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# Editorial

## *Sebastian Berg and Claus-Ulrich Viol*

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In spring 2024, we hosted a one-day workshop discussing the current relevance of historian E. P. Thompson and political scientist Ralph Miliband. We aimed at exploring the meaning of their work for scholars like us, who work in interdisciplinary fields and have an interest in the chances and limits of bottom-up political agency. For both Thompson and Miliband the analysis of class agency was central – as an academic project with political surplus value. Thompson demonstrated the potential of a Marxist social and cultural history that zoomed in on a ‘history from below’ which, however, could only be understood in a dialectical relationship with a ‘history from above’ – a history of class formation in and through class conflict.<sup>1</sup> Miliband sketched out an institutional Marxism which not only tried to locate state and class power but also to identify cases and models of collective insubordination.<sup>2</sup> There is a lot more that they have in common (including the fact that both turned 100 last year): both were active in Britain’s ‘first new left’ and other social movements, for example, the anti-nuclear weapons movement and the short-lived Socialist Society of the 1980s, and were involved in founding and contributed to their respective political-academic journals and publications. *New Left Review* and *Socialist Register* are the best-known ones. Both shared a commitment to an ‘undogmatic’ Marxism, which did not start, but became manifest, in the context of the uprising in Hungary in 1956, and was often referred to as ‘British Marxism’ or ‘socialist humanism’.<sup>3</sup> Both, hence, understood the state in its various institutionalisations of power as far from neutral and class formation as an activity that occurred permanently in conflict with these institutions. Both engaged in detailed studies that structural Marxists criticised as empiricist (and the potential agency proposed on the basis of these studies as voluntarist), and both had their own specific controversy with structural Marxists over the relationship of theory and practice, experience and ideology, and the character and locations of power.<sup>4</sup> Among our own generation of the intellectual left, ‘French’ structural Marxism and ‘French’ (post-) structuralism for a long time seemed more fashionable than ‘British Marxism’ (though we personally had our reservations about the former two). However, more recently, in a time in which increasingly authoritarian and exclusionary narratives of nation-state-based resilience are made hegemonic, many of us are again searching for levers of political agency. New reflections on the analyses provided by Thompson and Miliband (and on what to do with them) might have something to offer here.

Two of the papers presented at the workshop and making use of some of Thompson's central concepts and reflections have been written up into articles for *Socialist History*. Christian Huck's piece transfers the analysis of the upper-class robbery of land 'made legal', which Thompson identified as the reason for protests against 18<sup>th</sup>-century land enclosures, to the global digital economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and its cultural enclosures. Once more, he suggests, enclosures endanger social reproduction. In particular he argues that today's exploitation and today's digital precariat have a lot more in common with the rent-based exploitation and the pre-industrial labourers than with the wage-based exploitation of the proletariat in the factories of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century, leading to a more silent and more individualised suffering – an observation which is highly relevant for any reflection on political agency and strategy.

Valentina Nava explores in her ethnographic study of former Communists in rural *Emilia Romagna*, who now support the 'post-fascist' *Fratelli d'Italia*, how the feeling of being left behind produces a new class consciousness and a process of class formation that is primarily directed against a 'governing elite'. She observes parallels with Thompson's evaluation of bread riots which, he argued, were based on considerations of what counted as legitimate and illegitimate practices in a moral economy. People's turn to the extremist right has to be understood, Nava suggests, as a protest against a centre-left that ideologically delegitimised and materially destroyed the infrastructure that once was the cultural and structural basis for a moral economy of solidarity and sharing.

Both articles show that it is not only possible but helpful to apply Thompson's work and its key concepts to contemporary phenomena, to use them for the revelation and critique of today's power structures, and to think about (pre-) conditions of collective political agency.

## Notes

- 1 E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth 1963.
- 2 Ralph Miliband, *The State in Capitalist Society: An Analysis of the Western System of Power*, New York 1969.
- 3 E. P. Thompson, 'Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines', *The New Reasoner* 1, 1957, pp.105-143.
- 4 Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, London 1980; Ralph Miliband, 'The Capitalist State – Reply to Poulantzas', *New Left Review* 59, 1970, pp.53-60; Ralph Miliband, 'Poulantzas and the Capitalist State', *New Left Review* 82, 1973, pp.83-92; Nicos Poulantzas, 'The Problem of the Capitalist State', *New Left Review* 58, 1969, pp.67-78; Nicos Poulantzas, 'The Capitalist State: A Reply to Miliband and Laclau', *New Left Review* 95, 1976, pp.63-83; E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and other Essays*, London 1978.