Moral Economy at the Crossroads of History and Social Science: Finding Customs in Common

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EP Thompson's moral economy and legacy

Neville Kirk
Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

Abstract

This article offers a critical commentary upon historian EP Thompson's pioneering research, carried out between the 1960s and 1980s, into the notion of moral economy. It addresses the main features of Thompson's moral economy, his methodology and his profound, but also contested and ambivalent legacy to subsequent scholars. Set within the specific historical context of eighteenth-century England, Thompson's moral economy revealed in new and original ways the often strained and conflict-ridden relations and actions between the working population and its rulers around the marketing of food and the price of bread. Thompson paid particular attention to food riots. They clearly illustrated the conflict, between, on the one hand, the traditional regulatory *customs* of some of the ruled and their supporters and the 'free-market' innovations of increasing numbers of their rulers. Thompson offered a historical-materialist reading of moral economy, situated in social contexts, relations and actions as well as in values and norms. Having addressed key empirical and methodological issues, the article proceeds to a critical examination of Thompson's legacy. This covers the deep and widespread influence of Thompson's moral economy, academically and geographically, its weaknesses as well as strengths and the ways in which he responded to reviews. In the last section, 'Moral economy at the crossroads', the article outlines and comments upon some of the key characteristics of the recent and ongoing single-, multi- and cross-disciplinary proliferation of studies of moral economy. It concludes by briefly indicating the ways in which future research into moral economy may fruitfully develop.

Keywords

Custom, food riots, free market, historical materialism, moral economy, social being, social consciousness, EP Thompson

Introduction

As a roundtable participant in the workshop 'Moral Economy at the Crossroads of History and Social Science: Finding *Customs in Common*', held at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, in November 2023, I was asked by the organisers to consider the question, 'What, for you, offers a valuable way of approaching moral economy?' My

Corresponding author:
Email: n.kirk@mmu.ac.uk

response was to present a paper outlining and critically discussing the pioneering historical work of EP Thompson, conducted between the 1960s and 1980s, on moral economy. My revised piece, published here, both retains many of the core elements of my paper and, in the interests of achieving further clarification and precision for the reader, adds more empirical and methodological substance and hones my key arguments.

I offer the view that Thompson broke new and significant ground, conceptually, methodologically and empirically. In so doing, he established the initial framework for much of the subsequent worldwide discussion and development around the concept of moral economy. His questions and challenges indeed still centrally inform current debates. This is clearly evident in the contributions both to the workshop, this special issue of *Economic and Industrial Democracy* and in many other places and spaces. In view of the foundational and continuing major importance of Thompson's work on moral economy, it is important to bring it to the attention of current readers, to critically examine it and to use it to set the context of many of the other contributions to this issue. These are the main aims of this article.

The context

Thompson published his pioneering article, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', in the academic journal *Past and Present*, no. 50, in 1971. Yet he had started work on this subject 'while awaiting proofs' of his 1963 *magnum opus*, *The Making of the English Working Class*. Thompson later wrote 'a quite new study, of greater length', 'The Moral Economy Reviewed', in which he responded, in a characteristically detailed and lengthy way, in 92 pages, to 'some critics' and reflected upon 'the issues raised by others'. Both 'The Moral Economy' and 'The Moral Economy Reviewed' appeared in his outstanding book *Customs in Common*, published by Merlin Press in 1991 (Thompson, 1991: ix–x, 185–258, 259–351).

During this period of almost 40 years Thompson's historical work may usefully be contextualised, politically, academically and personally, in the following way. Between 1946 and 1956 Thompson was a member of the Communist Party Historians' Group. Formally established in 1946, the group included, alongside Thompson, several figures, such as Christopher Hill, Maurice Dobb, Eric Hobsbawm, Rodney Hilton, Victor Kiernan, Raphael Samuel, John Saville and Dorothy Thompson, who would come to exercise a major influence upon the development of history, especially social history, and the history of capitalism, during the second half of the twentieth century (Hobsbawm, 2023; Kaye, 1984; Samuel, 2016). Thompson left the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in 1956, in protest against its Stalinism and following the Soviet invasion of Hungary. He became a key advocate of what he termed democratic socialist humanism, one of the founders of the New Left, and a peace activist in the campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Thompson was a central figure in the 1960s birth and development of the 'new social history', most prominently the radical 'history from below' movement. Thompson's historical writings at this time, especially *The Making of the English Working Class*, had a strong west-Yorkshire colouring. This was because between 1948 and the1960s Thompson was heavily influenced, as staff tutor in history and literature, by the experiences and views of his mature students in the Extra-Mural Department at

the University of Leeds and in the radical history of the region more generally, including his home base of Halifax.

Yet in 1965, after 17 years of teaching, researching and living in Yorkshire, and during which time all three of the Thompsons' children were born, he left his post at Leeds to set up and direct, as Reader, the Centre for the Study of Social History at the University of Warwick. While at times critical of the lack of 'discipline', 'control' and 'adventurism' displayed by some of Warwick's left-wing students, Thompson, nevertheless, was politically as well as academically very active at Warwick. This was seen in his opposition to the university's keeping of 'secret' files on its prominent left-wing students and academics, particularly the visiting left-wing American labour historian David Montgomery. It was also reflected in Thompson's scathing critique of the 'business model' and what he saw as the unduly cosy relationship between the university and the local motor industry. This critique, edited by Thompson, and involving student authors, was published as *Warwick University Limited: Industry Management and the Universities* in 1970.

In the following year Thompson, Dorothy, his wife, and their children left Warwick to live in rural Worcestershire. Thereafter Thompson became a freelance writer with occasional stints of teaching and research at home and abroad, while Dorothy took up a full-time History post at the University of Birmingham. From the end of the 1970s until his death in 1993 Thompson was a major and full-time figure in the European peace movement, in the form of END (European Nuclear Disarmament). The latter sought to build a mass movement on the basis of a 'third-way', independent critique of the nuclear ambitions and aggression of both the East and West. In his later years Thompson's health began seriously to decline. Yet he still found time to write and publish in 1991, two years before his death, 'The Moral Economy Reviewed' (Dorothy Thompson, 2001: vii–x; see also Palmer, 1994; Winslow, 2014)

I first became aware of Thompson's interest in moral economy while I was a post-graduate student on the taught MA in Comparative British and US Labour and Social History in the Centre for the Study of Social History at Warwick between 1968 and 1970. I subsequently took part in relevant meetings and discussions on eighteenth-century English moral economy with colleagues at Warwick and elsewhere during the 1970s and 1980s, although my own research interests were in nineteenth – and twentieth-century British and US labour history rather than moral economy. I pursued these interests both during my MA and as a PhD student of David Montgomery at the University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the early 1970s. I have continued to research, write, publish and teach in the fields of labour, social and political history ever since. In this article I offer my Warwick and post-Warwick recollections of Thompson's views on moral economy, both written and oral, and some of the most important issues raised by them.

Thompson's notion of the moral economy

Thompson is widely considered to be the originator of the term, moral economy. In 'The Moral Economy Reviewed', he described his subject area, his 'object of analysis', as 'the mentality', or, as he would prefer to put it, 'the political culture, the expectations, traditions, and, indeed superstitions' of the 'working population' of eighteenth-century England 'most frequently involved in actions in the market'; and 'the relations

– sometimes negotiations – between crowd and rulers which go under the unsatisfactory term of "riot"'. Thompson continued, 'My method was to reconstruct a paternalist model of food marketing, with protective institutional expression and with emergency routines in time of dearth, which derived in part from earlier Edwardian and Tudor policies of provision and market-regulation; to contrast this with the new political economy of the free market in grain . . . and to show how, in times of high prices and of hardship, the crowd might enforce, with a robust direct action, protective market-control and the regulation of prices, sometimes claiming a legitimacy derived from the paternalist model' (Thompson, 1991: 260–261).

Thompson explained that this earlier, paternalist model of food marketing resided in a 'body of Statute law, as well as common law and custom'. Of particular importance was the Book of Orders. These codified, during the times of scarcity between 1580 and 1630, the emergency measures empowering magistrates to survey and enforce the legislation concerning the supply and sale of corn in the market. Strict rules were to be enforced to ensure that no corn was to be sold 'except in open market' and that the poor were 'provided of necessary Corne . . . with as much favour in the Prices, as by the earnest Perswasion of the Justices can be obtained'. More generally, the paternalist system of regulation was designed not only to meet the needs of the poor for food before other consumers, but to ensure social peace and harmony and to protect the consumer by means of direct contact between sellers and buyers in the marketplace. For example, there existed 'many restrictions' against 'forestalling, regrating and engrossing'. 'For most of the eighteenth century', notes Thompson, 'the middleman remained legally suspect, and his operations were, in theory severely restricted.' Millers and bakers 'were considered as servants of the community, working not for profit but for a fair allowance'. In short, the paternalist system was designed to meet the needs of the community for food by means of regulation, rather than serving the interests of private interests intent upon maximising profits and cutting costs (Thompson, 1991: 193–194, 224–225, 293, 301).

Thompson maintained that the paternalist model of food marketing 'very often, informed the actions of government until the 1770s'; and remained the one 'to which many local magistrates continued to appeal'. It had an 'ideal existence, and also, a fragmentary real existence'. Thus, 'In years of good harvests and moderate prices, the authorities lapsed into forgetfulness. But if prices rose and the poor became turbulent, it was revived, at least for symbolic effect' (Thompson, 1991: 193, 200). At the same time, however, the massive, if uneven, expansion of the market and the spread of the industrial-capitalist mode of production 'eroded' the body of Statute law regulating the market in food and other necessities. The new political economy of Adam Smith, David Ricardo and Thomas Malthus – of individualism and competition, the private pursuit of profit, of 'free', independent waged labour (often believed to lack reproductive and cultural 'restraint'), the deregulated market, the weak and small state and opposition to 'monopolies' and other impediments to market 'freedoms' and 'liberties' – emerged in the later eighteenth century and became increasingly hegemonic in England and Britain. This, of course, was the new 'system' of industrial-capitalist 'freedom' and 'emancipation' against which Marx and Engels would lay their charges of hypocrisy, exploitation, conflict and misery in the nineteenth century. Thompson's essays on moral economy and his wider body of work should be seen as part of this Marxist tradition of critique and

alternative political economy (Thompson, 1991: 193, 200–207, 268–271, 276; see also Stedman Jones, 2016: 171–180).

Thompson viewed the moral economy of the eighteenth-century English plebeian crowd as residing in social consciousness and social being. His definition of moral economy embraced not only values, norms, habits and customs, but also social situations, conditions, social relations, socio-political behaviour and the actions to be found in popular social movements, especially 'direct actions' in the marketplace around the provision and distribution of grain, food marketing and the price of bread. As against those who equate moral economy solely with *values*, for example those of fairness, justice and 'moral attitudes', Thompson protested that, 'if values, on their own, make a moral *economy* then we will be turning up moral economies everywhere'. Rather, for Thompson, moral economy was situated not only in values, in culture, but also in *specific social contexts*, in a particular historically-defined 'balance of class or social forces', in material and other structures (Thompson, 1991: 339–340). Thompson thus offered a *historical-materialist definition of moral economy* (Thompson, 1978: Introduction, ix–xi [by Dorothy Thompson], 50–68).

Thompson's definition, furthermore, arose out of his observations of the operation of the market, distribution, exchange and conflict in the sphere of *consumption* during the eighteenth century. In moving, in *The Making of the English Working Class*, to an examination of the more advanced development of industrial capitalism and popular social movements in the nineteenth century, Thompson, along with other labour and social historians, shifted the historical focus more to the spheres of *production* and *politics*. Many of these British historians, including Thompson, advanced the thesis that the emerging working class became more self-confident, independent-minded, radical and class conscious than the eighteenth-century plebs. The former were portrayed by Thompson and likeminded historians to be increasingly, albeit unevenly, less concerned with the defence of the past and traditional customs and more intent upon changing the industrial-capitalist present in new reformist and even revolutionary ways. Change and transformation, moreover, were to be achieved far less by the actions of paternalist and non-paternalist rulers 'from above' and far more by independent working-class means 'from below'. These means embraced self-help organisations such as trade unions, political groups and cooperative societies. In short, as active *agents*, these nineteenth-century workers increasingly looked to the creation of a new future rather than the food rioters' defence of a traditional past (Belchem, 1996; Prothero, 1981; Thompson, 1963).

According to Thompson, eighteenth-century social relations between the people and their rulers were, as noted above, often characterised by tensions and confrontations, between, on the one hand, advocates of 'an innovative market economy' and, on the other, the plebs and their 'customary moral economy'. The latter, in Thompson's view, afforded the utmost importance to the needs and interests of the 'commonweal', especially those of the plebs' own *communities*. The appeal to tradition served strongly to legitimise the actions of the plebs, especially in terms of providing communities with their customary provision, or *sufficiency*, of the vital daily staple of bread at a 'just' price. The need for this sufficiency, of course, became particularly acute during times of dearth and high prices and unemployment. These economic factors often constituted an important, but by no means sufficient, cause of the crowd's resort to action, especially in the

form of food riots, against what were seen to be selfish and exploitative individuals and groups who sought to maximise their self-interest by limiting supply (especially hoarding) and/or pushing up prices against the needs and interests of the whole community. During the eighteenth century, food riots were the most common form of popular social protest. (Thompson, 1991: 6–8, 188–189, 208–215, 303–305).

It is important to note in this context that, as observed by Thompson, Adam Smith was a leading advocate of the largely 'innovative free market' against the predominantly regulatory past. According to Thompson, Smith offered 'the most lucid expression in English of the standpoint of the new political economy upon market relations in subsistence food-stuffs'. For Smith, the free market, left to regulate itself, provided the best means of supplying food, maximising the satisfaction of all the parties involved and rationing, by means of the self-adjusting price mechanism in response to supply and demand, the provision of food throughout the whole year. Smith also saw middlemen as playing a positive role in transferring corn from 'areas of surplus to areas of scarcity'. Temporary shortages and dearth might occur. But these were highly preferable to the possibilities of starvation and famine, caused, according to Smith, partly by the meddlesome 'interference of the state and popular prejudice' and superstition. In short, the free market must be allowed to take its natural course. Thompson maintained that Smith's view was 'profoundly influential within British government circles' (Thompson, 1991: 200–207, 276).

Smith's economic arguments issued from the basic assumption, rather than from proven and detailed empirical evidence over time, that 'man's [*sic*] selfish propensities' outweighed any concerns for the lot of 'any other man [*sic*]'. This viewpoint was expressed in Smith's most famous and enduring work, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). Building upon this basic psychological assumption and proposition, Smith reached the conclusion that the 'free' market or 'perfect liberty' for the self-interested individual, complete with the market's inbuilt and unintended but regulating and socially beneficent 'invisible hand', constituted the 'natural' and most preferable form of economy, society and polity in the modern 'commercial age'. For Smith, this system of 'liberty', complete with minimal state intervention, stood in marked contrast and was much superior to past mercantilist and other societies with their defence of vested interests, oligopoly, monopoly, customary 'superstition' and heavy state intervention and regulation.

At the same time, however, Smith had agreed in his earlier book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), that man [*sic*] was not entirely devoid of interest in the fortunes and even happiness of others, albeit largely in terms of the effects upon his own self-interest and feelings (Smith, 2010 [1759], including the Introduction by the eminent economist Amartya Sen). In *The Wealth of Nations* he also recognised that, despite man's [*sic*] overriding selfishness, civilised society required 'general rules of justice and (positive) morality' and in some instances ameliorative economic measures (for example, the provision of public works) to prevent a descent into total chaos, conflict among predominantly self-centred individuals and extreme inequalities and divisions (Smith, 1986 [1776]: Introduction, especially 16–29 [by distinguished economist Andrew Skinner], 4–43, 77–82; Thompson, 1991: 201–203, 208 (n. 1), 268, 278–285).

In defending 'custom' against capitalist innovation, the plebs, resumed Thompson, were both conservative or 'backward-looking' and 'rebellious'. He observed that their

rebellious social movements at times also 'prefigured' subsequent 'class formations and consciousness; and the fragmented debris of older patterns are revivified and reintegrated within this emergent class consciousness'. The latter process would constitute the core story of *The Making of the English Working Class* (Thompson, 1963; 1991: 9–10, 12, 246).

In terms of profiling his selected eighteenth-century social movements, Thompson wrote that the 'occupational make-up of the crowd provides few surprises'. It was, he observed, seemingly 'fairly representative of the "lower" orders in the rioting areas'. Women, as key household managers and guardians of children, food marketers and often well-known and with extensive contacts in their communities, were often prominent, as were a range of rural-based industrial occupational groups. These included colliers, tinners, bricklayers, carpenters, masons, sawyers, cordwainers, labourers, weavers and woolcombers. The 'relative inactivity' of farm labourers demonstrated that eighteenth-century England did not have the large 'peasantry' and was more advanced in terms of industry and urbanisation than many European countries, for example France (Thompson, 1991: 233–234, 236–237, 305–336).

Thompson, furthermore, strongly and crucially argued that it was wrong to resort to 'the loose employment' of the descriptive and derogatory terms 'mob' and 'riot' to describe his chosen plebeian social movements. In the manner of another outstanding British Marxist historian, George Rude, a student of the 'faces', motivations and actions of protesting crowds in England and France between 1730 and 1848, Thompson convincingly argued that these terms, and their associations with irrational, unthinking, undisciplined, unfocused, disordered and 'spasmodic' thought and behaviour and an all-too-ready resort to 'plunder' and acts of violence, were wholly misleading (Rude, 1981; Thompson, 1991: 185–186). Thompson clearly showed that that these movements, with special reference to food riots, were 'a highly complex form of popular action, disciplined and with clear objectives' and modes of operation. They were generally well organised, restrained and enjoyed 'overwhelming popular consensus' and legitimation in their appeals to established tradition, including the, albeit declining, paternalist model 'from above'. They amounted to 'a sophisticated pattern of collective behaviour' rooted in a combination of economic, cultural, social and political factors, according to Thompson (1991: 185–186, 188, 208, 228–229, 253, 266).

Thompson's argument stood in marked opposition to the 'spasmodic' view of popular protest expressed most strongly by the famous North American economist and political theorist, Walt Rostow, in his 'social tension chart' of 1948. The latter claimed to prove that popular protests, such as food riots, were 'simple responses to economic stimuli', as direct and unmediated visceral responses to the economic distress to be found, for example, in hunger, poverty, unemployment and high prices (Thompson, 1991: 185–187). According to Thompson, 'too many' of Britain's 'growth' historians, including highly respected figures such as TS Ashton, had all too readily accepted Rostow's premises and arguments. As a consequence, they too had presented very narrow, partial, misleading and inaccurate economic-reductionist accounts of popular protest movements (Thompson, 1991: 185–187).

Thompson's methodology

In contrast to this 'spasmodic' and 'crass economic reductionist' approach, Thompson set out to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive methodology. This was intended to be more holistic and balanced in character and sensitive to the complexity of human motivations and actions. It would, for example, take into account the 'delicate tissue' of social norms and values, as well economic, social and other factors, informing human thought and behaviour. In championing this approach, Thompson drew attention not only to the relevant work of historians, but also the historically-informed sociological and social-anthropological insights of Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and Bronislaw Malinowski (Thompson, 1991: 187–188).

It is also most likely that Thompson's long and deep immersion in literature and poetry, as well as history, made him both particularly sensitive to the complexities of human beings and the human condition. As Dorothy Thompson, the person closest to him, declared of Edward, 'Although his degree was in history, his first love was probably always literature, especially poetry and drama' (D Thompson, 2001: viii). The notion of a largely one-dimensional 'economic man [*sic*]', narrowly but 'rationally', if somewhat blindly, pursuing the overriding goals of self-interest, competition and the maximisation of profit, would not hardly sit comfortably with one, such as Thompson, so finely and deeply attuned to human complexity, change and contingency over time.

More generally, as the Nobel-Prize winning economist and New Keynesian Joseph Stiglitz wrote in a 2001 Foreword to the pioneering study by the distinguished economic historian and social theorist Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, first published in 1944, self-regulating markets of the kind advocated by Smith and his host of modern followers 'never work'. Rather, their deficiencies, 'not only in their internal workings, but also in their consequences', are 'so great that government intervention becomes necessary' (Polanyi, 2001: Stiglitz Foreword: vii). Thompson was fully aware of this fact.

Finally, in his fascinating 2011 account of Thompson's trajectory as a Marxist thinker, the innovative sociologist Scott Hamilton showed that Thompson's sensitive democratic, humanist and open vision and practice, especially to the alternative and at times seemingly utopian and impossible alternative pasts, presents and futures offered by people 'from below', are the antithesis of not only Stalinist, but also, free-market capitalist and 'closed' 'modernisation' schemes, sometimes brutally imposed 'from above' (Hamilton, 2011).

These general methodological concerns, around comprehensiveness, complexity and sensitivity, strongly informed Thompson's empirical treatment of moral economy and the actions of the crowd. For example, Thompson demonstrated that cultural, social and political factors were necessary causative elements of food riots, alongside economic ones. As noted above, economic factors constituted important but insufficient explanation. Thompson wrote, 'The study of wages and prices and of norms and expectations can complement each other.' In turn, 'culture' would be placed within its 'proper material abode'. For Thompson, popular culture would no longer amount only to 'idealist, 'thin air' 'meanings, attitudes and values', but be 'located within a particular equilibrium of social relations, a working environment of exploitation and resistance to exploitation, of

relations of power which are masked by the rituals of paternalism and deference' (Thompson, 1991: 7, 185–189, 262).

Therein lay a clear demonstration of Thompson's flexible historical materialism in which relative autonomy, overdetermination and complex relations and overlaps between the various social processes, structures and levels – economic, political, social, ideological and cultural – prevail. As Hamilton showed, Thompson's materialist, but humanist, structural *and* cultural practice stood in marked opposition to a crude 'base-superstructure' model or mechanical system – as employed by some on the right and the Marxist left – in which socio-cultural, political and ideological phenomena could largely be simply 'read off' or predicted by trends in the economy. Rather, these phenomena were *constitutive* of reality while simultaneously being subject to the *limits* and *pressures* exerted by the other social forces, according to Thompson (Hamilton, 2011).

Yet Thompson's version of historical materialism was increasingly contested by other Marxists. Most prominently, during the 1960s and 1970s Marxism in Britain and elsewhere was strongly influenced by abstract structuralist theory, especially that of the French philosopher Louis Althusser. In 1978 Thompson published a formidable academic and polemical blast against Althusser and Althusserianism in his *The Poverty of Theory: Or an Orrery of Errors*. In this book Thompson defended his historical-materialist methodology, rooted in an unending dialogue between concept and evidence, abstract and concrete knowledge and structure and culture, against Althusser's dismissal of 'empiricism', 'humanism' and 'historicism'. For Thompson, Althusser was denouncing flexible, open and people-centred historical materialism in favour of the adoption of an impersonal, cold and profoundly unsatisfactory form of theoreticism, of a combination of idealism and structuralism. In the process, the crucial dialogue between social being, experience and social consciousness and concept and empirical evidence was being torn apart. For Thompson, under the absolutist and closed 'theology', or 'ideological terrorism', of Althusser, people became the largely unaware captives of their deep 'ulterior structural determinations', with the latter constituting the key to 'true' knowledge and understanding of the 'social formation' (Thompson, 1978: 1–12, 254).

Thompson continued to defend his belief in the 'rational', 'libertarian', 'humanist', 'democratic', 'open' and 'critical' historical-materialist tradition derived from Marx (Thompson, 1978: 254–255), but he increasingly felt the Marxist ground to be shifting under his feet. He had left the *New Left Review* in 1963 in bitter protest that it was moving to embrace structuralism. In the 1970s he was unfairly attacked for his 'culturalism', the false belief that he was neglecting the study of structure in favour of culture. In fact, Thompson continued to insist upon the interplay between the two: it was reified and frozen *structuralism* and *culturalism/*idealism that were to be rejected. Matters came to a head at the bad-tempered and uproarious History Workshop conference in Oxford in 1979 when Thompson angrily rejected the charge of culturalism. In turn, the growing popularity of postmodernism from the 1980s onwards saw Thompson being falsely criticised for his supposed concern more with materiality than subjectivity and language (Hamilton, 2011; Kirk, 1994; Thompson, 1978: Dorothy Thompson's Introduction and Postscript; *History Workshop Journal*, 2012; Thompson, 1993).

Thompson responded to all these criticisms by repeating his commitment to the open-ended *tradition* of historical materialism. Yet, as observed by Dorothy Thompson,

'towards the end of his life he ceased to consider himself a "Marxist"'. This was not because he had lost faith in the 'tradition' derived from Marx himself, but because 'the term had acquired a quasi-religious connotation which seemed to involve arguments which were irrelevant to the fruitful development of the positive elements in the tradition' (Thompson, 1978: Dorothy Thompson's Introduction, ix–xi, 50–68). It had become something of an unsatisfactory closed system rather than a relatively flexible and open tradition and method of historical enquiry (Thompson, 1957 in Winslow, 2014: 49–87).

Thompson's historical materialism also involved an attachment to the *paramount importance* of the study of *context*. He viewed history, above all other subject disciplines, as the study of *contexts* and the shifting balance between elements of continuity and change over time (Calhoun, 1994; Thompson, 1972). For Thompson, 'generalisations as to the universals of "popular culture"', for example, were 'empty unless they are placed firmly within specific historical contexts' (Thompson, 1991: 6). It followed that Thompson's definition of moral economy, arising out of his substantial engagement with the eighteenth-century empirical evidence and not imposed on it in an improper predetermined way, most definitely was 'not about *all* kinds of crowd' (Thompson, 1991: 260). He maintained that an understanding of 'the actions of any particular crowd may require attention to particular market-places and particular practices in dealing', and that his own particular findings could not be taken 'straight across to any "peasant market" nor to all proto-industrial market-places nor to Revolutionary France . . . nor to nineteenth-century Madras'. While 'some of the encounters between growers, dealers and consumers were markedly similar', Thompson described them 'as they were worked out within the given field-of-force of eighteenth-century English relations'. His account, moreover, 'did not offer a comprehensive overview' of food rioters in eighteenth-century England. (Thompson, 1991: 261).

In short, Thompson's fundamental commitment to historical context meant that that the general could not instantly and easily be extrapolated from the specific object of enquiry. The drawing of general conclusions about moral economy around commonalities, similarities and differences of definition, meaning, cause and effect, could only be made after further careful, precise and detailed *comparative* research had been undertaken. (Thompson, 1991: 344, 351). For Thompson, loose, instant and decontextualised usages of the term moral economy were incompatible with the pursuit of considered historical rigour and precision.

Thompson's legacy

Fecundity

During the 1970s and 1980s the social historian Adrian Randall was both 'inspired' by Dorothy Thompson while he was an undergraduate student in history at the University of Birmingham and connected with, and greatly influenced by, Edward Thompson. In his important study of 2006, *Riotous Assemblies: Popular Protest in Hanoverian England*, Randall rightly claimed that Thompson's model of the moral economy had proved to be 'exceptionally fecund'. Randall observed that as an 'explanatory tool', Thompson's model had been 'utilized' by historians and other students not only of Britain, but also of

France, America, India and China. It had, furthermore, provided a substantial boost to 'peasant studies of the third world', subaltern studies in India and widespread research across academic disciplines in the humanities and social sciences (Randall, 2006: 4–10). Within the United Kingdom it had become one of the most widely quoted works in the field of history.

As Thompson himself noted in his 'Moral Economy Reviewed', 'a "moral economy theory" was now at the centre of controversy in many places of peasant studies'. As Thompson acknowledged, this was in large measure due to the 'gain' and stimulus provided by the political scientist and anthropologist James C Scott, in his pioneering work on 'peasant conceptions of social justice, of rights and obligations, of reciprocity' in Lower Burma and Vietnam and the generalisations drawn from it. Much indebted to Thompson, Scott placed key emphasis not only on 'values', but also 'access to land, customs of land use, entitlement to its produce' and 'tenacious' peasant resistance to power and the powerful. Such resistance, as in the case of the 'lower orders' in eighteenth-century England, constituted an important aspect of the 'coping' strategies or 'weapons' used by peasants and others of the rural poor more generally in the face of the powerful and market rationalisations and innovations. The perspectives and arguments of Scott and Thompson had application not only to Asia, but from Ireland to Africa and Latin America (Scott, 1976, 1985; Thompson, 1991: 341–349).

In terms of the study of the lower orders, or subaltern groups, in India, Thompson's impact, was also 'extraordinary' (Chakrabarty, 1989, 2013; Van Schendel, 2006: 257, n. 79). While this applied more to Thompson's general thesis of working-class 'making' rather than to his more specific concern with moral economy, the latter still had a considerable impact. This was because India had large numbers of rural workers, both 'free' and 'unfree', and petty producers struggling for subsistence. Despite the persistence of 'consciousness of caste, religion and region' in India and its relatively low levels of proletarianisation and industrial labour, the importance attached by the 'Westerner' Thompson to culture, consciousness and conflict in the countryside, as well as more urbanised areas, had a strong appeal among students of Indian society and other parts of the Global South (Behal et al., 2010; Chakrabarty, 1989, 2013; Van Schendel, 2006).

Criticism and contestation

By the time of the new millennium, Thompson's moral economy had thus achieved widespread recognition and acclaim as pioneering and hugely significant. Yet it was also subjected at times to general and specific criticisms. It has become, both during Thompson's last years and since his death, a somewhat *contested* rather than a unanimously approved concept. For example, the prominent Cambridge intellectual historians, Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, took Thompson to task for 'caricaturing' moral economy and political economy. According to Hont and Ignatieff (1983), Thompson both portrayed moral economy as a 'set of vestigial moral preferences innocent of substantive argument about the workings of markets' and failed to situate Adam Smith within his relevant European context. In response, in 'The Moral Economy Reviewed', Thompson maintained that his moral economy was rooted in 'actual markets' rather than 'the theorised market relations' of Hont and Ignatieff and that they had displayed insufficient familiarity with, and research

into, the relevant social history and 'sloppiness' in relation to Thompson's portrayal of Smith and political economy (Thompson, 1991: 274–279, 282–283).

In 'The Moral Economy Reviewed', Thompson also engaged with the important criticisms levelled against him by historian John Bohstedt. In his challenging study, *Riots and Community Politics in England and Wales, 1790–1810*, published in 1983, Bohstedt argued that food riots were more successful than claimed by Thompson in persuading the authorities to take appropriate ameliorative action. (This argument about 'success' had been made by historians John Walter and Keith Wrightson in the 1970s in relation to the seventeenth century [Walter and Wrightson, 1976].) Bohstedt's thesis led him to the conclusion that compromise, negotiation and the protection of 'social peace' was often more important to the rulers than 'profit rights' and the ruthless implementation of the new political economy. For Bohstedt, furthermore, food rioters did not pose a fundamental and direct challenge to 'the whole system of property and power'. In a balanced and generally conciliatory reply to Bohstedt's 'major study of riot', Thompson agreed that there was evidence of 'social bargains' being struck between the poor and their rulers, that these gave a 'character of liberality to some country gentry' and that they helped to preserve 'the everyday exercise of hegemony'. Much depended, however, upon the local situation, the selected time period and the nature, both potential and actual, of popular actions around food, according to Thompson. Both Thompson and Bohstedt agreed that from the increasingly turbulent and politically charged 1790s onwards a 'waning paternalism' became 'thinly-disguised self-preservation' (Bohstedt, 1983; Thompson, 1991: 292–293, 300–302, 306).

In 1988, in what Thompson rightly described as a 'substantial article', Bohstedt extended his criticisms to the important, but neglected area of the role of women in food riots. He claimed to have demolished 'the myth of the feminine food riot'. In his lengthy and considered response in 'The Moral Economy Reviewed', Thompson concluded that despite its 'interesting material', Bohstedt's article, based as it was upon the period 1790–1810, could not 'support generalisations as to the feminine presence in food riots which extended over a period of well over two hundred years'. At a more fundamental level, Thompson unequivocally maintained that Bohstedt was attacking a straw target. While Thompson's and historians' research had shown women to have been active in food riots and to have had a 'significant place' in market-based activities, 'no-one, no historian' had 'ever suggested that food riots were a "monopoly" of women or were predominantly feminine'. 'Bohstedt', moreover, could 'show none', according to Thompson (1991: 306–336). Lastly, in his important 2010 book, *The Politics of Provision: Food Riots, Moral Economy and Market Transition in England*, Bohstedt considerably widened his timeframe – from 1790–1810 to 1550–1850 – to argue that Thompson's moral economy was too all-embracing to cover adequately the complexities and variations in local food riots during the whole of the eighteenth century and that the motives and targets of food rioters changed over time (Bohstedt, 2010).

In 1999 Adrian Randall and geographer Andrew Charlesworth co-edited a very useful overview and friendly, but critical, engagement with Thompson's work on moral economy in a book collection entitled *The Moral Economy and Popular Protest.* This book developed out of a conference held in 1992 to mark the 'coming of age' of Thompson's moral economy. In 2006 Randall's substantial and impressive single-authored book,

Riotous Assemblies, combined praise for Thompson's 'fecundity' with a useful summary of the main lines of criticism directed largely by historians at his moral economy. These included insufficient attention by Thompson to the finely-grained nature of eighteenth-century English society, especially the role of the 'middling sort' of publicans, professionals, trades people and other independent 'producers' in relation to 'middling consciousness', the labouring poor and food riots. This potentially very important area of debate was centrally raised by Randall himself. Following Bohstedt, there was also scope for more research in the areas of social accommodation, resignation, toleration and social peace as well as those of opposition, conflict and turbulence. Some scholars, moreover, remained unconvinced that Thompson had been sufficiently familiar with the full types, characteristics and meanings of moral economy, 'the economic dynamics of the era' and the presence of moral concerns in modern, market-based economies (Gotz, 2015; King, 1996; Randall, 2006; Randall and Charlesworth, 1999).

Thompson's ambivalence

After his death in 1993 Thompson, of course, was no longer present to respond in his characteristically vigorous and critical, but generally constructive, balanced and open-minded manner, to the views of his critics outlined above. Yet, in view of the central importance of context to Thompson and his strictures against loose, insufficient and decontextualised usage, we may reasonably ask whether he thought that it was possible and desirable to study moral economy – its definitions, meanings and usages – in contexts other than that of the moral economy of the English crowd during the eighteenth century. This question is important to contributors to this special issue because so many recent and currents students of moral economy acknowledge their considerable debt to Thompson's pioneering work.

Thompson responded cautiously and somewhat ambivalently. In 'The Moral Economy Reviewed', Thompson observed that 'the theory of a moral economy has now taken off in more than one direction and in several fields of specialist study' and that, while his own essay was 'sometimes times cited as authority', the term was 'available for every development which can be justified' (Thompson, 1991: 337). He then, however, proceeded to offer the caution that 'If the term is to be extended to other contexts' (than his chosen one), then 'it must be *redefined* (my italics) or there will be some loss of focus' and 'what it gains in breadth it loses in focus'. He added that, 'in inexpert hands', this 'may bleed off the edge into uncontextual moralistic rhetoric' (Thompson, 1991: 338, 341; see also Carrier, 2018). These arguments suggested that 'other' usages should be based upon Thompson's definition and usage as the standard bearer, the 'sometimes authority', and that the dangers of loose, imprecise and decontextualised usage were very real.

Yet, as I clearly recollect, Thompson did come to accept, or, as he wrote, was at least 'more than half persuaded' by, Adrian Randall's argument, published in 1988 as 'The Industrial Moral Economy of the Gloucestershire Weavers' in the eighteenth century (Randall, 1988: 29–51; Thompson, 1991: 338, 339). In this piece Randall demonstrated, to Thompson's satisfaction, that he had discovered the existence of an *industrial* moral economy in eighteenth-century Gloucestershire. As Thompson himself concluded on the basis of Randall's impressive research, the same Gloucestershire weaving communities

that were involved in food riots also resorted to industrial actions in defence of 'the same values, showed the same community solidarities and sanctions . . . a similar appeal to custom and to Tudor and Stuart statute law . . . and a similar insistence that, when the community's economic well-being was concerned, market forces and the profits of individuals should be subdued to custom'. In short, Randall was adjudged by Thompson to have shown that in a particular historical context an *industrial moral economy* (my italics) existed alongside his own *consumerist* (my italics) moral economy (Thompson, 1991: 338).

Yet Thompson continued to ask: 'Where are we to draw the line?' He remained critical of 'loose', 'unclear', 'imprecise' and insufficiently 'contextualised' definitions and usages of moral economy, to the very end of his life. As noted earlier, for Thompson the existence of values – of notions of morality such as right and wrong, consideration for others, fairness, justice, community, worth, respect, reciprocity and so on – 'on their own', were *not* a sufficient guarantee of the presence of 'moral economy'. Such 'moral' values had to be set in the context of a particular historical formation, its social relations and its patterns of social activism. Otherwise, a partial and unsatisfactory idealist account would be the result of the investigation rather than a more comprehensive and convincing historical-materialist explanation (Thompson, 1991: 339–340).

Moral economy at the crossroads

This brings us to the heart of our current dilemma, of the recent, present and future directions of moral economy, or, to employ the title of the Strathclyde workshop, of 'Moral Economy at the Crossroads'. As noted above, and as exemplified by the papers presented at our workshop, in this issue of this journal and elsewhere, single-, multi- and cross-disciplinary studies of moral economy have proliferated across the world since the later part of the twentieth century and are ongoing. In this very important sense the future thus looks bright. This section provides further brief examples of significant recent and continuing initiatives in moral-economic research and Thompson's possible and my own comments on them. The article then concludes by briefly indicating a potentially productive approach to future research.

The *moral dimension* of moral economy, especially the issue of considerate, altruistic and humanitarian attitudes and behaviour towards others, has become a particularly popular and important area of moral-economic research in the recent past and into the present. This has provided an important counterweight to the individualistic and competitive tenets of neoliberal capitalism, especially during its recent and current crises (Kirk, 2023, 2024). In this context, the reader's attention may be drawn to our first example: the pioneering research of the eminent sociologist Andrew Sayer into the ethics of moral economy (Sayer, 2000, 2005, 2011). Sayer's work on mutuality, cooperation, trust and consideration for others, moreover, has been complemented and extended by a number of other scholars. They have and continue to explore issues of morality and fairness, both 'from below' and 'above', nationally, internationally, globally and comparatively.

For example, in his 2017 study of the 'moral economists', RH Tawney, Polanyi and Thompson, Tim Rogan, historian turned barrister, offered the challenging, but flawed, thesis that Thompson's critique of capitalism, along with those of Tawney and Polanyi,

was essentially ethical rather than economic in character. It is true that, while Thompson's work as a whole did provide a sharp critique of capitalist utilitarianism and acquisitive individualism, it was, as we have seen in relation to the issue of moral economy, historical-materialist rather than solely or mainly ethical and cultural in character (Rogan, 2017).

The collaborative research of Sharon Bolton, Knut Laaser and Darren McGuire acknowledges Thompson's emphasis upon material as well as cultural factors. Yet it mainly adopts what may be termed a mixed moral-economic approach. Inspired by Sayer, Polanyi and Thompson, they have produced new and interesting research into the worlds of work and employment, European employment policy and organisational studies. This has been heavily influenced by Sayer's ethical concerns with morality, fairness, mutuality, reciprocity, legitimacy and justice (Bolton and Laaser, 2013; Bolton et al., 2016). Business and labour historian Quentin Outram, furthermore, is currently exploring the morality of the rich, while sociologists Sebastian Koos and Patrick Sachweh have recently undertaken comparative research into popular, moral-economic attitudes towards inequality, market-based competition, redistribution and reciprocity (Koos and Sachweh, 2019; Outram, 2023 [published in this issue]; Sachweh, 2012). Finally, in his comparative study of welfare states, sociologist Steffen Mau has shown that the acceptance and legitimacy of welfare states in Britain and Germany have rested in part upon moral assumptions and notions of social justice (Mau, 2014).

A second important area of moral-economic research has focused upon the nature, extent, popular experiences of and conflicts around industrial change, especially deindustrialisation and the concept of industrial moral economy. Much of this research has been very heavily influenced by the insights provided by Thompson. A fine example of this is to be found in the innovative cross-disciplinary work of sociologist Tim Strangleman. A former signalman on the London underground system, Strangleman attended Ruskin College, Oxford, and Durham University. As a postgraduate at Durham, he was associated with a group of sociologists strongly influenced by one of the most important past advocates of historical sociology, Philip Abram. Strangleman is currently Professor of Sociology at the University of Kent. Taking on board sociologist David Inglis's call, in 2014, for a more historically-informed kind of sociology, Strangleman published his important article 'Deindustrialisation and the Historical Sociological Imagination' in 2016. This study drew heavily and directly upon Thompson's moral economy and another of his key concepts, *experience*. Experience, for Thompson, concerns the ways in which people are both influenced by their underlying structures of being (economic, political and so on) and the various ways in which awareness of these structures breaks through into consciousness. Strangleman's piece convincingly demonstrated the ways in which Thompson's two concepts could help us better to understand 'the social experience of industrial change' more generally than the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century English case and the 'contemporary processes of deindustrialisation and work' (Inglis, 2014; Strangleman, 2016).

The subjects of capitalist industrialisation, deindustrialisation and moral economy have also constituted the core concerns of a novel and insightful international study, *The Deindustrialized World* (2017), edited by historians Steven High, Lachlan MacKinnon and Andrew Perchard. This book developed out of a conference in 2014

organised by the oral history centres at Concordia University and the University of Strathclyde. The core focus rested upon 'the full profundity' of 'the impact of deindustrialization and its aftermath in how this was embodied in everyday life' in a variety of local, regional, national and international places in the UK, Australia, Canada, France and the USA. It also set industrialisation and deindustrialisation in the context of the development and spread of global capitalism. Written by scholars from across the social sciences and humanities, it concentrated mainly upon past and recent episodes of industrialisation and utilised oral as well as written sources. It also involved a good deal of transnational collaboration and a certain amount of transnational understanding and knowledge of 'deindustrialization as a political and economic process integral to capitalist development' (High et al., 2017: 9).

This book holds particular relevance and fascination for us in that it was heavily influenced by the moral-economic perspectives of both Sayer and Thompson. This was particularly the case in terms of Thompson's definition of the moral economy as involving the protection of local and community needs and interests and the defence of customary and regulatory practices and outlooks, from both above and below. These developed in the face of often rapid and brutal free-market deindustrialisation in which whole communities frequently suffered significant material and cultural forms of grievance and loss (High et al., 2017: 3–22, 348–358).

Thompson's influence, furthermore, has been pronounced in work relating to the particular case of post-war industrial change and deindustrialisation in Scotland. It was during the post-war period and particularly during the years of Margaret Thatcher's rule that deindustrialisation rapidly accelerated in Scotland and had disastrous and widespread consequences upon work and the lives of the male-dominated industrial working class, their families and their communities. Several historians, most prominently Andrew Perchard, Ewan Gibbs, Jim Tomlinson, Jim Phillips and Valerie Wright, have recently provided us with detailed and impressive accounts of these developments and popular, moral-economic responses to them.

This combined body of research argues very strongly that those so badly affected and their middle-class sympathisers in industry, politics and the state, including some 'One Nation' Conservatives, were strongly attracted to a largely collectivist notion of *industrial moral economy*. This was centred around notions and movements in defence of jobs, fairness, justice, reciprocity, extensive state intervention, regulation, communities, traditions, customs, identities and the provision of alternative sources of employment. Although evident earlier in parts of Scotland (Kirk, 2007), attachment to a historically-specific version of industrial moral economy became most extensive and intensive during the rapid changes and turbulence of the post-war period (Gibbs, 2018, 2021; Perchard and Phillips, 2011; Phillips, 2013, 2017; Phillips et al., 2021; Tomlinson, 2011, 2021). The process and dreadful effects of deindustrialisation upon the 'traditional' industrial working class, of course, are still alive in Scotland and other parts of the United Kingdom today (Gildart, 2024).

The third and final area of research to be noted rests upon specific industries and state and government policies. For example, the substantial recent and ongoing research undertaken by co-authors Perchard and Phillips, and Perchard and his fellow historian Keith Gildart, provides fascinating and new insights into moral-economic, managerialist

and free-market practices and outlooks in the nationalised British coal industry and successive governments between 1947 and 1994. They show that many mining communities were strongly wedded to the notion of industrial moral economy outlined above (Perchard and Gildart, 2022; Perchard and Phillips, 2011).

Comments

In contrast to Thompson's own work on moral economy, the studies and related concepts and outlooks outlined above, and the even wider body of literature of which they form a part, have been set in a variety of contexts and often address different kinds of subject matter. As a result, and notwithstanding many overlaps, similarities and commonalities, they are often characterised not only by their separateness and diversity, but also by the fact that they present different definitions, meanings, usages and, at least in some cases, conclusions around the concept of moral economy. From a Thompsonian perspective, and irrespective of their often considerable merits, they thus lack a defining essence and unity. One can easily imagine that Thompson would have become very agitated in the belief that the line has indeed been 'crossed' and that 'moral economies' had become too 'loose' and 'everywhere'.

At the same time, however, it is important to note that, despite his various criticisms, Thompson ended his discussion of the development and future prospects for the study of moral economy on a positive note. This was, as discussed above, seen, for example, in the welcome he gave to the work of Scott in peasant studies and that of Randall on industrial moral economy. He also engaged in a generally constructive and friendly manner with Bohstedt. Thompson welcomed 'comparative enquiry' as 'an agenda for forward research'. In characteristic fashion, much of his initial show of anger, frustration and impatience soon gave way to a far more conciliatory stance. Standards, of course, were to be maintained, as was constructive criticism. But he concluded his 'The Moral Economy Reviewed' on a modest, tolerant, confident and forward-looking note. Thus, Thompson expressed 'no right to patent the term' of moral economy and conceded that 'some historians prefer a more descriptive and looser use'. He continued, 'In any case, if I did father the term "moral economy" upon current academic discourse, the term has long forgotten its paternity. I will not disown it, but it has come of age and I am no longer answerable for its actions. It will be interesting to see how it goes on' (Thompson, 1991: 340–342, 351).

My own view is that the diversity and variety of studies of moral economy are to be welcomed, provided that they apply and meet the standards of clear and precise definition and contextualisation. Furthermore, to qualify for Thompson's definition of moral economy from his historical-materialist standpoint, they would have to engage consciousness and being, 'culture' and structure', values, outlooks, social relations and situations and collective actions over clearly defined and justified periods of time. Thompson would also insist upon the necessity of deep and extensive research, with due attention to a comprehensive range of secondary and primary sources, engagement with contrary and 'awkward' as well as supportive evidence and the arrival at appropriately balanced conclusions. The latter would not be expected to consist of claims beyond their actual importance and scope. As 'apprentice historians', graduate students at Warwick were urged to

aim towards these very high 'Thompsonian' procedures and standards, while more experienced and fully qualified members of the history profession were expected to meet them as a matter of best practice.

I maintain, furthermore, that the proliferation of studies in moral economy is valuable because they usually take on board the profound 'Thompsonian' lesson that the economy is *not* a fully autonomous, absolutely determining and separate sphere of activity. Rather, it is relatively autonomous and deeply infused by politics, culture, ideology, social structure and social relations. The fact and extent of the 'embeddedness' of economic factors in social relations, culture and historical contexts over time have also been pioneeringly investigated and revealed by Polanyi in the 1940s and the sociologist Mark Granovetter in the 1980s (Fraser, 2017: 29–42; Granovetter, 1985; Polanyi, 2001: esp. Part 3; Strangleman, 2016). Recent and current studies, for example, by historians Gary Magee, Andrew Thompson and myself, have also worked on the premise that it makes far more historical sense to refer to political economy and socio-cultural economy than the economy and the economic factor pure and simple (Kirk, 2017: 44; Magee and Thompson, 2011: 13–15).

Conclusion

This article has presented an account of EP Thompson's moral economy. This has comprised of the context in which it developed, its main characteristics, Thompson's methodology, the strengths and weaknesses both of his concept and its empirical application, the responses and initiatives of other scholars and Thompson's legacy. In this conclusion it makes sense to round off my discussion by briefly raising an important issue which I have barely touched upon: the way(s) in which future research into moral economy might usefully develop.

In essence, I endorse the suggestion made by one of the contributors to the Strathclyde workshop, anthropologist Melissa Beresford, that future research should focus upon the three component elements of Thompson's moral economy: values, aspects of social being and the nature of the moral-economic actions (Beresford et al., 2022). I would, furthermore, welcome more comparative studies of past and present moral-economic social movements across local, regional and national boundaries. This, of course, is an ambitious agenda and would be greatly facilitated by teams of researchers working across disciplines rather than by individuals working within the confines of a single discipline. It would also require national and international funding. The potential benefits, however, greatly outweigh possible drawbacks. For example, the body of research could become more substantial, deeper and more extensive, more collaborative than competitive and more challenging and hopefully rewarding to all those involved. In these ways the study of moral economy would become more in tune with the globalised world in which we live.

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ORCID iD

Neville Kirk https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5966-2998

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Author biography

Neville Kirk, Emeritus Professor of Social and Labour History, Manchester Metropolitan University, has researched and published extensively in the UK, North America and Australia in the fields of modern British, comparative British, US and Australian and transnational labour, social and political history. His most recent books are *Transnational Radicalism and the Connected Lives of Tom Mann and Robert Samuel Ross* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017, 2021), *A Nation in Crisis: Division Conflict and Capitalism in the United Kingdom* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023) and *British Society and its Three Crises: From 1970s Globalisation, to the Financial Crash of 2007–8 and the Onset of Brexit in 2016* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2024).