

Agency

HI2K9: Historical Research

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Agency is at the heart of questions central to all historians:

- What makes history?
- Who makes history?
- How does historical change happen?

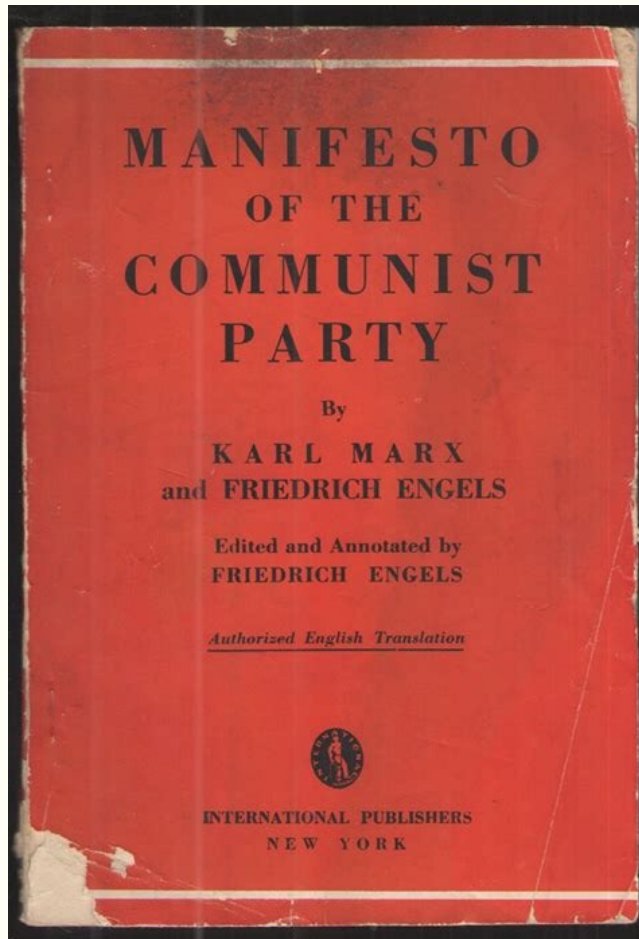


James McNeill Whistler, 'Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. 2: Portrait of Thomas Carlyle' (1872–73)

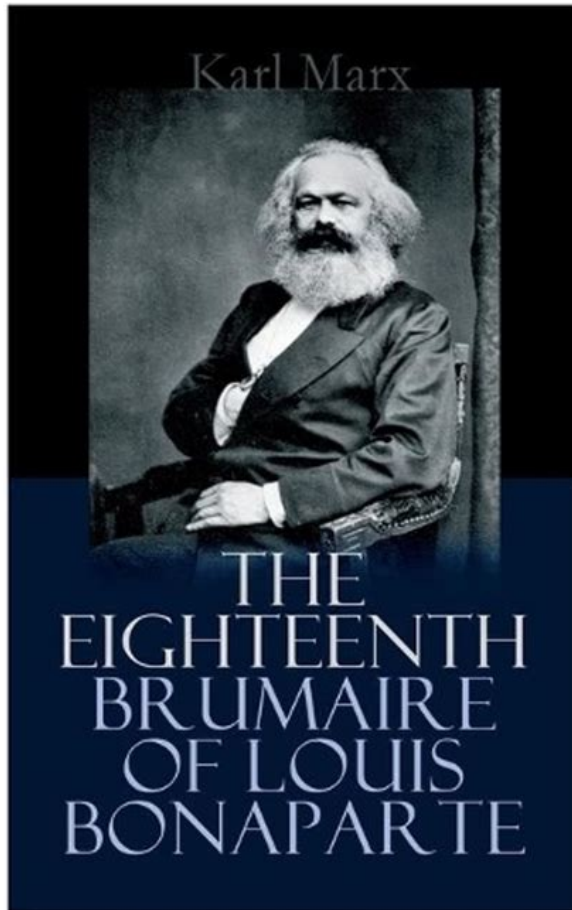
'Great Man' History

'The history of the world is but the biography of great **men**.'

Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841)



- **Historical materialism:** history driven not by 'great men' but by class struggle.
- This is determined by the **economic base/** mode of production (industrial capitalism).
- The factory system generated a **class-conscious proletariat** which will eventually overthrow capitalism.



'**Men** make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.'

Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852)

E.P.Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984 [first published 1963]).

- ‘The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making.’ (p. 8)
- ‘The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which **men** are born – or enter involuntarily. Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms... If the experience appears as determined, class-consciousness does not.’ (p.9)
- ‘The making of the working class is a fact of political and cultural, as much as of economic history. It was not the spontaneous generation of a factory system.’ (p. 213)

The Women's Liberation Movement and the rise of feminist 'history from below' (1970s-1980s)



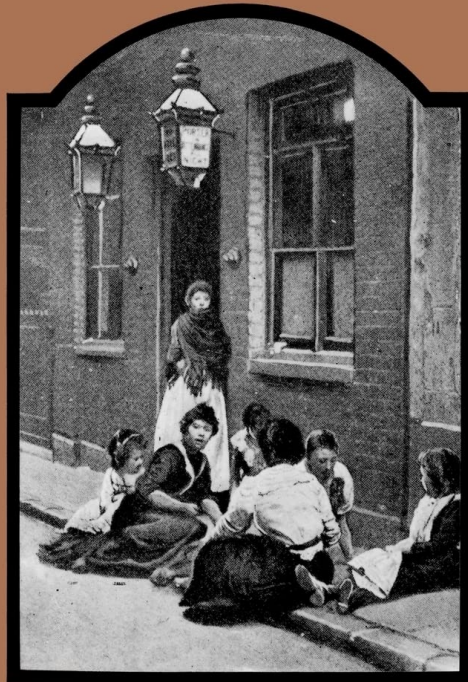
International Women's Day (1970)
howl-uk.org



The first women's history conference (1970)
liverpoolpeopleshistory.org

Prostitution and Victorian Society

Women, class, and the state



Judith R. Walkowitz

‘Prostitutes thus emerge as important historical actors, as women who made their own history, albeit under very restrictive conditions.’

Walkowitz (1980)

‘Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please...’

Marx (1852)

**Lynette Russell ‘ “Dirty Domestics and Worse Cooks”:
Aboriginal Women’s Agency and Domestic Frontiers,
Southern Australia, 1800-1850’, *Frontiers* 28:1 & 2
(2007)**

- ‘...it is imperative that we acknowledge their status as autonomous beings... Women might be thought of not merely as victims of the colonial encounter but as consciously engaging with the opportunities that arose out of it – even if those opportunities were limited...’ (pp. 27-28)
- ‘... women themselves had choices, although these might be seen as a choice between two evils.’ (p. 31)
- ‘Women can, do, and did effect change within the home; they exercised power, control, and agency.’ (p.18)

The problem with agency...?

‘a particular emphasis on ... “agency”... while giving short shrift or no consideration at all to relations of domination in general and to capital in particular... celebrate the inventiveness of so-called “common people” in making do and finding liveable niches under adverse circumstances... reducing conflictual and dynamic relations of social domination to “adverse circumstances” ...’

Ravi Ahuja, ‘Capital at Sea, Shaitan Below Decks? A Note on Global Narratives, Narrow Spaces, and the Limits of Experience’, *History of the Present: a Journal of Critical History* 2:1 (Spring 2012), 78-85, p. 81

The problem with agency...?



Estee C. Williams TikTok

Reference: Nicole Froio, "Trad wives' are using social media to romanticize a return to 'traditional values' as more and more women face post-COVID work/life balance burnout", *Business Insider* (7 November 2022)

The problem with agency...?

- Ania Loomba, 'Dead Women Tell No Tales: Issues of Female Subjectivity, Subaltern Agency and Tradition in Colonial and PostColonial Writings on Widow Immolation in India', Reina Lewish and Sara Mills (eds.), *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 241-62
- Saba Mahmood, 'Agency, Performativity and the Feminist Subject', Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville (ed.), *Bodily Citations. Religion and Judith Butler* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 177-221

A return to structure over agency?

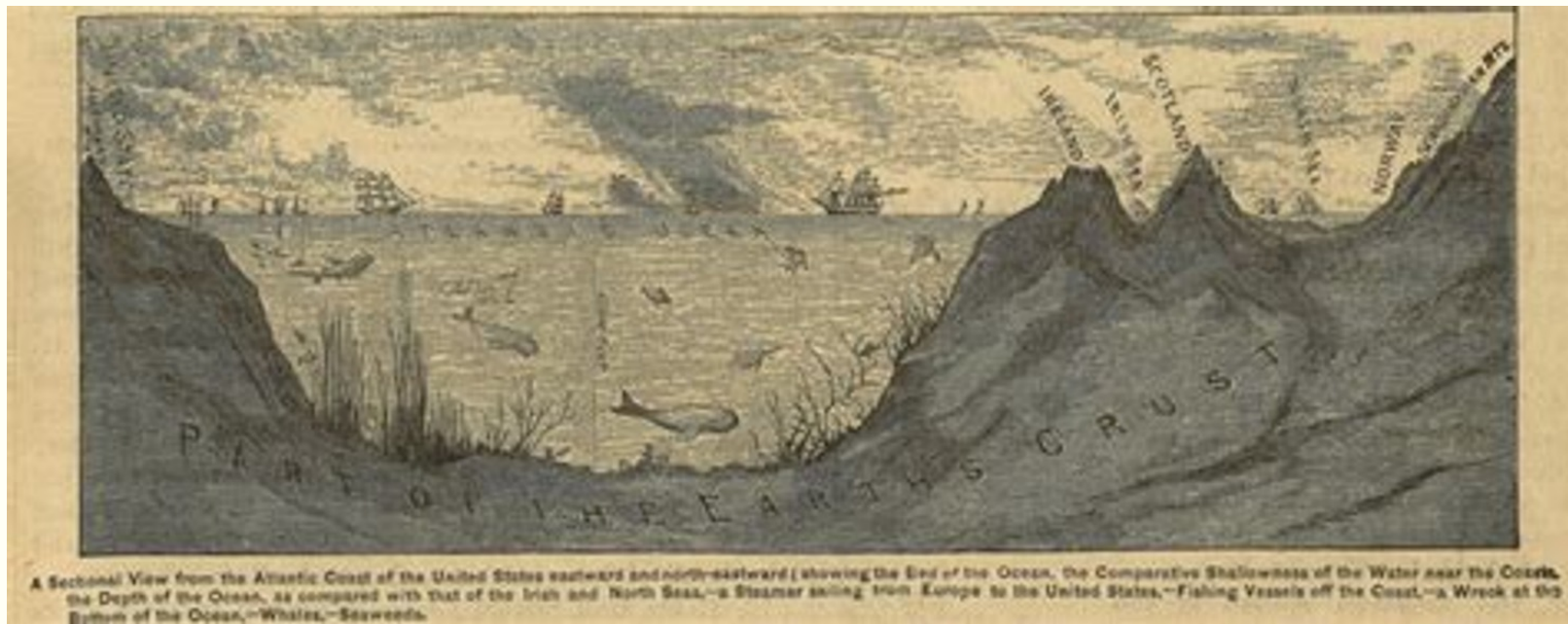


The new history of capitalism



Environmental history

Fernand Braudel's metaphor of the sea in *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949)





Suffragette attempt to blow up Holloway Prison causes blast damage to houses nearby, London c.1913