly linked by Mann to the work of Thompson. This engagement shapes Mann's attempts to delineate 'the cultural and political economy of the wage that is sensitive not only to narrowly economic dynamics but also to the ways in which the wage is both formed and given meaning by culture and politics and the history in which they are embedded' (Mann, 2007: 3).

By locating struggles over the wage at the nexus of debates over the intersections of race, gender and class Mann in part positions himself in relation to currents within social history that have worked creatively in the wake of figures like Thompson. Scholars who were inspired by Thompson have creatively pushed at the limits of a Thompsonian position and through doing so have opened up new accounts of the different articulations of experience and antagonism.¹⁰ Selina Todd has recently argued the 'displacement of class by gender' which is the 'most significant and wide-ranging change in histories from below' was shaped by socialist and feminist historians who 'built on Thompson's approach in studies of domestic life, welfare and youth' (Todd, 2013). These diverse lineages suggest the importance of engaging with the ways in which different articulations of experience have

¹⁰ Thus laments by figures such as Robert Colls that 'It's all gender, ethnic, "other" and global history these days as Marxists have de-Marxified and taken their struggles elsewhere' ignore the diverse intellectual impact of Thompson's work (Colls, 2013).

opened up a focus on new forms of political antagonism and asserted different accounts of what counts as political agency.

His account of the making of a working class presence, as Navickas (2009) has rightly identified, often tied to particular working class places and spaces (pubs, meeting rooms and public spaces). These spaces and the physical documentation of radical politics (pamphlets, leaflets, newspapers, etc.) all contributed to the production and assertion of a working class presence. Such spaces, as feminist historians such as Anna Clark have emphasised, were often produced through particular gendered spaces and relations. The tavern based meeting culture of the LCS, for example, was produced through forms of homosocial activity and were constituted through the exclusion of women (see Clark, 1995, Featherstone, 2010). Such exclusions, however, were not given or unchanging. Thus Catherine Hall (2000) argued for a focus on the intersections of race, class, nation and gender in the conjuncture of the 1832 reform act, in ways which open up understandings of the geographies of political reform beyond the bounded male working class invoked by Thompson.

In similar terms Paul Gilroy has argued that ‘the laudable, radical varieties of English cultural sensibility’ celebrated by Thompson ‘were not produced spontaneously from their own internal and intrinsic dynamics’ (Gilroy, 1993: 11). Hall concludes that ‘[t]he ‘rule of difference’ was indeed a complex business requiring the regulation of class, ethnic, racial and gender divisions both ‘at home’ and across the empire to secure the nation in its imagined homogeneity with subjects and citizens in place’ (Hall, 2000: 129, see also Bressey, 2011). Dipesh Chakrabarty takes such a concern with the implications of Thompson centring of English articulations of liberty and freedom further. He asks ‘[i]f the particular notions of ‘free born Englishman’, of ‘equality before the law’ and so on were the most crucial heritages of the English working class in respect of its capacity for developing class consciousness, what about the working classes for instance, the Indian one, whose heritages do not include such as a liberal baggage? Are the latter condemned forever to a state of ‘low classness’ unless they develop some kind of cultural resemblance to the English?’ (Chakrabarty, 1989: 223).¹¹ This suggests the need to question the universal quality that Thompson gives to his account of ‘class experience’ (Chakrabarty, 2013: 25).

¹¹ Thompson’s work was, nonetheless, to have a very significant role in Indian radical and labour history and shaped the terms of debate of both early work in Subaltern Studies and emerging critiques about the focus of that collective’s work, Guha, 1983, Sarkar, 1997, Chandavarkar, 2000.

There is a tension, however, in Thompson's work between his attempt to use 'Englishness' as a 'brake' on abstracted or romanticised ideas of internationalism and the more situated geographies which shaped Thompson's own internationalist politics and endeavours, which were central to the transnational trajectories and dissemination of his work (Thompson, 2014: 238). His editorial work with the *New Reasoner* shaped a strongly internationalist New Left-engaging with dissident Communists in Eastern Europe and leading anti-colonial figures. The *Making* was written at a time when he was developing a distinctive critical position on the internationalist trajectories of the New Left. Thompson sought to recover and assert the importance of working class internationalism, challenging accusations that the British labour movement was 'insular' and arguing instead that it had been 'fairly sensitive to international pressures' (Thompson, 2014: 231). He was, however, fiercely critical of the turn to 'Third Worldist' concerns by leading intellectuals in the new left which he saw as a form of 'revolutionary romanticism' and as risking an evacuation of struggles in 'first world' contexts. Thus he warned 'internationalists and intellectual workers' that 'the old mole, revolution, may still be at work in Battersea and Fife, in Tyneside and Ebbw Vale' (Thompson, 2014: 238). He continued that it always 'seems that events are more "real", more critical, more urgent, outside of this stubborn, tradition-bound, equable island' (2014: 238).

His stress on the importance of particular geographical contexts in such accounts can envision spatial politics in ways which stress the barriers erected between such places and international exchanges and traditions. Further there is a re-assertion of particular national left traditions which suggest a sense of an 'authentic' left tradition. His warnings against the 'potential geographical fragmentation of socialist theory' also speak to a universalising logic which could efface differences as well as uniting diverse struggles (2014: 223). Thus he could argue that 'if we exaggerate the differences in the Third World situations, we may neglect similarities; and we may also neglect the points at which we may make our internationalism effective, by clarifying what it is that socialist humanists in Moscow, London and Accra ought to be working for *together*' (2014: 224, emphasis in original). Historians who have sought to de-centre the nation in the writing of history from below such as Linebaugh and Rediker point, by contrast, to a transnational spatial politics which acknowledges the work of 'a motley crew' – 'a multi-racial, multi-ethnic. transatlantic working class' 'whose presence, much less agency, is rarely, if ever, acknowledged' by nation-centred historiographies (Linebaugh and Rediker, 1990: 229). Such approaches open up what counts as internationalism and positions 'universals' such as multi-ethnic

conceptions of humanity emerging through shared struggles and through the circulation of radical experience (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000: 352). Their account is also part of a challenge to the terms on which we understand the spatialities of working class experience.

5. Working Class Experience(s) and the Construction of Multiple Antagonisms

Of all the terms deployed in the *Making* ‘experience’ is undoubtedly one of the most contested contributions of the book and it was later to be deployed as a central weapon in Thompson’s ill tempered polemic against Althusser in *The Poverty of Theory*. While the *Making* was configured in relation to a transnational anti-Stalinist discourse, the text was nonetheless structured by certain limits, especially in relation to tensions around the nationalist, and largely masculinist, framing of radicalism given by Thompson. The previous sections have suggested, however, that as Thompson’s work itself moved, mutated and was challenged and reconfigured new understandings of agency and classed relations were generated. In the process different ways of articulating the relations between agency, class and politics were constituted, in part through exchanges shaped by Thompson’s internationalist commitments (Featherstone, 2012, Palmer, 1994). This section uses a focus on the contested nature of experience to engage with the diverse forms of agency produced through working class and social movement mobilisation. This more nuanced understanding of the politics of labour is combined with methodological suggestions regarding the developing remit of labour geography.

Thompson makes a key intervention by emphasising the actual brutality of the primitive accumulation process raised by Marx in *Capital Volume One*, by arguing that ‘the rewards of the ‘march of progress’ always seemed to be gathered by someone else’ (Thompson, 1968: 274). Massey (2011) has linked this aspect of Thompson’s work to an understanding of landscape which has ‘not allowed its smoothing effect, its subtle operation of reconciliation. The conventional continuity of landscape, and of the founding conception of space upon which it rests, is punctuated by a multiplicity of stories.’ Examples of this approach are evident throughout the *Making*, but are perhaps most notable between Chapters 7 and 10 which address Thompson’s concerns about arguments over the ‘standard of living’ and illustrate Thompson’s persistence in understanding class as a historical process and refusal to categorise class in an abstract manner. The chapters on ‘Field Labourers’, ‘Artisans and others’, and ‘The Weavers’ show this sensitivity to the diversity of labour cultures and communities within particular places and times. In these chapters, Thompson considers the

disruption of previous practices, the old way, interrupted by a new way and argues that in the case of the weavers ‘the closer we look at their way of life, the more inadequate simple notions of economic progress and backwardness appear’ (Thompson, 1968: 322). His arguments in these sections indicate the importance of engaging with diverse forms of working class experience as more capital centric accounts can overlook the changes, suppression and forms of resistance over assaults on workers and commoners’ customary rights and practices (Griffin, 2012).

Whilst acknowledging the historical specificity of such methods, we contend that labour geographers have much to gain from a more imaginative usage of sources and notions of labour experience to develop more textured accounts of agency and structuration as mobilised by figures such as Thompson. One key implication of such work is the need to develop methodologies which can engage and recover such multiple antagonisms and experiences. Accounts which restrict understandings of working class politics and labour organising to official trade union voices alone, risk ignoring nuances, tensions, connections and possibilities within labour agency. This necessitates an engagement with sources and methods that go beyond official union voices.

In this regard, Thompson’s opening up of agency in the *Making* was related to his innovations in his use of sources and methodology. The text illustrates an extraordinary ability to manage the many contrasting articulations of experiences within labour communities from songs, poems and letters to court papers, meeting minutes, and newspaper reports. As Cal Winslow notes ‘his use of poetry, song, broadsheets made academics flinch’ (Winslow, 2014: 21). Such inclusions position official correspondence from above alongside what Raphael Samuel (1994) described as more ‘unofficial knowledges’ (although Samuel would suggest that an even wider understanding of what constitutes history is required). This approach is one which also reads against the grain of the official histories to imagine the experience of the working class as Thompson himself concedes that much of the working class history he attempts to uncover, particularly the histories of the unskilled working class, remain undocumented.

In common with the opening of multiple antagonisms, experiences and solidarities in labour and social history, however, recent work in labour geographies has extended the sub-field ‘in novel and overlapping directions’, including an engagement with ‘new domains of action’ and ‘new modes of organisation’ (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2010b: 31). Diverse currents in

labour geography have sought to take seriously the many forms, outcomes and modalities of labour agency. This suggests the need to engage with the diverse spatial practices through which agency has been produced during working class struggles and formation. Thus, Waterman and Wills (2001: 306) have argued that work within labour geography requires perspectives which move beyond the conception of a 'homogenous working class – seen as the universal emancipatory subject.' Here we raise some examples of this approach to develop a more diverse, contested and plural sense of the 'agentic spatial practices' through which produced through political activity and labour organising and struggle. We use the term 'agentic spatial practices' to refer to particular uses of space to produce and sustain agency. The rationale for this is to go beyond rather general invocations of agency, to think about the particular spatial practices through which agency can be co-constituted.

In part such work has been enabled by a more sustained focus on 'unofficial' sources and stories in labour geography. Thus, Ince et al use an engagement with workers' use of internet forums in organising 'wild cat' strikes around the rather notorious 'British Jobs For British Workers' disputes at Lindsey Oil Refinery in North East Lincolnshire in 2009 (Ince et al, 2014, Cumbers et al, 2015). This work also used such an approach to engage with 'voices' and experience beyond key union hierarchies, strategies and leaderships which Coe et al have usefully identified as being overly foregrounded in labour geographies (Coe et al, 2008: 285). Sharad Chari has used photographs of the Coloured neighbourhood of Wentworth in Durban, to engage 'with subaltern critique of racial space and subjectivity in the present' (Chari, 2009: 521). Diarmaid Kelliher's engagements with archives and oral histories of solidarities between miners and lesbian and gay support groups during the 1984-5 miners' strike also suggests the importance of recovering histories and geographies of solidarity that have often been marginalised in official accounts of the left (Kelliher, 2014). These innovative approaches offering different aspects of the experience of labour within different geographical contexts also opens up a focus on diverse political antagonisms shaped through struggles and political practice.

Different ways of understanding the relations between struggles over place and labour agency have been shaped through recent work on the struggles of informal labour. Thus Chaturvedi and Gidwani (2011) use ethnographic engagements with legal issues to engage with the struggles of 'informal sector recyclers' in the context of neo-liberalizing India. In particular they focus on struggles of waste pickers in Ghaziabad against 'contractors' using violence and goons to extort money from them and ensuing conflicts over 'who controls the right to

waste?’ (Chaturvedi and Gidwani, 2011: 142). This speaks to the importance of how very marginal workers can nonetheless seek to make claims on, and challenge dominant forms of regulation of space and can attempt to exert agency through doing so (see also Chatterjee, 2004). Linda McDowell’s stress on the importance of engaging with domestic labour, has in similar terms opened up challenges to the dominant focus of labour geography by her focus on ‘reproductive employment that tended to be neglected in the industrial or productionist emphasis that has characterized the development of labor geography as a subfield of economic geography’ (McDowell, 2015: 3). Likewise Rutherford (2010) has linked Thompson’s work to a post-structuralist approach, emphasising identity politics and experiences beyond the workplace and wage relations, and has suggested that this poses many questions for the terms on which labour geographers understand work.

The production of both solidaristic and exclusionary spaces of organising through particular agentic spatial practices have been usefully developed in work by McDowell (2013) on gendering labour geographies, ongoing engagements with migrant workers (May et al, 2007, Rogaly, 2009, Wills et al, 2009) and work on ‘community unionism’ (Wills, 2001, Tufts, 1998). McDowell’s work on post-war migration to Britain, for example, uses oral history work to draw attention to the use of tactics of ‘everyday resistance’ by workers in ‘different service sector workplaces’. Thus she notes that among ‘nurses from the Caribbean a range of covert and overt strategies of resistance such as laughing, joking, and gossiping helped them to survive’ (McDowell, 2015: 17). Recent work has also suggestively linked past and present disputes in ways which enliven the terms of debate of contemporary labour geography. Thus Pearson et al’s (2010: 425) work on the Grunwick 1976-78 and Gate Gourmet 2005 strikes in London illustrates how this approach might be applied as to ‘understand what transformed, apparently docile migrant women into militant workers ready to take action requires an intersectional analysis that goes beyond the management of the labour process and takes into account a holistic understanding of their experience’ (Pearson et al 2010: 425). Such work encourages a pluralised account of labour agency and is sensitive to the fluctuations of labour agency and critically considers reasoning for this. By combining a variety of labour experiences, it destabilises the sense of who and what constitutes agency and opens up an important focus on the spatial politics of labour history (see also Scholz and Liu, 2007 and Featherstone, 2008).

This questioning usefully intersects with work in labour history which has engaged with more exclusionary spatialities shaped through some variants of working class internationalism. Such critical work has shed light on some of the exclusionary spatial practices shaped through working class organisation and which was often rather silenced by older generation of labour historians who tended to treat the forms of whiteness articulated through labour organising as given (Roediger, 1998). Jonathan Hyslop has traced forms of ‘white labourism’ shaped by circuits and flows of union organising between the UK, South Africa and Australia in the early twentieth century in the pre-First World War period saw the formation of an ‘imperial working class’ which ‘produced and disseminated a common ideology of White Labourism’ (Hyslop 1999: 399).

This resonates with, and has influenced, work in geography which has had a much greater sensitivity to the differentiated spatial and power relations constructed through organising practices (Featherstone, 2012). Thus Wendy Jepson has argued, in a discussion of the gendered spatial practices of farm worker unionisation, for an attention to the ‘production of differential spaces in the context of unionisation’ (Jepson 2005: 698). Michelle Buckley has usefully applied such a perspective to the geographies of construction labour in Dubai arguing that the “attending to questions about the politics of ethnicity and race, citizenship, class, or gender” can foreground how the production of space “can depend on the parallel production of complex inequalities and intersecting forms of social difference” (Buckley 2014: 5). The final section briefly draws out the key implications of our argument for an engagement between labour geography and labour history.

5. Agenda: Conversations between Labour Geography and Labour History

This paper has used an engagement with E.P.Thompson’s *Making of the English Working Class* to intervene in recent debates on the relations between space, labour and agency. We have sought to offer a different potential trajectory for labour geographies than the structuration inflected ‘constrained agency’ position outlined by Coe and Jordhus-Lier. In common with Coe and Jordhus-Lier we have articulated a focus on diverse spatio-temporal construction of labour organising which can be useful in moving beyond generic invocations of labour agency and in foregrounding the uneven and variegated constructions of labour’s spatial practices. But we have sought by contrast to open up a much more politicised account of labour agency which is attentive to the uneven and variegated constructions of spatial practices. Through so doing we have sought to emphasise the potential of a conversation at

the intersection of Thompsonian labour history and labour geography. In particular, we think this can address significant aspects of the politicised construction of agency, the spatial politics of labour and open up in methodological terms the ways in which labour is engaged with and understood. In this regard, we suggest the following key areas as being of particular significance in terms of areas of potential conversation and engagement between labour history and geography.

Firstly, we contend that a focus on the relation between agency and diverse spatial and temporal processes opens up possibilities for transcending labour geography's predominant focus on discrete disputes and events. This perspective can allow us to understand how labour organising and struggles can have effects beyond the immediate winning or losing of particular disputes and beyond a narrowly economic construction of work. This allows a concern with the political which is influenced by Thompson's focus in the *Making* on the role of working class actors in reshaping the terms on which the political was experienced and defined. This offers a more generative sense of political and labour agency than is implied by accounts which have been influenced by structuration theory, but is still sensitive to dynamic processes of conditioning. Such a focus on diverse spatial and temporal processes can also offer work in labour history resources for nuancing elements of accounts of space, place and agency.

Secondly, labour geographers, we would argue, have much to learn from emerging work in labour and subaltern histories which have sought to signal the importance of histories and geographies of transnational labour organising in different forms. In this regard, recent Thompsonian inspired work in social history has taken, and powerfully shaped the terms of, a transnational turn. The work of Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker on the motley multi-ethnic rebellions and resistances that traversed the early modern Atlantic, are only the most influential of such work (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000, see also Anderson, 2012, Ulrich, 2013). These debates share with work in labour geography a need to think in more careful terms about the spatial practices through which agency is constituted and there is much potential for engagements with the longstanding contributions to work by geographers on labour internationalism here (Castree, 1998, Cumbers et al, 2008, Herod, 2001). Thus Frykman et al argue that 'exploring the actions of sailors, laborers, convicts, and slaves and offering a fresh, sea-centred way of seeing the confluence between space, agency and political economy' (Frykman, et al, 2013: 4). The terms on which relations between space, agency and political economy are constructed and negotiated here, however, remains rather

broad and under-developed. There are key challenges and possibilities opened up by seeking to engage and draw out the particular spatial practices that shaped and reconfigured such relations.

Thirdly, this concern with the diverse spatial practices shaped through labour struggles and organising opens up an important focus on contested forms of ‘experience’ and exclusions shaped through labour organising. As the work of figures such as David Roediger and Jonathan Hyslop has emphasised forms of working class agency can have diverse and contested outcomes, rather than necessarily being progressive. Engaging critically with the terms on which labour agency is shaped, for example, in relation to the ‘unequal spatial divisions of labour’ that cut across contemporary European political and economic landscapes is particularly significant in this regard (Hadjimichalis and Hudson, 2014: 211). This also necessitates engaging more seriously with translocal processes of class formation and politics than those foregrounded in the *Making*. Here we have argued that engaging with the power relations through which such translocal processes are shaped can be important in recognising whose agency and experience is foregrounded in labour struggle and on what terms.

Fourthly, as we have argued through the paper, Thompson’s work allows us to foreground the relations between struggle, antagonism and agency in ways which are arguably closed down by accounts drawing on the rather mechanistic linkages between structure and agency adopted by structuration theory. In particular we have foregrounded Thompson’s understanding of class as a process forged through antagonisms. Returning to this stress on process is important in contexts where influential work such as Standing’s account of the ‘precariat’ has reasserted more fixed categorisations of class in tandem with a rather narrow sense of classed experience and agency (see, Shildrick et al 2012, Standing, 2011). In this regard, we suggest that a key contribution of a conversation between labour geography and labour history can be around articulating a diverse focus on the spatial politics of labour in different conjunctures and contexts. This arguably opens up a more politicised sense of labour geography than some accounts which stress labour geography as a predominantly economic project. Articulating such a ‘spatial politics of labour’ is clearly a necessary and urgent task in the post-crisis context defined by the pulverising logics of austerity.

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