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Made or Fabricated?

Methods of Social Science and Understandings of Working Class Culture

Scott NORTH

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Scott NORTH[(1)]

My purpose in this essay is to compare the methodology employed in two historical works on the same topic, one written by a historian, the other by a sociologist. Both books concern the culture of capitalism and the way in which a new world of work emerged in the nineteenth century. The historian is E. P. Thompson and his book is the celebrated *The Making of the English Working Class*[1)]. The sociologist is Richard Bernacki, author of a prize-winning dissertation published in book form as *The Fabrication of Labor : Germany and Britain 1640 - 1914*[2)].

As the "cultural turn" in social science has become more prominent, social historians and historical sociologists have come to increasingly resemble one another. The past thirty or so years have witnessed widespread miscegenation between the disciplines, resulting in prodigies such as William H. Sewell, Jr., a polymath who is much sought after by departments of sociology, political science, French, and history.

Still, despite sharing a growing appreciation for the role of culture in shaping human affairs, telling differences generally remain between the two social sciences considered here. As the following comparison will show, these differences are manifest in the choices the practitioners made in formulating the research problem, selecting cases for examination, identifying units of analysis, isolating key variables, and constructing concepts. In the final analysis, I suggest that such choices are the result of the extent to which theory mediates the relationship between the writer and the subject. That is, methodological differences reflect the political and scholarly passions of the investigator and his or her place in the relations of knowledge production, attachment to a particular school of thought, and ideas of the role of the intellectual in society.

In the examples I will consider, Thompson is clearly intent on rescuing Marxism from the degradation of Stalinism and the critique of rigid economic determinism. To do so he focuses on the experiences and traditions of Englishmen that gave rise to working class consciousness. Biernacki, on the other hand, wants to promote culture as a causal variable with an "independent, structuring influence" upon the specification of labor (Biernacki 1995, 18) and takes what he sees as the flaws in Thompson's pioneering

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effort on behalf of culture as one of his points of departure.

I will consider each work in turn, asking the same questions of each to elaborate my understanding of their arguments and the terms in which they are made. I will then contrast Biernacki with Thompson, discussing the criticisms of Thompson by Biernacki that I think reveal how the theoretical aims of each prefigure the objects and methods of their studies. In light of this comparison, the conclusion speculates on the question of disciplinary differences as a matter of the distinction between letters and science.

1. The Historian

Thompson sets out the question for his study in the title and preface of his book. In *The Making of the English Working Class*[3] his concern is with what class is and how it "happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships." (*The Making*, 9) He wants to show that conceptions of class as a "thing" are vulgar misrepresentations of Marx's intentions, and that referring to class as "it" produces the distortion of class as a static category of the type employed by functionalists such as Smelser (*The Making*, 10). Instead, Thompson aims to breathe life back into the phenomenon of class formation, emphasizing the importance of historical context and lived experience in the creation of class–consciousness.

Thompson's theory of class as something that happens relies on a thematically segregated, semi–diachronic protrayal of human affairs. Over time, he believes, it is possible to observe how social change modifies patterns of relationships between people. For Thompson, static conceptions of class, in which class is comprised of individual social actors playing roles, begs the question of how the actors were cast for their parts. He theorizes that class can only be "defined by men as they live their own history" and that "we cannot understand class unless we see it as a social and cultural formation, arising from processes which can only be studied as they work themselves out over a considerable historical period." (*The Making*, 11) This involves bringing "the agency of working people to light" and reading history "as in fact it occurred." (*The Making*, 12)

In pursuit of these two aims, Thompson plunges deep into an astonishing array of primary and secondary sources. So great is the volume of empirical material required to answer the question of how class happened in England between 1790 and 1832 that the text of *The Making* runs to more than 800 pages. The sheer volume of empirical material that Thompson is able to marshal in support his theory gives *The Making* an aura of authority that leaves the reader satisfied that all stones have been turned in the search for data appropriate to the question.

Adding to this feeling of thoroughness, *The Making* approaches class formation through several different levels and units of analysis. There are individuals such as John Thelwall, Thomas Paine, and Thomas Hardy. There are assorted groups of weavers, artisans, factory workers and tradesmen. There are radical groups of various stripes including Luddites, and members of patriotic and corresponding societies, and trade unions. There are Methodists, there are communities of English, Irish and other immigrants, and there is geographical variation. And there is, of course, as the final unit of analysis, the working class as a whole. Individual people, groups, organizations, societies, all these and more provide approaches to the question of how class happened.

Class for Thompson is both a saga to be told and the outcome to be explained. But unlike previous theorists of class formation, whose equation Thompson summarizes as "steam power and the cotton mill = new working class" (*The Making*, 191), Thompson downplays the importance of cotton mills, the industrial revolution, and economic history in producing the working class. To be sure, these variables are important and Thompson does not deny them influence. His equation, however, emphasizes culture and politics : "Too much emphasis upon the newness of the cotton–mills can lead to an underestimation of the continuity of political and cultural traditions in the making of working–class communities." (*The Making*, 193) He contends that, despite the problem of seeing a single class in the jumbled diversity of humanity that inhabited late 18th and early 19th century England, "the formation of the working class" can be measured by the growth of working class consciousness expressed in the various institutions that sprung up to represent working class interests against those of other classes. These political and cultural institutions of the working class were not created from whole cloth produced in the new factories, but were stitched together by working people from the remnants of the pre–industrial political and cultural traditions they had inherited as Englishmen.

Indeed, as has been pointed out by his biographer, Palmer, Thompson also recognized the contributions of England's unique political development to the making of the working class. Hence, he remarks, "Too often, Thompson's statement, 'the working class made itself as much as it was made,' is read only partially." (Palmer 1981, 74), Here the upshot is that the working class is a product of the experience of struggle against the ruling class. Class is not a box for historians and sociologists to put people into, it is a "structure of feeling" forged in the heat of the fight for the perceived common interests of the participants (*The Making,* 194).

Thompson holds that, while class formation may appear economically determined, the consciousness that gives rise to class is the result of the particular cultural logic of particular societies ; it is not possible to formulate a predictive law. "Consciousness of

class arises in the same way in different times and places, but never in just the same way." (*The Making*, 10; italics in original.) This implies that class formation as an economic product can be predicted, but that the "traditions, value systems, ideas, and institutional forms" through which class–consciousness will become manifest are unique (ibid.). He thus justifies limiting his study to the rise of working class–consciousness in England and does not attempt explicit comparisons or generalizations beyond the English case (*The Making*, 13).

Though Thompson's concepts (variables implies a degree of structural rigidity that evokes an image of interchangeable parts – a conception Thompson would not have encouraged) are vague and amorphous, his zealous pursuit of the connections between the experiences of the people and class–consciousness reveals ample evidence of them in the historical record. Nor does he neglect failure. The English working class is presented as a living organism and Thompson is the biographer, charting the twisting path from adolescence to self–consciousness maturity and its concomitant political and cultural expressions. Thompson argues that the slight statistical rise in per capita consumption under the new industrial regime during the period 1792-1832 was experienced by most workers as a real decline in living standards. But more crucial than standard of life for the emergence of working class consciousness is the qualitative challenge that industrialism posed to the worker's way of life. Thompson finds his evidence for this in literary rather than statistical sources, the exposition of which takes up the bulk of his text (*The Making*, 211).

2. The Sociologist

The question that drives Richard Biernacki's book is stated in the very first sentence of the Introduction to *The Fabrication of Labor: Germany and Britain 1640-1914*: "Do international differences in culture create and sustain decisive, systematic divergences in the formation of manufacturing practices and of industrial relations?" He is interested in how culture can account for differences in the labor process, remuneration, factory design, conceptions of time, and styles of collective action in the German and English woolen textile industries. To answer this question, and to isolate culture as the sole causal variable, Biernacki looks for cases which can be compared such that all variables other than culture can be controlled. This allows him to say that all the observed differences between his two cases arise from culture.

In his introduction, Biernacki points out that the question of culture's influence on industrial development is a vexing one. Biernacki believes that all previous studies have

been unsuccessful in separating culture from economic variables (*The Fabrication*, 14) and that this has resulted in culture being treated "as a decorative frill on the fabric of capitalist development." (*The Fabrication*, 28) At issue for him is whether culture can be shown to have "a constitutive and identifiable logic of its own." (Ibid.)

Biernacki's inquiry is theory driven. He aims to rout rational choice and other forms of economic reductionism and show that culture is "a systematically structuring force in its own right." (*The Fabrication*, 473) This means also dispelling the notion that culture is no more than a reflection of economic conditions or a mere component of the constellation of factors that gave rise to differences in industrial techniques.

Diverse empirical data are employed to support the theoretical claims. The bibliography runs to fifty pages and a casual estimate of the footnotes, made up largely of citations, shows that they take up about a third of the 500-page text. Biernacki draws heavily on archival records, oral histories, and periodicals. There is especially heavy use of trade journals intended for factory managers and the like. In this category, *the Yorkshire Factory Times* is prominent. Biernacki also makes extensive use of German language sources (even using German versions of texts for which there are long-established English translations – Marx's *Das Kapital* is one example of this). Finally, there are numerous works of theory, economics, and labor history.

From this collection of data Biernacki has created an argument of tremendous power and complexity. His unit of analysis is the nation state and his focus the "specification of the conveyance of labor as a commodity." (*The Fabrication*, 472) That is, he details how the differential ways in which labor was constituted and measured as a ware and sold by the workers to their employers formed the foundation of national differences in a host of related issues, including those as seemingly removed as factory architecture, labor movements, and popular culture.

Through a synchronic comparison of the wool textile industry in Germany and England, Bernacki shows that the differences in "the symbolic patterning of manufacturing techniques could not be explained by the tangible conditions of the immediate business environment." (*The Fabrication*, 472) He accomplished this partly through serendipity: he was fortunate to find two cases which could be matched so perfectly in terms of the technology used, markets sold to, and productivity that he could then isolate culture as the reason for divergent factory practices.

This first part of the analysis focuses on national differences in the method of defining labor as a commodity: Germans viewed the relationship between employer and employee as the purchase of labor effort and control over the laborer's time, while the English saw finished product as the means of measuring the amount of labor transferred from worker

to employer (*The Fabrication*, 43). Biernacki believes this fundamental difference in the way that labor was measured is a culture–specific "definition of labor as a commodity (...) communicated and reproduced, not through ideal symbols as such, but through the hallowed form of unobtrusive practices." (*The Fabrication*, 36)

Culture for Biernacki is not something that allows people to create a meaningful order (*The Fabrication*, 36), and he does not think it possible to show how culture forms a consistent worldview in the minds of the workers (*The Fabrication*, 92). Instead, culture in Biernacki's examples is the cause of the :

> different understanding of the transmission of labor as a commodity [that] emerged in each country, where it was shared by both its common people and its economic elites[.] [T]hese divergent specifications of labor subsequently configured the daily use of time and space in the developing factories of nineteenth–century Germany and Britain independently of the immediate economic and technological circumstances in which manufacturing techniques arose [and] once these nationally diverging models of the conveyance of labor were incarnated at the point of production, they were reproduced among managers and workers through the execution of work rather than through the reception of a discourse[.]

He goes on to point out how the divergent definitions of labor as a commodity were the basis upon which employee–management relations were constituted and even formed the core of *Das Kapital* (*The Fabrication*, 471).

In focusing on the weavers' piece–rate wage scales, Biernacki has found a way to measure the effect of divergent cultural logics exclusive of the confounding effects of economics or cultural structuralism. He suggests that his method of controlled comparison provides a way to support culture as a separate analytic category that "exercised an influence *of its own* but not completely *by itself*." (*The Fabrication*, 35 ; italics in original.)

Biernacki may have transcended the culture/economy divide in the particular case he examines, but it is unclear whether his theory can be generalized to other cases. He admits that the advent of government intervention in the labor process, as well as the shift to organized capitalism that made much of classical Marxism obsolete, "suggests that the principle of labor as a commodity has lost its salience as the primary mechanism that integrates social exchange as a whole and organizes the lifeworld of the producers." He goes on to suggest that because "divinity is contained in life's humblest details" we may only be able to see whatever central cultural principle animates the present from the perspective of a future that is not constituted by that principle. (*The Making*, 497)

3. Comparative Assessment

Having outlined, however briefly, the approaches taken by Thompson and Biernacki, it makes sense now to compare them and ascertain their points of convergence and divergence as a way of observing how the methods of sociology and history might be similar or different. In so doing I do not mean to imply that either of these gentlemen embodies a paradigm representative of his particular discipline. On the contrary, they are distinctive because they each depart from some of the basic practices of their respective disciplines. Still there has to be some reason for labeling them as we do. What follows considers some of the possibilities.

Choice of Topic. Both Thompson and Biernacki are writing social histories about labor and culture. Their titles bear an uncanny resemblance, but also point out a difference in emphasis : the making of a self-conscious class of people as opposed to the fabrication of a cultural practice. Their different objects of inquiry call forth different questions. Thompson wants to explain how class happens as an historical phenomenon created by human agency. Biernacki wants to test the theory that culture is a causal variable that has far-reaching effects even in areas commonly thought to be dominated by economics.

Both writers are motivated by similar theoretical concerns. They write to oppose reductionist models of history, which they feel do violence to the truth. They also share a desire to defend the possibility of human agency against determinism. For Thompson the enemies are the functionalist perspective and the structural Marxists. For Biernacki it is the rational choice school and, to a lesser extent, cultural structuralism. Both fear that the formulaic theories of their opponents will reduce culture to a subsidiary outcome of economic processes. In this regard, both men are defenders of humanism. If the realm of high theory is yielded to the forces of determinism, the possibility of a future shaped by conscious human action could be lost.

Therefore, Thompson, the Marxist historian, sets out to rehabilitate the concept of class and the importance of class struggle as the engine of history. This means rescuing the working class losers of the 1792-1832 struggles in England “from the enormous condescension of posterity” (*The Making*, 12) by showing the myriad ways in which their agency was manifest. Biernacki shows how reified cultural practices structured British and German woolen textile manufacturing. Both are using history to show how agency has operated and to suggest that it still can operate. In addition, Biernacki takes on the task of establishing controlled comparison as a methodology with which sociology can confront the challenge of rational choice.

Selection of Cases. To establish controlled cultural comparison as a method that can

displace competing deterministic theories Biernacki has to find cases that allow culture to be isolated as the causal variable. This means finding a perfect match on all other variables ; 19th century German and British wool mills are near-perfect for this. He is also fortunate to find archival documentation regarding pay rate scales that will permit him to establish the basis for comparison. As noted above, it is not certain whether his approach will bear the same fruit when the cases cannot be juxtaposed so cleanly.

Focusing exclusively on England, and employing a literature he is familiar with, Thompson does not have a comparative case. Instead, he measures change over time. Believing that the formation of class is as much a culture specific process as a universal economic one, he avoids comparison and is cautious about generalizing his conclusions beyond the British case.

Concepts and Variables. Nevertheless, Thompson wants to be able to generalize about culture just as Biernacki wants to generalize about culture. A fundamental difference seems to emerge : national culture for Biernacki is rooted in complexes of shopfloor practices that are fabricated from nationwide understandings of how labor is calculated as a commodity. The impact of culture can be measured by the watch (as in Germany) or the pick clock (as in England). For Thompson culture is an inherited discourse about the rights of Englishmen and a product of class struggle that can be measured by counting the number of corresponding societies, protests, pamphlets, and other manifestations of class-consciousness that are part and parcel of the experience of the working class. The former is a "synthetic reasoned generality, tested against the facts," the latter a matter of "historical uniqueness, a portrait of facts." Stinchcombe 1978, 115) However, these differing definitions of culture are not as different as they seem. According to Stinchcombe :

> Concepts are the things that capture aspects of the facts for a theory ; they are the lexicon that the grammar of theory turns into general sentences about the world. The argument is that the power and fruitfulness of those sentences is determined by the realism and exactness of the lexicon of concepts, and not by the theoretical grammar. (1978, 115)

Stinchcombe's point is that it is not so much the theories that are interesting. Rather it is the studies of the facts from which the concepts are drawn. Both Thompson and Biernacki, working to defend certain theoretical premises, construct concepts of culture by drawing analogies between the historical facts of the cases they examine. But the conceptual die is cast with the choice of topic, which itself follows from the theoretical conflicts each is involved with : Thompson with Althusser and structural Marxism ; Biernacki with advocates of rational choice.

A subsidiary interest is whether the concepts are analyzed synchronically or diachronically. Thompson, noting that class is a relationship, "a fluency which evades analysis if we try to stop it dead at any given moment and anatomize its structure," (*The Making*, 9) argues that synchrony cannot capture what is important in human history. Consequently he proposes to give us a purely diachronic account of class formation. But as Sewell notes (1990, 58-59), Thompson's work is riddled with brief bouts of synchrony and it is these that allow him to structure his narrative as a group of studies on related themes. Without this, his history would be even longer and more trackless[4].

Conversely, Biernacki embraces synchrony for it allows him to freeze history and facilitates the comparison of his cases without the intrusion of variance in the economic environment. Culture in the form of the "specification of the conveyance of labor as a commodity" is both Biernacki's key concept for "identifying meaningful configurations of practices" and "a discrete variable whose causes and consequences could be specified." (*The Fabrication*, 472) In order to make national cultural differences in the concept of labor as a commodity do double duty as both the origin and outcome of his story, Biernacki deftly moves from synchrony to diachrony and back again to avoid falling into the trap of tautology.

Theory. One way to locate authors in the theoretical debates that motivate their conceptual choices is to examine some of the criticism of their work. In this section, I will dwell mostly on Thompson's work, as it has long been a benchmark by which cultural histories of labor have been judged (Sewell 1990, 50). Biernacki's book has not been out long enough to function as a benchmark, although it has received awards. Fortunately, he is rather explicit about his motives, as described earlier in this essay. In any case, Biernacki's position *vis a vis* Thompson is easily established from Biernacki's critique of the latter.

Biernacki, like Sewell, acknowledges the tremendous debt that all students of culture and modern labor history owe Thompson. He then assails Thompson's defense of culture as insufficient for "respond [ing] adequately to social investigators who doubt that culture can be called upon to develop rigorous explanatory arguments." (*The Fabrication*, 17) Thompson has managed to get culture (manifest as "agency") included in the list of influences on working class formation, but it is "an ingredient whose independent, structuring influence is undemonstrated." (*The Making*, 18) For Biernacki, Thompson has not been able to decisively eliminate market forces or technology from the equation, an opening that utilitarian theorists might yet exploit to support their theories. In the form in which Thompson casts it, culture is only an enabling force for workers' movements. By

itself, culture cannot account for the political beliefs that the workers came to hold. Biernacki says Thompson "'humanizes' the point of production in peculiar fashion. He views the workplace as a site of personal experience, not as a set of practices patterned by culture; he highlights the subjective side of productive relations, not their cultural structure." (*The Fabrication*, 388. Italics in original.)

This critique is not without merits. But what interests us here is what Biernacki's critique of Thompson reveals about Birenacki's theoretical aims. There is a sense that Birenacki is petulant because Thompson has missed the chance to establish culture as a causal force in its own right. However, that is Biernacki's project, not Thompson's.

In a footnote (*The Fabrication*, 387-8, f.3), Biernacki notes the "extraordinary moral tone" of Thompson's work and the image of transcendent heroism with which he endows the working class. This romantic emplotment, almost offensive to Biernacki's sensibilities, is however, entirely in keeping with Thompson's purposes.

From Sewell (1990) and Palmer (1981), we learn that at the time that he wrote *The Making* Thompson was deeply disturbed by events in Hungary in 1956, trying to distance himself from Stalinism, and carrying a grudge against deductive theory in general and that of some English Marxists in particular. However, as the title of his book makes clear, he had not abandoned either Marxism or its emphasis on praxis. Thompson is not willing to suppose that economic factors play no role in structuring the world of experience. Nor is he simply writing to establish an unassailable redoubt for culture on the theoretical high ground. Part of his purpose was undoubtedly to construct an inspirational account so that, "Causes which were lost in England might, in Asia or Africa, yet be won." (*The Making,* 13) Biernacki's aim of preventing rational choice theory from dominating social research is perhaps indicative of the academic terrain upon which his battles are currently fought. Clearly, Thompson wrestled in a larger arena.

4. Conclusion

What are the points of convergence and divergence between Biernacki and Thompson and what can they tell us about the methodologies of historians and sociologists?

I have tried to argue that methodological differences are consequences of the writer's theoretical aims. To paraphrase Marx, social scientists write their own histories, but they do not do so under circumstances of their own choosing. Thompson emphasizes lived experience and human agency in the making of the English working class because he is attempting to preserve Marxism and its theory of history from what he saw as a rising tide of anti–humanist determinism. Biernacki isolates culture as the causal variable

responsible for the differences between British and German labor practices. This is necessary lest social inquiry be seduced by "the theories with the most commonsense resonance," meaning the rational choice discourse that was spreading through economics and political science at the time that Biernacki was in graduate school (*The Fabrication*, 34).

In consequence of these subjective orientations, the writers construct differing concepts of culture. Both employ an inductive approach that yields compelling, yet contrasting accounts that support their larger purposes. Thompson tries to be purely diachronic, avoids comparison, rejects structure, and ducks precise definition of his key concepts. Biernacki notes that, "Thompson, as a man of letters, believed that incertitude suited his humanist goals." (*The Fabrication*, 386) I submit that, to some degree, this orientation may be found in historians generally. Their concern with telling stories and bringing the past into the present in a colorful and accessible, if lengthy, form that characterizes the best work in their discipline. If Thompson was willfully vague, perhaps it was in the service of the revolutionary dream. In the words of philosopher Paul Feyerabend, "Without ambiguity, no change, ever." (Feyerabend 1995, 179)

Biernacki, the sociologist, is concerned with the narrower goal of building a foundation for social science research programs. Consequently he exhibits far greater concern for definitional rigor, for the need for comparative analysis, and for structure. This he achieves, but at the cost of accessibility. It is sad to note that the density and complexity of Biernacki's argument, as well as its relentlessly hectoring, scholarly tone, and absence of real people with whom the reader might identify, almost guarantees that his account will not excel its rational choice opponents in being the theory "with the most common resonance." I submit that this is characteristic of much that is adjudged the best of what sociology has to offer. It would likely offer more if it were less concerned with professional sociology and more concerned with practical problems and the production of public sociology.

Devotees of letters and followers of science, historians and sociologists have, through exposure to the canon of work in their respective disciplines, acquired different standards of what constitutes good work. Thompson, in his concern for saving Marxism's liberating potential, and Biernacki, in selecting cases on the dependent variable, diverge from the practice of "objectivity" that both historians and sociologists like to claim. As exemplars of the cultural turn in social science, however, both will function as exemplars who will shape the tastes of future generations of scholars.

Notes

1) Thompson's work continues to be influential. A new Japanese translation by Ishibashi Hideo and Haga Kenichi was issued by Aoyumisha in 2003.
2) Hereafter cited as *The Fabrication*.
3) Hereafter cited as *The Making*.
4) The reference is to Reinhard Bendix, who closed his review of *The Making* with the remark that "for all the hazards of conceptualization, without it history is trackless and very long." (Quoted in Palmer, 1981, 66).

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Methods of Social Science and Understandings of Working Class Culture

Scott NORTH

To explore differences and similarities in how history and sociology have each taken a "cultural turn" this paper compares the methods employed by a historian and a sociologist to study the emergence of working class cultures in Britain and Germany. Although they share the same subject matter, Richard Biernacki's *The Fabrication of Labor: Gernamy and Britain 1640-1914* and E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, exhibit important differences in their approaches to the topic. These are manifest in the choices each made in the formulation of their research problems, the cases and data they selected, their units of analysis, and the key variables and conceptual constructs deployed. I account for these differences by looking to the extent to which concern for theory mediated the relationship between each writer and his subject, paying particular attention to methodological differences that arise out of each author's scholarly passions, perceived place in the relations of knowledge production, and attachment to particular schools of thought.