

HOW CLASSES ARE MADE:
CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON E.P. THOMPSON'S
THEORY OF WORKING-CLASS FORMATION

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336

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WORKING-CLASS FORMATION**

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E. P. Thompson's The Making of the English Working Class is the obligatory starting point for any contemporary discussion of the history of working-class formation.¹ The general transformation and revitalization of labor history over the past two decades can be read as a dialogue with Thompson; The Making effectively set the agenda for an entire generation of labor historians.

It is worth recalling how much this book enriched and enlarged our conception of working-class history. In the two or three decades prior to its publication in 1963, studies of the working class had been confined primarily to four established genres: histories of labor unions and labor parties, biographies of labor leaders, histories of socialist doctrines, and investigations of 'the condition of the workers', conceived almost exclusively as a question of the rise or fall in workers' material standards of living. My first reading of The Making, when I was a graduate student at Berkeley in 1964, produced a kind of revelation. I was already dissatisfied with the narrow focus of most existing labor history and determined to find some way to get at a broader range of workers' experiences. Yet I was astounded by the sheer mass of 'ethnographic' detail about workers that Thompson had collected. Thompson's version of working-class history included not only trade unions, socialist doctrines, and real wages, but popular political and religious traditions, workshop rituals, back-room insurrectionary conspiracies, popular ballads, millenarian preaching, anonymous threatening letters, Methodist hymns, dog fights, trade festivals, country dances, strike fund subscription lists, beggars' tricks, artisans' houses of call, the iconography of trade banners, farmers' account books, weavers' gardens, and so on in endless profusion. For me personally, and for a whole generation of young historians, the horizons of working-class history -- and of history in general -- were suddenly and enormously expanded. We were launched by Thompson into the major historiographical project of the past twenty years -- 'history from below'. This revolutionary enlargement of the scope of working-class history has been Thompson's greatest achievement.²

In The Making, Thompson avoids explicit statement of his theoretical argument about class formation -- except, in somewhat cryptic form, in his preface. At the time, he was in full flight from Stalinist formalism, and did not want his readers to be able to reduce his book to a set of abstract propositions.³ His crucial contention was that the emergence of the working class was a product of the complex and contradictory experience of workers in the turbulent years from 1790 to 1832, and that it could not be understood apart from that experience. The genius of his long, sprawling, picaresque, Dickensian narrative was to give his readers some semblance of the workers' experience -- to make them participate vicariously in the suffering, the heroism, the tedium, the outrage, the sense of loss and the sense of discovery that constituted the formation of the working class. The result is the greatest literary tour de force in recent historiography.

The narrative is, to be sure, informed by theoretical notions about class formation, but theory is usually present by implication, woven into and only occasionally emerging out of Thompson's rich tapestry of working-class experience. Thompson's one explicit theoretical statement in the book -- his preface -- has been enormously influential; it may be the most frequently cited preface since Marx's preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. It has been a potent resource for validating historical approaches to class and a ready argument against any simple-minded economic determinism. It has also formed a handy authorized interpretation of the theoretical implications of a book whose scale, complexity, denseness, and resolute concreteness make the drawing of such implications difficult. But in spite of the preface's importance, much of what Thompson says there is either unclear or theoretically problematic. Moreover, the preface is by no means a sufficient theoretical account of his historical practice. Some of the most important implicit theoretical innovations of The Making remain completely unvoiced in its preface.

The object of this chapter is to state and evaluate Thompson's theory of class formation. I shall subject Thompson's explicit theory, mainly as set forth in his preface, to a close reading and critical analysis, attempting to demonstrate its inadequacy both as a theory and as an account of what he has achieved in his book. I shall also attempt to tease at least some implicit theoretical

notions out of his narrative of class formation, and to suggest my own amendments, critiques, and reformulations. This entire exercise should perhaps be seen as an effort to explain to myself how and why I have always found this extraordinary book at once deeply inspiring and deeply mystifying.

The theory of class formation in Thompson's preface

I shall try to set forth the major theoretical propositions contained in the preface of The Making briefly and somewhat formally.

(1) Class is an historical phenomenon. In opposition to the deductive formalism of Stalinists and the static definitions of structural-functional sociologists, Thompson insists that class is essentially historical.

I do not see class as a 'structure', nor even as a 'category', but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships.⁴

If we stop history at a given point, then there are no classes but simply a multitude of individuals with a multitude of experiences. But if we watch these men over an adequate period of social change, we observe patterns in their relationships, their ideas, and their institutions. Class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition.⁵

...The notion of class entails the notion of historical relationship. Like any other relationship, it is a fluency which evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and anatomize its structure.⁶

These passages enunciate a vigorous conception of the essential historicity of class. For Thompson class exists only in time, and consequently can only be known historically. Non-historical approaches to class necessarily distort, perhaps even obliterate, their object.

(2) Class is an outcome of experience. Thompson's insistence on the primacy of experience in class formation was a reaction against Stalinist formulations, which tended to be highly abstract and deductive. Thompson characterized Stalinist practice as follows:

'It,' the working class, is assumed to have a real existence, which can be defined almost mathematically -- so many men who stand in a certain relation to the means of production. Once this is assumed it becomes possible to deduce the class-consciousness which 'it' ought to have (but seldom does have) if 'it' was properly aware of its own position and real interests.⁷

Thompson took the opposite tack, insisting, as we have seen, that 'class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition'. 'Experience', I would argue, is the central -- and the most problematic -- theoretical concept in The Making, as well as the key to its narrative strategy. Thompson's discovery and adumbration of working-class experience, his ability to ferret out, interpret, and convey the textures and meanings of working-class lives, is the greatest triumph of his book.

(3) Workers are active and conscious participants in class formation. The Making, as Thompson puts it, 'is a study of an active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning. The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making'.⁸ That this now seems self-evident is an indication of The Making's influence. At the time Thompson wrote, most Marxist argumentation about class formation was highly determinist: factories produced a proletariat almost as mechanically as they produced cloth or rails. Even non-Stalinist labor historians showed little curiosity about what workers actually felt, said, wrote, and did. The conventional forms of historiography enabled them to write biographies of Fergus O'Connor or Jean Jaures, or to write institutional histories of trade unions or the Independent Labor Party, but before Thompson no one knew how to write the history of a class. One of Thompson's lasting contributions to historiography was to show how workers could be given voices and wills and could be constituted as a collective agent in an historical narrative.⁹

(4) Class is defined by consciousness. 'Class,' Thompson writes, 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.¹⁰

It is not the 'objective' identity of interests that makes a class, but rather the feeling and articulating of an identity. No consciousness, no class. Once again, this point is part of Thompson's polemic against Stalinism, which, he claims, defined class 'mathematically' as 'so many men who stand in a certain relation to the means of production,' and then deduced class consciousness from this definition.¹¹ Thompson, by denying that class exists apart from real people's consciousness awareness of their common interests, radically shifted the problematic of class formation by pushing to the fore the question of how this awareness came about historically. Class consciousness became not a corollary deducible from the real (economic) existence of class, but rather an historical achievement of workers who pondered their experiences and who constructed (with the collaboration of sympathetic intellectuals) a vocabulary and conceptual framework through which their identity as a class could be thought and actualized.

A Critique of Thompson's Theory

These four propositions form the core of Thompson's theory. Taken together they mark a significant reworking of the problematic of class formation -- one whose overall value as a stimulus to research and as a corrective to pre-existing approaches can hardly be disputed. Yet what Thompson's preface provides is less a systematic alternative theory of class formation than a set of admonitions whose value is largely determined by their place in a specific polemic. Thompson admonishes us to avoid sterile formalisms and to be ever aware that the 'making' of the working class was a temporal human process, lived out in the experiences of real men and women. But he tells us very little about how we might structure an account of class formation theoretically -- or, indeed, about how he has structured his own account. In fact, as I shall argue below, Thompson implicitly assumes the essential correctness of precisely the theory of class formation that he seems to be denying. Thompson's explicit theoretical reflections are so fixed upon his polemical opponent that he fails to articulate his own transcendence of classical Marxism.

Determination

Thompson's entanglement with his polemical opponent is nowhere clearer than in his statements about determination. His championing of working-class agency and his rejection of the classical Marxist metaphor of the determining economic base and the determined cultural and political superstructure has done much to free labor history from the bonds of a rigid economic determinism. Yet Thompson's own theory of how class formation is determined remains highly ambiguous. His most general statement is in the preface of The Making.

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.¹²

For all its particular accents, this passage appears to be stating a theory of determination of a recognizeably Marxist type. Economic relations (or class-in-itself) generate a set of class experiences, and these experiences give rise to class-consciousness (class-for-itself). In its general form, this is very close to the classical Marxist formulation -- say in the Communist Manifesto -- where exploitative capitalist economic relations give rise to class struggles through which the proletariat becomes conscious of itself as a class with the historical destiny of abolishing the exploitation of man by man. But there are important differences.

First, for Thompson it is class experience that provides the historical mediation between productive relations and class consciousness, whereas for classical Marxism it is class struggle. Class struggle -- political movements, union organizing, strikes and boycotts -- is a crucially

important form of class experience for Thompson. But his notion of class experience is vastly broader. It includes the whole range of workers' subjective responses to their exploitation -- not only in movements of struggle, but in their families and communities, in their leisure-time activities, in their religious practices and beliefs, in their workshops and weaving-sheds, and so on. Between the hard facts of productive relations and the discovery of class-consciousness lies the vast, multiple, contradictory realm of experience, not the neat and unidirectional process of learning-the-truth-through-struggle posited by classical Marxism.

Thompson's second difference from classical Marxism, not surprising given the amorphousness of his mediating term, is a much looser theory of determination. The process of class formation is not driven by inexorable laws of history. Class experience, he affirms, is determined by the productive relations into which men are born or enter involuntarily -- although he qualifies this determination with the modifiers 'largely' or 'appears as'. The way these experiences are 'handled in cultural terms' is determined far more loosely. It is, apparently, in the cultural handling of class experience that human agency enters the picture decisively -- with the consequence that we can predicate no 'law' of the development of class-consciousness. A weaker form of determination is retained, however: there is some sort of parallel 'logic' at work in the development of class consciousness even if there is no 'law'. Thompson keeps the directionality of the classical Marxist account -- the causation moves from economic relations, to social experience, and thence to consciousness. But the determination is much weaker -- productive relations determine experience largely, but presumably not fully, and class experience determines consciousness yet more loosely. Thompson's account leaves plenty of room, within broadly determined limits, for the exercise of human agency and the vagaries of human experience.

But in spite of his denial of a base-superstructure model of society, Thompson really offers no alternative to an economic determinist theory of class formation. He assigns a significant role to human agency and experience, but this simply loosens the causal linkages to the form of probabilistic laws rather than absolute 'iron laws'; no non-economic cause of the rise of class

consciousness is introduced into the account, simply a variation in how consciousness will arise in different times and places. Moreover, in this sketch of the class-formation process, Thompson implicitly affirms what he elsewhere denies: that class is in fact present in the economic structure independently of the workers' consciousness or lack of consciousness of class. If workers' experiences produce class-consciousness, rather than some other sort of consciousness, this is because their experiences are class experiences. And if these class experiences are determined, as Thompson asserts, by productive relations, then these productive relations must be class productive relations, prior, in a logical sense, to the class experiences which they generate. And if the class-consciousness that arises the same way in different times and places follows a single logic, this implies that the class experiences, and hence the class productive relations that determine them, must have an even more unified single logic. In short, we are led to capitalism as conceived by Marx -- a system of productive relations with a unitary logic wherever it appears. Now this ought to be perfectly acceptable in a Marxist work, but it in fact puts Thompson in a very tight conceptual spot. If he intends this sort of account of class formation, how can he deny that class exists in the productive relations themselves? It seems utterly metaphysical and arbitrary to deny the presence of class in the productive relations yet affirm its presence in the experiences and the consciousness that those productive relations generate.

Thompson's explanatory account of class formation, thus, turns out to contradict implicitly certain of his major theoretical propositions. In his preface Thompson attempts to outline a novel approach that assigns a much greater than usual role to experience, agency, and consciousness, and that abandons the deductive base-superstructure model of his Stalinist-Marxist predecessors. But he also, in the passage I have been analyzing here, embraces the old determinist model even while he is attempting to surpass it. The classical Marxist schemas of base-superstructure and the movement from class-in-itself to class-for-itself thus implicitly underlie and structure his account of working-class experience, agency, and consciousness, but do so in unacknowledged and unexamined fashion.

This problem appears in The Making on a narrative and empirical as well as a theoretical level. Although Thompson explicitly disavows economic determinism, he also assumes it as a kind of unconscious rhetorical backdrop against which specific empirical accounts of working-class experience, agency, and consciousness are placed and assigned their significance. Or, to change the metaphor, economic determinism acts in The Making as a kind of hidden dynamo that, unknown to the actors and felt rather than seen by the author and reader, propels the narrative in a certain direction. By suppressing but unconsciously retaining economic determinism, Thompson cleared a vast narrative space that could be filled almost exclusively by specific accounts of working-class experience, agency, and consciousness, untroubled by, yet globally shaped by, the underlying rhythm of a classical Marxist movement from class-in-itself to class-for-itself. The result is an account of class formation that, for all its empirical richness and persuasive power, remains elusive and mystifying.

Diachrony and synchrony

Thompson's statements about the historicity of class are in many ways parallel to his statements about determination; once again, his polemical zeal leads him to deny in his theory what he is unable to deny in his practice. Thompson's assertion of the essential historicity of class implies an extremely radical -- in my opinion quite untenable -- ontological and epistemological position. He appears to be saying not only that class comes into being through a historical process, but that it only exists over time. ('If we stop history at a given point there are no classes....') As an ontological commitment this is perhaps acceptable -- in some sense nothing exists except in time. But Thompson appears to draw from this the dubious epistemological conclusion that no synchronic analysis of class can be valid. (Class 'evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and anatomize its structure'.)

This, I think, is mistaken. While class exists in time, it is also necessary as a moment in any adequate historical analysis of class to stop or bracket time, to look at class as a set of synchronic relations -- between individuals, between various groups of workers, between workers

and their employers, between workers and the means of production, between workers and available ideologies, etc. In contrast to Thompson, I would argue that the notion of relationship, which he takes as implying fluency, is in fact profoundly synchronic. To call class a relationship is to imply that we cannot capture it through a purely diachronic narration of events, but that we must pause now and again to describe it as a structure -- one that, to be sure, crystallizes out of events and will be transformed by subsequent events. In his polemic against the ahistorical conceptions of Stalinism and structural-functionalism, Thompson appears to have gone beyond the sound position of insisting that an account of class must maintain a dialectic between synchronic and diachronic approaches to embrace pure diachrony.

A moment's thought about the text of The Making makes it evident that Thompson's own historical practice is very far from pure diachrony. To begin with, Thompson's Dickensian narrative style, with its omniscient narrator commenting self-consciously on events, is hardly well adapted to pure diachrony. Thompson's theoretical position, if taken seriously, would imply a style of narration more akin to Virginia Woolf's or Robbe-Grille's.¹³ Moreover, Thompson's text is in fact densely interwoven with synchronic analyses. This is not to say that Thompson 'stops time' in some literal sense in his text. What we mean when we say that a historian 'stops time' is that she momentarily suspends time by abstracting some pattern, structure, or relationship out of the flow of events in order to contemplate, categorize, anatomize, or construct it in her mind and in her text. The pattern, structure, or relationship will normally be constructed from bits of evidence whose creation was not literally simultaneous but which in some sense fit together, constitute a whole. Certainly Thompson does this in his brilliant analysis of London artisans when he uses Mayhew's observations from 1849 and 1850 as evidence about the distinction between honorable and dishonorable trades in London in the teens and the twenties.¹⁴ This move is legitimate only because he is building up a synchronic picture of a structure that he regards as having endured in at least important essentials for several decades. In short, Thompson's text, more than many historical texts, is punctuated by synchronic analyses, in spite of his theoretical advocacy of pure diachrony.

One might well object that Thompson is no philosopher, and that he surely does not intend to rule out the kind of practical dialectic between synchrony and diachrony that characterizes his own text. Why should we hold Thompson to the literal meaning of the statements he makes in his preface? But the preface is only one instance of a pervasive theme in Thompson's writings -- an adamant refusal of deductive theory that is stated most eloquently (and most brutally) in his attack on Althusser in The Poverty of Theory.¹⁵ Whatever one thinks about the relative merits of Althusser and Thompson (if forced to choose I would unhesitatingly take Thompson) it should be noted that Thompson's position tends consistently to stigmatize explicit synchronic theorization as illegitimate and unhistorical while refusing to recognize the no less synchronic character of the implicit theorizations in his own narratives. Thompson therefore refuses the possibility of a rational confrontation between his own theories and those of his opponents, in effect ruling them out of court on procedural grounds. In this sense, Thompson's passionate embrace of radical diachrony is as mystifying as his unfulfilled renunciation of a base-superstructure model of determination.

Experience

If the rich narrative portrayal of working-class experience is the great triumph of The Making, the heavy explanatory load placed on the concept of experience is, in my opinion, The Making's cardinal weakness.¹⁶ The meaning of the term 'experience' is so intrinsically amorphous that it is difficult to assign it any delimitable role in a theory of class formation, and Thompson makes matters worse by using it in inconsistent and confusing ways. Quite explicitly in his essay 'Folklore, Anthropology, and Social History', and at least implicitly in the preface to The Making, Thompson presents experience as mediating between productive relations and class consciousness, or between 'social being' and 'social consciousness'.¹⁷ The problem with such a formulation is that experience appears to encompass both the terms between which it is supposed to mediate. Do 'productive relations' or 'social being' or 'consciousness' exist outside of experience? Any 'social being' that exists outside of experience would have to be a synchronic

structure of the kind whose existence Thompson explicitly denies. And consciousness that exists outside of experience would be the kind of deduced consciousness that Stalinists had attributed to the working class. One major triumph of Thompson's narrative of English working-class formation is to portray productive relations not as an abstraction but as the experiences of real men and women. This, it seems to me, is the principal achievement of Part Two of The Making ('The Curse of Adam'). Likewise the 'Class Consciousness' described in the final chapter is not a set of abstract and logical doctrines that workers ought to have held, but the concrete experience of radicals, journalists, autodidact workers, and Owenites who wrote and read tracts, handbills, and newspaper articles or made speeches in the context of their own political and social struggles and who practiced class-consciousness in their own lives. In short, in spite of Thompson's explicit claims to the contrary, experience cannot play a mediating role in his account of English working-class formation because for him working-class formation is nothing but experience.

If experience is a medium in The Making, it is a medium not in the sense of 'a substance through which a force acts or an effect is transmitted' (this, Webster's second meaning, would cover mediation between being and consciousness) but 'that through which or by which anything is accomplished' (Webster's third meaning).¹⁸ Rather than mediating between social being and consciousness, experience appears in Thompson's account as the medium in which theoretical structures are realized (even though Thompson officially denies that these structures exist). The class relations tacitly posited as present in the material base are realized in the medium of human experience -- experience of productive relations, of struggles, and of consciousness. A tacitly posited synchronic structure works itself out in the real, historical, experienced lives of human actors.

This interpretation of experience as medium seems authorized by a passage in The Poverty of Theory where Thompson reflects on the accomplishments of the English Marxist historians (and pre-eminently, it seems clear, of The Making). 'We explored', he says, 'those junction concepts (such as "need", "class", and "determine") by which, through the missing term, "experience", structure is transmuted into process, and the subject re-enters into history'.¹⁹

Here, quite unambiguously, experience appears as the medium through which structure is realized in actual historical human subjects.

The precise nature of the 'structure' and the way it is realized in experience is not clear in this sentence. But these questions are elaborated on thereafter in a complex and murky passage, which must be quoted at some length.

And at 'experience' we [that is, the English Marxist historians] were led on to re-examine all those dense, complex and elaborated systems by which familial and social life is structured and social consciousness finds realization and expression (systems which the very rigor of the discipline in Ricardo or in the Marx of Capital is designed to exclude): kinship, custom, the invisible and visible rules of social regulation, hegemony and deference, symbolic forms of domination and of resistance, religious faith and millenarian impulses, manners, law, institutions and ideologies -- all of which, in their sum, comprise the 'genetics' of the whole historical process, all of them joined, at a certain point, in common human experience, which itself (as distinctive class experiences) exerts pressure on the sum.²⁰

The very opacity and contradictions of this passage are revealing. At first Thompson seems to be saying that those 'dense, complex and elaborated systems' which could not be understood within the traditional Marxist framework were themselves structures, more or less parallel to the structures (that is, modes of production) which could be grasped in Marxist terms. They are, at least, presented as having the power to structure social life and as being realized in social consciousness. Then he seems to say that these structures must all be understood purely under the category of experience. They are, at least, all 'joined...in common human experience.' Thompson then equates this common human experience (made up, remember, of that long string of 'systems' beginning with 'kinship' and ending with 'ideology') with 'distinctive class experiences'. In other words, Marxist historians, pursuing an analysis centered on the mode of production, encounter in their research a series of systems that are not reducible to modes of production. But these systems, which together constitute a realm of 'experience,' turn out to have

in common the fact that they are all class experiences. And since class is itself ultimately determined by the mode of production, this implies that systems not reducible to the mode of production are, nevertheless, in some sense attributable precisely to the mode of production. The passage, in short, seems utterly contradictory.

A clearer but no less distressing picture begins to emerge in the very next paragraph.

But, in my view, we did not discover other, and co-existent, systems, of equal status and coherence to the system of (anti) Political Economy, exerting co-equal pressures: a Kinship Mode, a Symbolic Mode, an Ideological Mode, etc. 'Experience' (we have found) has, in the last instance, been generated in 'material life', has been structured in class ways, and hence 'social being' has determined 'social consciousness'. La Structure still dominates experience but from that point of view her determinate influence is weak. For any living generation, in any 'now', the ways in which they 'handle' experience defies prediction and escapes from any narrow definition of determination.²¹

Here Thompson seems to be saying that the systems which constitute the realm of 'experience' (that is, kinship, custom, etc.) are not really systems after all, at least not of a type parallel to modes of production. These various crypto-systems are now portrayed as lacking the 'coherence' and the 'determining pressures' that Thompson attributes to 'the system of (anti) Political Economy' -- that is Marx's materialist science of the mode of production. He asserts that the English Marxist historians have 'found' in their research that experience (including, remember, kinship, custom, etc.) has in the last instance been 'generated in "material life"' and 'structured in class ways'. These crypto-systems apparently have been found to have no independent causal dynamics; hence they can be said to be, ultimately, experienced through class, whence all causal pressure flows. The crypto-systems that make up 'experience' are themselves an inert medium; their life is derived entirely from the dynamic of the mode of production.

But in what sense have the English Marxist historians 'found' this to be true? Not in the usual empirical sense that the science of the mode of production has accounted for most of the observed historical behavior. In fact the empirical finding Thompson trumpets is just the opposite:

that the determinate influence of 'La Structure' is weak. The way in which any living generation handles experience 'defies prediction and escapes from any narrow definition of determination'. This is an odd argument from a fervent advocate of empirical investigation and sworn enemy of dogmatic a priori theorizing. The weakness of the posited explanation should have driven Thompson to consider that the assortment of crypto-structures -- kinship, law, ideology, and so on -- might, as he initially suggested, have some independent explanatory power. But Thompson has ruled this out, on grounds that, since they obviously are not empirical, must be a priori theoretical. Faced with only weak determination by his chosen explanation, he concludes not that other systems of determination are also operative, but, since only the mode of production can be regarded as determining, that anything it cannot explain must be assigned to the vagaries of experience -- to the deep complexities of human existence and the unpredictable operation of human agency. Ironically, Althusser, with his insistence on the 'relative autonomy' of different levels in a social formation and his notion of 'overdetermination', here turns out to be more flexible and less dogmatic than Thompson the anti-dogmatist defender of empirical knowledge.

Once again we arrive at a mystification, at bottom the same mystification that ruled out yet assumed the determination of the superstructure by the base and that suppressed in principle but could not suppress in fact the importance of synchrony in historical analysis. In attempting to specify the nature and role of experience, Thompson returns straight to the theoretically excluded but in fact unexcludable a priori Marxist synchronic structure par excellence: the mode of production. The vast realms of history not explainable in terms of the dynamic of the mode of production are then relegated to a residual category of 'experience', which is not capable of explanation at all, or at least not in determinate terms. All sorts of systems apparently discoverable in human societies are in fact not systems, but part of the murky and complex medium of 'experience' -- the balky, effervescent, cranky, resistant, and independent-minded human stuff in which the mode of production very incompletely determines history.

Once again, Thompson's theory obviously does not square with his practice, either in The Making or elsewhere. In his narratives, the various crypto-structures appear as anything but

inert, as having their own definable dynamics and their distinct determinate pressures. This is perhaps clearest in Whigs and Hunters, where Thompson's eloquent celebration of the 'rule of law' argues precisely that law has its own causal force in history.²² But the same observation also holds for The Making. Such 'systems' as the Paineite tradition, Methodism, or institutions of trade solidarity are not merely media for dynamics originating in the mode of production, but palpable causal forces in their own right. By casting all these systems as 'experience,' Thompson hides from himself the extent to which his narrative tacitly assumes not only a determination in the last instance by the base of productive relations, but also an overdetermination by a whole series of relatively autonomous cultural, institutional, and political systems. In this respect, his tacit model of the architectonics of society is actually very close to Althusser's.

Experience Demystified

Thompson's claims about experience as a theoretical category are so incoherent that one is tempted to discard the term entirely. Yet experience seems an appropriate label for what Thompson has captured so brilliantly in his narrative in The Making. It therefore seems worthwhile instead to deflate the concept, to clarify it and extract it from the untenable philosophical claims Thompson makes for it. Restored to something like its usage in ordinary language, experience has a place in the theory of class formation -- and in the theory of historical change more generally.

The first step is to disengage the notion of experience from the quite distinct problem of multiple causation. Deviations of historical events from a strict economic determinist model should not automatically be assigned to 'experience', and thereby tacitly explained as consequences of an essentially mysterious human 'agency'. Much of such deviation can be accounted for relatively straight-forwardly as the outcome of causal interactions between a diversity of more or less autonomous structures or systems. Experience should be conceptualized much more narrowly, in line with Webster's, as 'the actual living through an event or events...; actual enjoyment or suffering; hence, the effect upon the judgment or feelings produced by

personal and direct impressions...; as to know by experience.²³ Although experience may refer merely to the actual 'living through of events', it ordinarily implies an 'effect upon the judgment or feelings', with knowledge as a result. When we call an event an experience, we usually mean that the person who has enjoyed or suffered the event has reflected upon it. Experience, as Clifford Geertz puts it, is something 'construed'.²⁴ Thompson himself, in The Poverty of Theory, at one point gives a definition of experience very similar to that in Webster's -- before going on to inflate and confuse the concept by arguing that it mediates between social being and consciousness. 'Experience', he says, 'comprises the mental and emotional response, whether of an individual or of a social group, to many interrelated events or to many repetitions of the same kind of events'.²⁵ This definition is reasonably clear and specific. It indicates something important but not very mysterious -- that people respond mentally and emotionally, both individually and in groups, to what happens to them.

This also seems consistent with Thompson's practice in The Making. His narrative reconstructs not so much the actual events people lived through as the way people construed events as they were living through them. By patiently assembling the surviving documents and carefully attending to judgments and feelings expressed in them, he has rendered the familiar events of early nineteenth-century English history -- Peterloo, the industrial revolution, the suspension of habeas corpus, Luddism -- as experiences of ordinary people. What makes Thompson's account different from those of earlier labor historians is that he enables us to see events -- or perhaps we should say creates the narrative illusion that we can see events -- from the standpoint of those who lived through them. Thompson's narrative tells us where people are coming from; he invariably presents their experience (that is, their emotional and mental response to events) as structured -- by productive relations, political institutions, habits, traditions, and values. What gives Thompson's portrayal of experience such persuasive force is that it is based on a structured and explicable, rather than a purely voluntarist and mysterious, concept of agency.

Thompson is right to insist that his difference with Althusser is profound, but but the difference is obscured rather than clarified by the long discussion of experience in The Poverty of Theory. The essential contrast is in their theories of the subject. In Althusser's theory, subjects are deprived of agency; they are reproduced in a rigidly determined fashion by the operation of education, the family, religion, and other so-called ideological state apparatuses.²⁶ Althusser's theory, as Goran Therborn points out, constitutes subjects so hegemonized by the ideology of the ruling class that they would be incapable of resistance or struggle.²⁷ Thompson develops no elaborated theory of the subject, but he spends a lot of time constructing subjects in his narrative, and these subjects are utterly different from Althusser's. They are endowed with agency -- not with a naive individualist's 'freedom of the will', but with a structured agency. His subjects are formed by the various systems or structures that constitute their historical life space; what they can think, feel, and do is determined by the fact that they are Methodists, 'free-born Englishmen', journeymen in a craft undergoing degradation, Londoners, and so on. But the determination is not mechanical, for Thompson's subjects are what Anthony Giddens calls 'knowledgeable'. They are intelligent and willful human beings, who reflect on the events they live through (that is, have experiences) and are capable of acting purposefully and rationally on the basis of their experiences, within the constraints imposed and the possibilities opened up by the structures that constitute their subjectivity and their environment.²⁸

I have cast this statement of Thompson's implicit theory of the subject in Giddens' theoretical terms because I believe that Giddens' notions of agency and structure provide a better theoretical pivot for Thompson's account of class formation than Thompson's own amorphous concept of experience. Giddens incorporates what is useful about Thompson's 'experience': he insists that human beings are constantly engaged in 'reflexive monitoring' of both their own and others' action, and that their conduct of and understanding of social life grow out of this reflexive monitoring.²⁹ But his theory incorporates experience without mystifying the relationship between agency and structure.

In large part, this is because Giddens develops an alternative to the reified Stalinist or Althusserian (or structural-functionalist) concept of structure, whereas Thompson rails against it but proposes no alternative. Because he continues to conceive of structure in reified supra-human terms, Thompson casts experience and structure as antagonistic principles. The role of experience in his theory is to frustrate and blunt structural determination. Giddens, by contrast, de-reifies structure, making it no less human than agency. He sees structure and agency not as antagonistic but as indissolubly linked: agency and structure 'presuppose one another'.³⁰ Structures for him are at once the medium and the outcome of human interactions. They are transformed by agents, but they are also reproduced by agents. Structures are not only determining or constraining, but enabling as well: agents could not exist without the structures that provide their constraints and possibilities, and structures could not exist without the agents who enact and/or transform them. This concept of structure and of its relationship to agency requires no mystification to account for the transformative effects of experience. If structures are seen as the continuing product of reflexive monitoring in the first place, then it stands to reason that changes in structures arise out of the same reflexive monitoring process.

Simply invoking Giddens' theory does not solve all the theoretical problems posed by Thompson's account of English working-class formation. It does not tell us when to be abstract and when concrete, how to recognize or describe structures, or how to constitute appropriately knowledgeable agents in our narratives. But I think it provides a theoretical vocabulary capable of accounting for what Thompson actually achieves in the text of The Working -- a portrayal of English workers as structurally constrained and endowed agents whose experience and knowledgeable action produced, in interaction with other agents operating under different structural constraints and endowments, a self-conscious working class.³¹

One advantage of this theorization of Thompson's history -- as an account of structurally formed agents enacting and/or transforming structures -- is that it offers a solution to a widely recognized weakness in The Making: Thompson's unwillingness to address explicitly the role of structures in class formation. Thompson avoids structures because he does not wish to introduce

any extra-human forces into his account; his critics counter that by concentrating on 'subjective' forces, he leaves out the 'objective' forces which in fact play the dominant role in class formation. But both Thompson and his critics share the misconception that structures are 'objective' and therefore exist at a different ontological level than agents. If we accept Giddens' position on structures, then any contrast between 'objective' and 'subjective' becomes purely methodological. Abstraction becomes only a moment in the analysis: a necessary strategic move in any complex historical argument. We can introduce structures without ceasing to be ontological humanists, and can recognize the efficacy of 'experience' without ruling out a structural argument.

Culturalism or Experientialism?

When Thompson's Marxist critics have accused him of insufficient attention to structural determinants, they have virtually always had in mind economic determinants. Most Marxists implicitly equate structure with economic explanations and agency with ideological or cultural explanations. Hence it is easy for Richard Johnson to leap from a cogent critique of Thompson's 'overbearing stress on "experience"', to a mistaken indictment of Thompson as a 'culturalist'.³² While it is true, as Johnson, Perry Anderson, and others argue, that Thompson sacrifices analytical bite by refusing to include a more structural approach to the history of capitalist productive relations, it is not true, as the term 'culturalism' would indicate, that Thompson has relegated economics or productive relations to a secondary or derivative role. We have seen that Thompson's theoretical statements imply, in spite of occasional explicit disavowals of economic determinism, that development of the capitalist mode of production is the fundamental underlying cause of the formation of the working class. Nor has Thompson neglected productive relations empirically in The Making. Chapters six through ten ('Exploitation', 'The Field Labourers', 'Artisans and Others', 'The Weavers', 'Standards and Experiences') and significant portions of his account of Luddism in chapter fourteen are crammed with brilliant analyses of the economic life and productive relations of English workers. What distinguishes these analyses is not so much their emphasis on culture -- although Thompson quite rightly insists on the inextricable

interpenetration of culture and productive relations -- as their insistence on depicting productive relations as lived human experiences rather than as abstract structures. Here, and throughout the book, Thompson resists abstraction and insists on recounting of all aspects of the 'making' of the English working class -- whether economic, or cultural, or political, or religious, or social -- exclusively from the perspective of concrete historical experiences. Thompson is not really a 'culturalist' -- which implies someone who privileges cultural over other types of explanations. He is, rather, an 'experientialist', whose narrative perspective privileges the point of view of concrete historical agents over that of the theoretically self-conscious analyst.

One indication that 'experientialism' rather than 'culturalism' is the appropriate label for Thompson's perspective is that his account of the emergence of class consciousness -- a cultural change, after all -- suffers from the same lack of theoretical specification as his account of changes in productive relations. At the end of The Making we feel that class-conscious conceptualizations of society and class-conscious protest movements have somehow arisen out of the history Thompson has recounted, but it is not easy to specify precisely how and why. Class-conscious ideologies obviously included a reflection on the experience of exploitation so powerfully narrated in Part Two of The Making, but they were certainly not mere 'reflections' of that experience. They were also, it is clear, strongly influenced by the political traditions described in Part One ('The Liberty Tree') and by the political struggles recounted in Part Three ('The Working-Class Presence'). But how these influences and forces resulted in a particular cultural transformation -- the emergence of class consciousness -- remains unclear. Instead, class consciousness appears in the early 1830s as the result of a tumultuous and inspiring but conceptually murky 'experience.'

Reconstructing the Argument

In reconstructing Thompson's argument, I shall make no attempt to indicate how The Making could be improved by a more structural approach to the dynamics of capitalism; others have done that before. Instead, I shall attempt to supply what previous critiques have left out: a structural argument about the emergence of working-class consciousness -- one that is compatible

with Thompson's narrative but that clarifies its conceptual foundations and theoretical significance. What I say will also draw on my own study of France, where I see the emergence of class consciousness as having taken place in the same years as in England and by a remarkably similar process.³³

This reconstruction of Thompson's argument can usefully be focused on a much-disputed claim of his book: that the working class had really been 'made' by the early 1830s. This supposition is made plausible both by the feverish working class activity of the immediate post-Reform-Bill years, and by Chartist domination of English popular politics from the mid-thirties to the late forties. But doubts remain as to how definitive this 'making' was. Although Chartism was a mass movement of workers, its program and language were only very incompletely class conscious. Chartism concentrated on electoral reform, and its critique of monopoly and corruption were more trenchant than its critique of property relations. After the final collapse of Chartism in 1848, English workers lapsed into a long period of conservatism, apathy, or narrow 'trade-union consciousness'. Rather than a definitive 'making' of the working class in the early 1830s, it can be argued that the history of English workers is one of successive makings, unmakings, and remakings.³⁴ From this perspective, the achievements of 1790 to 1832 were not so impressive after all; they were not definitive, but reversible. Yet I think there was something special about the first making that renders it more fundamental than any of the subsequent makings, unmakings, and remakings. To see why, however, will require some theoretical distinctions that take us beyond the purely experiential level of Thompson's own narrative.

What does Thompson mean when he claims the English working class was 'made' by the early 1830s? In the first place, the working class had defined itself as a class and had divided itself conceptually from the middle class. In doing so, it had developed a particular critique of capitalist society and property relations. It had, in short, developed a class discourse. At the same time, it had developed a working-class movement. This movement had its distinct institutions (trade unions and confederations of trade unions, newspapers, clubs, and embryonic political parties such as the National Union of the Working Class). In and around these working-

class institutions, hundreds of thousands of workers were mobilized to struggle self-consciously for working-class goals. The discourse and the movement were intimately linked: it was within the institutions of the working-class movement that militants developed and disseminated working-class discourse; and it was the notions contained in working-class discourse that shaped and motivated the working-class movement. Thompson offers an intensely experiential narrative of the emerging working-class movement. But scattered through this narrative is a parallel account of the emergence of class discourse, an account that, in my opinion, needs more explicit theoretical formulation.

What is Thompson's implicit theory of the emergence of working-class discourse? First, working-class discourse is a transformation of preexisting discourses. This is implied by the very organization of his book. Class conscious discourse does not arise -- as one might have gathered from Thompson's preface -- purely as a reflection of and reflection on the exploitation of workers in capitalist productive relations. If this were the case, there would be little point in the long and impassioned discussion of pre-nineteenth-century popular political traditions that occupies Thompson's first five chapters. These traditions were important because they contained notions that were transformed into a new working-class discourse around 1830. In other words, the political and religious traditions described in Part One, when subjected to the experience of exploitation described in Part Two, were transformed via the political agitations described in most of Part Three into the 'class consciousness' described in the final chapter. The fact that class discourse is a transformation of previously existing discourse has an important theoretical implication: it means that to explain the emergence of class discourse, we must understand the nature, the structure, and the potential contradictions of the previously existing discourses of which it is a transformation.

Although understanding the genesis of class discourse requires a long chronological sweep, the actual emergence of class consciousness took place by a relatively sudden conceptual breakthrough during a period of intense political struggle. The suddenness of the breakthrough is in large part a consequence of the formal structure of the conceptual transformation itself: the

emergence of working-class consciousness required a simultaneous transformation of two quite different previously existing discourses.

In both England and France, working-class consciousness first emerged in the same period (the early 1830s), out of analogous political agitations (the Reform Bill crisis and the July Revolution), and from strictly parallel conceptual transformations.³⁵ In both countries, the emergence of working-class discourse was a consequence of the breakdown of political alliances between workers and bourgeois following successful struggles against regimes dominated by landed aristocracies. In both cases, workers had every reason to feel that having carried the major burden of the battle against what they saw as a common aristocratic enemy, they were abandoned by the bourgeoisie (or the middle class, to use English terminology), who took all the spoils of victory for themselves. In both cases, workers were shut out of the state by steep property requirements for the franchise, and saw their collectivist or mutualist goals pulverized by the patronizing and uncompromising individualism of the now dominant bourgeoisie. The shock of this betrayal led to a deep disillusionment with the bourgeoisie and an attempt to rethink and restate the workers' grievances.

What resulted was a dual transformation of existing discourses. First, the workers' collectivism, which arose out the traditional discourse of trade and community solidarity, was universalized so as to encompass all workers. Because workers' traditional solidarities had been constituted in exclusivist trade and community terms, this meant developing a new vocabulary that instead emphasized the brotherhood of all workers. The obvious source of such a vocabulary was the discourse of individual rights and democratic participation in whose terms the joint struggle against the landed aristocracy had so recently been waged. But here a serious problem presented itself: in both its English and French variants, this discourse was so deeply individualist that it would not authorize the kinds of collective claims that workers were attempting to make.

The universalization of traditional trade and community solidarities was based on a second transformation: the radical or republican tradition was made compatible with collective claims. The centrality of private property in the radical tradition was challenged and replaced with some

notion of collective control. In both England and France, this was accomplished from two different angles simultaneously. First, the right of individuals to associate freely in pursuit of common goals was invoked as a justification for collective organization to limit the destructive effects of competitive individualism. In England this was accomplished under the banner of 'cooperation', in France under the banner of 'association'. Second, the Lockean theory of property was reinterpreted so as to invest political rights not in property, which the Lockean tradition regarded as a product of labor, but directly in labor itself. From this perspective, property became an abusive privilege that simultaneously exempted its idle owners from labor and (under existing suffrage laws) gave them a monopoly of political power as well. This logically interlocking complex of structural transformations created a working-class discourse that established a solidarity between workers of all trades, empowered workers to make collective claims about the character and products of productive activities, gave them a moral claim to political power, and stigmatized wealthy property owners as privileged and greedy monopolists.

Once it had been achieved by both English and French workers in the early 1830s, this discursive transformation was remarkably durable. Class institutions could disintegrate or atrophy, and class-conscious mass movements could be crushed or could lapse into apathy. But conceptual or discursive transformations are not so easily reversed. They are far less vulnerable to repression than are class institutions, because they can be preserved intact by a tiny cadre of militants, or in print, or in the memories of vast masses of workers. Thus preserved, they are immediately available when a more favorable conjuncture returns. Institutions must be painfully rebuilt, masses must be remobilized, but ideas do not have to be reinvented. Thus, the genie of class discourse, once created, proved very difficult to get back into the bottle. In this sense, Thompson was right to claim the English working class was in some important sense 'made' by the early 1830s, even though it was subsequently 'unmade' and 'remade' at the institutional level. But to see that this is true requires a theorization of Thompson's narrative of working-class formation in such a way that these different levels of 'making' can be distinguished.

Conclusions

These few words can hardly pretend to a complete theorization of The Making. But I think they indicate the direction which an adequate theory of working-class formation will have to take.

Theoretical discussion of working-class formation cannot remain on a purely diachronic and experiential level. Numerous critics have pointed out that a clear understanding of the making of the English working class requires an account of the structural dynamics of early industrial capitalism. Similarly, understanding the emergence of class discourse in England and France in the early 1830s requires abstracting both the structure of class discourse and the structures of pre-existing discourses out of the experiences and the temporal sequences in which they exist. It also requires the elaboration of a synchronic transformational model of the logic posited to underlie the emergence of class discourse. Only by such a process of synchronic and structural abstraction, I would argue, can the true nature and consequences of the experienced history be understood. In particular, the sudden and simultaneous rather than gradual and piece-meal emergence of class consciousness is a consequence of the logically interlocking character of the conceptual transformations. An adequate theory of class formation must include a dialectic between structural and experiential and between synchronic and diachronic moments.

Theorizing the emergence of working-class discourse explicitly helps us to determine why 'consciousness of class arises in the same way in different times and places, but never in just the same way'.³⁶ If class discourse is a transformation of pre-existing discourses, then national differences in forms and content of class consciousness need not be attributed purely to the vagaries of agency, nor purely to different patterns of capital accumulation, but also to differences in the nature of the discourses that were transformed into class consciousness. Thus, the much more pronounced socialism of French than of British working-class consciousness is probably in large part a consequence of the difference between French and British radical traditions. The centrality of private property as the touchstone of individual liberty in the ideology of the French Revolution made a critique of property absolutely central in French workers' discourse, and the revolution's equation of productive work with the 'sovereignty of the people' and of idleness with

the counter-revolutionary 'aristocracy' almost invited workers to define property-owners as aristocrats and enemies of the people.³⁷ British radicalism, with its 'country party' heritage and its powerful moral animus against corruption and monopoly gave rise, as Gareth Stedman Jones has demonstrated, to a quite different constellation of working-class political consciousness.³⁸

It is also very important to recognize that class discourse is only one of several discourses available to workers to conceptualize and act out their place in society and the state. Even workers involved in class institutions are interpellated (to use the Althusserian term) by various other discourses: unreconstructed radical democracy, reformist meliorism, self help, Toryism, nationalism, various religious ideologies, consumerism, and so on. These rival discourses may co-exist not only in the same class, but in the same mind; class discourse, once invented, does not necessarily remain the privileged discourse of workers. Which discourse prevails depends on changing political, economic, and social conjunctures. And while the invention of a given political discourse cannot be reversed, all such discourses are transformed in the course of historical experience. In extreme cases, such as the United States after World War II, class discourse can be so marginalized as to be virtually effaced. While class discourse may commonly have been more durable than class institutions in the nineteenth century, class movements have sometimes outlasted class discourse in the twentieth.

A final conclusion: the process of class formation, or any other historical process, must be conceptualized as an outcome of temporal conjunctures between multiple causal structures. Thompson's implicit notion that only productive relations have genuine causal power, while other apparent systems must be assimilated to the category of experience, leads only to mystification and confusion. Whether one accepts the Althusserian formulation of a multitude of relatively autonomous levels or systems determined in the last instance by the economic base, or a more agnostic formulation that eschews any notion of final cause, is not important -- a question of metaphysics rather than of method. What matters is that one recognize the internal structure and dynamic, and hence the autonomous causal force, of each of the systems in question, as well as, of course, their mutual influence and systematic interrelations. Until some systematic and

autonomous determinants beyond the mode of production are recognized and theorized, any attempt to transcend a base-superstructure model is illusory.

In the case of English and French working-class formation, the emergence of class consciousness must be seen as resulting from a temporal conjunction of at least two systems: a system of capitalist productive relations in which labor in the handicraft trades undergoes a relentless formal subsumption to capital; and an ideological system in which trade solidarity and radical notions of individual rights undergo a mutual transformation into a new discourse of class consciousness. Each system has independent causal power, and their conjunction is necessary to explain the historical emergence of class consciousness. In fact, to represent the emergence of class consciousness as resulting from the conjunction of only two systems -- economic and ideological -- would itself be a gross over-simplification. My own abbreviated account of developments in England and France actually signals the importance of another system: that of political alliances between classes. The emergence of class consciousness in both countries followed a joint working-class and bourgeois political struggle against a landed aristocracy, in the course of which workers participated in institutions and ideologies of struggle that could be transformed into resources for a struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie when the original class alliance broke down. Once again, the structure and dynamic of class alliance had an independent causal force that cannot be reduced to a reflection of ideology or economics. The importance of a broken interclass political alliance for the development of working class consciousness also emerges from Sean Wilentz's study of New York City in the same era, where the parallels with England and France were remarkable.³⁹

The American case also suggests yet other systems with an important bearing on working-class formation. The nature of class consciousness was different in New York, where workers had long since gained the franchise, than in France and England where they were denied the vote; and whereas the development of working-class discourse and a working-class movement in London or Paris more or less guaranteed the national significance of the working-class political presence, this was by no means true in the United States, where the highly regionalized federal political system

meant that developments in the premier city did not necessarily spread to the rest of the country. In short, a glance at the American case suggests the importance of state structure as an autonomous determinant of working-class formation. And the subsequent history of the American working class also suggests the importance of demographic structures: in a country where the labor force was growing far more rapidly than the natural increase of the population, the working-class was continually fed by a flood of European immigrants. Attempting to maintain a class-conscious workers movement in these circumstances was an altogether different matter than doing so in England, where the population grew more quickly than the labor force, or in France, where the industrial labor force itself grew only relatively slowly. Explaining the patterns of working-class formation in the various countries that underwent capitalist development in the nineteenth century will require a theoretical framework that can manipulate several different relatively autonomous causal systems simultaneously.

But the point of all this theorizing is not to list the various causal systems that conspire in the process of class formation or to show how different permutations of their formal features will give us the the different types of working class movements and ideologies found in different European and North American countries. That would be a retreat into precisely the kind of dessicated formalism that Thompson drove from the field when he published The Making. The point is to make possible the writing of more complex and satisfying histories of working classes, histories that embrace Thompson's vision of experience, diachrony, and agency in the historical process, but that elaborate the diachronic experience of agency in a continuing and acknowledged dialectic with synchronic structures of determination. For we cannot claim to know such synchronic structures of determination until we can show in circumstantial narratives how they shape and are shaped by real actors in experienced historical time. To believe that abstract theoretical generalizations are the end point of our enterprise would cast our lot with the ghost of the same sclerotic Stalinism that Thompson routed two decades ago -- when The Making awoke labor history from its long dogmatic slumbers.

1. Belinda Davis, Geoff Eley, Howard Kimeldorf, Max Potter, and Joan Scott have provided generous intellectual assistance in the preparation of this paper.
2. It should be noted that Thompson was by no means the only inspiration for my generation's embracing of 'history from below.' Such historians as Albert Soboul, George Rude, Richard Cobb, Eric Hobsbawm, Charles Tilly and Stephen Thernstrom also had an important impact. But Thompson's influence seems to me to have been the widest, deepest, and most lasting.
3. On Thompson's split from the British Communist Party, see Palmer, 1981.
4. E. P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (Victor Gollancz, London, 1963), p.9.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
9. Again, it must be noted that Thompson was not alone in this historiographical achievement. Other historians who were simultaneously finding means to restore wills and speech to the common people include Eric Hobsbawm, Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (W. W. Norton, New York, 1959); George Rude, The Crowd in the French Revolution (Oxford University Press, London, 1959); Richard Cobb, Les Armees revolutionnaires: Instrument de la Terreur dans les departements, avril 1793 -- floreal an II, 2 vols. (Mouton, Paris, 1961-63); and Albert Soboul, Les Sans-culottes parisiens en l'An II: Mouvement populaire et gouvernement revolutionnaire, 2 juin 1793 -- 9 thermidor An II (Librairie Clavreuil, Paris, 1962).
10. Thompson, The Making, p. 9, emphasis mine.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
12. Thompson, The Making, pp. 9-10.
13. Anyone who thinks that this sort of 'modernist' writing style is incompatible with social historical narrative should look closely at Carlo Ginsburg's The Night Battles: Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, trans. by John and Anne Tedeschi (Penguin Books, New York, 1983). Although this book is hardly an example of pure diachrony, its narrative passages are written, with a certain self-conscious modernist austerity, from the perspective of a historian 'overhearing' inquisitorial interviews. Ginsburg's own interventions are marked off quite sharply from the narration -- much more sharply than is the case in The Making, where the abstracting, moralizing, generalizing, and (let us not forget) synchronizing voice of the narrator is present even in the apparently barest recitations of events.
14. Thompson, The Making, pp. 249-60.

15. E. P. Thompson, 'The Poverty of Theory or an Orrery of Errors', in The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays (Monthly Review Press, New York and London, 1978), pp. 1-210.
16. Thompson's concept of experience is the subject of some controversy. Critics of Thompson include Perry Anderson, Arguments Within English Marxism (Verso, London, 1980), pp. 25-29; Richard Johnson, 'Edward Thompson, Eugene Genovese, and Socialist-Humanist History', History Workshop, 6 (Autumn 1978), pp. 79-100; and Sande Cohen, Historical Culture: On the Recoding of an Academic Discipline (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1986), pp. 199-204. Thompson's defenders include Harvey J. Kaye, The British Marxist Historians (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1984) and Ellen Meskins Wood, 'The Politics of Theory and the Concept of Class: E. P. Thompson and His Critics', Studies in Political Economy, 9 (Fall 1982).
17. E. P. Thompson, 'Folklore, Anthropology, and Social History', Indian Historical Review, 3 (January 1977), pp. 247-66; The Making, pp. 9-10.
18. Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language, 2nd ed., unabridged (C. C. Merriam, Springfield, Mass., 1959), p. 1528.
19. Poverty of Theory, 170, emphasis mine.
20. Ibid., pp. 171-2, emphasis in original.
21. Ibid., pp. 172, emphasis in original.
22. E. P. Thompson, Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act (Pantheon Books, New York, 1975), pp. 258-69.
23. Webster's New International Dictionary, p. 896.
24. Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (Basic Books, New York, 1973), p. 405.
25. Thompson, Poverty of Theory, p. 7. Emphasis in original.
26. Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)', in Lenin and Philosophy (Monthly Review Press, New York, 1971), pp. 127-86.
27. Goran Therborn, The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology (Verso Editions, London, 1980), pp. 8-10.
28. Anthony Giddens, Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1979); A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism (Macmillan, London, 1981); and The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984).
29. Giddens, Central Problems, pp. 53-9 and The Constitution of Society, pp. 5-14.
30. Giddens, Central Problems, 53. Emphasis in original.

31. Marx himself provides a warrant for such a view. 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past'. Karl Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (International Publishers, New York, n.d.), p.13.
32. Richard Johnson, 'Socialist-Humanist History', p.97.
33. William H. Sewell, Jr., Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to the French Revolution (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980).
34. Cogent critiques of Thompson on this point have been mounted by Tom Nairn, 'The English Working Class', New Left Review (March-April 1964); Anderson, Arguments within English Marxism, pp. 43-9; Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Rethinking Chartism', in Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982 (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983), pp. 90-178; and, more gently, by Eric Hobsbawm, Workers: Worlds of Labor (Pantheon Books, New York, 1984), pp. 194-213.
35. The assertions about France are argued and documented more fully in my Work and Revolution in France, especially chapter 10.
36. Thompson, The Making, p. 10.
37. On the property question and French socialism, see William H. Sewell, Jr., 'Property, Labor, and the Emergence of Socialism in France, 1789-1848', in Consciousness and Class Experience in Nineteenth Century Europe, John M. Merriman, ed. (Holmes and Meier, New York, 1979), pp. 45-63. On the people-producer/aristocrat-idler idea, see William H. Sewell, Jr., 'The Abbe Sieyes and the Rhetoric of Revolution', Consortium on Revolutionary Europe Proceedings, ed. by Harold T. Parker, Louise Salley Parker, and William M. Reddy (Durham, N. C., 1986), pp 1-14.
38. 'Languages of Class'.
39. Sean Wilentz, Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class (Oxford University Press, New York, 1984).