

## **The moral economies of marketised higher education**

MORRISON, Andrew <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6700-6875>>

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# The moral economies of marketised higher education

Andrew Morrison

Institute of Education, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK

## ABSTRACT

This article discusses how three other articles have employed E.P. Thompson's concept of the moral economy to analyse movements of resistance to higher education (HE) marketisation processes. Two of the studies relate to the English HE sector while one is a study of the Israeli system. The articles were selected because they are indicative of one of the key challenges that scholars working within the sociology of higher education may encounter when applying Thompson's ideas: rendering a faithful sense of the temporality which is foundational to Thompson's concept, and which makes it such a powerful tool of critique regarding dominant hegemonic processes such as higher education marketisation. I conclude the article with a discussion of the challenges that arise in transferring a concept that originated in history to the sociology of higher education.

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## Introduction

This article examines how the concept of the 'moral economy', as elaborated by the English historian E.P. Thompson, has been employed in three recent sociological studies as an analytical tool to critique the marketisation of the higher education (HE) sectors that they describe.

In recent decades the English higher education sector has undergone intensive processes of marketisation (Brown and Carasso 2013; Nixon, Scullion, and Hearn 2018; McCaig 2018). These processes have been enacted in a wide range of different areas, including the emergence of the paying 'student-consumer' and academic performativity. Such processes are not unique to England but, rather, have been repeated internationally across higher education sectors (Jayadeva et al. 2021; Teixeira et al. 2014). The three articles that I explore span both aspects of marketisation. Two of them attend to the imposition of undergraduate tuition fees, one in England (Ibrahim 2014) and the other in Israel (Sapir 2021) while one discusses the effects of performativity on academic labour in the English sector (Sutton 2017).

Within the social sciences, the most well-established and significant interest in E.P. Thompson's moral economy has been in anthropology, where it has been applied to a wide range of different contexts (see Edelman 2012 for a review). However, it can be argued that within anthropology Thompson's concept has been subject to some degree of movement

away from its conceptual origins, particularly in relation to its core feature of temporality (see, for example, Siméant 2015; Götz 2015; Palomera and Vetta 2016). This is important because, as I argue, it is the temporality of the moral economy which underpins Thompson's concept and makes it such an incisive tool of critique of dominant hegemonic processes. By comparison, there is much less work within the sociology of education that has employed Thompson's ideas. That may be slowly changing, however, as some scholars working within the sociology of higher education have found the moral economy to be a powerful mode of analysis with which to frame their critical evaluations of marketisation processes. The three articles that I review all adopt this approach. I welcome the application of Thompson's ideas to any critique of higher education marketisation. However, I also argue that each of the three studies exhibits, in different ways, some of the same issues in relation to temporality that are a feature of some of the anthropological literature.

In the following section, I discuss Thompson's writings on the moral economy. To underline the importance of the temporality which, I argue, is central to understanding Thompson's concept, I then draw comparisons between moral economy and Raymond Williams' temporal parsing of hegemony into dominant and residual social formations. Following that, I apply this framework to my review of the three articles. The contribution of this present article is to provide a form of wider 'theory generalisability' (Misco 2007) by which to evaluate other articles that employ Thompson's concept. Thus, in the discussion section I highlight some of the challenges entailed in transferring to sociological studies of contemporary higher education a concept which originated in historical investigation. In broadly accepting Goldthorpe's (1991) distinction between history as 'ideographic' and sociology as 'nomothetic' disciplines, I argue that the application of a concept with specific historical-spatial roots to a range of different contexts beyond its original usage raises analytical questions which authors should acknowledge.

## Moral economy

The term 'moral economy' did not originate with the English, Marxist historian E.P. Thompson, but he has become closely associated with it since it first appeared in his ground-breaking work of social history, *The Making of the English Working Class* in 1963. Thompson (1963, 72) applied the term to convey his argument that popular disturbances over increases in the price of bread (the principal food staple of the poor), which were a common occurrence throughout the eighteenth-century and well into the nineteenth, were motivated not simply by desperate hunger but also by a powerful sense among the poor that the price rises represented a breach of customary social norms and practices. Thompson elaborated on his argument at greater length in a seminal follow-up article in 1971. Here, the 'moral economy of the poor' referred to a set of assumptions regarding social norms and obligations, following which the poor expected to be protected from the worst effects of poor harvests and to be able to purchase the necessities for bread-making at prices within their reach. These assumptions held that every individual within the production and supply chain relevant to bread—farmers, millers, bakers—should work only for a fair allowance and not exact any undue profit, particularly at times of relative scarcity.

Thompson (1971) argues that the poor of the eighteenth-century believed, with considerable justification, that in making these assumptions they customarily enjoyed the backing of local elites. This traditional support was manifested in the remnants of Statute law, in

common law and in a long folk memory of customary social usages (Thompson 1971, 83). Thus, the social contract of the 'paternalist model', whereby the powerful could be called upon to ensure a supply of bread in times of dearth, was a legitimising notion behind almost every disturbance according to Thompson (1971, 78). Thompson (1971) is careful, though, not to offer a prelapsarian past. On the part of the elites, the paternalist model was primarily a mode of social control and was more often honoured by symbolic gestures. For their part, the poor employed 'tradition' actively and selectively to achieve their goals (Thompson 1971, 98). Nevertheless, the salient point is that a sense of custom, whether sincerely felt or actively reinterpreted, formed a key cultural resource which the poor drew from to underline the moral legitimacy of their claims.

Thompson (1971) juxtaposes the moral economy of the poor, whereby food prices are to be restrained by social norms and obligations, with the emergent economic model that was to dominate the later eighteenth-century and into the nineteenth in Britain: *laissez-faire* political economy. On this model, the '*...natural operation of supply and demand in the free market would maximize the satisfaction of all parties and establish the common good. The market was never better regulated than when it was left to regulate itself*' (Thompson 1971, 90). Where the moral economy was firmly embedded within wider social relations and took account of non-economic considerations, the new mode of economy required a thorough 'de-moralizing' of the theory of exchange and consumption (Thompson 1971, 90). By this last comment, Thompson (1971) did not suggest that Adam Smith and others were lacking in a moral concern for the public good. Indeed, he recognised that Smith and others felt themselves to be working *towards* the common good through their theoretical precepts. The point, though, was that the common good was to be attained by ensuring that the economy was 'disinfested of intrusive moral imperatives' of the type voiced by the eighteenth-century poor (Thompson 1971, 90).

Thompson's account of the eighteenth-century moral economy, and of its collision with the economic and moral order of *laissez-faire*, is essentially an analysis of a long, slowly evolving historical transition. Thompson (1971) provides copious details of disturbances across England where the poor held fast, in the face of the new political economy, to a belief in the paternalist model of social protection. In many places throughout his study he reminds us that, though this model was breaking down as the eighteenth-century progressed, it retained an enduring power in the collective memories of the poor. By the end of the eighteenth-century, however, the Napoleonic Wars had finally dislodged the equilibrium between paternalist authority and the poor and the tenets (if not always the practice) of *laissez-faire* were firmly in the ascendant (Thompson 1971, 129). But, although political economy won out in the end, for Thompson (1971, 132) the persistence of the moral economy leaves historians with a clear lesson:

But too often in our histories we foreshorten the great transitions. We leave forestalling and the doctrine of a fair price in the seventeenth century. We take up the story of the free market economy in the nineteenth. But the death of the old moral economy of provision was as long-drawn-out as the death of paternalist intervention in industry and trade.

What Thompson (1971) is proposing, in fact, is that due attention be paid to the distinction between what Raymond Williams terms 'historical analysis' and 'epochal analysis'. A discussion of this distinction—and of Williams (1977) further distinction between dominant and residual cultural formations—will serve to illustrate the temporality that is central to

Thompson's moral economy, and which consequently should be key to any application of the concept to higher education marketisation.

## Hegemony and historical analysis

Williams (1977) development of Gramsci's concept of hegemony provides a theoretical frame for Thompson's (1971) own insistence that social relations need to be seen fully in their spatio-temporal context. Williams (1977) distinction between historical and epochal analysis is essentially a warning against marking out history by its end 'stages' and thereby ignoring the more complex realities of contemporaneous and often competing social tendencies. Thus, in epochal analysis, historians will treat the dynamism of a cultural *process* as a cultural *system*, conferring certain determinate features upon it (Williams 1977, 121). The examples of feudal culture or bourgeois culture are offered by Williams (1977), but more current examples could be concepts such as neoliberalism, post-modernism or post-fordism, all of which may impart a sense of a definitive temporal break with past social arrangements. Williams (1977, 121) concedes the value to historians of emphasising what emerge retrospectively as the dominant and definitive contours of a period. However, the problem with such a method of abstraction is that it can overlook the messier complexities of social movement and formations *within* historical periods. This task requires the work of historical analysis, as Williams (1977, 121) argues:

In authentic historical analysis it is necessary at every point to recognize the complex interrelationships between movements and tendencies both within and beyond a specific effective dominance. It is necessary to examine how these relate to the whole cultural process rather than only to the selected and abstracted dominant system.

This is precisely the point made by Thompson (1971) when he argues that all too often history can 'foreshorten the great transitions' and ignore the way in which countervailing social tendencies, such as the moral economy, can have a temporal co-existence with what ultimately emerges as the dominant social force: the theory of laissez-faire in this case. This point may be made in more detail by reference to Williams (1977) further distinction between dominant and residual social formations. Williams (1977) discussion of these terms follows logically on from his insistence that hegemony is never complete or static; rather, it is a *process* that is always contested and which must continually be defended by dominant social forces. Consequently, while social analysis must always identify and recognise what is dominant and thus 'effective' within any given historical social process, it must also acknowledge that the dominant may exist alongside the residual:

The residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present. Thus certain experiences, meanings and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practised on the basis of the residue— cultural as well as social — of some previous social and cultural institution or formation (Williams 1977, 122).

There can be no clearer precis of Thompson's ideas than this. The moral economy of the eighteenth-century poor is a residual cultural formation that draws its sense of legitimacy by making active, present-tense use of past customs and social usages (whether firmly

rooted in actual practices or creatively reinterpreted). This mode of temporality is at the heart of Thompson's concept and it is what gives it its force as a critique of exploitative capitalist relations. Williams (1977) concepts thus complement Thompson's but there are certain differences to note. Following Williams (1977) concern with hegemonic relations, the concept of the residual is more bound up with notions of consent than Thompson's original usage of the term moral economy would allow. For the dominant to sustain itself and to achieve social purchase it will need to incorporate the actively residual in some way—by rearticulating and appropriating it (Williams 1977, 123). Discourses and other forms of meaning-making are central here. By contrast, in Thompson's argument, the eighteenth-century authorities were not concerned to actively manufacture consent; instead, they appeased social disquiet largely through symbolic or diversionary gestures.

A second point of departure is that Thompson's moral economy is essentially a description of a mode of social normativity within a particular socio-historical landscape. It is an attempt to explain the normative basis by which non-market forces (reciprocity, obligations) are expected to assume a prior place to that of pure market forces. By contrast, Williams' concepts are broader. Residual social formations do not carry the same type of normative force that Thompson attached to the moral economy. Thus, residual attachments may not necessarily be socially progressive or defensible ones: classism, misogyny and racism are all examples of present-day social forces that are sustained, at least partly, by recourse to residual cultural and social practices.

I have argued that temporality is central to the concept of the moral economy. Before taking this argument further, however, the following section explains the choice of articles under review.

### **Method: Article sampling**

As I indicated in the introduction, the influence of E.P. Thompson's work within the sociology of higher education is beginning to grow. Scholars have seen in the concept of the moral economy a valuable analytical tool to understand conflicts between dominant political economies of marketisation and oppositional value systems that draw on a sense of past social usages for their legitimacy. The three articles that I review all broadly adopt this type of analysis. Three articles represent a small sample but the selection decisions were guided by three criteria which had the effect of limiting the number of articles available.

Firstly, I wanted to evaluate only articles that explicitly drew from Thompson's concept of moral economy. This is an important qualifying criterion because the concept of a moral economy did not originate with Thompson nor is it limited to his usage of the term. Consequently, some authors who have written about different aspects of HE marketisation have applied a moral economy framework that makes no reference at all to Thompson's ideas. Sayer's (2008) discussion of the normative underpinnings of academic workload allocations, and Kauppinen's (2014) investigation into the moral values surrounding Finnish research universities' patent policies are two examples of such studies.

The second criterion was that I wished to limit selections to articles published within five years of the preparation for writing this present article. As I indicated above, hegemony is a dynamic process. Marketisation is a particularly fast-moving form of hegemonic governance and thus it was considered important to select only articles within a limited time

frame. The question of how, in light of the rapid social and policy changes they discuss, the three authors deal with the notion of 'tradition' that is inherent within Thompson's moral economy is key to my analysis. In the event, I made an exception for the Ibrahim article which was published in 2014 just outside the five-year frame as I felt there was much to discuss in relation to that study.

The third criterion served as the governing criterion in relation to the previous two. My key purpose in selecting a small sample was to enable an in-depth discussion of each article in a way that would not have been possible with a much larger sample. In this respect, I was seeking to produce a form of theory generalisability that Firestone (1993) terms case-to-case translation. This mode of generalisability, or 'transferability', entails the application of findings from one study to a different sample or context. It is also sometimes known as reader generalisability (Misco 2007). Following this approach, I provide a detailed discussion of each article's treatment of temporality in relation to Thompson's concept of moral economy; readers will then be able to draw their own conclusions about the generalisability of my arguments to other articles on HE marketisation that employ a moral economy framework, and to their treatment of temporality in relation to Thompson's concept. Hence, any transferability of this present article's findings is ultimately to be undertaken by its readers who will interpret its conclusions and decide whether the critique that I make may similarly apply to other studies within the field.

Following these criteria, a google scholar search was then undertaken. This yielded five potential sources which were then reduced to a sample of three. The other two sources consisted of a monograph-length study of the 2011 student tuition fee protests in England (Myers 2017) and an article-length study which examined the same protests but with a focus on one English university (Salter and Boyce Kay 2011). Both were rejected for the sample because, although they make reference to Thompson's concept, neither source elaborates on Thompson's ideas to any extent. Of the three remaining articles, two examine the controversies of undergraduate tuition fees, one in England and the other in Israel and one examines the performativity of academic labour within the English sector.

### ***Performativity of academic labour***

In his article, which is based within the English higher education context, Sutton (2017) discusses the effects of performativity on what he terms 'academic labour'. For Sutton (2017, 626) academic labour is what academics can, or should, do. Taking his cue from Marx, Sutton (2017, 626) defines academic labour as a form of social labour that has the potential to transform both the 'sociohuman world' and academics themselves for the positive benefit of all. It is a mode of labour that is underpinned by a 'moral energy' which provides it with a sense of purpose and value. In more concrete terms, academic labour finds expression in demonstrations of 'love': attitudes of responsibility, care, respect and knowledge towards students and colleagues which help to create feelings of connectedness with others (Sutton 2017, 626).

Sutton (2017, 626) argues that performativity is a management regime that measures only what it can measure and, in consequence, values only what can be measured. Demonstrations of love, the unquantifiable core of academic labour, cannot be measured within performative assessment regimes and thus have no real value within modern market-driven managerialism. In consequence:



In England, the higher education economy is no longer structured by the norms and values of academic culture committed to education as a public good. It has been reorganized by the ideology of neo-liberal capitalism. The university economy is now structured by the principle of supply and demand and the cost–benefit calculus. Academic labour is now performed in a culture of measurement (Sutton 2017, 626).

Before evaluating Sutton's (2017) treatment of Thompson's moral economy, it is worth considering two other aspects of his argument: the relationship between performativity and HE marketisation, and academic labour as a public good.

As Sutton (2017) rightly observes, performativity is a mode of institutional and personnel regulation based largely upon quantitative performance indicators. Though his article itself does not make the link, performativity is a key element within what is known as 'new public management' (NPM). This form of educational governance has displaced the older, traditional input-driven models of bureaucracy with a new emphasis upon outcomes-related accountability (Rizvi and Lingard 2010, 119). The first point to note is that this form of managerialism is not *necessarily* coterminous with marketisation in the way in which Sutton (2017) presents it. As Rizvi and Lingard (2010, 119) note, NPM is, above all, a new form of political control: monitoring of performance measures at the meso and micro-levels offers governments and their agencies the opportunity for 'steering at a distance', a form of management which is reflective of low-trust, surveillance cultures. This form of higher education governance need not necessarily articulate with market mechanisms. Indeed, some of the examples of performativity which Sutton (2017, 628) provides, such as institutional quality assurance measures and staff performance development reviews, do not link with inter-institutional markets in any direct way. The second point, however, is that in general Sutton (2017) is right to connect performativity with marketisation, although he needed to offer a more concrete and specified link between the two. For example, many performance outcomes appear in league tables which thus create competitive institutional markets: graduate employment outcomes and student course satisfaction ratings are two such measures which feature prominently.

Secondly, Sutton's (2017) use of the term 'public good' to describe the love that constitutes academic labour does not best serve his argument that love stands in opposition to the neoliberalism he criticises. A public good is, at base, a social sphere that stands outside the market system (Davies 2017, 48). In terms of higher education in England, this originally found expression in a nineteenth-early twentieth century liberal notion that the pursuit of knowledge was an end in itself (Williams 2016), a position which, perhaps surprisingly, found some sympathy with early neoliberals such as Hayek (1960, 331). As Williams (2016) details, the 'public good' of HE in England (in the broad sense of their purpose) has undergone multiple shifts in meaning since these early ideas. Universities in the post-1945 period have increasingly served market needs; however, it has required active state agency to facilitate this in the belief that pure market forces themselves may not be able to do so (Davies 2017). By falling at least partially outside the scope of the market in this respect (Davies 2017, 48) universities retain a basic sense of being public goods in a way that nevertheless remains compatible with the neoliberalism that Sutton (2017) contrasts with the love of academic labour.

There are two key points to make in support of the main substance of Sutton's (2017) arguments. Firstly, Sutton's (2017) suggestion that what is central to academic labour is love is surely an unexceptionable argument. The affective and inter-personal are key domains

within the practice of all higher education professionals. Secondly, as I note above, it is certainly true that there is no place within performative measurement regimes for such unquantifiable social interactions. My critique, however, lies with Sutton's (2017) treatment of E.P. Thompson's moral economy, the use of which is implied rather than applied. In the introductory section of his article, Sutton (2017, 626) observes that, '*As I was researching this paper, it struck me that there are strong resonances between Thompson's analysis and the marketization of higher education in late twentieth century and early twenty-first century*'. In fact, although Sutton (2017) offers an excellent moral critique of the effects of performativity on academic labour, it is not one that owes much to E.P. Thompson's concept of the moral economy.

In his accounts of the moral economy, Thompson goes to great lengths to provide a description of the old set of customs and social usages, based within a paternalistic framework, that established a set of expectations and which provided a legitimating basis for the protests of the eighteenth-century poor when faced with the new mercantilist procedures. This sense of perspectival temporality that is central to Thompson's concept—its notion of a conflictual 'before' and 'after' when both meet at a point of transition—is largely missing from Sutton's (2017) discussion. Thus, although Sutton (2017) provides a powerful argument that love *should* be a key component of academic labour, he has not offered convincing evidence that love ever really *has* been central to what academics do. I emphasise here that I do not really doubt it to be at least broadly the case; my point, rather, is that Sutton (2017) does not adduce evidence of the sort that would support such an argument. Sutton (2017) does not draw upon empirical studies that would testify to the existence of a customary, long-standing sense of '*...soulfulness central to the social relations of academic production and the moral economy of the university as a public good...*' (Sutton 2017, 634).

In fact, there is a wealth of sources that Sutton (2017) could have drawn upon to make this argument. Tight (2010) and Murphy (2011) both record a powerful belief among long-serving academics in a pre-marketised, lost 'golden age' of collegiality and humanistic academic-student relations. Both these authors, particularly Murphy (2011), are circumspect about the reality within such recollections. However, there is no doubt that, within the marketised era, HE practitioners continue to value such practices, and that, in doing so, they associate these with an ideal-type pre-marketised age (Fitzmaurice 2008; Carnell 2007; Cribb and Gewirtz 2013). A Thompsonian moral economy offers a way of understanding such ideals, of how the past—both real and imaginary—can provide HE practitioners with a rich resource for alternative and oppositional stances in relation to performativity and marketisation. However, in the absence of such supporting sources, Sutton's (2017) propositions about academic norms and values emerge as an authorial argument rather than being detailed historically. In short, because of its missing temporal perspective, Sutton's (2017) treatment of morality is essentially normative, being based upon a form of first-principles argument, rather than being rooted in the more historically descriptive treatment that formed the basis of Thompson's concept.

### ***Tuition fees and student consumerism in England***

Undergraduate tuition fees, and their relationship to processes of marketisation, have been a subject of debate across a very wide range of different national higher education systems

(Czarnecki, Korpi, and Nelson 2021; Garritzmann 2016; Ertl and Dupuy 2014). The following two articles that I review address different aspects of this issue. Ibrahim (2014) discusses the UK student movement of 2010–2011 that arose in reaction to the decision by the UK government in November 2010 to raise the cap on tuition fees in England (previously limited to £3,200 per year) to a new upper limit of £9,000, thereby opening the way for a near tripling of undergraduate tuition fees across English higher education institutions. It has been argued that the ensuing widespread campus-based actions, and particularly the London street march of 50,000 students that took place in November 2010, represent the most widespread and radical student protest movement in England since the late 1960s (Hensby 2017; Myers 2017; Rheingans and Hollands 2013).

Ibrahim's (2014) article is an account of his ethnographic study, conducted over a two-year period from January 2009 to December 2010 and drawing on interviews, observations and documentary analysis, of the student protest movement at Manchester University in the north of England. Ibrahim (2014) argues that the campus protests and street marches can readily be understood as a moral economy in E.P. Thompson's use of the term. An 'embedded custom'—that of 'affordable HE'—has been violated by the triple rise in fees:

The parents of today's students pass on folk memories and stories of free education and, in some cases, entitlements to maintenance grants. It is arguable that HE in the UK before 1997 was a traditional entitlement for students. So even though free at the point of use HE has not been an entitlement for some time, it is reasonable to assume that students are aware of the erosion of such an entitlement. It is the case that most students have come to expect that fees need to be charged; however, the threefold increase may have resulted in political action by the student community since the fee may now be considered to be too high (Ibrahim 2014, 81).

Ibrahim (2014, 85) notes that the protestors' grievances at Manchester University, apart from the actual rise in tuition fees, covered a number of related areas including perceived low teaching contact time, lack of tutor support, poor levels of assignment feedback and the use of video-linked lectures due to lack of lecture hall capacity. For Ibrahim (2014, 87) one of the key features of the protests that gives them the character of a *moral* economy is the fact that the students involved in the actions would not have been personally affected by the rise in fees. In consequence, their protests were not actuated by self-interested or utilitarian considerations; they were protesting on behalf of future students and this locates their actions as a moral economy in the same sense that the eighteenth-century food rioters were part of a wider social community with a broadly shared understanding of the norms that underpinned food provision.

Ibrahim's (2014) sense of the temporality that sits at the heart of Thompson's concept is stronger than that of Sutton (2017). There is a clearer argument that a breach has been made in customary entitlements, a breach which is met by mass, co-ordinated protests which enjoy some measure of wider public support. To that extent, there are clear conceptual parallels between the UK student protests of 2010–2011 and Thompson's eighteenth-century food protestors. However, while Ibrahim's (2014) understanding of the principle of temporality may be better than Sutton's (2017), there are some conceptual issues in his application of it within the study.

Ibrahim's (2014) concept of 'affordable HE' is a good example of how neoliberal economic reforms and practices—in this case, higher education marketisation—have ceased to be experienced as a rupture in past arrangements but have, rather, sedimented into a form of

tradition in their own right. Ibrahim (2014, 81) notes that most students accepted (however reluctantly) the principle of fee-paying higher education; they were motivated to protest by the rapid triple rise in tuition fees. It may be argued, therefore, that the students are reaching back to some tradition of entitlement that sits *within* the prevailing market order: affordable tuition fees. On a general level, this use of Thompson's concept of the moral economy is certainly consistent with the original—the eighteenth-century food protestors were also consumers and they undoubtedly expected to pay for their bread, it was steep and sudden price rises that they objected to. Nevertheless, the application of the moral economy to the protests against the tuition fee increases raises some temporal ambiguities which Ibrahim (2014) does not fully acknowledge.

The issue is that the sense of tradition—the 'before' preceding the 'after'—which informs Thompson's concept becomes compressed. Fees were first introduced in England only 12 years before the protests (in 1998) as £1,000 up-front fees, six years later top-up fees of £3,000 per year were imposed. On the one hand, one may argue that this relatively 'thin' notion of tradition functioning within Ibrahim's (2014) application of the moral economy represents a creative use of the concept which is in line with its use in a sociological rather than historical study. It captures the dynamic nature of both the shifts in HE policy-making in England and resistances to it. This interpretation would find some support from Thompson himself (1991, 341) who recognised the broad value in such approaches because they demonstrate that tradition is never static; it is a continuously regenerative form of anti-capitalist critique and a source of resistance. On the other hand, however, Thompson (1991) was doubtful about applications of the moral economy that downplay the role of custom as a legitimating ideological force since, '*...what this gains in breadth it loses in focus, and in inexperienced hands may bleed off the edge into uncontextual moralistic rhetoric*' (Thompson 1991, 341). I certainly do not accuse Ibrahim (2014) of any such thing. But, I shall return to issues of temporality in relation to sociology and history in the discussion section.

### ***Tuition fees and student consumerism in Israel***

Sapir (2021) examines the contestations surrounding the imposition of undergraduate tuition fees in quite a different context to that of Ibrahim (2014). Drawing on university archival records, her article discusses the demise of the 'free listening' programs in an Israeli university. The free listening program was an initiative begun in the 1970s whereby senior citizens were able to attend regular academic classes free of charge, although they could not gain credit for them. These programs were conceptualised as a form of public service to the wider community and as a means of opening up access to higher education (Sapir 2021, 4). In her article, Sapir (2021, 5) details how, from 2002, the university changed policy and required anybody wishing to attend such classes to register and to pay a fee; the number of courses that individuals could participate in was also limited. These shifts in access to university courses are linked to wider changes within the political economy of Israeli higher education towards a more market-driven, consumerist form of provision.

Sapir (2021) goes on to provide numerous examples of the protests that these changes provoked among students, teaching staff and members of the public. She uses Thompson's moral economy as a way to understand the nature of their complaints:

Much like the rioters in Thompson's research (1971, 1991), those who expressed opposition to the university's new 'free listening' policy considered it a violation of a moral consensus. Their arguments reflected shared understandings of what constitutes the university and its role in society (Sapir 2021, 6).

The moral economy that the protestors sought to safeguard was '*...built on universities' historical mandate as vehicles for the pursuit of knowledge, free dissemination of knowledge, and civic duty. In this respect, they emphasized the injustice in extracting fees from a socially vulnerable group*' (Sapir 2021, 7). While Sapir (2021, 7) notes that the public service function of the university may always have been more of an idealised notion than reality, she also emphasises the social power of this idea as a legitimating concept behind the protests. And here Sapir (2021, 9) is able to draw close parallels with Thompson's moral economy, where protests were also fuelled by a strong sense of the reciprocal obligations incumbent on all parties within the bread supply chain.

There is much to commend in Sapir's (2021) application of Thompson's moral economy to the marketisation of Israeli higher education. There is a much stronger sense of temporality in Sapir's (2021) discussion than appears within Sutton (2017) or even Ibrahim (2014). The moral values of the protestors are shown to be grounded in a shared understanding of past customs and social usages—that of free provision for senior citizens. In other words, their moral outrage did not simply stem from what the staff and students felt *should* be the appropriate form of provision, it originated in their knowledge of what had been until very recently the prevailing mode of access for such students in Israeli universities. Furthermore, Sapir's (2021) discussion is nuanced. In acknowledging that the beliefs that underpin the moral economy of the free listener program may be at least partly a nostalgic idealism rather than a reflection of reality, Sapir's (2021) analysis remains faithful to that of Thompson himself who emphasised that eighteenth-century patricians frequently only paid lip service to the demands of the crowd for a fair price for their bread—that the moral economy of the poor was often honoured more as an ideal than a reality. Finally, Sapir's (2021) account of the protestors' beliefs in the public service remit of Israeli universities, in which she sees clear equivalence with the sense of reciprocity that sustained Thompson's eighteenth-century crowds, is a good example of how a close reading of Thompson's concept can draw out its explanatory potential. Thompson's view of the moral economy is a profoundly relational one and that relationality—the sense of duty to others—is clearly a key feature of the protestors' value systems in her account.

Despite the strengths of Sapir's (2021) application of Thompson's concept, there are areas where temporality is not so well dealt with. Sapir (2021, 12) suggests that the marketisation of the university, of which the cessation of the free classes was simply one example, represented '*...a profound change in the moral economy of the university that reproduced the public space of the university, not only in the narrow proprietary sense, but also in the broader value-based sense*'. This point is later elaborated upon:

The debates over this case of commodification show a process of an ongoing shift in the moral economy of the university. Faced with growing economic pressures in the context of a neoliberal political economy, university management and its supporters embraced a moral position that prioritised values such as efficiency, rationality, quality, value for money, and order. According to this position, in times of scarcity, it is the moral obligation of management to focus on the 'core' of academic activities, and rethink priorities, obligations, and the distribution of resources (Sapir 2021, 12–13).

The problem that arises with this analysis is that it conflates two quite different things. The strictures of the new neoliberal university in Israel may well be couched in a form of moralistic language but their rationality (as the author herself notes) is a fundamentally economic and managerialist one in which non-market moral concerns are very much secondary. Thompson himself recognised this difference between dominant and oppositional moral orders in his responses to criticisms of his own treatment of Adam Smith. As I have indicated above, Thompson (1971) did not suggest that Adam Smith lacked a moral concern for the public good but he later felt obliged to clarify his position. In applying the word ‘moral’ to the value systems of the eighteenth-century poor, Thompson (1991, 271) argued that he was ‘...discriminating between two different sets of assumptions, two differing discourses, and the evidence for the difference is abundant’. The moral economy of the poor was built upon social norms and obligations rooted within the ‘...dense tissue of precedents and practices in the sequence of food marketing’ (Thompson 1991, 271). By contrast, the Smithian ‘market’ is a ‘superb and mystifying metaphor’ and is a ‘...mask worn by particular interests, which are not coincident with those of ‘the nation’ or ‘the community’ but which are interested, above all, in being mistaken to be so’ (Thompson 1991, 330). Thompson is, therefore, clear on the distinction between the two moral orders: the language of the free market is expressed within a normative, moral register but that does not make it a moral economy in Thompson’s terms; indeed, it is something quite distinct and to quite a degree oppositional to a moral economy.

It must be acknowledged here that Sapir (2021) clearly recognises the way in which the neoliberal dispensation has appropriated the language of more customary moral values—of student care, quality and value for money—in the service of the new market order. She applies the Gramscian concept of ‘rearticulation’ to capture the semantic shifts that have taken place within the HE sector in Israel. This is very apt but the problem remains that she continues to employ the term ‘moral economy’ in relation to these developments and thus, I believe, over-applies the concept by effacing the temporal distinction between two quite different moral orders. Here, I suggest that, again, Williams (1977) offers a way forward. The moral economy of the Israeli university protestors is a residual social formation that reaches back to a (perhaps largely imagined) past; the new market order is now the dominant hegemonic force within Israeli HE.

## Discussion

This article has discussed how three other articles have employed E.P. Thompson’s concept of the moral economy as an analytical framework for their critiques of higher education marketisation processes. There is a developing interest in Thompson’s ideas within the sociology of education and the contribution of this present article has been to examine how the three articles have addressed themselves to the temporal aspect of the moral economy, which I have argued is central to understanding the concept. The three articles deal with temporality in different ways but in each case there is evidence of some distance travelled from Thompson’s original concept. To some extent, however, it is understandable that there may be some difficulties in taking a concept that has emerged from within one discipline, history, and applying it to another, the sociology of higher education. In the remainder of



this article, I want to highlight some of those issues with the aim of offering a broader ‘theory generalisability’ (Misco 2007) to my analysis.

In a celebrated debate about the difference between history and sociology, the sociologist John Goldthorpe (a historian by undergraduate study) insisted that history should be understood as an ‘ideographic’ discipline aiming to produce time-bound, localised accounts of singular phenomena with no pretensions towards generalised trans-periodic theorisations (Goldthorpe 1991). By contrast, Goldthorpe (1991) argued, sociology should be regarded as a ‘nomothetic’ discipline which seeks to generate theories and broader explanatory generalisations which may transcend particularities of time and space. Goldthorpe (1991) was criticised for drawing an overly stark distinction between the two subjects (see Mann 1994; Bryant 1994). I also believe that the border between the two disciplines is more porous than Goldthorpe (1991) allows. Nevertheless, his argument certainly raises some questions about history that Thompson himself was alive to.

Thompson regarded history as a subject of context above all and, in that vein, he emphasised the historico-spatial roots of the moral economy ‘... *within the field-of-force of eighteenth century English relations*’ (Thompson 1991, 261). In view of his insistence upon the historical specificity of the moral economy, Thompson was wary about its application across other fields, arguing that, ‘*If the term is to be extended to other contexts, then it must be redefined or there will be some loss of focus*’ (Thompson 1991, 338). I do not believe that the concept needs to be redefined. Nevertheless, the moral economy is a concept with ideographic roots but which, in being put to the task of generating explanations across disciplines and contexts, is now serving more of a universalised, nomothetic function. I shall now consider in more detail the issues this raises in relation to two aspects of Thompson’s concept with which I have been most concerned: the temporal and the moral.

It is important to recognise how temporal analogies are stretched by different timescales. The ‘long drawn-out death’ of the eighteenth-century moral economy (Thompson 1971, 32) is of a different dimension to sociological temporalities. For example, there is an influential strain of thought within sociology which argues that we are undergoing processes of ‘social acceleration’: our experience of time is speeding up across many social domains, including politics, work and education. Such ideas are closely associated with the concept of ‘late modernity’ and the notion that social change in this period is occurring at a faster rate than in previous historical times (Giddens 1991; Rosa 2003). This has been linked with a number of factors, including technological developments which have had the effect of separating time from space and permitting social relations up to a global level (Giddens 1991). Both Giddens (1991) and Rosa (2003) concede that this process is a very uneven one with many localised differences while some commentators are more sceptical of the phenomenon itself (Lawson 2014). I suggest, however, that Ibrahim’s (2014) use of moral economy to characterise the student protests for affordable HE (as opposed to no fees) offers an example of social acceleration, wherein rapid policy changes lead to a flatter, thinner notion of ‘tradition’. This is appropriate to the sociological timeframes of Ibrahim’s (2014) analysis. However, it points to the need on the part of Ibrahim (2014) to acknowledge the distance travelled from the ideographic roots of Thompson’s original (where tradition—whether real or reinterpreted—was measured by much longer time scales) to its nomothetic application in his more compressed usage of the term.

With the ‘moral’ we encounter the same conceptual challenges of disciplinary transfer. In its ideographic origins, the moral was for Thompson the sense of customary usages which the poor drew upon to legitimate their view of proper market relations. But the moral is also a very broad concept with much wider, nomothetic applications beyond Thompson’s specific meaning. The classical tradition of Durkheimian functionalism, for example, regards society as a ‘moral entity’ which functions through a ‘moral order’ of collective values and constraining norms. More recently, much writing on neoliberalism has pointed to the ways in which it can ‘get into the head’ as a powerful normative force. Concepts such as the ‘entrepreneurial self’ and ‘homo economicus’ have been coined to capture the extent to which neoliberalism is believed to function not simply as an economic order but as a moral one (Rose 1992; Kelly 2006; Foucault 2008). Thus, in view of the capaciousness of the ‘moral’, Sapir’s (2021) assignation of the term moral economy to the dominant market order of Israeli higher education is understandable. Nevertheless, it also clearly represents a departure from Thompson’s usage. In the absence of some alternative formulation to refer to its original sense—such as ‘traditional moral economy’—writers should be candid about the conceptual shift.

Finally, it is important to recognise the limitations of a Thompsonian moral economy as an explanatory tool for contemporary English higher education. Some current developments in thinking about access to HE illustrate this point. Recent years have seen a growing concern among some HE practitioners with what has been termed ‘epistemic’ or ‘epistemological’ access (Clegg 2011; Stevenson, Burke, and Whelan 2014; McCowan 2016). The argument here is that simple formal access to higher education for disadvantaged or minoritised groups is not sufficient if they are then alienated by dominant group institutional cultures or curricula. Student-led activism has encouraged a search among practitioners for more inclusive pedagogies, such as the ‘decolonising the curriculum’ movement, which has sought to move away from traditionally Eurocentric curricula which marginalise the histories and experiences of people of colour (Pimblott 2020).

Within Thompson’s terms, such developments are certainly ‘moral’ in that the claims they make for a socially just HE system are, to some extent, oppositional to the dominant market-led values of the sector. Indeed, it has been argued that progressive pedagogies tend to exist in tension with the demands of marketised higher education (Stevenson, Burke, and Whelan 2014; Burke, Crozier, and Misiaszek 2017). However, it is more difficult to relate Thompson’s notion of temporality to epistemic access. This approach to widening participation owes nothing to previous HE developments such as the formation of the ‘new’ universities of the early 1960s which generally cleaved to a traditional form of pedagogy and curriculum (Collini 2012; Thompson 2012). While movements such as decolonising the curriculum have antecedents (Pimblott 2020), in their present form they are best understood less as a residual movement and more as what Raymond Williams has termed an ‘emergent’ cultural formation: new values, meanings and practices which are not simply novel but also, in some way, alternative or oppositional to the dominant (Williams 1977, 123). The distinction between the residual and the emergent has implications for how we understand English higher education as a key site of social change. Oppositional tendencies may be a form of Thompsonian moral economy which draws discursively upon a real or imaginary past; equally, though, resistance may be made by producing new values. The difference between the two forms is complex and certainly not watertight. However, where the tendency appears to be more towards the latter case, I suggest that writers need to look beyond Thompson for an analytical framework.



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