

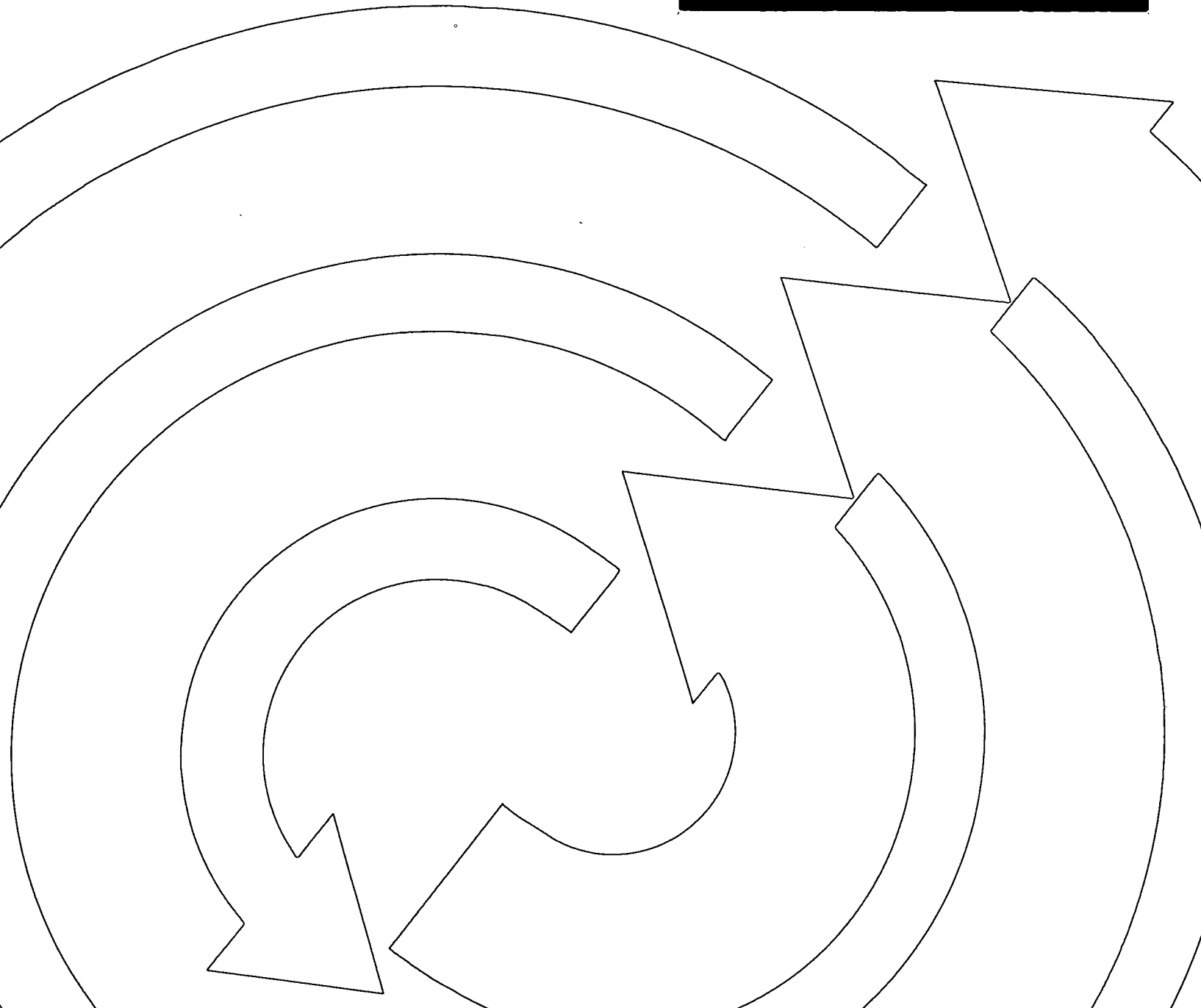
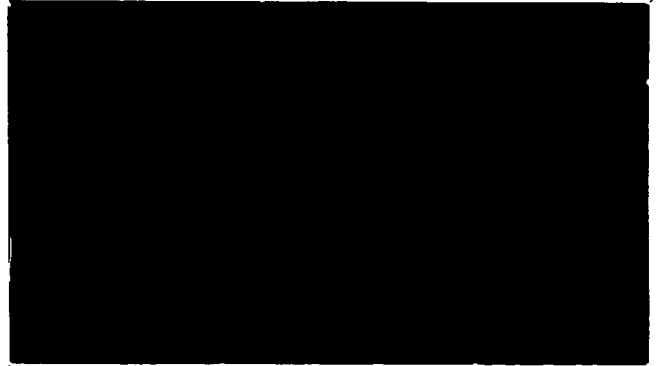


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THE "REMAKING" OF THE
ENGLISH WORKING CLASS?

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The "Remaking" of the English Working Class?*

--Draft (#3)--

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comments on previous drafts. All errors of omission and commission are of course
wholly my own

Roundhead, Leveller, and Cavalier, Chartist and Anti-Corn Law Leaguer, were not {Pavlovian} dogs; they did not salivate their creeds to economic stimuli; they loved and hated, argued, thought, and made moral choices. Economic changes impel changes in social relationships, in relations between real men and real women; and these are apprehended, felt, reveal themselves in feelings of injustice, frustration, aspirations for social change; all is fought out in human consciousness, including the moral consciousness. If this were not so, {people} would be--not dogs--but ants, adjusting their society to the upheavals in the terrain. But {people} make their own history: they are part agents, part victims: it is precisely the element of agency which distinguishes them from beasts, which is the *human* part...and which is the business of our consciousness to increase.

--E. P. Thompson¹

In the quarter-century since the publication of Thompson's remarkable tome, The Making of the English Working Class; it and his subsequent works have informed the historical vision of a generation of social scientists in Britain and in the U. S. These works have sparked political and academic controversy. Thompson and his confederates have wrestled with critics over the constitution of the early 19th-century working class, the historical development of British class structure, and the theoretical problematic of culture versus structure. Much of these debates--sometimes heated and often downright scrappy--has been conducted within the confines of Marxist historiography and theory, although for Thompson, at least, such controversies are always as much a matter of practical politics as the stuff of academic roundtables.

Thompson's achievements have come under renewed scrutiny recently through a new line of critique. Whereas the initial examination of The Making was conducted largely through the perspective of a structuralist (Althusserian) Marxism, this new critique originates in the "linguistic turn" in social theory. Drawing on deconstructionist/post-structuralist theory, both Gareth Stedman Jones (1983) and Joan Wallach Scott (1988) in particular seek to recast Thompson's analysis of class formation.²

In this paper I critically examine this "re-making" of the English working class, focusing specifically on what these it implies for Thompson's analysis of agency and experience in class formation, a key theoretical couplet that is sustained throughout his work. The post-structuralist critique presents a persuasive case for broadening the the study of class formation by including the systematic analysis of discourse. However, I argue its proposed recentering of the analysis of

¹ From "Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines," New Reasoner, no. 1; Summer 1957, p. 122

² Critique of Thompson's work is still being carried out within the confines of a materialist perspective as witnessed in Julia Swindel's and Lisa Jardine's (1990) feminist analysis of the failings of the British Left. However, the post-structuralist attack represents a more radical revisionist challenge to Thompson's work.

class formation from a discursive perspective is a regressive exercise that undermines our understanding of agency as explicated by Thompson.

The essay is divided into four parts. First, I briefly review Thompson's use of the concepts of agency and experience. Second, I summarize the revisionist approaches of Stedman Jones and Scott, focusing on their analyses of the role of discourse in the process of class formation. Third, I critique these perspectives, arguing that they serve to obscure the role of agency and experience in class formation. Finally, I propose an alternative means by which discourse can be incorporated into Thompson's analysis.

Agency and Experience in The Making

The Making is an historical panorama of class struggle and formation painted in fine brush strokes: the resilient subculture of West Riding weaving villages and the furtive machinations of London's ultra-radicals are equally illuminated with brilliance. This history, as Thompson informs us in his oft-quoted preface, is an account of how disparate groups of workers forged a class culture partly from popular traditions during their formative experiences of in an emergent capitalist society. As the strokes fill the canvas of forty years the vision painted is almost always from the perspective of the terra firma of historical specificity. Thompson's purpose is to explain the "particular ways" in which outworkers, artisans, and factory workers constructed a consciousness of their own interests as opposed to the interests of those who sought to dominate them. These cultural expressions of experience are presented in a plethora of miniatures. In the concluding chapter, "Class Consciousness," for example, as representative experiences, practices, and actors complete the canvas, there is little that directly informs us of the overarching processes that are the foundations of his analysis.

A reading of Thompson's corpus (and of those who have sympathetically adopted his mode of class analysis) suggests that the concepts of agency and experience are at the heart of his account of class formation. Thompson's work has been a sustained reaction to both the mechanistic formalism of a "Stalinist" Marxism as well as to liberal sociological alternatives to class analysis. As opposed to these perspectives he proffers a fundamentally relational and historical understanding of class. As he states,

Class eventuates as men and women *live* their productive relations, and as they *experience* their determinate situations, within "the *ensemble* of social relations", with their inherited culture and expectations, and as they handle these experiences in cultural ways (1978b, p. 150).³

³ His remonstrance against ahistorical sociological models of status hierarchies remains relevant decades after its publication.

Class is a *process* in which people, facing common struggles against exploitation and antagonism imposed upon them by their structural situation, create experiential and collective responses to their predicaments. In fashioning a common consciousness of their situation and a stock of cultural processes to express their resistance, class actors are active participants in the process of class formation. As he has summarily observed, "Class formations. . . arise at the intersection of determination and self-activity" (1978a, p. 106).

It is precisely at this juncture that experience assumes a critical role in Thompson's scheme. People involuntarily enter into ensembles of social relationships, structured and limited by dominant forms of material life, which demand collective response.⁴ These relationships exert pressure on their consciousness to make cultural sense of their role and purpose in the course of life's events. Experience then is the effect of living through the process of historical relationships,

Sociologists who have stopped the time-machine and, with a good deal of huffing and puffing, have gone down to the engine-room to look, tell us that nowhere at all have they been able to locate and classify a class. They can only find a multitude of people with different occupations, incomes, status-hierarchies, and the rest. Of course they are right, since class is not this or that part of the machine, but *the way the machine works* once it is set in motion--not this interest and that interest, but the friction of interests--the movement itself, the heat, the thundering noise. Class is a social and political formation (often finding institutional expression) which cannot be defined abstractly, or in isolation, but only in terms of relationship with other classes; and, ultimately, the definition can only be made in the medium of *time*--that is, action and reaction, change and conflict. When we speak of a class we are thinking of a very loosely defined body of people who share the same categories of interests, social experiences, traditions and value-system, who have the *disposition to behave* as a class, to define themselves in their actions and in their consciousness in relation to other groups of people in class ways. But class itself is not a thing, it is a happening [1978a {1965}, p. 295].

Thompson's lengthy polemic against Althusserian Marxism, The Poverty of Theory, contains much of his critique of mechanistic Marxism that has motivated his writing since the mid-1950s. For his account of this motivation see the Interview with Mike Merrill (1983 {1976}). For background on the role of the impact of the Left turmoil on Thompson's thinking see Bryan Palmer's brief but useful intellectual biography (1981). For a useful summary of the debates between Thompson and his Left critics see Harvey J. Kaye (1984, ch. 6).

⁴ For Thompson, despite accusations of voluntarism by his critics, the mode and social relations of production are determinative forces in this process. They provide the fundamental parameters through which experience is lived out, though they do not predestine the actual content of these experiences nor their outcome.

The mode of production...gives us also the attendant relations of production (which are also relations of domination and subordination) into which men and women are born, or involuntarily enter. This provides the "general illumination in which all colours are plunged and which modifies their specific tonalities." Relations of production, in modern societies, find expression in the formation and struggle (on occasion, equilibrium) of classes (1977, p. 264).

common to many like-situated people.⁵ Importantly for Thompson, such experiences are not confined within the realm of production (i.e. the economic), nor can they be parsimoniously reduced to economic causes. Lived experience is never so tidy. Rather, it occurs wherever the friction of class interests creates the heat of conflict and discontent, and frequently this is in the sphere of politics.⁶

The other line of convergence at this intersection then is agency, i.e. the ways in which class actors respond to and make sense of these common experiences. The collective consciousness of common interests, the production of culture and systems of feeling to articulate them, and the struggles against exploitation in which they are acted upon are central to the "self-making" processes through which class formations are constituted (Thompson 1978a, p. 107). For Thompson this conjunction between "lived" experience and agency is determinative only in the sense that it sets social forces in motion. The outcome is not teleologically overdetermined; social change is always dependent on the "class ways" in which these interests are pursued.

Change in material life determines the conditions of that struggle, and some of its character: but the particular outcome is determined only by struggle itself. This is to say that historical change eventuates, not because a given "basis" must give rise to a correspondent "superstructure", but because changes in productive relationships are *experienced* in social and cultural life, refracted in {peoples'} ideas and their values, and argued through in their actions, their choice and their beliefs (1977, p. 266).

A shared sense of agency--class consciousness--is thus developed by class actors as they engage in the process of class struggle. A cultural appreciation of their own interests (as opposed

⁵ Experience for Thompson is not the perception of those processes as refracted through consciousness. Many of those who have criticized him for his overly voluntarist and culturalist approach (including Anderson (1980), Cohen (1978), Hall (1981b), Johnson (1978), McLennan (1982)) tend to mistakenly conflate what Thompson has subsequently termed as "lived" and "perceived" experience (1981, p. 405-6). For a proper reading of Thompson's concept see Ellen Meiksins Wood brilliant refutation of Thompson's critics. She notes that Thompson's understating of experience is the material and historical aspect of social being that germinates class consciousness as people grapple with their class situations (1982, p. 49).

⁶ As Thompson remarked long ago in "The Peculiarities of the English", politics is often a quintessential force in the class fissioning of a society:

Politics is often exactly about this--how class will happen, where will the line be drawn? And the drawing of it is not (as the impersonal pronoun nudges the mind into accepting) a matter of conscious--or even unconscious--volition of "it" (class), but the outcome of political and cultural skills. To reduce class to identity is to forget exactly where agency lies, not in class but in {people} (1978a [1965], p. 296).

For Thompson there is no theoretical prioritizing of societal spheres in the real processes of history. The cultural, political, and social are all just as hospitable abodes for conflict and change as the economic (see for example 1977, p. 262-5, 1978b, p. 147-150, as well as the lengthy diatribes in "The Poverty of Theory").

to the interests of their antagonists) is produced in the process of struggle. It is often a pastiche of old culture forms transformed and infused with new relevancy. For Thompson this too is an ongoing process rather than one of finitude: history does not tip its hand to its players. To say that classes are "made" is thus misleading; instead it is more appropriate to say that they are constituted (and re-constituted), and the actors themselves always have an active hand in this process.

The roles of experience and agency in the process of class formation are why Thompson insists that class struggle is the most fundamental object of a Marxist analysis, and why "Class and class consciousness are always the last, not the first, stage in the real historical process" (1978a, p. 149). For it is experience's fomentation of divisive interests which leads people to construct a common culture (and consciousness) of class, and in turn to seek to change their existence. In this process "class defines itself as, in fact, it eventuates" (1978b, p. 150). Experience and agency are the essential elements which keep the process in motion.

The panoramic vision of The Making is thus a story of class formation told from the vantage of working-class people who struggled against the weight of economic exploitation and political oppression. These were common experiences, though there were realized in many "particular ways". Central to the telling is how people drew upon extant plebeian and radical culture, reshaping it in the process "with intelligence and moral passion" as they formulated their consciousness of class (1966, p. 832).

Importantly, for Thompson this culture is produced in social relationships, often in the "theatre" of social struggle. The production of meanings of cultural forms is fundamentally behavioral and contextual: "every meaning is a meaning-in-context, and structures changes while old forms may express new functions or old functions may find expression in new forms" (1977, p. 256). This meaning thus is tethered to the actions of collective actors who produce it in the process of making experiential sense of their social relationships (Thompson 1977, 1978b). Additionally, Thompson never insists that the culture of the early 19th-century working class was homogeneous. Instead his account is of a web of understandings within which working-class actors moved and through which they were able to collectively construct and convey their dissatisfactions to themselves and the larger world. Their experiences were multifarious, nested in regionally distinct artisanal communities which, strung together, were the foundations of a national working class (1966, p. 471, 611, 719). As an experientially grounded culture of resistance it was in fact born both of this diversity and underlying commonalties.

Finally, the casting of this process of class formation as a historically contingent process leads Thompson to reject any privileged space for this story in the general history of class formation (1978b, p. 150). The role of agency and experience in the process foreclose the option of a teleological interpretation: class is no more or less than as it happens. Born of struggles

between class actors, the histories of these struggles defines class, always relationally, and always in the context of particular times and places.

Stedman Jones and the Analysis of Radical Language

In the first round of Left critique, The Making was criticized for its overemphasis on agency and experience and an alleged sublimation of the economic and structural. None of the critics sought to confront directly the dynamic role of culture in Thompson's account. However, in several essays Gareth Stedman Jones has offered a revamped interpretation of the development of English working-class consciousness in the early 19th century in which the role of a crucial part of this culture, the radical language, is formulated in a new light (1982, 1983). His mooring for this revision is a reconsideration of the Chartist movement, a radical working-class political movement for universal suffrage stretching roughly from 1837-1852.⁷ Through a re-examination of Chartism he seeks to recast the historiography of working-class formation for the period circumscribed in The Making.

Stedman Jones initiates his reformulation by way of a two-point critique. First, he faults extant historiography of the Chartist movement as economistically reductionist. Historians, he argues, have viewed the actual political dynamics as epiphenomenal. Starting from the proposition that the movement was a mass working-class response to economic circumstances, they have incorrectly viewed the political programme of the Chartists largely as a vehicle for venting economic spleen. By not taking politics as the touchstone of analysis they have fundamentally misread the foundations of the movement, its inceptions, and its ultimate decay. This reading of the history of Chartism is symptomatic of much of the historiography of working-class formation for the period [1983, p. 93-4, 99].

An outstanding exception to this mode of analysis for Stedman Jones is Thompson. He finds in The Making the germination of a working class writ large in the unfolding of political processes. Despite this significant achievement, here too Stedman Jones perceives a reductionism that begs at least part of the problem of the development of a working-class consciousness. Within

⁷ The rubric Chartism was derived from the plank of demands that were established in the early phases of the agitation in 1838. The bedrock of Chartism was the Charter, six demands for the radical reformation of the political system. The six "points" of the Charter were universal male suffrage, annual Parliaments, equal electoral districts, vote by secret ballot, salaried representatives (MPs), and the eradication of property qualifications for office holding. As a movement encompassing a decade of agitation there were of course a variety of other political and economic platforms that ebbed and flowed during its course. The Charter was however the one element of constancy that survived the entire period and one that had national adherence. For recent histories of the movement see Dorothy Thompson (1984), Epstein (1982), Epstein and Thompson (1982), and Saville (1987).

Thompson's encompassing "experiential" analysis the construction of consciousness is posed in relatively unproblematic terms:

Thompson's concept of class consciousness still assumes a relatively direct relationship between "social being" and "social consciousness" which leaves little independent space to the ideological context within which the coherence of a particular language of class can be constituted [1983, p. 101].

The solution for Stedman Jones is to bring the language of politics squarely into the analysis of class dynamics. In language (what I will term discourse) Stedman Jones isolates the mediating link between structured experience and the binding ties of consciousness. Through discourse experience is organized, a conflict-oriented consciousness is fomented, and collectivities is wedded to strategies for social change (Ibid., p. 96, 101).

Stedman Jones thus re-reads Chartism to demonstrate that the growth of the political radical discourse served as the crucial medium of the movement. Parrying discourse against extant historiography he concludes that Chartism, and indeed working-class solidarity, was cultivated in an expressly *political* understanding of oppression derived from a discourse that predated the actual formation of the working class (Ibid. p, 100, 105). This discourse was born of the political dissent of the 1770s, and by the 1790s had been transformed into a plebeian critique of political corruption (Ibid., p. 111). Its metamorphosis continued in the first two decades of the 19th century, as its bayonets of critique were directed less at profligate sinecurists and aristocrats and more toward capitalists and middlemen (Ibid., p. 122, 134, 153).

In the first decades of the 19th century the vocabulary of political radicalism was stretched to cover the changing palpable realities of oppression. The discursive core, however, remained steadfast: the working class saw that they labored under domination because of their political exclusion (Ibid., p. 104). An unholy alliance of unconscionable greed and ill-begotten wealth tyrannized through political fiat. The root problem was thus political, and it demanded a response in kind.

The solution was a Painite republicanism, one which was constructed a theory of natural rights, notions of the legitimate accumulation of wealth, and a fundamentally democratic constitutionalist vision of a just order (Ibid., p. 125-6, 156, 169). Eradicate the monopoly of power that secured the domination of the rich and the rest of the structure would crumble in the wake of its extinction. This was the analysis and the programme.

Political radicalism was faced with challengers--especially Owenism and trade unionism--but none succeeded in surmounting either its analysis nor the appositeness of its prescriptions (Ibid. p. 115, 117, 122, 124, 127). In the 1830s this discourse spoke to the exigencies of the moment, as an arbitrary and imperious government imposed increasing misery on the working classes through repressive legislation. It provided a tangible plan of transformation, one that was

not fundamentally class-based in social or economic terms. Chartism's ability to capture the imagination of the working class rested in this palpable political critique, rather than an inherent class analysis. However, the increasing reformism of the British state in the 1840s attenuated the pertinence of this radical discourse. Increasingly bereft of cogency it became a pallid and outmoded interpretive scheme until it was vitiated into political irrelevancy.

For Stedman Jones, then, radical discourse played the central role in the making of English working class. As he observes, "Radicalism...determined the form taken by the democratic movement" (Ibid., p. 126). This radical discourse defined the origins of working-class social maladies, structured their grievances, and demarcated the antagonists and objectives to which their collective response was directed.

In this sense radical discourse was both the vehicle and the limiting factor for class agency. Class struggle was possible because working-class groups were able to translate the raw material of experience into an intelligible shared critique of their oppression as well as a programme for action. The role of experience is transformed in Stedman Jones's account in subtle and ambiguous ways. Its impact on the process of class is bounded by the opportunities that any given discourse presents as the essential mediator between experience and consciousness. In the process of class formation the roles of economic exploitation and political oppression become contingent upon cultural dynamics. Stedman Jones thus seems to be proffering the type of argument of which Thompson's (structuralist) Left critics mistakenly accused him.

Joan Wallach Scott and the Gendering of Class

Where Stedman Jones brings discourse squarely into the examination of class formation, Joan Wallach Scott makes it the consuming object of analysis. Claiming to adopt methods of analysis from deconstructionist and post-structuralist theory, she provides a gender-based critique of The Making. Scott contends that,

theories of language, by providing historians with a way of how to "see" how gender figures in the construction of social and political meaning, thereby provide us with a way to recast our understanding of the place of gender in history, of the operation of sexual difference in the "making" of the working class (1987, p. 2-3).⁸

Defining gender as the "articulation (metaphoric and institutional) in specific contexts of social understandings of sexual difference," Scott argues that gender itself, as all meaning, is a

⁸ Scott is not the first to criticize Thompson for his lack of attention to women and the issue of gender in class formation. Among others who have already contributed to this debate are Lane (1976), McCalman (1980), and Taylor (1983) in her important addition to the history of feminism. However, none have been as encompassing in their criticism as Scott, and their critiques have not been from a post-structuralist perspective.

discursive field of power (1987, p. 2; see also 1988, p. 2, 42).⁹ We experience this power through discursively constructed meaning: "Without meaning there is no experience; without processes of signification, there is no meaning" (Ibid. p. 38). Experience, in this sense, is constituted through the multitude and dispersed "fields of force" that are a product of discourse. Within such fields people have agency to the extent that they can attempt to

construct an identity, a set of relationships, a society within certain limits and with language--conceptual language that at once sets the boundaries and contains the possibilities for negation, resistance, reinterpretation, the play of metaphoric invention and imagination (1988, p. 42).¹⁰

It follows that the interests which motivate actors are themselves constructed through discourse rather than emanating from social relationships (Ibid., p. 5).

Within this deconstructionist perspective, class thus becomes a discursive "field that always contains multiple and contested meanings" (1988, p. 88). Moreover, class as a category of discursive understanding is related to other categories within which actors and their interests are constituted, gender foremost among them. For Scott this is the repressed history in The Making: "The concept of class in the nineteenth century relied on gender for its articulation" (Ibid., p. 48).

In Scott's critique, Thompson's history becomes a myopic masculine reading of the process of class formation.¹¹ Gendering is immanent (though sublimated) in the encoding of productive relations as masculine and of the domestic sphere as feminine (1988, p. 69, 73, 79). By locating the dynamic of class formation in labor exploitation, and the nascent radical politics of the working class as a reaction to this, women and the domestic sphere are excised from the process of formation. The Making "is preeminently a story about men, and class is, in its origin and in its expression, constructed as a masculine identity, even when not all of the actors are male" (Ibid., p. 72).

⁹ Scott describes gender as having four constituent elements: its symbolic representation, the normative concepts used to interpret them, their politics within social institutions and organizations, and its existence as a subjective identity (Ibid. p. 43-4).

¹⁰ Scott uses this post-structuralist account of discourse to critique Stedman Jones's revision of The Making as well. She critiques his conceptualization of discourse as a simple referential system of meaning, and not as the constitutive process that it actually is (1987, p. 4-6). As a result she fails to recognize the constitutive role of the act of language itself, as well as its constitutive role in class and gender formation.

¹¹ This criticism applies more generally to all Marxist analyses: "within Marxism, the concept of gender has long been treated as the by-product of changing economic structures; gender has had no independent analytic status of its own" (1988, p. 36, see also p. 86 and 1989, p. 14). Attempts at a fusion of Marxism and Feminism have only stifled the analyses of gender as a field of power.

Within this male-centered perspective the sphere of labor is seen as the fount of class consciousness. The rationalist and secular aspects of working-class radical politics are portrayed as masculine; the expressive, utopian, and spiritual are negatively constructed as feminine (Ibid., p. 76, 78-9; 1987, p. 9). Women are thus relegated to two secondary representations in this process: either they are part of the sphere of production, in which case they are participants in the masculine construction of class, or they are regressive elements, whose expressive nature is "a troubling exception, asserting needs and interests detrimental to class politics..." (1987, p. 10).

That which is encoded as feminine thus becomes marginalized. The gendering of the family division of labor, the part of the domestic sphere in the production of class meaning, and the role of spiritual and utopian ideas in the construction of class consciousness are all lost within this masculine reading. Women themselves are presented as "only partial or imperfect political actors" (1988, p. 73).

Scott provides no alternative reading of English working-class formation, and indeed her deconstructionist perspective should eschew any such essentialism. Rather, she challenges analysts to dissect the many moments of this history in which the constitution of class was the result of shifting and contested meanings. The construction of sexual difference is of course a primary aspect of such processes. By producing such accounts we will be able to understand how discourse organized lived experience, and how the agency of working-class actors was bounded and realized in the production of meaning (1988, p. 88-89).

Critically Appraising the "Re-Making"

Both Stedman Jones and Scott significantly revamp The Making. While Scott provides a more radical critique, their shared emphasis on discourse leads to certain commonalities of argument. In particular, both concentrate on the role of discourse in the process of nascent class formation.

These contributions can be assessed on three distinct levels. First is the issue of their reading of The Making (and Thompson's related work): do they faithfully represent Thompson's version of class formation? Second is the question of whether these revisions have added to our understanding of class formation, building upon the advances contained in the experience/agency couplet. Do these revisions provide theoretical gains for the analysis of class formation? Finally, these approaches can be evaluated at the level of historiography. Does Stedman Jones enhance our knowledge of radical working-class politics. Does Scott add to our comprehension of the role of women in the formation of the early 19th-century English working class? In each case I believe that the answers are largely negative. However, the issues they raise about the role of discourse are important, and should be addressed from a materialist perspective.

Readings of The Making

Both Stedman Jones and Scott offer reductionist accounts of Thompson's history, particularly the latter. Stedman Jones rightly isolates the link between experience and social consciousness as a key dynamic in The Making. However, he too readily attributes an unproblematized version of this relationship to Thompson's work. In fact, Thompson maintained throughout that experience and the consciousness to which it gives rise exist in a complex dialectical relationship (see for example 1981, p. 398). The link between the two is never simply referential. Indeed, one of the principal achievements of the The Making is the detailing of the ways in which working-class groups fashioned an oppositional consciousness out of manifold elements of plebeian politics and culture. Undergirded by a Gramscian sense of cultural struggle, Thompson has always taken this to be a central problematic in his analysis of class formation.¹²

It is Scott, however, who provides the more reductionist version of Thompson's panorama. Her portrayal misrepresents The Making on at least three themes: the unity of working-class culture, the essentially masculine, rationalist form in which it is depicted, and the role of the domestic in its development. On the first issue Scott contends that Thompson depicts the growth of a working-class culture in "unified terms", in which he assumes "some exact fit between material life and political thought" rather than examining its diversity (1988, p. 72, 89). Thompson does not systematically examine the connections between the various strands of working-class culture which he charts, and there remains theoretical and historical space to explore the ways in which these strands were able to construct a unifying experience of exploitation and oppression. However, as I have noted, he never insists upon an unilinear conception of working-class culture, and the many facets of it explored in The Making are clear evidence of this.¹³

In her critique of Thompson's version of working-class radicalism as masculine and rationalist and of the chiliastic religion of the period as feminine Scott presents a clean fissure in working-class culture where Thompson finds many jagged edges. While he maintains a central role for the rationalist and Enlightenment traditions (including, of course, Mary Wollstonecraft, along with Paine and Godwin), Thompson never loses sight of the other elements of plebeian culture that workers drew on in constructing a class consciousness. In the closing pages of The Making he observes that,

¹² See his remarks for example on the problem of working-class hegemony in "The Peculiarities of the English" (1978a [1965], p. 284-5).

¹³ Scott in fact hedges on this assertion. For example, she notes that "it is the articulation of the experience that varies according to culture, time and place", and that "Thompson insisted that the terms used to express the idea of class were relative to time and place" (1988, p. 69, 89).

...it is premature, in the 1830s, to think of the English working people as being wholly open to secular ideology. The Radical culture which we have examined was the culture of skilled men, artisans, and of some outworkers. Beneath this culture (or co-existing with it) there were more obscure levels of response, from which the charismatic leaders like Oastler and O'Connor drew some of their support (1966, p. 802).¹⁴

Finally, Scott misrepresents Thompson's characterization of the domestic sphere. The Making is clearly deficient in its analysis of domesticity, yet this absence does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that it was a "place from which politics cannot emanate because it does not provide the experience of exploitation that contains with it the possibility of the collective identity of interest that is class consciousness..." (1988, p. 73). Thompson does understand the domestic sphere to be a place crucial to the organic production of a working-class culture and as a site where exploitation was acutely experienced.¹⁵ However his analysis centers on the exploitation of the domestic unit--not women--and this omission needs correction.

The Analysis of Class Formation: Agency and Experience

These misrepresentations of The Making are grounded in alternative theoretical approaches to class formation. They reflect divergences in perspective, particularly on the centrality of agency and experience for class formation. As we have seen, Thompson's contribution in re-centering the analysis of class was on class as a process, in which class actors are not simply moved imperiously by structure, but have an active hand in their making. However, in their revisionism both Stedman Jones and Scott construct a neo-structuralism of discourse in which language is invested with imperial ascendancy.

¹⁴ It is particularly on the issue of rationalist politics versus spiritualism that Scott distorts Thompson's position. She states that "He depicts rationalist, secular politics as *the only possible form of class consciousness*, thereby making its appearance natural or inevitable, instead of the product of struggle or debate" (1988, p. 76, emphasis added). This leads her to suggest that religion is the feminine antithesis of politics (a peculiarly essentialist statement for a deconstructionist). However, Thompson never draws such a neat distinction, and at times is at pains to examine how the two coalesce at specific junctures. In his summation of Owenism, for instance, he observes that "Mr. Owen, the Philanthropist, threw the mantle of Joanna Southcott across his shoulders. The tone of the ranter was noted not only by Hazlitt, but by others of his contemporaries" (1966, p. 787).

¹⁵ Radical politics had clear domestic roots in Thompson's depiction. It was at the hearth where children were steeped in its ideology and tradition, the "really useful knowledge" lauded by working-class writers (see R. Johnson 1979). Thompson, for example, quotes the radical James Watson as remembering "my mother being in the habit of reading Cobbett's *Register*, and saying she wondered people spoke so much against it; she saw nothing bad in it, and many good things in it" (1966, p. 755). Thompson has also noted the role of women in rioting, particularly food rioting. Women, he reminds us, had the best sense of market exploitation, and were often the protectors of the moral economy of staples (1968, p. 115-16).

For Stedman Jones this is an acute problem on the issue of agency. In his model experience remains the bedrock for action, filtered through the perspective of language. As the grand interpreter of experience, discourse itself becomes a privileged actor, inscribing meaning on the lessons that experience renders. Initially it appears as a vehicle for agency, providing a window of interpretability and a means of setting an agenda for action. Yet this agential role quickly becomes the impresario of the class process. In Stedman Jones's formulation, discourse does not exist in a dialectic relationship with experience (as culture does for Thompson). Instead it appears to exist outside of the dynamics of ongoing social and political life. Somehow (we are not privy to the process) it manages to accommodate itself to the changes that these bring, yet its structure is never fundamentally threatened by changes in material life. As such, discourse seems to be autogenic, requiring neither experience or any other facet of social life for its continuity. In the end it is the structure of political discourse that becomes a gilded cage for class action.

If in Stedman Jones's formulation experience is a servant of discourse, within Scott's deconstructionist perspective neither experience nor agency have substantive roles. For Scott, experience has no reality outside of its signification (1988, p. 38). Its apprehension is reduced to a radically temporalized form, dependent on context driven processes of meaning production. One divergent moment follows another, as experience becomes a marginalized process of iterated, and perhaps not cumulated episodes.¹⁶

While experience is dissipated in moments of meaning, agency is essentially stillborn. Though Scott specifically argues for a concept of agency in this discursively constructed world, she can do so only by contradicting the very epistemological ground that serves as her foundation.¹⁷ It is precisely in the discursive construction of the subject that deconstructionism and its allied post-modern philosophies deny agency in subjectivity. As Linda Alcoff argues,

post-structuralists deny not only the efficacy but also the ontological autonomy and even the existence of intentionality...In their defense of a total construction of the subject, post-

¹⁶ As Susan Bordo has observed, deconstructionism in this way can lose sense of the overarching nature of patriarchal domination: "Too relentless a focus on historical heterogeneity...can obscure the transhistorical hierarchical patterns of white male privilege that have informed the creation of the Western intellectual tradition" (1990, p. 149; see also Barbara Christian's (1988) trenchant commentary).

¹⁷ On the issue of agency she states that,

Within these processes and structures there is room for a concept of human agency as the attempt (at least partially rational) to construct an identity, a life, a set of relationships, a society within certain limits and with language--conceptual language that at once sets boundaries and contains the possibility for negation, resistance, reinterpretation, the play of metaphoric invention and imagination (1988, p. 42).

structuralists deny the subject's ability to reflect upon discourse and challenge its determinations (1988, p. 416-17).¹⁸

With consciousness and interests a product of discourse (1988, p. 5) it would seem that the agendas of class (and gendered) actors are given and not devised. Discourse operates largely as a structural constraint, rather than a facilitator for collective action or social change.¹⁹

If we accept Thompson's perspective on class formation as an advance over more structure-bound theories, then the discursive turn of Stedman Jones and Scott is largely regressive. Within their analyses we lose sight of the role of class actors in the making of class formations. Discourse dictates world views, channels collective action, and itself becomes the motor of change. Since it constitutes the material world, discourse does not react to it, but rather imposes an order upon it.

Moreover, even if we were to accept these discursive perspectives, we are left with virtually no understanding of the dynamics of discourse or the social change it produces. In the case of Stedman Jones, political radicalism is a pre-given entity. Its mutations to accommodate new working-class trials and experiences are noted but never wholly analyzed. We are told that it successfully bent to fit the growing class divisiveness of the early 19th century and mortally

¹⁸ Other feminists who have sought to wed post-structuralism and gender criticism have been more attuned to the contradictions presented by this epistemology, though at surmounting this problem than Scott (see Weedon 1987). As Mary Poovey observes,

From the perspective of {deconstructionism}, a feminism that bases its epistemology and practice on women's experience is simply another deluded humanism, complicit with the patriarchal institutions it claims to oppose (1988, p. 52).

See also Christine DiStephano (1990) and Deborah Cameron (1985) on the difficulties of a post-structuralist feminist politics. For an additional critique of agency in Scott's work see the brief but important remarks by Louise Tilly (1989, p. 452) and Myra Jehlen (Caplan et. al. 1989, p. 34-5) on the problem of historical agency.

¹⁹ In fact, several of Scott's applications of post-structuralist theory in Gender and The Politics of History leave her commitment to a true deconstructionist agenda open to question. "A Statistical Representation of Work: La Statistique de L'Industrie a Paris, 1847-1848" (ch. 6, p. 113-38) is an excellent example. In the article Scott examines the origins of this statistical report on labor in Paris, essentially produced by the Paris chamber of commerce. She argues, quite persuasively, that the construction of the report was a political effort to define the organization of trade and labor to the advantage of the male business elite. Nonetheless, this is hardly a deconstructionist reading. There is clear authorial intention on the part of the chamber in construction of the report, and power is portrayed as centralized and willfully exercised. This is antithetical to the Derridean/Foucauldian perspective, in which there is no such intentionality and power exists in "dispersion". In this analysis Scott actually seems to be following a more conventional epistemology which argues that all data is "theory-laden", i.e. that our observations of the world are dependent upon the theoretical categories by which we make them (see Stinchcombe, 1968, ch. 2 and 1978, ch. 1).

faltered in the face of a moderated state policy in the 1840s. The underlying mechanisms for either success or failure, however, remain obscure throughout.

For Scott change is an inherent and endemic feature of discourse because of its essential polysemy. This deconstructionist vision of change, however, is vague and incomplete. It is a synchronic understanding of many moments, but the diachronics which link them are never adequately explicated. Within the discursive field the "supplement" of meaning of any signifier lurks in the shadows, waiting to deny any fixity of meaning. As a result Scott does not actually address the process of class formation. The gendering of class actors (and action) itself is an enigmatic process, and we are only privy to its results. Production is "masculine" and the domestic sphere is "feminine", but how this came to be (and why it could remain so given discourse's essential "slipperiness") is never explicated.²⁰

In arguing for the centrality of discourse in the process of class formation both Stedman Jones and Scott have raised an important issue which is never confronted by Thompson. (I return to this in the final section.) However, by proffering discourse as the singular explanans of class formation they succeed only in impoverishing Thompson's account. As a result, their discussions of their own center pieces--politics and gender--suffer, a subject to which I now turn.

Failed Revisions of Politics and Gender

Within each critique of The Making an analytic theme is used as the scalpel for dissecting Thompson's vision of class formation. For Stedman Jones this theme is radical politics; for Scott it is the process of gendering. Renderings of each theme within a discursive perspective are taken to highlight the failures of Thompson's approach and to recast the analysis of class formation. However, in each case the models fall short in explaining the process that is the object of analysis.

In The Languages of Class, Stedman Jones seeks to discern the ways in which meaning contained in political language forges a consciousness of power relations and class (1983, p. 8, 19). Within this formulation the lessons of experience are never simply referentially conveyed through language, nor do they necessarily cumulate as class consciousness (Ibid., p. 20). Rather, class and interest are taken to be discursive constructs, part of the semiotic reality of social being that is defined and animated in discourse.

We cannot therefore decode political language to reach a primal and material expression of interest since it is the discursive structure of political language which conceives and defines interest in the first place. What we must therefore do is study the production of interest, identification, grievance and aspiration within political languages themselves (Ibid., p. 22).

²⁰ In her response to Scott's critique of Stedman Jones (1987) Christine Stansell offers a similar line of criticism, arguing that Scott's post-structuralism tends toward "the flip side of crude materialism" (1987, p. 28).

Discourse manufactures and orchestrates demands, collective identifications, and the need for collective action and redress (Ibid. p, 24).

While Stedman Jones isolates an important problematic, his singular emphasis on the production of meaning reduces politics to a language game. His discursive emphasis leads to an excessive relativism in which the political devolves into the grand art of persuasion. Ultimately the boundaries and constitution of the political themselves become hopelessly muddled in the anterior dynamics of discourse. For there is no coherent explanation for why actors would seek to politicize a facet of the social world, accept a particular vision of the political over competing forms, or even how actors have autonomy to effect transformations within these discursively given perceptions. Such explanations require recourse to non-discursive forces which have little causal role within his perspective.²¹ As a result, rather than gaining insight, we lose sight of the role of politics in the process of class formation. In a world produced by discourse there is no clear demarcation between class and politics, and no sure means of distinguishing the causal connections between them.

For Scott deconstruction leads to a neglect of the particular experiences of women in class formation, the possibilities of greater gender parity at junctures in the process, and a paradoxical essentialism. On the first point, Judith Bennett observes that Scott's concentration upon meaning creates a myopic disregard for women's lives.

Pursued on its own, the Scottian study of gender ignores women *qua* women (a subject that still deserves greater attention); it evinces very little interest in material reality (focusing on symbols and metaphors rather than experience); and it intellectualizes and abstracts the inequality of the sexes. The hard lives of women in the past; the material forces that shaped and constrained women's activities; the ways that women coped with challenges

²¹ This reductionism causes serious ambiguities in his discussion of the relationships between the material and the discursive. For example, in discussing the construction of links between the social and political realms he observes,

Changes in the social realm necessarily form a large part of the raw material out of which different political languages and practices may be forged or reforged. But such changes are not bearers of essential meaning in themselves. They are endowed with particular political meanings so far as they are effectively articulated through specific forms of political discourse and practice. There are no simple rules of translation from the social to the political. Relatively minor phenomena may be endowed with enormous significance, while major secular changes may be invested with no political significance at all (Ibid., p. 242).

Despite the initial observation it is entirely unclear as to why any social change is necessary for the definition of the political. Since it is discourse which invests phenomena with meaning change is seemingly irrelevant. For an analysis of the French Derrideans' frustration with the definition of the political which has interesting parallels to Stedman Jones's quandry see Fraser (1989, ch. 4).

and obstacles--all of these things can too easily disappear from a history of gender as meaning (1989, p. 258).

While over the last decade there has been considerable work on the roles of women in the transformation of production, our ignorance is still considerable.²² We lack a sufficient picture of the experiences of women in many degraded trades and in their transition from domestic to factory work. Our histories include precious little on women's roles in the organization of domestic production during the period of The Making, and our knowledge of women's trade societies is scant.²³ Most importantly, as Maxine Berg has observed, women formed crucial links between domestic production, consumption and community networks, links vital to the process of class formation (1988, p. 95). Summarily labeling production as "masculine" does little to advance our knowledge of the contributions and experiences of women in these areas, while it tends to deflect attention from them and toward those spheres of life supposedly encoded as "feminine". Indeed, an important missing piece in The Making is an explanation of how degradation of trades and gendering were intertwined in the capitalist transformation of domestic production (Alexander 1984, *op. cit.*).²⁴

²² Among the work in this category is the pioneering study of women in the London trades by Sally Alexander (1976), the work of Sonya O. Rose (1987) and Nancy Osterud (1986) on women in framework knitting, Lenore Davidson on women in agriculture (1986) and Angela John's (1980) study of women in the coal industry. Pinchbeck's classic volume (1981 {1930}) remains an important source, and Tilly and Scott (1978) contains an essential overview of the British and French experiences. (For an overview of this literature see Rose (1986)). As Maxine Berg has recently noted we still know very little about the experiences of women in the 18th and early 19th centuries (1988, *op. cit.*).

²³ Sheila Lewenhak's Women and Trade Unions (1977) remains the most comprehensive account, but it's history of this early period is thin (though see also Thomis and Grimmett (1982) on women in unions and Taylor (1983) on participation in Owenite societies). A daunting problem in the reconstruction of women's unionism is women's invisibility. Ten percent of all friendly societies in the early 19th-century were female, and we know little about them (Bohstedt 1988, p. 99). (The problem of invisibility is of course nearly a ubiquitous one for women's history, and Scott herself has recently commented on it (Scott 1988b)).

²⁴ The Making is clearly deficient on these grounds, though Thompson does remark upon the effect of the transformation of production in the lives of women (1966, p. 413-15). Despite the turn towards post-structuralist analysis many feminist historians have continued to produce important theoretical and empirical work on the intertwining of the processes of gender and class formation. Alice Kessler-Harris has suggested that we need to observe these interconnections holistically.

"...gender, like class, is a process. Paraphrasing Thompson's definition of *class*, one could argue that gender is a "historical phenomenon" not a "structure" or a "category" but something that happens in human relationships...In a gendered approach, women are not merely introduced into labor history. Rather we begin to understand (more clearly at certain moments than others), how ideology about male and female roles orders the

Much the same can be said of the contributions of women in politics and protest. As Sonya Rose has noted, a great deal of the work in these areas has focused on women's participation as an extension of their domestic roles (as in the case of food riots which Thompson (1968) has vividly chronicled) (1986, p. 122). Even though their public participation became increasingly marginalized with the growing formalization of working-class protest, women doubtless continued to shape ideas on justice, equality, and mutuality central to working-class politics (Smith and Valenze 1988, *op. cit.*; Taylor 1983).²⁵

Just as importantly, Scott's emphasis on difference and meaning deflects attention from the possibilities of increasing gender parity among certain working-class groups during the period. Degradation was a great leveller, and both women and men in the sweated trades of the period shared the experience of exploitation. In such trades as framework knitting and cotton weaving, for example, women were active (though not vocal) members of trade unions, and in a host of outwork industries--including shoemaking, nailing, men's clothing, etc.--women increasingly swelled the ranks of the degraded (Alexander 1976, Berg 1988, Bythell 1978, Pinchbeck 1981 [1930], Thomis and Grimmett (1982)). Questions of gender difference frequently center on the rise of the "separate spheres" ideology and conservative male unions (Seecombe 1986). However, the possibility of a lessening of differences due to the importance of women's wage labor to the household economy and their entrance into degraded (and previously male) occupations also require greater scrutiny.²⁶

behavior and expectations of work and family, influences the policies adopted by government and industry, and shapes perceptions of equity and justice. Because gender, like class, helps to construct consciousness, it operates at all levels--in the process of household production, on the shop floor, within the family, in the neighborhood, and in the community--to shape the ideas that form the core orientation on which working people will act. The historian's task must include an analysis of how gendered perceptions contributed to certain decisions and actions (1989, p. 226).

For additional comments from non-post-structuralist perspectives see Bennett (1989), Brenner and Ramas (1984), Buhle (1989), Kelly (1984, esp. ch. 1), Lewis (1985), Lovibond (1989), Seecombe (1986), and Tilly (1989).

²⁵ Barbara Taylor's Eve and the New Jerusalem (1983) is doubtless the standard in this area. However, there are also important contributions on women and Chartism (Jones (1983) and D. Thompson (1984, ch. 7) and the radicalism of the previous decades (McCalman (1980); Thomis and Grimmett (1982)). For the role of women in working-class Dissent see Valenze (1985). For other work on women's participation in plebeian collective action see Bohstedt (1988), Stevenson (1979), and Rose (1963-4).

²⁶ There is no disputing the argument that any trade which was seen as "women's work" was also viewed as degraded, nor that much of the wage work performed by women continued to be segregated (Alexander 1976, p. 74, 87; Tilly and Scott 1978, p. 77). Common experiences of impoverishment and degradation, however, may have led to a diminution of gender difference in certain social spheres (see the comments of Smith and Valenze 1988, p. 288). The possibilities of a levelling effect have yet to be investigated in great detail.

Finally, Scott's reading of The Making and the period's history at times seems to take on an essentialism contrary both to her deconstructionism and the complexities of the history itself. This is so in two respects. First, while criticizing Thompson and other Marxist historians for myopic visions of the development of industrial capitalism, she offers an alternative partial perspective.

...the sexual division of labor, oppositions between work and family, household and workplace, men and women, are what capitalism itself is all about (Abelson et. al. 1989, p. 48).

There is no question that the development of capitalism is about such matters. However it is not *all* about them, any more than the transformation of the labor process or the development of new class structures are our sole foci of analysis.

Second, Scott argues that Thompson and other social historians treat that which is coded as "feminine" as marginalized or excluded.²⁷ However, many non-deconstructionist historians have noted that the feminine at times had positive social connotations. One striking example is the widespread use of cross-dressing by male protesters. Male outworkers dressed as women were not unusual features of industrial protest involving the destruction of machinery, as in the Luddite and Swing protests. Additionally, the female image as a character of justice, as in the case of the Rebecca riots, suggests another such construction (Thomis and Grimmett 1982, ch. 7; Peel (1968) {1895}; Jones 1989).²⁸ These histories then do illustrate that the "feminine" could contain positive, even heroic, meanings, and that gendering, as class, was a complex and context-dependent process. Further, all of these analyses were conducted without the aid of deconstruction.

In sum, while both Stedman Jones and Scott seek to add new dimensions to the analysis of class formation, their efforts fall short. Under the encompassing perspectives of politics and gender, class formation itself is obscured. In addition, each of these analyses tend to become reified. Discourse becomes singularly causal, while the many facets of social life which comprise lived experience are reduced to a system of meaning. However, experience is never so singular as

²⁷ In doing so she parallels the Lacanian approach of Alexander who describes the encoding of the feminine in terms of lack or loss (1984, *op. cit.*).

²⁸ As Barbara Taylor argues, the image of femininity had ambiguous connotations:

The notion that women had a unique moral mission to perform was popular among all kinds of people in the early nineteenth century, anti-feminist as well as feminist. Its ideological function was highly ambiguous (1983, p. 30).

Other political protests, particularly the Queen Caroline Affair, may also show positive meanings attached to the "feminine" (Lacquer 1982; Prothero 1979, ch. 7).

to be captured within the confines of one abstraction. What we need, and what the post-structuralists lack, is a way of tying discourse to the complex processes of class formation, showing how it is a mediating process. In the final section below I suggest some ways in which this may be accomplished.

Bringing in Discourse

Regardless of their inadequacies Stedman Jones and Scott have pinpointed an important problem in The Making. Through radical discourses working-class actors become conscious of their positions, interests, and agency. For Thompson the radical press offered a window on class subjectivity, revealing commonalties between people in both the pain of exploitation and the desire for redress.²⁹ Working-class groups developed a class consciousness through participation in this radical culture. Yet despite its centrality in the chronicle the causal role of discourse is enigmatic.

Within materialist approaches to language, however, we can find a theoretical framework that ties discourse to Thompson's understanding of class formation. The starting point is Stedman Jones's initial observation--that discourse mediates between experience and consciousness. The purpose of the extension is to understand how discourse serves to mediate experience on the one hand, and on the other, the degree to which it affects agency in the process of class struggle.

Contrary to the post-structuralist viewpoint, materialist theories assert that people bring experiences to discourse, i.e. that material social life has an apprehended existence prior to its discursive framing (Doyal and Harris 1984). Indeed, materialist theories argue that discourse exists as a process because the other material/social processes in which people engage beg a larger symbolic ordering. Discourse is the process through which actors create propositional or evaluative accounts of the relations between themselves, other actors and situations, and larger social processes. Actors and contexts are historically and dialogically tied together in the process. The process of meaning production is itself always governed by systems of rules which delineate the use of signifiers, the meanings attributed to them, and restrictions on those who engage in the process. Discourse is thus viewed as a productive process, with certain homologies to other forms

²⁹ It could be argued that Thompson's recurring discussion of the radical press is the unifying theme which tie the pictures in his panorama together. Typifying the importance he places upon it is this observation:

In the absence of national organization, the local societies took their lead from the Radical press. It was because this press provided the very tissues without which the movement would have fallen apart, that the claim for the fullest liberty of the press was one of the foremost radical demands. 1816-20 were, above all, years in which popular Radicalism took its style from the hand press and the weekly periodical (1966, p. 674).

of production (Hodge and Kress 1988; Macdonnell 1986; Rossi-Landi 1975; Volosinov 1986 {1929}).³⁰

As the production of social meaning discourse is both an ideological and hegemonic process. It is an ideological process because it is through discourse that we provide (a) generalized maps of relations between actors, contexts, and activities, (b) evaluative frames for these, and (c) possibilities for alternative social relations and situations (Therborn 1980, p. 18; see also Sumner 1979; J. B. Thompson 1987; Hodge and Kress 1988). By linking diverse situations through discourse we construct collective and supra-contextual evaluative frames which are ideological windows on experience.

Discourse can be a hegemonic process because it orders collective understandings of the world in particular ways, privileging some meanings and precluding others which are potentially subversive. Additionally, it can be hegemonic because its rules legitimate some actors and proscribe others from participation in the process of meaning production. In all of the above ways, we may conceive of discourse (in part) as a lynchpin in a Gramscian ideological "war of position" in class formation. Contests are waged over the control of meaning production and with it ideological ascendancy (Mouffe 1979, p. 192; Gramsci 1971, 1984; Grossberg 1984; Hall 1981a; Shiach 1989; Williams 1976).³¹

Because it is the social and productive relations in which people engage that demand the production of discourse, we can see partially routinized patterns arising within this production. Elsewhere I have termed these discourse streams (Steinberg, forthcoming). Recursive patterning in their production creates sets of streams that are tied to particular institutional and social spheres. They contain a rudimentary stock of symbolic elements which are routinely employed by actors to structure plausible accounts of situations and activities. For any given historical period and for particular social and institutional contexts there are a limited number of such streams through which actors can structure accounts.³² Together the summation of such streams structures the discursive field within which actors produce meaning.

It is in the use of streams to construct meaning where we find agency tied to experience in class formation. Discourse, while bounded within such streams, is never simply referential. Its

³⁰ The homology between material and linguistic production is most thoroughly specified by Rossi-Landi (1975, 1983).

³¹ Gramsci himself was sensitive to the importance of discourse in hegemonic conflict. For explications of his views see Femia (1981), Mansfield (1984), and Salamini (1981).

³² Contrary to the post-structuralist theories of discourse, I am arguing that there is a finitude imposed on discourse by the material and social world. The social world is of a *different* constitution than the literary text. People limit the "supplement" of the signifier because their social life requires that intelligible accounts be created through discourse.

polysemy leaves it open to alternative (and sometimes conflicting) interpretations. Further, the semiotic manipulations of streams leaves them open for appropriation and transformation for use in different contexts from those of their origins.³³ Thus we find agency in the ways class actors are able to dominate the use of streams within a discursive field to structure and articulate their apprehensions of the world. The discursive boundaries imposed on this agency are those where issues of intelligibility and comprehensibility arise. In proffering these understandings through discourse streams actors are at once constructing a set of collective interests as well as defining potentially oppositional meanings and interests. It is in this sense that we find a "war of position".

Finally, discourse is a process tied to forms of social organization and action, institutional contexts, and collective resources. The availability of streams is crucially dependent on the networks that compose a collectivity, its ties to other groups and access to social spheres, and the resources it has to both survey and appropriate streams in a discursive field and disseminate proffered meanings. Parallel to Thompson's concept of culture, discourse in this formulation is a process of collective activity (Volosinov 1986; Wuthnow 1989).

In terms of the process of class formation then, discourse can be conceptualized best as the process which bounds possibilities for collective perceptions of class struggle and structure. Rather than having determinant causal power over such formation, it mediates the way in which groups experience and react to the material and social forces that animate it. This is most easily noted in the sphere of ideology and other forms of cultural production in which collective actors make sense of their experience.

Returning to The Making we can see how in Thompson's history this process was repeated among numerous working-class groups across both time and nation. Through printed word (particularly the "unstamped" press) and oral tradition, and within political and trade organizations, the working-class was provided with a series of discourse streams through which they framed their interests and those of their antagonists. As Stedman Jones correctly asserts these streams mediated between collective experience and consciousness. In this process groups exercised their agency in constructing working-class understandings of their dilemmas. Discourse translated experience, informed context, and posed possibilities. It did not, however, impose grievances, paths of redress, or class consciousness.

The underlying importance of discourse may be appreciated from the start of The Making in Thompson's emphasis on the importance of the London Corresponding Society. The idea of

³³ There are likely many forms of these transformations, such as metaphor and metonymy, and they are always in part dependent on context and discursive field. In general, I maintain that many of them involve some manner of homological transference, in which sets of valuations of relations can be transferred from one context to another.

"members unlimited" was not only important for working-class organization, it was equally important for the production of working-class discourse. The various societies and committees that pepper the subsequent course of Thompson's panorama are consequential in the same sense, for they all provided crucial social venues and organization within which the production of discourse occurred.

As important (if not more so) were the many organs of working-class expression which figure so prominently in Thompson's account. They can be conceived as having provided the partially processed materiel--sets of signifiers and meanings--through which working-class collectivities produced a consciousness of class. Cobbett and Carlile, Hunt and Hetherington, Owen and O'Brien, all are crucial in The Making because they provided the working class with discourse streams through which they could articulate their senses of oppression and exploitation. Periodicals such as the Political Register, The Republican, The Poor Man's Guardian, as well as the myriad pamphlets that were the staple fare of hawkers provided archetypal streams which were appropriated to express class consciousness in the "particular ways" in which experience begged. Their pages did not dictate the ways in which groups apprehended and responded to their oppression. Rather, they provided models of the world which working-class groups refined and reformulated to reflect their local exigencies and experiences. Through indigenous organization and collective action these formulations served as a collective voice.

The Making then is partly a history of class agency through discourse and of discursive transformation itself. What it is not is the history of a class discourse, if by that we conceive of a single internally coherent discourse stream (much as Stedman Jones's political radicalism). Instead we find many intertwined streams, whose uses varied by locale and group. The Enlightenment rationalism of a Paine or Carlile was often found together with the utopian visions of a Spence or Owen. As they were appropriated many such streams were refashioned in context to illuminate local experiences. An appreciation of their use requires a firm grounding in these contexts. Thus, we should envision these streams as operating in "class ways" not because of their signifiers or specific meanings, but because of the processes by which working-class actors employed them. In the sharing of streams across groups, contexts, and locales successively larger working-class collectivities were included within their systems of meanings.

An equally central part of this history was the process of discourse use as class struggle. Bourgeois and aristocratic groups also jockeyed within this discursive field for ascendancy. Paternalism and Political Economy were but two such streams often used to proffer visions of the world, and they themselves were subject to working-class appropriation in particular contexts. The latter, a protean discourse in its halcyon days, was a stream whose want of exactitude

dismayed its practitioners, and left it open as a terrain of discursive class struggle.³⁴ While Adam Smith was invoked by capital to justify free markets and unfettered competition, he was also cited by workers to legitimize their claims for high wages, a fair share of production, and the legacy of the worker to "live by his labor".³⁵ In purveying popular Political Economy to the working classes its champions frequently found that their attempts at suasion were turned into something alien to their designs.³⁶ Religious discourses, often one of the mainstays of attempts to "civilize" the working classes, were also part of the contested discursive field.³⁷

Through this conceptualization we can see that the challenge posed by The Making is to obtain a better appreciation for the ways in which discourse both facilitated and limited working-class agency in making sense of and acting upon their experiences. This is the case in at least two senses, both of which are lacking in Thompson's panorama. First, we need detailed analyses of the ways in which working-class groups conducted discursive struggles on the local level. This includes both their decisions and actions in structuring a collective voice within the discursive field available to them, and the ways their discourse helped to orient subsequent collective actions. Second, we need further research on how groups bridged such locally produced structures of meaning, to create larger frameworks for understanding and articulating their senses of oppression and redress in regional and national contexts. To take but one example, how did the framework knitters of Nottingham--degraded outworkers and enthusiasts of Cobbett--find a common vision of oppression with the cotton spinners of Southeast Lancashire--skilled factory workers and avid supporters of the likes of Detrouisier, Carlile, and Doherty? These two trade groups were among the anchors of the National Association for the Protection of Labour, and at first glance they appear somewhat curious bedfellows (Cole 1950; Kirby and Musson 1975).

³⁴ Richard Whatley, for instance, the heir to Nassau Senior's chair of Political Economy at Oxford, complained about the derivation of its core vocabulary from standard language and of its resultant inexactitude in use as a consequence (1827, p. 313).

³⁵ In particular there is much in Smith's discussions in Book One on wages which was fodder for the working class. Statements such as "Masters are always and everywhere in a sort of tacit, but constant and uniform combination, not to raise the wages of labour above their actual rate," or "A man must always live by his work, and his wages must be at least be sufficient to maintain him," flowed from the working-class pen with relative ease (1910, p. 60, 61).

³⁶ See for example Claeys's (1985) analysis of "productive" versus "unproductive" labor, as well as Goldstrom's (1985) discussion in the popularization of Political Economy. Noel Thompson (1984) in his provocative discussion of "Smithian socialism" presents many insights along these lines. As Claeys observes propagandists found themselves in a protracted struggle up until about the mid-century in achieving hegemony through the discourse of Political Economy (1985, p. 133).

³⁷ For discussions of Christian Socialism during the first half of the century see Hobsbawm (1959) and Saville (1954). For a recent analysis of populist preachers see Valenze (1985).

However a close examination of the discourse through which they affected their alliance should provide some insights as to how this bridge was constructed.

Thus, we should view The Making as a vital first step in the analysis of the ways in which discourse mattered in class formation. Thompson is clearly sensitive to its role in the culture of the working class, though he does not explicitly focus upon it. However, to remove its examination from the pages of The Making would impoverish its insights considerably. To further investigate the role of discourse conversely should extend the genius of Thompson's analysis.

Conclusion

More than twenty-five years after its publication The Making of the English Working Class remains a landmark work in English history and the study of class formation. Thompson's formulation and application of agency and experience in understanding the process of class formation have altered the ways historians and social scientists approach the study of class. From its inception The Making has been a lightning rod for criticism, some of it piquant and politically charged. In the latest round of critique Gareth Stedman Jones and Joan Wallach Scott have argued that Thompson seriously neglects the role of discourse in class formation, and in doing so has presented a partial picture of the subject of his panorama. They each have offered analyses which find a central causal role for discourse in the process of class formation. Stedman Jones sees political radicalism as a guiding force of working-class collective action, while Scott finds a fundamental gendering of the ways in which the working class was organized through discourse.

Both Stedman Jones and Scott are clearly correct in observing that discourse played an important role in this working-class history, yet their accounts are reductionist and highly skewed interpretations of a rich and complex history. By privileging discourse as a casual force in class formation they shunt experience and agency into minor roles, providing an impoverished account of how the working class was indeed active in its own making.

The alternative I have proposed is to focus on discourse as an intermediate process linking experience and agency, animated through social organization and collective action. The English working class of the early 19th century faced degradation of their labor and political oppression of rights they perceived as fundamental. In response to these trials they constructed expressions of their grievances and visions of solutions through the discourse streams available to them. Through the contextual use of various streams they articulated a consciousness of class. This process itself was part of the class struggle that was their making. In this sense discourse framed the painting of the panorama, and perhaps added shading, hue, and perspective, but it did not create the picture. As Thompson, following Marx, has observed, it is people that do the making, even if it is not just as they please.

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