

# The Centrality of Social Relations: E.P. Thomson's Concept of Class and the Renewal of Historical Materialism<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

During the 1980s and 1990s, E.P. Thompson's once-celebrated approach to social history came to be regarded as little more than an unstable half-way house between analytical and structuralist Marxism, on the one hand, and post-structuralism on the other. Critics on both sides maintained that "experience" and agency could not be analytically privileged without fatally undermining the theoretical foundations of historical materialism itself. This article recovers Thompson for historical materialism by demonstrating that the profound theoretical contributions of his work have yet to be fully recognised and explored. Some of the blame for this must lie with Thompson himself, for he never fully reconciled the different understandings of "class" sprinkled throughout his oeuvre, nor did he systematically investigate the broad, theoretical implications that his work held for the abstract propositions of classical Marxism. I argue that Thompson's concept of class clarifies two particular problems in the classical Marxist tradition. The first is the relationship between social being and consciousness, which Thompson re-conceives as a dialectical interaction through the mediation of "experience". The second is the historical origin of the working class through a process of making, a concern which was left largely unaddressed in the classical canon. Thompson's central insight that class relations are distinct from production relations and require a very specific kind of "horizontal solidarity" between persons in similar class "situations", is at once a crucial theoretical extension of Marxism and an affirmation of historical materialism's explanatory potential.

## KEYWORDS

agency, class, class consciousness, E.P. Thompson, experience

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E.P. Thompson was an avowedly Marxist historian, but did not hide his aversion for what he termed Marx's "*Grundrisse* face." Marx's critique of political economy, Thompson suggested, only confronted the political economists on their own turf. Marx became entrapped within the "circuits of capital," developing a highly conceptualized and abstract analysis of the capitalist mode of production in which determinism appeared to be "absolute." According to Thompson, it was necessary to make the analytical shift from the circuits of capital to capitalism—in which the hypotheses of historical materialism were not simply assumed, but shown to be so historically. Against Marx's allegedly absolute determinism, Thompson posited a "historical" version of determination as the "exerting of pressures" or "logic of process," in which determinations emanating from one direction are met with countervailing determinations from another.<sup>2</sup>

Without suggesting that the differences between Marx and Thompson are unimportant, however, it is possible to see a similar dialectical method at work between them, at least with respect to historical process and determination. Rather than engaging in a detailed historical account of capitalism's emergence, Marx sought to identify the "economic law of motion" of capitalism at its highest level of abstraction.<sup>3</sup> Yet, as Geoffrey Pilling has noted: "The task of Marx's critique of political economy was *not* one that involved him finding a 'constant' in terms of which everything could be quantified but of establishing the laws of mediation through which the 'essence' of

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<sup>2</sup> THOMPSON, E.P. *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*. London: Merlin Press, 1978. p. 355.

<sup>3</sup> See SMITH, M.E.G. *Invisible Leviathan: The Marxist Critique of Market Despotism beyond Postmodernism*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994. p. 53.

phenomena manifested itself as ‘appearance.’”<sup>4</sup> These laws are not the theoretical expression of empirical regularities but expressions of the key material forces constituted by capitalist social relations, what Marx called tendencies. Like Marx, Thompson also proceeded from the “organic whole,” rejecting any attempt to splice reality into “independent, autonomous” fragments such that the technological or economic is construed as independent from the social and from the cultural. For this reason, Thompson also placed social relations, particularly social production relations, at the centre of his analyses. An affirmation of the primacy of social relations does not replace one form of determinism with another (“productive forces determinism” with, say, “production relations determinism”). Social relations assume analytical priority, but since humans are intentional actors, consciousness interacts with social being in determining ways. The challenge of historical analysis is to chart their mediation.

Yet it is here where Marx and Thompson may seem to depart. In his famous Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Marx famously noted: “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.”<sup>5</sup> Here, “social being” and “consciousness” form a unity, but determination seems to flow in only one direction, from the former to the latter. This has the danger of reducing historical materialism to little more than a version of naturalistic materialism, because it makes no provision for the active role of consciousness and intention in constituting reality. In other words, the

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<sup>4</sup> PILLING, G. “The Law of Value in Ricardo and Marx,” In: FINE, B. (ed.), *The Value Dimension*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986. p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> MARX, K. *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in MARX, K. and ENGELS, F. *Selected Works*, Volume One. Moscow: International Publishers, 1969. p. 503. In *The German Ideology*, a similar point is made: “Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.” MARX and ENGELS, *The German Ideology*. New York: International Publishers, 1977. p. 47.

meaning endowed to social being as a product of consciousness has no purchase on its “independent” existence. The social then simply becomes a reflection of the natural, as it is in G.A. Cohen’s technological-determinist version of historical materialism based on the 1859 Preface.<sup>6</sup> Ironically, it is against the 1859 Preface that Thompson’s fidelity to Marxism has been judged. Many Marxists have argued that Thompson’s conception of class is excessively subjectivist, privileging the subjective over the objective, the cultural over the economic, agency over structure, and social consciousness over social being.

In this paper, I argue that Thompson’s concept of class is not a muddled half-way-house between genuine historical materialism and post-structuralism, but is instead an important *extension* of historical materialist inquiry. As is evident from the 1859 Preface, there was a discernible economic determinism and reductionism in the “historical materialist” Marx. This determinism must be assessed critically—it will not do to suggest that it was simply shorthand used to evade the Prussian censors, or to suggest that Marx has been completely distorted by his “vulgar” successors.<sup>7</sup> However, what Thompson demonstrates so ably is that a confrontation with Marx’s deficiencies does not force us to decide for or against historical materialism. Thompson points the way to a “renewal” of historical materialism through a consistent application of the dialectical method to historical explanation. In doing so, Thompson shifts analytical attention from things (e.g., industrial machinery) and—like “*Grundrisse* face” Marx—focuses on the determining

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<sup>6</sup> For critical assessments of Cohen, see WOOD, Ellen Meiksins. *Democracy Against Capitalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. chapter 4.

<sup>7</sup> These two possibilities are raised by Perry Anderson in his assessment of the controversy over the Preface. See ANDERSON, Perry. *Arguments Within English Marxism*. London: Verso 1980. pp. 120-4. Perry does, however, make a valid point when he notes that “The infrequency of its [base and superstructure] use by Marx contrasts sharply with the transformation of the metaphor into a universal formula by Second International and Stalinist thinkers.” pp. 120-1.

effects of historically specific exploitive relations of production.<sup>8</sup> This enables Thompson to remedy two specific deficiencies in classical Marxism. The first is the relationship between social being and consciousness, which Thompson re-conceives as a dialectical interaction through the mediation of “experience.” The second is the historical origin of the working class through a process of making, a process which was largely unaddressed in the classical canon. I will seek to highlight Thompson’s contributions in both these areas by first detailing his theory of class formation, and then assessing the claims of two of his more “classically”-minded Marxist critics. To demonstrate Thompson’s contributions in both respects, this paper first develops a detailed reinterpretation of his theory of class formation; critically assesses the “structural” conception of class offered by Thompson’s more “classically”-minded Marxist critics; analyzes the contemporary relevance of these debates for the development of a non-Eurocentric historical materialism; and, finally, reconsiders the Marx’s own language of class in light of Thompson’s concerns.

### **Thompson on experience, consciousness and class**

The central ideas informing Thompson’s theory of class and class formation are expressed in the preface to his *The Making of the English Working Class* (hereafter *The Making*), originally published in 1963. Consequently, it has become a touchstone for critics and partisans alike<sup>9</sup> -- and just as a narrow focus on Marx’s Preface led to a

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<sup>8</sup> Two sources were particularly helpful in developing my understanding of this point: WOOD, *Democracy Against Capitalism*, chapter 4; and COMNINEL, G.C. *Rethinking the French Revolution: Marxism and the Revisionist Challenge*. London, 1987. chapter 7. Of course, many Marxist scholars have noted the limitations of the 1859 Preface, but few have contrasted its logic with the logic of Marx’s critique of political economy, a contrast that has very significant implications for our understanding of historical materialism.

<sup>9</sup> W.H. Sewell suggests that Thompson’s preface may be “the most frequently cited” since Marx’s. See SEWELL, W.H. “How Classes are Made: Critical Reflections on E.P. Thompson’s Theory of Working-

neglect of his other writings on historical materialism, so too has a one-sided focus on Thompson's preface produced inattention to his other writings on class.<sup>10</sup> Still, the preface is certainly Thompson's most concise elaboration of his theory, and the distinctions introduced in his later writings—particularly between “class situation” and “class formation,” and between “experience I” and “experience II”<sup>11</sup> largely extended and clarified the central concepts introduced by the preface. It therefore seems apt to comment on the preface first, and then to introduce the important concepts of Thompson's later writings after the arguments of his critics have been elaborated.

For Marxists reared on the “structural” definition of class, perhaps the most jarring statement in the preface is the claim that “[c]lass is defined by men as they live their own history, and in the end, this is its only definition.”<sup>12</sup> It is jarring because it is not offered as *one* definition of class, or as a particular *aspect* of class (perhaps class consciousness or “class-in-itself”). Instead it is offered as the *only* definition of class, and one which seems to privilege the subjective factor over the objective. Such a polemical “bending of the stick” was entirely characteristic of Thompson. However, it opened the door to charges of inconsistency from Marxists and non-Marxists alike when it was discovered that Thompson did, in fact, leave much room for “objective” structuration. Thus, it is important to appreciate that Thompson's “bottom line” definition of class is

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class Formation.” In KAYE, H. J. MCLELLAND, K. (eds.), *E.P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990. p. 51.

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the ink was barely dry on *The Making of the English Working Class* before Thompson began to ink polemics against his Marxist opponents. “The Peculiarities of the English” and, later, “The Poverty of Theory” are the two most oft-cited examples. Still, two shorter essays by Thompson are just as helpful in clarifying his notion of class. They are: “The Politics of Theory,” in SAMUEL, R. *People's History and Socialist Theory*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981; and “Eighteenth-century English society: Class struggle without class?”, *Social History*, 3:2 (1978), pp. 133-165.

<sup>11</sup> See THOMPSON, “The Politics of Theory” and “Eighteenth-century English society.” *Op.Cit.*

<sup>12</sup> THOMPSON, E.P. *The Making of the English Working Class*. Middlesex: Penguin, 1968. p. 10.

not an assertion of subjectivity *over* objectivity, or agency *against* structure—it is an affirmation of the idea that class is a historical relationship between human beings.<sup>13</sup>

An understanding of class as a *specific* kind of social relationship informs Thompson’s distinction between “class consciousness” and “class experience”:

class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. 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: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms. If the experience appears as determined, class-consciousness does not. We can see a *logic* in the responses of similar occupational groups undergoing similar experiences, but we cannot predicate any law. Consciousness of class arises in the same way in different times and places, but never in just the same way.<sup>14</sup>

Production relations are inherently conflictual, ensuring that the experience of these relations is a “class” experience. However, these experiences are “handled” in cultural terms. It is helpful to underline that such experiences can *only* be handled in cultural terms, because the class actors in question are living human beings, not structures. As they attempt to understand their experience of production relations, they will necessarily rely upon cultural resources, especially those that have been transmitted from the past. For this reason, class experience, but not class consciousness, appears as determined—consciousness is inseparable from cultural inheritances which are variable across nation,

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<sup>13</sup> See THOMPSON, “Eighteenth-century English society”. *Op.Cit.* p. 147. Thompson’s usage of “men” as shorthand for “human beings” in the passages quoted here is regrettable, but not necessarily typical. In many instances, Thompson was careful to explicitly include men and women in his concept of class, and one feminist scholar even finds it to be “most compatible with feminist project”. See ACKER, Joan. “Class, Gender and the Relations of Distribution,” *Signs*, 13:3 (1988), p. 478. This discrepancy is symbolic of a much wider gender blindness in Thompson’s work, with gender (and race) relations receiving little analytical attention. It can justly be asked, therefore, whether Thompson’s account of class formation and consciousness, for all of its richness, is inherently deficient for neglecting its profoundly gendered character. For further critical discussion, see Joan W. Scott’s influential statement, “Women in *The Making of the English Working Class*,” in SCOTT, Joan W. *Gender and the Politics of History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988 and more recently, GREGG, Robert. “Class, Culture and Empire: E.P. Thompson and the Making of Social History”. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 11:4 (1998), pp. 419-460.

<sup>14</sup> THOMPSON. *The Making*. *Op.Cit.* p. 9.

region, age, and occupation. Thompson nevertheless betrays a strong conviction that class experiences *will* make their mark on culture, yielding a common logic of response among similar occupational groups. An important implication of Thompson's framework (but de-emphasized in the preface) is that cultural inheritances can act to *inhibit* the feeling or articulation of an identity of interests among those in similar positions in production relations. If class "happens" when men articulate an identity of interests between themselves, and class consciousness is necessary for such an articulation to occur, then class consciousness and class are co-requisite. This is quite different from the classical Marxist understanding of class consciousness, which suggested that the "class-for-itself" only forms after a protracted period of class struggle. In that account, class consciousness arrives when members of a class not only articulate their shared interests, but also commit to a revolutionary political strategy appropriate to their "objective" class interests.<sup>15</sup>

The identity that Thompson draws between class and class consciousness is unconventional and even seemingly contradictory. Even if it is agreed that class is a historical social relationship, not a "thing"; a "happening," not a structure; and a cultural phenomena rather than a mathematical quantum, it is not clear why class should be identified with a particular form of class consciousness (that is, consciousness of an identity of interests). Thompson's Marxist critics readily acknowledged that individuals "experience" class in cultural terms. But they continued to insist that individuals could collectively constitute classes even without possessing any particular consciousness or

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<sup>15</sup> For some considerations regarding the relationship between Thompson's concept of "class consciousness" and the traditional notion of "class-for-itself," see WOOD, Ellen Meiksins. "The Politics of Theory and the Concept of Class," *Studies in Political Economy*, Issue 9 (Fall 1982), pp. 65-70. This article appears, in slightly amended form, as chapter 3 of Wood's *Democracy Against Capitalism*. The crucial question of "class-for-itself" is addressed at the end of the paper.



understanding of the production relations in which they are objectively embedded. As discussed below, Thompson may have come to see some legitimacy in these criticisms, encouraging the further clarification of his concepts.

However, even if Thompson's terminology could benefit from refinement, he nevertheless points to something of crucial importance—*viz.*, that class relations are *not* coterminous with production relations. As Ellen Wood has suggested, relations of production “are the relations among people who are joined by the production process and the antagonistic nexus between those who produce and those who appropriate their surplus labour.”<sup>16</sup> By its very definition, production relations imply an antagonism of interest between direct producer and appropriator, and so it is hardly surprising that many Marxists have simply equated them with class relations. Yet there remains a crucial distinction: the production relation is a direct relationship between producer and appropriator, but the class relation is not. Workers at different sites of production, or peasants on different *seigneuries*, may experience a similar relation of exploitation vis-à-vis their respective ruling class appropriators; but they are never brought together as a class through the production process or process of surplus extraction. Class, therefore, “implies a connection which extends beyond the immediate process of production and the immediate nexus of extraction, a connection that spans across particular units of production and appropriation.”<sup>17</sup> From this perspective, to say (as Thompson does) that class “is something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships”<sup>18</sup> is to suggest that class relationships are formed between people who have a common experience of production relations but are not brought together

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> THOMPSON. *The Making. Op.Cit.* p. 8.

*directly* on the basis of these production relations. Experience and consciousness then emerge as crucial analytical categories mediating between production relations and class relations.

It is also clear that if production relations and class relations are distinguished in the way Wood suggests, the process of forging class relationships can only be a cultural, conscious process, through which agents come to comprehend an identity of interests based upon similar positions in production relations. Experience is therefore also an important mediation between “social being” and “consciousness,” or the interface where the two meet. As Thompson elaborates in the *Poverty of Theory*, social being is not some “gross materiality” separated from consciousness. Instead,

What we mean is that change takes place within social being, which give rise to changed *experience*: and this experience is *determining*, in the sense that it exerts pressures upon existent social consciousness, proposes new questions, and affords much of the material which the more elaborated intellectual exercises are about.<sup>19</sup>

Here, Thompson’s defence of “experience” is directed at Althusserians, but his initial validation of the concept in *The Making* was directed against economic historians and “crude” Marxist theorists. That Thompson was driven to defend his basic theoretical framework against such a diverse array of critics speaks to a common assumption: that the making of the English working class was largely a corollary of industrial and technological advance. This assumption can be traced back to certain writings of Marx and Engels themselves. In *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*, Engels remarks that that “the proletariat was called into existence by the introduction of machinery.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, references to the “proletariat” in the *Communist Manifesto* are

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<sup>19</sup> THOMPSON. *Poverty of Theory*. *Op.Cit.* p. 200. See also WOOD, Ellen Meiksins. “The Politics of Theory”. *Op.Cit.* p. 62.

<sup>20</sup> ENGELS, F. *The Conditions of the Working Class in England*. Frogmore: St Albans, 1969. p. 50.

intended to evoke the *industrial* working class. In their initial stage of development, proletarians are compelled to strike “against the instruments of production...seek[ing] to restore by force the vanished status of the workmen of the Middle Ages.”<sup>21</sup> Class consciousness arrives later, when the “development of industry,” “unceasing improvement of machinery,” and “improved means of communication” compel proletarians to overcome attachments to a pre-industrial past, enabling the formation of trade unions and a political party capable of striking against bourgeois “conditions of production.”<sup>22</sup>

There is certainly much of value, and even striking prescience, in the *Manifesto*. Yet Thompson’s insistence that the industrial proletariat was not a “fresh race of beings”<sup>23</sup> is a reminder that the potted account of proletarian consciousness offered by Marx and Engels—and often taken for granted by subsequent Marxists—assumed a rather limited conception of working-class “experience.” Growing concentration of industry and improvement of communication were highly significant for the advancement of trade union and party organizations, and corollary forms of class consciousness. However, in *The Making* Thompson stresses that the changing productive relations and working conditions commonly associated with the Industrial Revolution were felt in a very particular ways precisely because they were imposed “not upon raw material, but upon the free-born Englishman—and the freeborn Englishman as Paine had left him or as the Methodists had moulded him.”<sup>24</sup> It is hardly sufficient, then, to regard religious traditions, constitutionalism, Dissent, remembrances of customary right, notions of

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<sup>21</sup> MARX, K. and ENGELS, F. “Manifesto of the Communist Party”. In: MARX, K. and ENGELS, F. *Selected Works*, Volume One. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 111-2.

<sup>23</sup> See THOMPSON. *The Making. Op.Cit.*, p. 213.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

equality before bourgeois law, craft traditions, and other pre-industrial inheritances as so many forms of “false consciousness” to be shed with the advancement of industry. The problem is that these political and cultural inheritances had a profoundly *contradictory* effect upon class formation. Tracing the “reactionary” or “backward-looking” nature of these traditions from the perspective of revolutionary socialism is not especially difficult; but understanding their contribution to class consciousness, in ways that shaped particular forms of political organization and social values, is a truly challenging analytical task.

Thus, Thompson argues against the suggestion that Luddism was reactionary through and through, preferring instead to call it a moment of “*transitional* conflict.” On the one hand, it did look backward to old customs and paternalist legislation that “could never be revived.” On the other hand, it tried to revive ancient rights “in order to establish new precedents.” At different times, their demands included a legal minimum wage, the control of “sweating” of women and juveniles, arbitration, engagement by masters to find work for skilled men made “redundant” by machinery, and the right to open trade union organization. In this way, the Luddites actually sought to articulate an alternative political economy and morality to that of *laissez faire*, one which looked forward not so much to a paternalist as a democratic community.<sup>25</sup>

Without the sort of “transitional” conflicts exemplified by Luddism, it is difficult to envision how a movement like that of the Chartists could have emerged. Chartism was not simply a “necessary” or “logical” response to the vagaries of industrialization but a product of cultural, political, and social struggles waged by previous generations of workers as they experienced capitalist development. The Chartist demand for universal suffrage, for example, was an extension of previous Reformist and Radical political

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 603.

campaigns that engaged sections of the working class—campaigns for equality before the law, an end to “Old Corruption” and parasitism,<sup>26</sup> freedom of the press, and for redress after Peterloo.<sup>27</sup> Chartism was as much a social and economic movement as a political one, since the vote was regarded as means for working people to achieve “*social control* over their conditions of life and labour.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, Chartism also inherited the socio-economic struggles that Thompson so assiduously documents—early trade union demands for a “fair” price, “just” wage, and respect for standards of workmanship;<sup>29</sup> Luddism; illegal trade union organizing; and customary demands for a minimum wage, the ten-hour day, and restrictions of female and child labour.<sup>30</sup> These struggles, carried out at the earliest stages of industrialization, were integral to the emergence of a new working-class consciousness and the political break with the middle class that made Chartism possible.

Thompson’s focus on the “experience” of the early industrial worker also allows for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between social being and consciousness. As was noted above, certain formulations in Marx’s “historical materialist” writings, especially the 1859 preface, seemed to posit a rigid determination between social being and consciousness, with the former wholly determining the latter. Thompson’s concept of experience, in contrast, allows for a mutual determination between both categories while still retaining a notion of social being as “primary” in an analytical sense. Thus, in the *Poverty of Theory* Thompson argues that there is

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 103-5.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 734-68.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 910.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 261

<sup>30</sup> The struggles of the weavers are dealt with particularly well by Thompson. See *Ibid.*, pp. 334-342.

dialogue between social being and social consciousness. Obviously, this dialogue goes in both directions...consciousness, whether as unself-conscious culture, or as myth, or as science, or law, or articulated ideology, thrust back into being in its turn: as being is thought so thought also is lived—people may, within limits, *live* the social or sexual expectations which are imposed upon them by dominant conceptual categories.<sup>31</sup>

The key phrase here is “within limits.” The Hegelian idealist philosophers that Marx polemicized against, like contemporary post-structuralists, were reluctant to connect the ideational realm to any material foundation, rendering it completely autonomous. In contrast, Marx and Thompson both insist that an analysis of social being is a necessary starting point for an understanding of consciousness. Individuals find themselves in societies that are structured in determinate ways (especially through production relations), and this has a profound bearing upon what is thought about.<sup>32</sup> Thompson’s innovation is to point out that as changes to social being are “experienced” (perhaps through intensified exploitation or enhanced state repression), these changes will be understood through existing (or “imposed”) consciousness—challenging certain predispositions, while reinforcing others. As people react to this experience (and Thompson insists that “no worker known to historians ever had surplus-value taken out of his hide without finding some way of fighting back”<sup>33</sup>), they employ their conscious understanding of how things are—and how things ought to be—to effect a transformation of their conditions. Even when they are not fully successful in realizing their ambitions (and they rarely are), their agency does alter social being, including production relations.

Thompson’s discussion of the Speenhamland decision serves as an excellent illustration of this dialectical approach. In 1795, bread prices soared as war stalked the

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<sup>31</sup> THOMPSON. *Poverty of Theory*. *Op.Cit.* p. 201.

<sup>32</sup> See THOMPSON. “Eighteenth-century English society”. *Op.Cit.* p. 149.

<sup>33</sup> THOMPSON. *Poverty of Theory*. *Op.Cit.* pp. 345-6.

European continent. Workers mainly understood this experience through perspectives of moral economy and customary rights, although the experience proved so extreme that a minority embraced elements of Jacobin politics as well. To enforce their customary rights, aggrieved workers engaged in a “climactic year” of rioting, compelling the authorities to subsidize wages in relation to the price of bread.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, the Norwich worsted weavers understood their experience of intensified exploitation through Jacobin and trade union traditions, and succeeded in keeping up wages in the 1830s by “a combination of picketing, intimidation of masters and ‘illegal’ men, municipal politics, and violent opposition to machinery.”<sup>35</sup>

It would be easy to claim that such victories were small and necessarily short-lived, mere respites from the irrepressible juggernaut of industrialization. Yet this urge should be resisted. Victories, even if limited, were still victories, and demonstrated that workers acting on their consciousness could alter social being. Moreover, workers’ capacity to do so was profoundly shaped by specific regional traditions, especially the differing sets of inherited ideological and organisational resources that could be leveraged for collective action and resistance. Although they confronted broadly similar macro-economic tendencies and pressures, weavers in the West Riding proved much less willing than those in Norwich to engage in militant action against exploitation, resulting in a much earlier erosion of their artisanal status. The reasons for this divergence are undoubtedly complex, but it is undoubtedly significant that the Jacobin and trade union traditions that were so instrumental for struggles in Norwich were largely absent in the West Riding. Workers’ agency ensured that production relations were never rigidly

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<sup>34</sup> THOMPSON. *The Making. Op.Cit.* pp. 72-3.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 316.

determining in their force, nor homogenizing in their outcome.<sup>36</sup> The history of capitalism therefore appears as a “structured process,” where capitalist relations of production are determining only in the sense of setting broad limits and exerting pressures.

As important as it is to note the wide latitude that Thompson gives to consciousness, agency, and historical process, it should not be forgotten that a class *is* made. The determinations provided by production relations are experienced so powerfully that they do give rise to a common consciousness, ultimately fostering class relations. That class relations were established among such a heterogeneous group of workers, with such variegated traditions and in so many different regions, suggests that capitalist production relations exerted a very powerful determining force on consciousness, even before the full onset of industrialization. Contra Engels, it was not machinery which “called” the proletariat into existence, but instead the expansion of capitalist relations of production, and the determining effect that these relations had upon experience and consciousness.<sup>37</sup>

Thompson makes this point explicitly in part two of *The Making*, noting for example that the decline in weavers’ living standards *preceded* “serious competition” with the power loom, and stemmed instead from “the abominable system of reducing wages” in out-work.<sup>38</sup> Both the homogeneity *and* the heterogeneity of working-class experience in the early-nineteenth century contributed to class consciousness and class formation. On the one hand, all workers felt the determining pressures of exploitative

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<sup>36</sup> THOMPSON. *Poverty of Theory. Op.Cit.* p. 98. See also LACHER, H. *Beyond Globalization: Capitalism, territoriality and the international relations of modernity.* New York: Routledge, 2006. p. 33; and WOOD. “The Politics of Theory”. *Op.Cit.* p. 63.

<sup>37</sup> Wood makes this point well in *The Origins of Capitalism: A Longer View.* London: Verso, 2002. p. 65-9.

<sup>38</sup> THOMPSON. *The Making. Op.Cit.* p. 314.



capitalist production relations. On the other hand, these pressures were transmitted to various groups of wage labourers—from factory hands, out workers, and miners to agricultural labourers and skilled building workers—each of which brought different cultural traditions to bear in developing an understanding of their exploitation. These distinctions engendered intra-class division but they were also a source of strength. As Thompson repeatedly points out, artisans played a particularly prominent role in the making of the working class precisely because they were *not* factory hands. Their experience of capitalist exploitation was not just an affront to their material standard of living, but also to deep-seated customary norms and attendant notions of self-esteem and independence. Artisans reacted to exploitation by utilizing their strong organizational traditions--membership in “friendly societies,” stable trade union organization, involvement in educational and religious movements<sup>39</sup>--to press the most radical political demands of their time. Factory workers, while feeling the material deprivations of capitalist exploitation just as strongly (if not more so), were more vulnerable to victimization by their employers, and found the Radical appeal to old customary rights less relevant to their own situation. Their initial energies were therefore poured into their own trade union organization.<sup>40</sup> Class consciousness resulted from a confluence of these two traditions—(primarily) artisanal Radicalism and trade union militancy—which both had their foundation in changing production relations.<sup>41</sup> Thompson’s notion of working-class “experience” therefore calls into question the pervasive reification of “machinery” and “technology” in most accounts of the Industrial Revolution, and returns the focus to

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266-7.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 706-7.

<sup>41</sup> See *Ibid.*, chapter 16, particularly pp. 781-2.

exploitative social relations—exactly where the attention of historical materialists should lie.

### **Thompson’s Marxist critics and the “retreat from class”**

The above assessment of Thompson’s work is drawn in very broad strokes, and hardly does justice to the full complexity and originality of his theoretical and historical writings. However, it captures the most essential theoretical implications of Thompson’s work, and helps to establish his concept of class as a legitimate extension of historical materialist ideas. The importance of introducing experience into historical materialist analysis becomes all the more apparent when the arguments of Thompson’s “Marxist” critics are confronted. Many examples could be raised, but this section focuses on G.A. Cohen for two reasons. First, his “defence” of Marx’s theory of history<sup>42</sup> proved to be highly influential for subsequent Marxist scholarship, including strands that are often considered to be divergent (e.g., the historical sociology of Perry Anderson and the rational choice/analytical Marxism of Jon Elster, John Roemer and others).<sup>43</sup> Through these authors, some of Cohen’s foundational propositions about Marxist theory acquired a widespread and sometimes unacknowledged resonance, assuming a taken-for-granted status among many critics and defenders of historical materialism alike. Second, and relatedly, Cohen’s critique of Thompson illuminates some of the most crucial methodological and theoretical issues that remain unresolved within historical materialism specifically, and social inquiry more generally. Cohen’s critique provides a unique window for recovering Thompson’s place within the broad historical materialist

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<sup>42</sup> COHEN, G.A. *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.

<sup>43</sup> See ANDERSON, P. *Arguments Within English Marxism*. *Op.Cit.* p. 40; ROEMER, J. (ed.), *Analytical Marxism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.

tradition, and through this, reassessing commonplace assumptions about the relevance of class analysis in contemporary historical study.

Like most of Thompson's Marxist critics, Cohen makes clear that he does not question the "magnificence" of Thompson's historical writings, but rather his "misconceived" theoretical framework. Empirical history is ceded to Thompson—Cohen only wages his battle on the terrain of high theory.<sup>44</sup> In fact, it is this attempt to divorce the "theoretical" from the "historical" in Thompson which is the most problematic aspect of the Cohen/Anderson argument, for a central methodological conclusion of Thompson's analysis is that there cannot be a rupture between the theoretical and the empirical. Cohen's critique is predicated upon a strongly "structural" concept of class, one which Anderson upholds as "of exemplary clarity and subtlety."<sup>45</sup> A person's class

is established by nothing but his objective place in the network of ownership relations, however difficult it may be to identify such places neatly. His consciousness, culture, and politics do not enter the *definition* of his class position. Indeed, these exclusions are required to protect the substantive character of the Marxian thesis that class position strongly conditions consciousness, culture and politics.<sup>46</sup>

This definition is certainly clear. Unlike the flights of Althusserian metaphysics that Thompson so vehemently attacked in *The Poverty of Theory*, this definition does not deny that class relations are "human relations."<sup>47</sup> Instead, it simply claims that class relations exist regardless of whether members of classes are aware of them. Production relations are effectively equated with class relations, detaching experience and

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<sup>44</sup> WOOD. "The Politics of Theory". *Op.Cit.* pp. 62-3.

<sup>45</sup> ANDERSON. *Arguments. Op.Cit.* p. 40.

<sup>46</sup> COHEN, G. *Karl Marx's Theory of History. Op.Cit.* p. 73.

<sup>47</sup> Indeed, Althusser's explanation of production relations reads like a direct response to Thompson: "And if by chance anyone attempts to reduce these relations of production to relations between men, i.e., 'human relations,' he is violating Marx's thought, for so long as we employ a truly critical reading to some of his rare ambiguous formulations, Marx shows in the greatest depth that the *relations* of production (and ideological and social relations) are irreducible to any anthropological inter-subjectivity—for they not only combine agents and objects in a specific structure of the distribution of relations, places and functions, occupied and 'supported' by objects and agents of production." ALTHUSSER, L. and BALIBAR, E. *Reading Capital*. London: Verso, 1997. p. 180.

consciousness from the concept of class itself. In defending this equation, Cohen and Anderson offer a number of arguments that explicitly challenged Thompson's contentions.

Cohen agrees with Thompson that there is no simple connection between production relations, on the one hand and consciousness, politics and culture on the other: "There is logic in it but not law."<sup>48</sup> However, he suggests that Thompson has ignored the crucial distinction between "class-in-itself" and "class-for-itself":

If Thompson were right, the French peasantry of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* could not be considered a class. This is a curious result, and hardly in line with the Marx Thompson invokes, who described them as "the most numerous class of French society," the *class* base of Louis Napoleon's power. It is precisely because a class need *not* be conscious of itself that the phrase "class-in-itself" was introduced.<sup>49</sup>

For this reason, Cohen suggests that it is not appropriate to speak of class as a happening or process, but rather as something that "*undergoes* a process of political and cultural formation."<sup>50</sup> It is still appropriate to speak of the "making" of the English working class, but only in the sense of being made "*into* what it once was not: a self-aware group with definite political dispositions."<sup>51</sup>

For his part, Anderson invokes Cohen's structural definition to raise similar objections, albeit with greater historical concreteness. He dismisses Thompson's "voluntarist and subjectivist" conception of class because it would logically entail seemingly absurd conclusions, such as the conjecture that Athenian slaves, Indian "caste-ridden villagers," and Meiji workers were not members of a class simply because they did not "come to struggle, think in class ways."<sup>52</sup> He also points to Thompson's own

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<sup>48</sup> COHEN. *Karl Marx's Theory of History. Op.Cit.* p. 74.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> ANDERSON. *Arguments. Op.Cit.* p. 40.

writings on eighteenth-century English society as offering a powerful account of the structural reality of class even in the absence of class consciousness.<sup>53</sup> Like Cohen, Anderson concludes with the suggestion that it is better to say, “with Marx, that social classes may not become conscious of themselves, may fail to act or behave in common, but they still remain—materially, historically—classes.”<sup>54</sup>

In response, it should first be noted that Cohen and particularly Anderson detect a real ambiguity in Thompson’s writings: how to refer to agents who are placed in certain production relations before class consciousness is achieved. Marx did refer to them as members of a class, albeit only a “class-in-itself,” but Thompson largely avoids this terminology. In fact, Thompson does go some way towards addressing this question in his writings on eighteenth-century English society, where he distinguishes between class “situation” and “class formation”:

We know about class because people have repeatedly behaved in class ways; these historical events disclose regularities of response to analogous situations, and at a certain stage (the “mature” formations of class) we observe the creation of institutions, and of a culture with class notations, which admits of trans-national comparisons.<sup>55</sup>

Thompson’s usage of “class” here is confusing because he is referring to its existence before it has been “made.” Yet the context of Thompson’s article is clear enough: it seeks to affirm the presence of class struggle in England even before the formation of the working class and industrialization. “Class struggle without class”, as he puts it, was possible because people were situated in particular “class situations” (analogous to positions in the relations of production) without yet being part of a mature “class formation” (analogous to the “made” class of 1832).

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>55</sup> THOMPSON, E.P. “Eighteenth-century English society: Class struggle without class?”. *Social History* 3:2, 1978, p. 147.

It is tempting to see Thompson's distinction between class "situation" and "class formation" as essentially similar to Cohen's distinction between class-in-itself and class-for-itself. The dispute between Thompson on the one hand and Cohen and Anderson on the other could then be attributed to semantics. Yet there remains a profound difference, with far-reaching consequences. For Thompson, the distinction between class situation (position in production relations) and class formation (the "made" class) is not simply one of consciousness, but also of *real relationships*. Production relations are not class relations because the latter do not arise from the process of production itself. They can only arise through struggle, whereby individual producers come to articulate an identity of interest with those who occupy similar positions in the relations of production. This is exactly why classes are made through a process, and why the vagaries of "experience" and the contradictions of consciousness are so analytically important. When Cohen distinguishes between class-in-itself and class-for-itself, he suggests only the difference in consciousness entailed by the two forms. Consciousness then becomes entirely disembodied from social and material processes, because there is no longer any mediation between production relations, on the one hand, and class and class consciousness, on the other. We are not given any conceptual or analytical tools for understanding how and why abstractly similar production relations give rise to class consciousness in some circumstances and not others.

Of course, neither Cohen nor Anderson wish to suggest a rigid determination between production relations and class consciousness, but their conflation of production relations with class would seem to offer little alternative. Class consciousness hangs in the air as a *political ideal* to be delivered, not as a cultural form arrived at through the

historical negotiation of working-class experience. It is hardly surprising that, when socialist conceptions of an ideal class consciousness failed to materialize in the late 1970s and early 1980s, proponents of the “structural” definition of class began to doubt whether social being had *any* determining effect upon consciousness. The Althusserians were the first to join the ranks of what Ellen Wood dubbed the “new ‘true’ socialists”<sup>56</sup> those who concluded that Marxism itself is invariably economistic and class reductionist, and that class and class struggle need not occupy any necessary place in the socialist project. Ideology and politics were reconceived as being entirely autonomous from any social basis, particularly any class foundation. A highly influential text in this trend, which even today remains a foundational document in post-Marxism and post-structuralism, was Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985). In grounding their claims, Laclau and Mouffe offer a potted version of what they take to be the foundational assumptions underlying Marxist class reductionism: that the economy is a “self-regulated” mechanism, operating according to endogenous laws and without any “indeterminacy resulting from political or other interventions; that this mechanism automatically constitutes social agents, and that these social agents, by virtue of their positions in the relations of production, will possess “historic interests” which will be reflected at other “social levels”, including the “fundamental interest” of the working class in socialism.<sup>57</sup> At bottom, because Marxism upholds a “general law of development of the productive forces,” “the economy may be understood as a mechanism of society acting on upon objective phenomena independently of human action.”<sup>58</sup> For our

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<sup>56</sup> See WOOD, E.M. *The Retreat from Class: A New ‘True’ Socialism*. London: Verso, 1986. pp. 1-2.

<sup>57</sup> LACLAU, E. and MOUFFE, C. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso, 1985. p. 76.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

purposes, what is remarkable about Laclau and Mouffe's interpretation (and dismissal) of Marxism as technological determinism is that it not just strikingly resembles, but is *directly* predicated upon, Cohen's account. In making their strident claims they actually reference the work of Cohen rather than Marx, carrying out an interpretation by proxy.<sup>59</sup>

While following a somewhat different intellectual and political route, Cohen also came to conclude that there could be no meaningful relationship between class—conceived again as a purely “economic” position—and consciousness.<sup>60</sup> A decade after the publication of *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, Cohen offered a new “restricted historical materialism,” which was

[p]rimarily a theory about the course of material development itself rather than about the relationship *between* that development and other developments....Restricted historical materialism does not say that the principal features of spiritual existence are materially or economically explained.<sup>61</sup>

Thereafter, Cohen shifted the focus of his work from “material development itself” to ethical and moral philosophy, seeking in particular to identify the abstract basis for a desirable and feasible “socialist alternative” based on moral principles of equality and

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<sup>59</sup> This is noticed by WOOD. *Retreat from Class. Op.Cit.* p. 55, note15.

<sup>60</sup> In a recent review of *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, S. Kennedy notes that Cohen has “retreat[ed] from nearly all of the book's arguments.” Kennedy does an excellent job of charting the evolution of Cohen's thought, from initial bravado to a thorough cynicism that historical materialism can in fact explain anything. In *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2000. p. 103), Cohen remarks: “To the extent that Marxism is still alive, it presents itself as a set of values and a set of designs for realizing those values.” See KENNEDY, S. “*Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*, Revised Edition,” *Historical Materialism*, 13:4, 2005, pp. 331-44. It seems that Anderson has not traveled as far down this road, but he has exhibited a pronounced “historical pessimism” in the face of “neoliberalism”: “Whatever limitations persist to its practice, neo-liberalism as a set of principles rules undivided across the globe: the most successful ideology in world history.” See ANDERSON, P. “Renewals,” *New Left Review*, II, 1, January-February 2000, p. 17. Boris Kagarlitsky suggest that “[f]or Anderson, the history of socialism is a history of ideas, and furthermore, of ideas that have gone out of fashion. See KAGARLITSKY, B. “The suicide of *New Left Review*,” *International Socialism*, 88, Autumn 2000, p. 129; see also ACHCAR, G. “The ‘historical pessimism’ of Perry Anderson,” *International Socialism*, 88, Autumn 2000, pp. 135-41. Unsurprisingly, recent events have compelled Anderson to take a somewhat less pessimistic view of future possibilities: see ANDERSON, P. “Jottings on the Conjuncture,” *New Left Review*, II, 48, November-December 2007, pp. 5-37; and ANDERSON, P. “On the Concatenation in the Arab World,” *New Left Review*, II, 68, March-April 2011, pp. 5-15.

<sup>61</sup> COHEN, G.A. *History, Labour, Freedom*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1988. p. 368.



community.<sup>62</sup> This might seem to be a dramatic departure from his original concern with the historical materialist theory of history, and indeed Cohen came to identify as an “ex-Marxist.” But it bears a striking resemblance to the trajectory of the post-Marxists, and for good reason. They both held the same technologically determinist understanding of historical materialist explanation, which, in reducing class to a purely economic location distinct from ideological, cultural and political spheres, lacked any understanding of the inherently *social* process of class formation that Thompson sought to capture. Having already abstracted politics and ideology from their understanding of class, it was not a great leap for either Cohen or Laclau and Mouffe to pursue a class-less politics. Ironically, it is the structural definition of class which threw open the doors to “voluntarism” and “subjectivism.”<sup>63</sup>

The Cohen/Anderson structural definition leaves historical materialists with little ability to explain how forms of consciousness and culture that *preceded* class formation were rooted in exploitative production relations. Anderson is sceptical that such cultural forms can be explained materially, and we are left to assume that they were somehow severed from any basis in production relations. Thompson’s dialectical method, in contrast, allows us to situate the popular culture of the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries “within its proper material abode,”<sup>64</sup> demystifying the kind of behaviour that Anderson views as “so coalescent and contradictory as to be ‘unclasslike’.”<sup>65</sup> Thus, in his collection of writings in eighteenth-century England, *Customs in Common*, Thompson

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<sup>62</sup> COHEN, G.A. *Why Not Socialism?* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

<sup>63</sup> Worth noting in this context is Anderson’s claim—against Thompson—that socialism does not require “a victorious industrial proletariat to impose it.” Castroite Cuba and Maoist China are offered as two examples of such “socialism.” See ANDERSON, Perry. “Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism,” *New Left Review*, I, 35, January-February 1966, p. 9.

<sup>64</sup> THOMPSON, E.P. *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture*. New York: New Press, 1993, p.7

<sup>65</sup> ANDERSON. *Arguments. Op.Cit.* p. 43.

explains how seemingly “unclasslike” behaviour was grounded in the experience of changing production relations, making popular culture “an arena in which opposing interests made conflicting claims.”<sup>66</sup> A good example is the essay “Patricians and Plebs,” where Thompson situates the gentry’s vaunted “paternal responsibilities” within the context of particular social relations of exploitation. The eighteenth century witnessed a tremendous expansion of market dependency, with two results: the gentry came to rely upon tenancy, trade and taxation as means of appropriating surplus labour, while plebeians became more vulnerable to market-mediated patrician exploitation. Such celebrated “responsibilities” as the roasted ox, the sports prize, the liberal donation to charity in time of dearth, the proclamation against forestallers, and the Christmas dole appeared, in this new historical context, as gestures calculated to ensure the deference of the poor, especially in times of possible social conflict.<sup>67</sup> In turn, such varied products of popular culture as food riots, wife sales, and “rough music,” were plebeian responses to patrician “technique of rule,” assertions of independence and self-sufficiency in a period when custom was under assault from property and the market.

Thompson is also quick to point out that the predominance of vertical “trade” consciousness rather than horizontal “class” consciousness did not mean that other forms of horizontal consciousness were absent in the eighteenth century. Cultural values, libertarian rhetoric, and patriotic and xenophobic prejudices were never passively absorbed by the plebs, but were reworked at the level of experience to handle changing material conditions. It is in this sense that we can see very “non-economic” conflicts,

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<sup>66</sup> THOMPSON. *Customs in Common. Op.Cit.* p.6

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47.

such as street protests by “the mob” against prohibition of Shrove Tuesday football, as incidents of class struggle without class.<sup>68</sup>

### **Eurocentrism, Anglo-centrism and the problem of specificity**

Thompson’s writings on the eighteenth century may also help to clarify contentious contemporary debates regarding the efficacy of historical materialist analysis of non-European societies and history.<sup>69</sup> Post-colonial theorists and global historians, themselves often influenced by the linguistic and cultural turn discussed above, often criticize both Marx and Marxism for being irredeemably Eurocentric in their concerns and analyses. This alleged Eurocentrism manifests in two distinct, albeit related, ways. The first is most familiar and also largely incontestable: that Marx and Marxists have typically focused their analytical attention on developments in West, largely neglecting “the Rest.”<sup>70</sup> Indeed, E.P. Thompson can be regarded as one of the worst offenders in this regard. Unlike some of his fellow British Marxist historians, Thomspson’s body of work is notoriously *Anglo-centric*, and has little to say even about the British empire, much less about the “Global South.”<sup>71</sup> The second criticism is more far-reaching, and claims that even when historical materialists cast their gaze outside Europe, they cannot evade Eurocentrism because the very categories, models and assumptions they deploy (class,

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63-64.

<sup>69</sup> For a broad introduction to the debate and its implications, see BARTOLOVICH, C. and LAZARUS, N. Lazarus, eds. *Marxism, Modernity and Post-Colonial Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

<sup>70</sup> See HOBSON, J.M. *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilisation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. p. 7.

<sup>71</sup> See GREGG, R. and KALE, M. “The Empire and Mr Thompson: Making Indian Princes and English Working Class”. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 6 September 1997.

mode of production, etc.) are predicated on European historical experience. Despite their critical ambitions, historical materialists are actually complicit, if unwittingly, in the totalizing and universalizing pretensions of Western knowledge production more generally. Recovering historical difference, in the words of Dipesh Chakrabarty, can only be achieved by “provincializing Europe,” and with it the epistemological categories of Marxism.<sup>72</sup>

This latter charge, of course, raises issues of immense historiographical and theoretical complexity, which a focus on Thompson alone cannot adjudicate, much less the exceedingly limited focus afforded here. But it does help to refocus attention from Thompson’s analytical Anglo-centrism (which has absorbed most commentary so far) to the far more interesting and pertinent question of whether Thompson’s specific conceptual and methodological innovations may help to renew historical materialism on a non-Eurocentric basis. Ironically, Thompson’s seemingly provincial focus on Britain informed an historical materialist vocabulary and approach that is uniquely attentive to historical and geographical difference, and is, in this sense, of potentially “global” application. His insistence on fine-grained, richly detailed, and temporally specific class analysis was hardly popular among his Marxist contemporaries. But it was only through this rigorous attempt to apply and adapt the concepts and models of historical materialist theory to the contingencies and particularities of an historical process (even one as familiar as British industrialization!) that the centrality of agency and experience could become evident. These are insights of universal relevance because they provide an antidote to *any* universalizing models of class or other structures of domination and

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<sup>72</sup> CHAKRABARTY, D. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

stratification. Concerns about the specificity of African or Asian history, in this light, are valid not just for “the Rest” but also for Europe itself.<sup>73</sup>

Thompson’s methodology, then, provides a compelling basis for a truly non-Eurocentric historical materialism which uses class experience to chart what exactly is locally specific in changes or trends that are seemingly universal or at least regional in scope. Much can be learned, indeed, from the many efforts that have already been made to apply Thompson’s ideas to processes of proletarianization in the Global South, particularly India and Africa. Frederick Cooper notes how many Africanist labour historians, in a willingness to counter stereotypical notions of African “traditionalism” and “authenticity,” one-sidedly stressed the “making” of an African working class without adequately attending to the specific ways in which African workers utilized their own cultural resources and affiliations to negotiate their experience of changing production relations. New, horizontal class relations and forms of class consciousness often did emerge from this encounter, but they were not as universal, sustained, or hegemonic as Africanist labour historians often suggested. African class formation, as a result, was understood less as a genuinely historical process than simply a teleological one.<sup>74</sup>

An opposite tendency has been observed by Rajnarayan Chandavarkar in India, where the founding historians of what became the highly influential Subaltern Studies school initially took up Thompson’s ideas in the early 1980s to counter the crude economic reductionism of the Stalinist-influenced Marxist historiography that was then

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<sup>73</sup>This point is well made in COOPER, F. “Work, Class and Empire: An African Historian’s Retrospective on E.P. Thompson”. *Social History*, 20:2, May 1995, p. 237.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 235-241.

prevalent.<sup>75</sup> Unlike their Africanist counterparts, they frankly acknowledged that an Indian working class had not been “made”; but they went even further, claiming that proletarianization in India failed to generate any sort of novel, class-inflected cultural forms of the sort that Thompson observed in eighteenth-century. Chakrabarty, a leading scholar in the school, claimed that rural migrants in Bengal had simply “imported a peasant culture into the industrial setting,” one that was primarily a “pre-capitalist, inegalitarian culture marked by strong primordial loyalties of community, language, religion, caste and citizenship.”<sup>76</sup> While this analysis had the virtue of highlighting the cultural specificity of the Bengali working class, it also missed the ways in which this culture, far from being “primordial,” was transformed through the experience of new production relations and urban living environments, and even provided the materials from which entirely new horizontal class solidarities could be informed.<sup>77</sup> In seeking to avoid class reductionism, Chakrabarty and others in the Subaltern Studies group one-sidedly emphasized the cultural traditions and inheritances of particular social groups. As Chandavarkar observes, this only produced “a static timeless indeed Orientalist characterization of a ‘traditional’ Indian” not far removed from the essentialist depictions of colonial discourse.<sup>78</sup>

Luckily, we do not have to choose between an economically reductionist Marxism which buries specificity under universalizing hierarchic models, and a post-colonialism which inadvertently does the same by essentializing difference. An agency-based

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<sup>75</sup> CHANDAVARKAR, R. “The Making of the Working Class’: E.P. Thompson and Indian History,” *History Workshop Journal*, 73, 1997, pp. 177-181. A concise but informed discussion of the evolution of the Subaltern Studies school and its relationship to broader trends in social history can be found in DWORKIN, D. *Class Struggles*. Harlow, UK: Pierson Education, 2007. Chapter Eight.

<sup>76</sup> CHAKRABARTY, D. *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal, 1890-1940*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989. p. 69.

<sup>77</sup> CHANDAVARKAR. *Op.Cit.* p. 187.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, 182.

historical materialism of the sort that Thompson pioneered provides a method, though not a template, for writing the non-Eurocentric global historical narratives that can carefully connect locally specific experiences with global movements and flows. As Cooper notes, “Capitalism may not define a metanarrative, but it faces us with a megaquestion”: how so many Asians, Africans, Latina Americans (and indeed Europeans!) came to depend on wages for their livelihood.<sup>79</sup> Answering it requires not a rejection of Marxist theory itself, but a working out of the tension within Marxism of the distinction between “abstract” labour power and “real” labour power.<sup>80</sup>

### **Marx’s language of class and the critique of political economy**

These considerations do not refute the “structural” definition of class itself, but instead reveal its deafening silences. Thompson, rather than assuming the prior existence of a class, took on the challenge of explaining how a class was historically “made.” In doing so, he wrestled with historical materialism’s thorniest problems—notably the relationship between social being and consciousness—not through theoretical permutations, but through a direct engagement with the complexities, contradictions and ambivalences of historical sources. The concepts and distinctions that he formulated along the way—production relations versus class relations, class “situation” versus “class formation,” the “logic of process,” and above all the importance of “experience” as a mediating factor—are very useful in concretely tracing the determining role of production relations upon consciousness. In the face of this challenge it is still possible to

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<sup>79</sup> COOPER. *Op.Cit.*, p. 239.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, 240.

maintain a static definition of class as coterminous with the structure of production relations—but such a definition does not get us very far in understanding the questions of greatest interest to historical materialists.

Thompson is largely correct in suggesting that “*Grundrisse* face” Marx was silent on the category of “human experience” and gave little heed to how production relations were “handled” through consciousness and culture.<sup>81</sup> But Marx should not be ceded to the structuralist and analytical philosophers who once claimed, and now largely reject, his name. In the first place, a high level of abstraction was a necessary characteristic of the critique of political economy. Capitalism’s “laws of motion” can only be understood in the abstract. Despite its abstract character, however, the critique of political economy offers many profound insights into the working-class experience of capitalism, not least that of alienated labour and “commodity fetishism.” Moreover, as Daniel Bensaid has pointed out, it was in the *Grundrisse* where Marx utilizes the insights of the critique of political economy to offer nothing less than a “*new way of writing history*”—history as characterized by the “discordance of temporalities.” Marx writes of “*The uneven development of material production relative to e.g. artistic development...*” the really difficult point to discuss here is how relations of production develop unevenly as legal relations.” This is a far cry from the rigid correspondence of the 1859 Preface, and in fact points to the kind of questions that Thompson himself would address.<sup>82</sup>

Secondly, the discussion of class in the “historical” Marx is hardly as cut-and-dry as Cohen and Anderson suggest. Bertell Ollman has observed that Marx’s usage of class

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<sup>81</sup> THOMPSON. *Poverty of Theory*. *Op.Cit.* p. 356.

<sup>82</sup> See BENSaid, Daniel. *Marx for Our Times: Adventures and Misadventures of a Critique*. London: Verso, 2002. pp. 20-1. In support of this view, Bensaid refers to the *Grundrisse*. *Op.Cit.* pp. 109-11.



“varies with his purpose in making the particular classification.”<sup>83</sup> The concept should not be detached from the structured knowledge it seeks to express, and ultimately of which it is an integral part.<sup>84</sup> The structural definition of class employed in *Capital* is clearly advantageous for illustrating capitalism’s abstract “laws of motion,” but in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* the “historical” Marx opts for a different usage:

In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their cultural formation from those of other classes and bring them into conflict with those classes, they form a class. In so far as these small peasant proprietors are merely connected on a local basis, and the identity of their interests fails to produce a feeling of community, national links, or a political organization, they do not form a class.<sup>85</sup>

The distinction that Marx makes here between two senses of class is much more assimilable to Thompson’s perspective than Cohen’s, because the difference is not simply one of consciousness, but also of real social relations. In his own reading of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, Thompson aptly noted:

For Marx, a class defined itself in historical terms, not because it was made up of people with common relationship to the means of production and a common life-experience, but because these people *became conscious of* their common interest, and developed appropriate forms of common organisation and action.<sup>86</sup>

In this reading, the peasantry is a class insofar as its members are situated in production relations that compel them to struggle against their exploiters; these struggles, in turn, help to shape a distinct cultural formation. This sounds like an apt description of the

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<sup>83</sup> OLLMAN, Bertell. *Social and Sexual Revolution*. Montreal: Black Rose Press, 1978, p. 41. See also the discussion in DAHRENDORF, Ralf. *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Society*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959). Chapter One.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>85</sup> MARX, Karl. “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in Karl Marx, *Surveys from Exile* (edited by David Fernbach). Middlesex: Penguin, 1973. p. 239.

<sup>86</sup> THOMPSON, E.P. “Revolution Again! Or Shut Your Ears and Run”. *New Left Review* I/6, November-December 1960, p. 24. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer from *Workers of the World* for bringing this article and quotation to my attention.

working poor of eighteenth-century England, who occupied distinct class “situations” and engaged in class struggle without class. Insofar as the connections between those occupying similar positions in the relations of production are merely local, and there is no “feeling” of identity producing national links, a class community, and class political organizations, the peasantry does not form a class. This is much like saying that production relations have not produced the kind of social relationships which bind together persons in similar class situations on the basis of consciously recognized common interest. In other words, the peasants of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* were not a class because they were not joined by the kind of class relations that characterized the English working class in 1832. The problem with the structural definition of class—even when it is amended to encompass the for-itself/in-itself distinction—is that it does not highlight the qualitative difference between production relations and class relations. Marx seems to have been cognizant of this difference, and recognized that the structural definition of class obscured as much as it clarified when used in an historical context.

Where does this leave the traditional class-in-itself, class-for-itself distinction? The answer is: wounded, but not fatally so. The distinction may still be useful, so long as its limitations are appreciated. Thompson rarely if ever employed the distinction himself, probably because its salience, from Marx onwards, was largely political rather than analytical. It is sensible for a Leninist to insist that the working class has certain fundamental “objective” interests which are determined by its members’ position in production relations, and that it will not become a class-for-itself until it has achieved genuine class consciousness, i.e., consciousness of the necessity of social revolution. The political context of the Leninists’ comments are clear, and subject to challenge from

social democrats, Stalinists, Maoists, and anyone else who has a different opinion on what constitutes “genuine” class consciousness. It makes much less sense for the historian—even the Marxist historian—to engage in a similar game. Largely because of his own break from Stalinism,<sup>87</sup> Thompson is able to assume the challenging historical task of explaining how a class was made, demonstrating convincingly that production relations provide a basis for class, but do not themselves *constitute* class. Thompson agrees with the classical Marxist notion that class consciousness is a product of class struggle, but his contribution is to note that this struggle is necessarily one of forging new social relationships on the basis of production relations. These new social relationships—class relations—constitute class, and are the necessary social object of class consciousness itself. We may disagree with Thompson on the historical detail, and of course seek to trace the class’s later development—after all, classes are never “made” in the sense of being finished or having acquired their definitive shape.<sup>88</sup> However, we must still recognize that classes have origins, and these origins can only be understood if production relations are distinguished from class relations, and class consciousness is recognized as being integral to class itself. It may still be useful to speak of a “class-for-itself”—but only if we clearly identify this category not with class consciousness as such, but with a certain variety of political consciousness linked to socialist strategy.

## Conclusion

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<sup>87</sup> Bryan Palmer has devoted particular attention to the relationship between Thompson’s political trajectory and his historical writing. See PALMER, Bryan. *The Making of E.P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism, and History*. Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1981 and *E.P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions*. London: Verso, 1994, especially chapters 4-7.

<sup>88</sup> This point is usefully made in HOBSBAWM, E.J. *Worlds of Labour: Further Studies in the History of Labour*. London, 1984. p. 194.

Thompson is one of a rare breed of modern Marxist writers who, in recognizing the shortcomings of classical Marxism, neither explicitly rejected the enterprise entirely (as did many Althusserians) nor destroyed the project through a thousand revisions (as did the analytical Marxists). Instead, Thompson sought to improve the explanatory power of classical Marxism by returning to what might be called its first principle: a focus on “human relationships,” particularly social relations of exploitation. Thompson’s decision to take this messy course—rather than embrace the illusory “rigour” of structuralist or analytical philosophy—certainly has much to do with his methodological background as an historian. His insistence that historically specific social relations constitute the analytical heart of historical materialism led him to sharply criticize not only the fashionable “new Marxist idealism” of his time, but also the abstract character and alleged “absolute” determinism of Marx’s “*Grundrisse* face.” Yet the abstract laws and tendencies of Marx’s critique of political economy are themselves predicated upon an analysis of specific social relations, and imply a dialectical approach to determination. Thompson’s historical writing should be seen, then, not as a refutation of Marx’s critique of political economy, but as an historical application of the critique’s central postulates. This way of viewing Thompson does not deny his originality as a Marxist writer, but instead underlines the specific nature of his contribution, which was to bury the implied economic/technological determinism of the 1859 Preface.

Thompson’s concept of class clarifies two particular problems in the classical Marxist tradition. The first is the relationship between social being and consciousness, which Thompson reconceives as a dialectical interaction mediated through “experience.” The second is the historical origin of the working class through a process of making, a

concern largely unaddressed in the classical canon. Thompson's central insight that class relations are distinct from production relations and require a very specific kind of "horizontal solidarity" between persons in similar class "situations," is at once a crucial theoretical extension of Marxism and an affirmation of historical materialism's explanatory potential. The structural definition of class is not adequate for historical explanation. In forcefully demonstrating this simple yet crucial point, Thompson did much to renew historical materialism.