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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Hann, C. (2018). The Invention of Another Tradition: Tim Rogan on a Trio of Radical Historians in 20th Century Britain. *Soziopolis: Gesellschaft beobachten*. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-82597-4>

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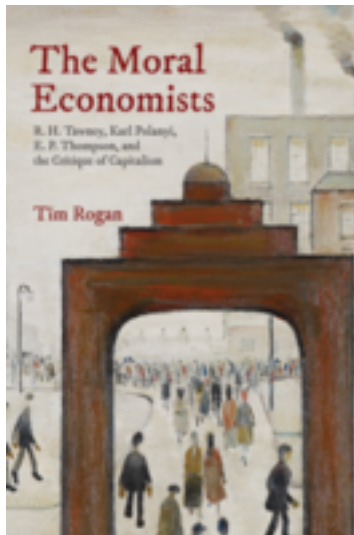
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Chris Hann | Rezension | 10.05.2018

The Invention of Another Tradition

Tim Rogan on a Trio of Radical Historians in 20th Century Britain



Tim Rogan

The Moral Economists . R. H. Tawney, Karl Polanyi, E. P. Thompson, and the Critique of Capitalism

USA / Großbritannien

Princeton, NJ / Oxford 2017: Princeton

University Press

viii, 263 S., \$ 39,95 / £ 30,00

ISBN 978-0-691-17300-9

R. H. (Harry) Tawney (1880–1962), Karl Polanyi (1886–1964) and E. P. Thompson (1924–1993) are three radical historians whose accounts of the emergence of industrial capitalism in Britain have been enormously influential, not only among historians but across the social sciences. The common threads of their successive reactions to 19th century utilitarian thought are skillfully woven together by Cambridge historian Tim Rogan, who adapts “moral economy”, a term of Thompson, as his master concept. All three engaged with what the mainstream economists from Alfred Marshall onwards turned their backs upon: the value of each individual human personality, and the ways in which traditional social relations and the force of custom shape the rational choices made by persons.

Of course, the three humanist heroes themselves have to be placed in social and intellectual contexts if we are to understand whence their ideas came and their influence not only on other scholars but on wider publics, including political and economic policymakers (though only in the case of Tawney was the last category of much significance). Tim Rogan charts these contexts with a sure hand. In Chapter 1 he allows himself a 15 page excursus to survey the terrain in which Tawney pioneered his original “high minded” (as it seemed to many, even at the time) moral critique. The influences included Oxford idealist

philosophers (notably T. H. Green and Bernard Bosanquet) rejected in the wake of Edwardian crisis, the more constructive shortcomings of “pluralism” (exemplified by legal historian F. W. Maitland and his protégé Ernest Barker), Guild Socialists (notably G. D. H. Cole) – and numerous dyed-in-the-wool Fabian socialists still sadly in thrall to utilitarianism. Chapter 2 presents Christian socialism as the main strand of continuity between Tawney and Karl Polanyi (whose formative intellectual influences in Hungary are not charted in such detail because that would take Rogan too far outside his overwhelmingly English genealogy). Before moving on to tackle Thompson, the author gathers breath by devoting an entire chapter to outline the midcentury moment when, in the wake of another war, the “beast” of capitalism suddenly seemed as if it might be tamed. For this third chapter he has combed the writings of long forgotten Labour Party revisionists, notably Evan Durbin and Anthony Crosland; the sociology of knowledge developed by another Hungarian immigrant, Karl Mannheim, during and after the Second World War also figures prominently, as part of the intellectual background to the birth of the welfare state and Butler’s Education Act of 1944. Chapter 4 is then devoted to Edward Palmer Thompson, who unlike the other main characters was a communist by conviction from his schooldays. After military service, Thompson’s social philosophy was initially shaped by the political economy of the Marxist Maurice Dobb on the one hand and the conservative humanism of T. S. Eliot on the other. Rogan outlines the steps which led Thompson to distance himself from Stalinism, his deep aversion for the anti-humanism of influential Parisian philosophers, and abiding tensions with Perry Anderson and other leading lights of the *New Left Review*. By the end of this fourth chapter, even natives of the island in the era of Jeremy Corbin and Brexit will have learned much from the author’s deft reconstructions of progressive politics over the best part of a century. In addition to fascinating insights into the social history of intellectual elites, Rogan’s narrative offers instructive glimpses into the emergence and professionalization of new social science disciplines (social psychology and sociology as well as economics).

Though Tim Rogan pays some attention to their lesser works, it is convenient for him that all three moral economists wrote a single opus magnum that deservedly assumes pride of place in his analysis. Tawney’s *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* was based on a series of lectures at the LSE and published in 1926. It traced the onset of capitalism back to the impact of Protestantism from the 16th century, well before industrialization, but in reinterpreting the thesis of Max Weber, Tawney’s ethical message was very different. His deeper motivation was that of a Christian moralist who preferred Anglican doctrines of the incarnation of Jesus to the “twaddle” of Marshallian economics. Like others in the 1920s (such as Marcel Mauss in Paris), Tawney was attracted by notions of Guild Socialism as a

middle way between liberal individualism and Bolshevik collectivism. These ideas were imbibed by the economic journalist Karl Polanyi in Vienna. When it was time to leave in 1934, Polanyi made his way to London, where he worked closely with his Christian socialist contacts (in particular moral philosopher John Macmurray, but also Tawney himself). But in Rogan's analysis the Jewish Central European promptly substituted the early writings of Karl Marx (then recently published by Siegfried Landshut and J. P. Mayer in German) as his humanist touchstone. By the time he published *The Great Transformation* in 1944, Polanyi had taken a further significant step. According to Rogan, his inadequate treatment of historical sources, notably those pertaining to the motivations of the magistrates in Speenhamland in the late 18th century, which led him to date the onset of disembedded capitalist relations to the early 19th century, cost Polanyi any chance he had of obtaining an academic position in Britain. But whatever the quality of his archival research, his move to dispense with the need to ground economic critique in either theology or secular philosophy was of lasting significance. It was enough for him to return to the tradition of Adam Smith, and thus to reconstruct a critical political economy from within.

Despite the lack of textual evidence (Thompson does not cite Polanyi in any published work and his private papers will not become available to researchers for decades), Rogan argues plausibly that the youngest of his heroes effectively took over Polanyi's analysis of Speenhamland (rejected by Tawney), and thereby his alternative chronology for capitalist transformation. Thompson's talent as a narrative historian, nourished by his exposure to F. R. Leavis and the literary criticism of the journal *Scrutiny*, enabled him to dig deeper into the sources. In *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) he expounded how older values of community and solidarity, which in Tawney's account began to atrophy in the 17th century, in fact persisted well into the 19th century. Yet Thompson was not willing to follow Polanyi in embracing Adam Smith. Following the Hungarian uprising of 1956 and later polemical exchanges with Leszek Kołakowski in England, even after becoming acquainted with the writings of the early Marx via French translations, Thompson was compelled to admit the deficiencies of Marxism; but the allegedly scientific socialism of Althusser and his followers was no solution. Instead, according to Rogan, Thompson's principal legacy to future generations is the elusive notion of (the) "moral economy". This was introduced almost incidentally in the major work of 1963, where it carries no theoretical weight. Later it was formulated more elaborately to account for "bread riots" in small market towns. By the time of Thompson's death it had been extended to countless other cases, most famously by James Scott to the survival strategies of peasants in Southeast Asia.¹ Thompson was uneasy about these adaptations of "moral economy" to radically different contexts, but conceded at the end of his life that he had no patent on his coinage.

Noting the paradox that “moral economy” only took off for general, interdisciplinary research purposes *after* Thompson had invested it with a specific and rather narrow meaning in late 18th century Britain, Rogan signs off with a short Conclusion in which he outlines some more generic ways in which the moral dimension has been revived in mainstream economics. Shortly after the Second World War, Kenneth Arrow was the first to move beyond the limitations of utilitarian welfare economics and to acknowledge the universal importance of a “scheme of socio-ethical norms” that could not be grounded exclusively in calculating individuals.² Arrow cited Tawney in making this argument. Following a brief discussion of the utopian alternatives proposed by E. F. Schumacher in the 1970s,³ Rogan then settles on Nobel laureate Amartya K. Sen as the economist who has done most to advance the moral agenda, premised on his recognition of the evolved “impurities” of human social relations in history.⁴ But would Tawney, Polanyi and Thompson (none of them notably numerate, each arguably more interested in “love” than in analysis) have recognized a continuation of their emancipatory ambitions in the mathematical sophistication of Arrow and Sen? It was not clear to me at the end of this rich book why Rogan finds redemption with these particular economists, rather than with e.g. Thomas Piketty, whose influential materialist analysis of rapidly expanding inequalities in a globalized capitalism,⁵ however admirable, is judged to lack a grounding in the moral or spiritual dimension. Isn’t the social choice theorists’ lack of a sociological dimension (e.g. in their reluctance to use a concept of “social class”) an equally serious shortcoming?

Another aspect where I would have appreciated further discussion is biographical. It is a recurrent theme of Rogan’s that all three moral economists were profoundly influenced by their exposure to the vitality of the working class communities where they lived and worked in formative phases of their careers: the English Potteries for Tawney, Yorkshire for Thompson, and ‘Red Vienna’ for Polanyi. But just how closely did these extremely productive intellectuals interact with the locals? All three were privately educated and rebelled against the privileges of their own social class: can we trust their interpretations of custom and tradition among the workers? One cannot expect much detail about interaction across class boundaries in a study that operates primarily at the level of intellectual history. Besides, these authors, whose works have had enormous impact on anthropologists, never claimed to be fieldworking anthropologists themselves. There are a few clues that later biographers will no doubt be able to elaborate on: in one revealing detail we learn that the puritanical Thompson did not enjoy drinking beer (p. 236, n.13). He did not manage to hit it off with Raymond Williams (a near contemporary in Cambridge with working class roots in South Wales, whose Marxism Thompson considered to be somehow idealistic and abstract) any more than he managed to get along with more cosmopolitan aristocrats of the British

left such as Anderson.

One is left wondering whether these three moral economists and their three great books perhaps exaggerate solidarities and romanticize certain elements that the authors somehow envied, while glossing over other, less attractive elements (such as racism or “jingoism”) a little too quickly. Given the comparable relationship between author and subject in each case, how can these works provide the basis for an account of the moral dimension of socio-economic organization that would have more general, even universal validity, beyond subalterns and beyond the capitalist mode of production? What exactly do we mean by capitalism anyway, and how can historians differ so widely as to its origins? Are the liberal utilitarians really as devoid of moral credentials as these three radicals paint them? Do the theoreticians of social choice provide an adequate scholarly framework for dealing with custom or culture (and, if the answer is yes, then only at the expense of expunging the political radicalism that mattered for all three of Rogan’s protagonists)? These are some of the questions I was left with after reading this elegant and immensely stimulating book. They are important because, to return to Tawney’s metaphor, as we now know, the capitalist “beast” was not slain after all. Quite the contrary, it is still alive and barely tamed. In an age of neoliberalism that could hardly be more different from the climate of Clement Attlee’s Britain (when Tawney, Polanyi and Thompson might conceivably have interacted in London, though there is no evidence that they did), our need to grasp the non-utilitarian factors that shape human social relations has never been greater.

Endnoten

1. James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant. Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*, New Haven, NJ 2006.
2. Kenneth J. Arrow, *Social Choice and Individual Values*, New York / London 1951.
3. See E[rnst] F[riedrich] Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful. A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*, New York / London 1973; *A Guide for the Perplexed*, New York / London 1977.
4. Amartya K. Sen, *Collective Choice and Social Welfare*, San Francisco, CA 1970; cf. Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, London 2009.
5. Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-first Century*, Cambridge, MA 2014.

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Dieser Beitrag wurde redaktionell betreut von Karsten Malowitz.

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