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The Moral Economy and Industrial Politics in the UK from the 1960s to the 1980s

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T. Rogan, *The Moral Economists: R. H. Tawney, Karl Polanyi, E. P. Thompson and the Critique of Capitalism* (Princeton University Press: 2017), ix + 263pp., hbk £30, ISBN 9780691173009.

The ‘moral economy perspective’ has enriched a number of recent analyses in the history of industrial relations. Focusing on perceptions of fairness helps to explain the reasoning and activism of workers and trade unionists engaged in the past in industrial politics, movements and protests. A moral economy framework seems particularly apt where activists were animated by a sense of the established order being disturbed and dismantled by employers and policy-makers.¹ The issue of deindustrialization especially has been viewed in this way. Working-class and trade-union responses to the loss of industrial employment from the 1960s to the 1980s were often articulated in terms of collective injustice. Examination of these responses in recent literature has been influenced by the works of E. P. Thompson and Karl Polanyi,² although the influence of Raymond Williams – a New Left comrade of Thompson’s – has also been acknowledged.³ The history of the later twentieth century has arguably been enlivened by this approach: seeing the erosion of manual employment and changing working-class organization through the twin frameworks of deindustrialization and the moral economy is more productive than older and arguably dead-end narratives of economic decline and trade-union defeat.⁴

Polanyi and Thompson feature as central protagonists in Tim Rogan’s *The Moral Economists*, together with R. H. Tawney. The book is a useful introduction to these important thinkers. It has a lengthy chapter on each, with close reading of a selected work: Tawney’s *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1922), in chapter one (pp. 16–50); Polanyi’s *The Great Transformation* (1944), in chapter two (pp. 51–91); and Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), in chapter four (pp. 133–183).⁵ Chapter three explains intellectual

readings of the changing nature of capitalism in the decades between the Polanyi and Thompson titles (pp. 92–132). The neat twenty-year intervals between the three major books might suggest a valuable generational story. Matters of personal, family and social experience are present in Rogan's analysis, but his predominant interest is intellectual formation and specifically the manner in which the three authors infused their analyses of capitalism with moral questioning. This involved exploration of human identity and agency, seen by Rogan as under-played or even ignored in the materialist criticisms of capitalism associated with Karl Marx. Tawney argued that humans were essentially co-operative: they were happier when working together to build a better society than when defending individual property. Common security was more valuable than personal self-interest. Reading this from the perspective of trade-union organization, it can be noted, Tawney was not an advocate of utilitarianism: the happiness of the majority did not warrant the exploitation of minorities or the obliteration of their rights. It was immoral, in other words, for the strong to trample on the weak. Vulnerable groups were entitled to protect their economic interests through collective action.

Polanyi was influenced by Tawney, although largely eschewed the latter's religious-spiritual critique of capitalism. Secular and humanist elements were central to the moral economy approach in *The Great Transformation*. Polanyi argued that industrialization had been dehumanizing; social imperatives and the human inclination to co-operate had been buried by market mechanisms and competitive forces. A delayed social reaction eventually followed, from the late nineteenth century onwards, with economic actors collectively defending themselves against market insecurity via various means, ranging from government regulation to political and revolutionary movements, and trade-union organization. Polanyi saw social reaction to damaging economic change as the 'double movement'. There was a tendency for economic liberalization to be met by 'counter-movement' coalitions included policy-makers and organized workers. In Polanyi's time, the mid-twentieth century, competing moral economies were part of a 'counter-movement' but articulated contrasting ends.

This important history of organization and activism is beyond Rogan's narrower intellectual and literary purview, but can briefly be reviewed here. In the UK policy-makers were seeking to re-embed economic activity within a social framework, to subvert calls for more egalitarian wealth and power

redistribution.⁶ One important expression of this was the Churchill Coalition government's 1944 White Paper, *Employment Policy*. This stated that governments would protect workers from unemployment so long as they were willing to change jobs and occupations as national priorities shifted.⁷ Workers were claiming a share in the taking of decisions about resources, and in the process challenging the authority of both employers and policy-makers. The double movement of the 1940s and 1950s therefore involved a continuation of class conflict. Social developments on the 'Home Front' in Britain in the early 1940s anticipated the longer-term post-Second World War survival of industrial tension. Workers secured better employment conditions through collective action, but these were grudgingly yielded by employers and policy-makers, particularly Conservatives in Churchill's Coalition.⁸

Rogan's chapter linking Polanyi and Thompson examines capitalism 'in transition' in the 1940s and 1950s. The works of Evan Durbin and Tony Crosland, both Labour 'social democrats' with Oxford connections to Tawney, *The Politics of Democratic Socialism* and *The Future of Socialism*,⁹ suggest to Rogan a progressive path of economic and political development. Each, he argues, **injected** economic analysis with moral sentiment as they sought to explain how greater egalitarianism could attain and retain popular support (pp. 98–103, 106–12). Durbin was elected MP for Edmonton in Clement Attlee's Labour landslide in July 1945, but drowned in a family tragedy on the coast of Cornwall three years later. With a longer life he might have served as a frontline Labour politician, a social-democratic ally of Hugh Gaitskell, leader from 1955 until his early death in 1963, along with Crosland, MP for south Gloucestershire from 1950 to 1955 and then Greater Grimsby from 1959 until dying in office in 1977. Crosland, who served as a Cabinet minister in the Wilson and Callaghan governments of the 1960s and 1970s, was particularly vexed by the question of consent. *The Future of Socialism* was written after the Attlee government's 'fair shares' agenda of economic controls, popular with many working-class supporters, had been resisted vociferously, mainly by middle-class consumers and voters.¹⁰ The issue of equality was important. The gini coefficient for income distribution after taxes and benefits was 0.42 in 1938 but narrowed to 0.24 in 1961, under the combined weight of changes in welfare policy, full employment, nationalization of key industries and stronger collective bargaining.¹¹ Left intellectuals nevertheless emphasized that further advance was blocked by

undisturbed class structures and inequalities. Elite privilege was consolidated in all manner of areas, including the survival of the private schools and narrow access to the ancient universities.¹² In workplaces there was no substantial move to greater employee influence in the organization of production. Joint production and advisory committees had been introduced in many engineering plants during the war, offering a future of 'integrative' workplace consultative structures in industrial relations alongside 'distributive' collective bargaining. But this initiative was set aside with a restoration of liberalized free collective bargaining despite the broader social-democratic framework. This suited employers, keen to reassert their sovereignty in workplaces, although a significant strand of trade-union opinion was suspicious of taking a share in the 'traditional' functions of management, seeing dangers rather than possibilities in employee involvement, and preferring the certainties of adversarial bargaining.¹³

Thompson, as a member of the Communist Party until 1956 (when resigned after the USSR invasion of Hungary in November of that year) and a member of the New Left thereafter, was disappointed by post-Second World War social democracy (pp. 135–57). This shaped the *Making of the English Working Class*, which remains an influential work of social analysis as well as history. Its key insight was that class is a dynamic relationship. Shifting economic, social, legal, political, and cultural contingencies are all involved in its relentless construction and reconstruction. Class-infused cultural customs and social expectations were central elements of Thompson's moral economy. These were offended and disrupted in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in various ways by industrialization, urbanization and liberalization. Political formations of the working class were geared to alleviating the economic insecurity caused by these changes. Thompson returned to this theme, collective action to enforce communal security, in his 1971 essay, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd'.¹⁴ Rogan, concentrating on *Making of English Working Class*, has little to say about this later contribution (pp. 181–2), which feels like a missed opportunity. The publication date is important: 1971, a year of great economic and industrial flux in Britain. Edward Heath's Conservative government was engaged in a floundering programme of economic liberalization. This had contributed to a major escalation of unemployment, from 2.7% in the summer of 1970 to more than 4% in 1971, with job losses especially pronounced in industrial sectors.¹⁵ Liberalization also involved an attempted reform of industrial

relations, to reduce extant trade union privileges. The Industrial Relations Act of 1971 was experienced by many trade union activists as a highly coercive measure. A major crisis erupted in 1972 after five London dockers were imprisoned under the Act for contravening its provisions when protesting about the impact of containerization on their employment. The locus of port transport work was being changed, with containers stuffed and emptied in cargo terminals distant from the waterfront, and operating outwith the National Dock Labour Scheme (NDLS) which regulated employment in established ports. This new regime was a moral economy violation of established customs, which the dockers **fought** to repel by picketing the remote cargo terminals, and seeking, unsuccessfully, to have this new activity brought within the NDLS.¹⁶

There are important parallels between Thompson's analysis of the eighteenth-century crowd, defending plebeian customs and rights against enforced liberal-marketization of food supply, and working-class organization and protest from the 1960s to the 1980s against unemployment, changing employment practices, and unwelcome initiatives in industrial relations policy. Cultural factors were prominent in the later period, with a younger generation of union leaders and activists mobilizing in defence of working-class interests that were defined in moral economy terms. In the Scottish coalfields, pit closures and job losses were only acceptable if two moral economy criteria were satisfied: the provision of employment alternatives nearby, either in other collieries or in factories established by government regional policy-initiatives, and where these changes were carefully negotiated and agreed by the union and political representatives of the workers and communities affected.¹⁷ The moral economy was enforced in the coalfields in the late 1960s and early 1970s by trade-unionists born in the 1920s and 1930s, whose working lives had passed more or less entirely in the conditions of post-1945 full employment. One of these activists in Fife was Lawrence Daly, future **General** Secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers, and a New Left associate of Thompson's.¹⁸ Having also left the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1956, Daly was an occasional contributor to *New Left Review*.¹⁹ Daly and others of his generation, including those who remained Communists, shared Thompson's frustration with social democracy. They had expectations of continuing improvement, and were not prepared to tolerate the recrudescence of economic insecurity. When the rate of

growth of new jobs slowed in the coalfields in the mid-1960s, collective action placed a brake on further pit closures until the Thatcherite turn of the 1980s.²⁰

Popular culture provides an unusual but valuable sidelight on this generational turn in defence of working-class economic security. *Who's Next*, recorded in the spring of 1971, included the famous rock expression of generational awakening and disaffection, 'Won't Get Fooled Again'. The photograph on the album's cover, with The Who apparently zipping up after peeing against a concrete monolith, was taken by Ethan Russell on a slagheap adjacent to Easington Colliery in County Durham. Although chosen serendipitously,²¹ this setting illustrates the wide reach of industrial civilization in 1971, more than a decade after the post-nationalization peak of employment in coal. The album was released in the summer of 1971, coinciding with a markedly generational and class struggle in defence of shipyard employment on the Clyde. Upper Clyde Shipbuilders (UCS) had faced liquidation in 1969, but collective pressure from the workforce, the Scottish Trades Union Congress and local MPs had forced the Labour government to commit financial resources to recapitalize the firm. A large-scale programme of redundancy was implemented simultaneously, reducing the workforce from 10,800 in August 1969 to 8,500 in January 1971.²² This was accepted by trade-union representatives because the reconstruction was presented by government ministers and UCS management as establishing a viable future for remaining employees, while employment alternatives were believed to be available for those who left the yards. This was the moral economy in action, with the security of the affected workers and communities apparently prioritized.²³ But more than one-third of those who left in 1969 and 1970 had encountered two or more spells of unemployment by the late spring and early summer of 1971.²⁴ In Glasgow the problem of joblessness was acute. Among males it increased from 6.8% in the first quarter of 1970 to 9.1% in the first quarter of 1971, and 10.5% in the third quarter of that year, more than double the national rate.²⁵

The subsequent liquidation of UCS in June 1971, when Heath's Conservative government refused to extend further credit despite a busy order book, was a further transgression of moral economy expectations. The threat to economic security was resisted through the novel strategy of the work-in, led by shop stewards, Communist Party activists among them, with generational change strongly evident. Jimmy Reid, born in 1932, and Jimmy Airlie, born in

1936, mobilized a broad alliance against liquidation. They constructed a compelling political narrative contrasting the 'responsibility' of the workforce with the 'immorality' of Westminster, where 'faceless' and 'wrecking' policy-makers were distant physically and socially from the yards and surrounding communities.²⁶ Supportive campaigners included Frank Field of the Child Poverty Action Group, the future Labour MP for Birkenhead, and the Institute for Workers' Control (IWC). Field's analysis of the social-security costs of closure alone, rising to £20 million over the first three years, was published by the IWC in its 'social audit', a **moral economy-influenced critique** of the narrow business-financial criteria applied by the Heath government when establishing the 'viability' of an industrial enterprise.²⁷ The government was forced to reverse its position. Through major state investment three in four of the threatened jobs were preserved.²⁸ This was a moral economy victory, fuelled by working-class expectations of security and voice. This is a fresh and valuable perspective on a perhaps over-studied but misunderstood episode: the workers and stewards were seeking to enforce established rights and customs rather than construct an 'alternative' form of industrial or business organization. Reid and Airlie courted conventional investment from private capital and the government during the work-in. In a perhaps telling incident at the Labour Party conference in Blackpool in 1971, they were reluctant to be photographed with Tony Benn, the former and future Cabinet minister who was emerging as a forceful advocate of public ownership and workers' control in industry, remarking that this might be **politically** embarrassing.²⁹

Moral economy reasoning underpinned industrial struggles later in the 1970s. One important example comes from a lengthy strike in 1976 by workers at Trico Folberth, a US multinational which produced windscreen wipers and other accessories in Brentford, west London. The moral economy context was the gender-fairness agenda established by the Equal Pay Act 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act 1975. The legislative pursuit of equal pay for equal work was complicated by practices in many workplaces that made it difficult to compare the value of different tasks undertaken by female and male employees. At Trico men generally worked on night-shifts and women on day-shifts. But in the spring of 1976, after the cancellation of a night-shift at short notice, a small number of men were redeployed on the day-shift. This exposed the injustice of the firm's rewards system to the 400 women who worked in the factory. **The**

practices of their employer were illegitimate and possibly illegal under the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts but it took a twenty-one week strike to win equal pay.³⁰ Wider economic and social factors influenced this outcome. As with the sewing machinists' action at Ford Dagenham and Halewood in 1968, the strike of the Trico women interrupted a complex supply chain, triggering a wider cessation of production that pressurized their employer. In another echo of the Ford dispute, the Trico strike was founded on a strong sense of working-class consciousness: the women were demanding equality of treatment as workers.³¹ This emphasis on class has arguably rendered the strike less visible in historical literature than disputes where gender was more strongly articulated. Plus it was a victory, which fits awkwardly with predominant historical narratives of labour defeats in the later 1970s and 1980s.³²

The Trico strike overlapped with a longer dispute at the Grunwick photo-processing plant, in north-west London, a further illustration of the manner in which workers framed their activism with reference to the defence of justice. A large majority of Grunwick's 450 workers were women of South Asian origin. Their earnings were well below the London average rates for manual employment. The action started as a protest in the hot summer of 1976 against compulsory overtime and morphed into a two-year campaign for union recognition. The strikers did not win their case, and most were sacked.³³ Their action is remembered because of the courageous manner in which it challenged the trade-union movement to pursue workplace justice for all workers, irrespective of ethnic and racial origin.³⁴ It also fits the established narrative of union set-backs in the later 1970s.

But it has been thinly understood. The presence of authoritarian management has been forgotten. Nor has the coercive influence on workers rather than employers of unfair consumer pressure been much noted. Tawney would certainly have recognized the injustice of the Grunwick women being compelled to work overtime so that customers could receive their developed prints in timely manner. The moral economy nature of the resistance has also been ignored. The workers accepted as legitimate the exchange of time and effort for money wages, but only where their rights to consultation were respected. Trade-union recognition was seen as a valuable way of enforcing this moral economy demand for workplace voice. Despite the outcome, the strike plainly contributed to positive changes in the trade-union movement, with

greater recognition and accommodation of the distinct interests of women and black and ethnic minority workers. Empowered female and black union activists become a prominent force in the London trade-union movement in the 1980s. Their activism included support for striking miners in 1984–85, expressed in class terms, and with reciprocal benefits: the Londoners were emboldened by their interaction with the men and women of the coalfields.³⁵

Capitalism has shown itself over several centuries to be a dynamic force, but the inhumanity and immorality of its markets has been constant. Rogan's book is a valuable addition to economic history, showing that criticism of capitalism on moral grounds has been resilient and remains important. The book helps to restate the value of the moral economy framework for understanding the motives and actions of trade-unionists in resisting liberal-market incursions on their jobs and economic security. The miners' strike in 1984–85 was a defence of the moral economy, seeking to protect employment, workplace voice and communal well-being. It was a mass social-movement response to deindustrialization and the anti-union agenda of the National Coal Board and the Conservative government. The right to work demand was asserted by miners in the same language articulated at UCS in 1971–72. The strikers' defence of union voice in pursuit of justice likewise echoed the equal pay and recognition strikes in 1976–77 by the women and men of Trico and Grunwick. To paraphrase Thompson, reframing these and other industrial struggles in the moral economy register is a valuable way of rescuing them from the condescension of posterity, where historical narratives of the 1970s and 1980s are falsely dominated by themes of decline and defeat.

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