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Democracy Against Capitalism

CHAPTER 3

Class as process and relationship

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There are really only two ways of thinking theoretically about class: either as a structural *location* or as a social *relation*. The first and more common of these treats class as a form of 'stratification', a layer in a hierarchical structure, differentiated according to 'economic' criteria such as income, 'market chances' or occupation. In contrast to this geological model, there is a social-historical conception of class as a relation between appropriators and producers, determined by the specific form in which, to use Marx's phrase, 'surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers'.

If the second of these conceptions is specifically Marxist, the first covers a broad spectrum from classical sociology up to and including some varieties of Marxism. So, for example, class defined as 'relation to the means of production' can take a form not so very different from the income differentiation of conventional stratification theory; and some of the most recent and influential theories of class elaborated under the rubric of 'Rational Choice Marxism' have deliberately shifted the focus of class away from the social relations of *surplus extraction* to the distribution of 'assets' or 'endowments'. Here, as in theories of stratification, the operative principle is relative advantage or *inequality*, not direct social relations between appropriators and producers but indirect relations of *comparison* among people differentially situated in a structural hierarchy.¹ By contrast, for 'classical' Marxism the focus is on the social relation itself, the

¹ I have discussed Rational Choice Marxism and its conception of class at great length in an article which I contemplated including in this volume: 'Rational Choice Marxism: Is the Game Worth the Candle?', *New Left Review*, 177 (1989), pp. 41-88. In the end, I decided to extract only a small section of it (in the next chapter), partly because it is already being included in a volume on rational choice Marxism edited by Paul Thomas and Terrell Carver, to be published by Macmillan, but also because debate with this school of theory tends to take discussion off on tangents which seem to me not very fruitful outside their own fairly self-enclosed game-theoretic universe.

dynamic of the relation between appropriators and producers, the contradictions and conflicts which account for social and historical processes; and *inequality*, as simply a comparative measure, has no theoretical purchase.

This distinctively Marxist conception of class has received remarkably little elaboration, either by Marx himself or by later theorists working in the historical materialist tradition. The most notable exception has been E.P. Thompson; but, while he self-consciously exemplified this conception in his historical work, he never actually spelled out a systematic theory of class in these terms. The few allusive and provocative remarks he did venture to make on the general definition of class have sparked a good deal of controversy, which has done little to clarify the issues between the dominant geological model and the historical-materialist theory of class.

What I sought to do when I wrote this essay was to tease out of Thompson's work a more elaborated theory of class than he ever explicitly outlined, knowing that I was taking the risk of attributing to him some of my own views on class but convinced – as I still am – that I was not traducing his. I proceeded by responding to Marxist critics who found Thompson's conception of class insufficiently 'structural'; and while this may seem an outmoded procedure in these post-Marxist days, when he is more likely to be criticized for being *too* economic or *too* class reductionist, it still seems to me to capture the more general issues at stake in the theory of class.

There is also another reason for leaving this argument more or less as it was. There has been a curious convergence between Thompson's Marxist critics and current anti-Marxist fashions on the left. When I wrote this chapter originally, Thompson was also being criticized by people who were already moving in a 'post-Marxist' direction. Having conceded that there is no automatic equation of 'structural' class positions and conscious class formations, such critics suggested, he did not go far enough. Thompson was accused of failing to 'face up' to the consequences of his 'non-reductive' Marxism. Once he had opened the floodgates by renouncing 'reductionism', apparently nothing stood between him and post-Marxist contingency.

This criticism, as we shall see, paradoxically converged with the Marxist objection that he was guilty of dissolving 'objective' structures in subjective 'experience' and culture, of identifying class with

class consciousness, of dissolving structural determinations into subjective experience – though where one castigated him for seeing *no* class where there is no class consciousness, the other accused him of seeing class everywhere, complete and ‘at the ready’, in all manifestations of popular culture. Both these apparently antithetical criticisms had as their starting point what I would regard as a fundamentally ahistorical view of the world, where there is nothing between structural necessity and empirical contingency, no room for *historical* determinations, structured processes with human agencies.

THE STRUCTURAL DEFINITION OF CLASS: E.P THOMPSON
AND HIS CRITICS

Thompson has been accused of mistakenly believing that, because ‘production relations do not mechanically determine class consciousness’, ‘class may not be defined purely in terms of production relations’.² In opposition to Thompson, Gerald Cohen argues that class may be defined ‘structurally’, ‘with more or less (if not, perhaps, “mathematical”) precision by reference to production relations’.³ Thompson, he suggests, rejects the structural definition of class and defines class ‘by reference to’ class consciousness and culture instead of production relations. ‘The result’, argues Perry Anderson, concurring with Cohen and accusing Thompson of neglecting objective or structural determinations, ‘is a definition of class that is far too voluntarist and subjectivist . . .’.⁴

Neither Anderson nor Cohen means to suggest that production relations ‘mechanically’ determine class consciousness or the formation of class organizations. On the contrary, Cohen is here criticizing Thompson on the grounds that he is too ready to jettison the structural definition of class on the mistaken assumption that it necessarily implies this kind of mechanical determinism. Both critics insist that there is, for Thompson, no class in the absence of class consciousness. His conception of class, in other words, does not allow for Marx’s distinction between a ‘class-in-itself’ and a ‘class-for-itself’, between a class that exists ‘objectively’ and a class that exists as an active and self-conscious historical subject, in opposition to other classes. Thompson, according to this argument, insofar as he

² G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence* (Princeton, 1978), p. 75.

⁴ Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism* (London, 1980), p. 40.

³ *Ibid.*

defines class at all, identifies it with the latter. Before a class exists in this form, it is not a class at all.

As I have already suggested in the previous chapter, it can be argued that exactly the reverse is true: the great strength of Thompson’s conception of class is that it is capable of recognizing, and giving an account of, the operations of class in the absence of class consciousness; while those who adopt the kind of structural definition his critics seem to have in mind have no effective way of demonstrating the efficacy of class in the absence of clearly visible self-conscious class formations, and no effective response to the claim that class is nothing more than an ideologically motivated theoretical construct imposed on historical evidence from without. I intend to elaborate that argument here but also to suggest that the failure to see this aspect of Thompson’s work has less to do with his own neglect of objective structures than with his critics’ understanding of what counts as a structural determination.

Where Thompson’s critics see structures *as against* processes, or structures that *undergo* processes, Thompson sees structured processes. This distinction reflects an epistemological difference: on the one hand, a view that theoretical knowledge – the knowledge of structures – is a matter of ‘static conceptual representation’, while motion and flux (together with history) belong to a different, empirical sphere of cognition; and, on the other hand, a view of knowledge that does not oppose structure to history, in which theory can accommodate *historical* categories, ‘concepts appropriate to the investigation of process’.⁵

It may be true that Thompson tells us too little about the relations of production and that he fails to define them with enough specificity. He may indeed take too much for granted. But to accuse him of defining class ‘by reference to’ or ‘in terms of’ class consciousness instead of production relations is quite simply to miss the point. It is not at all clear that Thompson’s conception of class is incompatible with, for example, the following statement by Perry Anderson, although Anderson intends it as a rejoinder to Thompson, an attack on his excessively voluntarist and subjectivist definition of class, and an expansion of Cohen’s criticism:

It is, and must be, the dominant mode of production that confers fundamental unity on a social formation, allocating their objective positions to

⁵ E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory* (London, 1978), p. 237.

the classes within it, and distributing the agents within each class. The result is, typically, an objective process of class struggle . . . class struggle is not a causal prius in the sustentation of order, for *classes are constituted by modes of production, and not vice versa*.⁶

Now unless the proposition that 'classes are constituted by modes of production' means – as in Anderson's case (or indeed Cohen's) it clearly does not – that modes of production immediately constitute active class formations or that the process of class formation is unproblematic and mechanical, Thompson (no doubt with some stylistic reservations) might readily accept it. His historical project presupposes that relations of production distribute people into class situations, that these situations entail essential antagonisms and conflicts of interest, and that they therefore create conditions of struggle. Class *formations* and the discovery of class consciousness grow out of the process of struggle, as people 'experience' and 'handle' their class situations. It is in this sense that class struggle precedes class. To say that exploitation is 'experienced in class ways and only thence give(s) rise to class formations' is to say precisely that the conditions of exploitation, the relations of production, are objectively *there* to be experienced.⁷

Nevertheless, objective determinations do not impose themselves on blank and passive raw material but on active and conscious *historical* beings. Class formations emerge and develop 'as men and women *live* their productive relations and *experience* their determinate situations, within "the *ensemble* of the social relations", with their inherited culture and expectations, and as they handle these experiences in cultural ways'.⁸ This certainly means that no structural definition of class can by itself resolve the problem of class formation and that 'no model can give us what ought to be the "true" class formation for a certain "stage" of process'.⁹

At the same time, if class formations are generated by 'living' and 'experiencing', within a complex totality of social relations and historical legacies, they presuppose what is lived and experienced: productive relations and the determinate situations 'into which men are born or enter involuntarily'.¹⁰ In order to experience things in

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁷ E.P. Thompson, 'Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?', *Social History* 3 (2) (May 1978), p. 149 n. 36.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 150. ⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1968), p. 10.

'class ways' people must be 'objectively distributed' into class situations; but this is the beginning, not the end, of class formation. It is not a small, or theoretically trivial, point to distinguish between the constitution of classes by modes of production and the process of class formation. Nor is it unimportant to suggest that, however completely we may succeed in deductively situating people on a chart of class locations, the problematic question of class formation will remain and may yield answers that are both theoretically and politically more significant. The crucial point is that the main burden of a Marxist theory of class must be less on identifying class 'locations' than on explaining processes of class formation.

In effect, Thompson is being accused of voluntarism and subjectivism not because he neglects the objective, structural determinations of class, but on the contrary, because he refuses to relegate the process of class formation, which is his central concern, to a sphere of mere contingency and subjectivity set apart from the sphere of 'objective' material determination, as his critics appear to do. He does not proceed from a theoretical dualism which opposes *structure* to *history* and identifies the 'structural' explanation of class with the charting of objective, static class locations while reserving the process of class formation for an apparently lesser form of historical and empirical explanation. Instead, Thompson, taking seriously the principles of historical materialism and its conception of materially structured historical processes, treats the process of class formation as a *historical* process shaped by the 'logic' of material determinations.

Thompson could, in fact, turn the tables on his critics. One of his major objectives in refusing to define class as a 'structure' or 'thing', as he points out in *The Making of the English Working Class*, has been to vindicate the concept of class against those, especially bourgeois social scientists, who deny its existence except as 'a pejorative theoretical construct, imposed upon the evidence'.¹¹ He has countered such denials by insisting upon class as a relationship and a process, to be observed over time as a pattern in social relations, institutions and values. Class, in other words, is a phenomenon which is visible only in process.

The denial of class, especially where there is no historical clarity to force its reality upon our attention, cannot be answered simply by

¹¹ *Ibid.*

reciting the 'structural' definition of class. This is, in fact, no better than the reduction of class to a theoretical construct imposed on the evidence. What is needed is a way of demonstrating how the structuration of society 'in class ways' actually affects social relations and historical processes. The point, then, is to have a conception of class that invites us to discover how objective class situations actually shape social reality, and not simply to state and restate the tautological proposition that 'class equals relation to the means of production'.

The concept of class as *relationship* and *process* stresses that objective relations to the means of production are significant because they establish antagonisms and generate conflicts and struggles; that these conflicts and struggles shape social experience 'in class ways', even when they do not express themselves in class consciousness or in clearly visible formations; and that over time we can discern how these relationships impose their logic, their pattern, on social processes. Purely 'structural' conceptions of class do not require us to look for the ways in which class actually imposes its logic, since classes are simply *there* by definition.

Thompson has nevertheless been attacked on the grounds that, by failing to define class in purely 'structural' terms, he has rendered the concept inapplicable to all historical cases in which no class consciousness can be discerned.¹² Yet the emphasis on class as relationship and process is especially important precisely in dealing with cases where no well-defined expressions of class consciousness are available to provide uncontested evidence of class. This applies in particular to social formations before industrial capitalism, which in nineteenth-century England for the first time in history produced unambiguously visible class formations, compelling observers to take note of class and provide conceptual instruments to apprehend it.

In fact, Thompson is arguably the one Marxist who, instead of evading the issue or taking class for granted, has tried to give an account of class which can be applied in such ambiguous cases. His purpose here has not been to deny the existence of class in the absence of class consciousness but, on the contrary, to answer such denials by showing how class determinants shape social processes, how people behave 'in class ways,' even before, and as a pre-

¹² For example, Cohen, *Marx's Theory*, p. 76; Anderson, *Arguments*, p. 40.

condition to, the 'mature' formations of class with their consciously class-defined institutions and values.¹³

So, for example, the formula 'class struggle without class', which Thompson tentatively proposes to describe English society in the eighteenth century, is intended to convey the effects of class-structured social relations upon agents without class consciousness and as a precondition to conscious class formations. Class struggle therefore precedes class, both in the sense that class formations *presuppose* an experience of conflict and struggle arising out of production relations, and in the sense that there are conflicts and struggles structured 'in class ways' even in societies that do not yet have class-conscious formations.

To argue that a purely structural definition is required to rescue the universal applicability of 'class' is to suggest that in the absence of class consciousness classes exist *only* as 'objective relations to the means of production', with no practical consequences for the dynamics of social process. So perhaps it is not Thompson but his critics who effectively reduce class to class consciousness. Thompson, in contrast, seems to be arguing that the 'objective relations of production' always matter, whether or not they are expressed in a well-defined consciousness of class – though they matter in different ways in different historical contexts and produce class *formations* only as a result of historical processes. The point is to have a conception of class that turns our attention to precisely how, and in what different modes, objective class situations matter.

Thompson, then, does indeed say that classes arise or 'happen' because people 'in determinative productive relations', who consequently share a common experience, identify their common interests and come to think and value 'in class ways';¹⁴ but this does not mean that classes do not, in any meaningful sense, exist for him as objective realities before class consciousness. On the contrary, class consciousness is possible because 'objective' class situations already exist. His primary concern, of course, is to focus attention on the complex and often contradictory historical processes by which, in determinate historical conditions, class *situations* give rise to class *formations*. As for purely 'structural' definitions of class, since they cannot define completed class formations, either they are intended

¹³ Thompson, 'Eighteenth-Century English Society', p. 147.

¹⁴ See, for example, Thompson, *English Working Class*, pp. 9–10. See also Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, pp. 298–9.

simply to denote the same determining pressures exerted by objective class distributions on variable historical processes – so that the difference between Thompson and his critics is largely a question of emphasis – or such definitions refer to nothing significant at all.

THE MAKING OF THE ENGLISH WORKING CLASS

The proposition that Thompson neglects objective determinations in favour of subjective factors has been put to a practical test by Perry Anderson in a particularly trenchant criticism of his major historical work, *The Making of the English Working Class*. Anderson argues that, in this work, the objective conditions of capital accumulation and industrialization are treated as secondary and external to the making of the English proletariat:

It is not the structural transformations – economic, political and demographic – . . . which are the objects of his inquiry, but rather their precipitates in the subjective experience of those who lived through these 'terrible years'. The result is to resolve the complex manifold of objective-subjective determinations whose totalization actually generated the English working class into a simple dialectic between suffering and resistance whose whole movement is internal to the subjectivity of the class.¹⁵

In fact, suggests Anderson, the advent of industrial capitalism becomes merely a moment in a long and largely 'subjective' process, going back to Tudor times, in which the formation of the English working class appears as a gradual development in a continuous tradition of popular culture.¹⁶ There is, according to Anderson:

no real treatment of the whole historical process whereby heterogeneous groups of artisans, small holders, agricultural labourers, domestic workers and casual poor were gradually assembled, distributed and reduced to the condition of labour subsumed to capital, first in the formal dependence of the wage-contract, ultimately in the real dependence of integration into mechanized means of production.¹⁷

So, Anderson argues, Thompson provides us with no means of testing his proposition that 'the English working class made itself as much as it was made', since he gives us no measure of the proportional relation between 'agency' and 'necessity'. What would be required is at least a 'conjoint exploration of the objective assemblage and transformation of a labour-force by the Industrial Revo-

¹⁵ Anderson, *Arguments*, p. 39.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

lution, and of the subjective germination of a class culture in response to it'.¹⁸ By concentrating on the 'immediate experience of the producers rather than on the mode of production itself', Thompson gives us only the subjective elements of the equation.¹⁹

Anderson correctly isolates two of the most characteristic and problematic themes in Thompson's argument: his stress on the continuity of popular traditions cutting across the 'catastrophic' break of the Industrial Revolution; and his insistence on historically situating the critical moments in the formation of the English working class in such a way that the moment of fruition comes in the period 1790–1832, that is, before the real transformation of production and the labour force by industrial capitalism was very far advanced and with no account of the tremendous changes in the working class thereafter.²⁰

Difficulties certainly do arise here, as Anderson suggests. The emphasis on the continuity of popular traditions – older traditions not specifically proletarian but artisanal and 'democratic' – may at first glance make it hard to perceive what is new about the working class of 1790–1832, what is specifically proletarian, or unique to industrial capitalism, in this class formation. What, exactly, has been 'made', and what role has the new order of industrial capitalism played in the making? The temporal parameters may also present problems. To end the process of 'making' in 1832, when industrial transformation was far from complete, may seem to imply that the developments in class consciousness, institutions and values outlined by Thompson occurred independently of 'objective' transformations in the mode of production.

There are no doubt many historiographical issues to be contested here about the nature and development of the English working class. But the immediate question is whether Thompson's insistence on the continuity of popular traditions and his apparently idiosyncratic periodization of working-class formation reflect a preoccupation with subjective factors at the expense of objective determinations. Is it Thompson's intention to set 'subjective' developments (the evolution of popular culture) against 'objective' factors (the processes of capital accumulation and industrialization)?

The first striking point about Thompson's argument is that, for all his insistence on the continuity of popular culture, he considers his

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

argument not as a denial but as a reaffirmation of the view that the period of the Industrial Revolution represents a significant, indeed 'catastrophic', historical milestone, marked by the emergence of a class sufficiently new to appear as a 'fresh race of beings'. In other words, his object is not to assert the subjective continuity of working-class culture against the radical objective transformations of capitalist development but, on the contrary, to reveal and explain the changes within the continuities.

In part, Thompson's emphases are shaped to fit the specific terms of the debates in which he is engaged, debates about the effects of the Industrial Revolution such as the 'standard of living' argument, controversies between 'catastrophic' and 'anti-catastrophic' or 'empiricist' analyses, and so on. He is, among other things, responding to a variety of recent historical – and ideological – orthodoxies which question the importance of dislocations and disruptions entailed by industrial capitalism, or, if they admit to the existence of hardships within the generally progressive and improving tendencies of 'industrialization', attribute them to causes external to the system of production – for example, to 'trade cycles'. Such arguments are sometimes accompanied by denials that *the* working class, as distinct from several working classes, existed at all.

An emphasis on the diversity of working-class experience, on the differences between the 'pre-industrial' experience of domestic workers or artisans and that of factory hands fully absorbed into the new industrial order, can be particularly serviceable to capitalist ideology. It is, for example, especially useful in arguments that confine the hardships and dislocations engendered by industrial capitalism to 'pre-industrial' or traditional workers. In these interpretations, the degradation of such workers becomes simply the inevitable and impersonal consequence of 'displacement by mechanical processes', 'progress', and improved industrial methods, while the modern worker moves steadily onward and upward.

Thompson vindicates the 'catastrophic' view, as well as the notion of *the* working class, by confronting the evidence adduced by their critics. One of his tasks is to explain why, although by certain statistical yardsticks there may have been a slight improvement in average material standards in the period 1790–1840, this improvement was experienced by workers as a 'catastrophe', which they handled by creating new class formations, 'strongly based and self-conscious institutions – trade unions, friendly societies, edu-

cational and religious movements, political organizations, periodicals' together with 'working-class intellectual traditions, working-class community patterns, and a working-class structure of feeling'.²¹ These institutions and forms of consciousness are tangible testimony to the existence of a new working-class formation, despite the apparent diversity of experience; and their expressions in popular unrest bear witness against the 'optimistic' view of the Industrial Revolution.

Yet Thompson then faces the problem of accounting for the fact that this class formation is already visibly in place when the new system of production is still undeveloped; that large numbers of the workers who constitute this class formation, and indeed initiate its characteristic institutions, do not apparently belong to a 'fresh race of beings' produced by industrialization, but are still engaged in ostensibly 'pre-industrial' forms of domestic and artisanal labour; and that factory hands probably did not (except in cotton districts) form the 'nucleus of the Labour movement' before the late 1840s.²² In light of these facts, it would on the face of it be difficult to maintain that the new working class was simply created by the new forms of production characteristic of industrial capitalism. To account for the incontestable presence of class formations that unite new and traditional forms of labour – artisans, domestic workers, factory hands – it becomes necessary to identify a unifying experience, one which also explains why the 'catastrophic' impact of the Industrial Revolution was experienced in sectors apparently still untouched by the transformation of industrial production.

Here Thompson's critics might argue – as Anderson's criticism suggests – that Thompson relies too much on 'subjective' experiences, suffering and the continuity of popular culture to override the objective diversity of artisans and factory hands without giving an account of the processes that actually, objectively, united them into a single class. Indeed, these critics might argue that for Thompson no objective unity is necessary to identify the working class, as long as it can be defined in terms of a unity in consciousness.

But criticisms like this concede too much to Thompson's anti-Marxist opponents. For example, the 'optimistic' and 'empiricist' arguments rely at least implicitly on setting up an opposition between 'facts' and 'values', between their own 'objective' standards

²¹ Thompson, *English Working Class*, pp. 213, 231.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 211.

and merely 'subjective' standards having to do with the 'quality of life'. This opposition can be used to obscure the issues by relegating problems of exploitation, relations of production and class struggle – which are the focus of Thompson's argument – to the sphere of subjectivity, while identifying objectivity with 'hard' 'impersonal' factors: trade cycles, technology, wage and price indices. Thompson, while certainly concerned with the 'quality of life', defines its conditions not simply in subjective terms but in terms of the objective realities of capitalist production relations and their expressions in the organization of life.

'OBJECTIVE' DETERMINATIONS

The single most important objective condition experienced in common by various kinds of workers during the period in question was the intensification of exploitation; and Thompson devotes the second and central section of *The Making of the English Working Class*, introduced by a chapter entitled 'Exploitation', to a description of its effects.²³ He is concerned not simply with its effects in 'suffering' but in the distribution and organization of work (as well as leisure), most especially its consequences for work discipline and the intensity of labour, for example in the extension of hours of work, increasing specialization, the break up of the family economy, and so on.²⁴ He also considers how the exploitive relationship was expressed in 'corresponding forms of ownership and State power', in legal and political forms, and how the intensification of exploitation was compounded by counter-revolutionary political repression.²⁵ These are factors that certainly cannot, from a Marxist point of view, be dismissed as 'subjective'; and Thompson sets them against the 'hard facts' of the 'empiricist' argument, not as subjectivity against objec-

²³ See, for example: *ibid.*, pp. 217–18, 226. The structure of the book as a whole is worth noting. Part One describes the political culture and traditions of struggle which people brought with them into the transforming experience of 'industrialization'. Part Two describes in great detail that transforming experience itself, the new relationship of exploitation and its multifarious expressions in every aspect of life, in work and leisure, in family and communal life. Part Three describes the new working-class consciousness, the new political culture, and the new forms of struggle that emerged out of that transformation. Part Two is the pivotal section, explaining the objective influences (as Thompson himself describes them), the transformations through which the old popular tradition was reshaped into a new working-class culture.

²⁴ See, for example: Thompson, *English Working Class*, pp. 221–3, 230.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 215–18.

tivity, but as the real objective determinations which underlie the 'facts':

By what social alchemy did inventions for saving labour become agents of immiseration? The raw fact – a bad harvest – may seem to be beyond human election. But the way that fact worked its way out was in terms of a particular complex of human relationship: law, ownership, power. When we encounter some sonorous phrase such as 'the strong ebb and flow of the trade cycle' we must be put on our guard. For behind this trade cycle there is a structure of social relations, fostering some sorts of expropriation (rent, interest, profit) and outlawing some others (theft, feudal dues), legitimizing some types of conflict (competition, armed warfare) and inhibiting others (trade unionism, bread riots, popular political organization) . . .²⁶

The underlying objective determinations affecting the developments of 1790–1832 were, then, the working out of capitalist modes of expropriation, the intensification of exploitation this implied, and the structure of social relations, legal forms and political powers by which that exploitation was sustained. The significant point is that these factors affected *both* 'traditional' and new forms of labour; and their common 'experience', with the struggles it entailed – in a period of transition which produced a moment of particular transparency in relationships of exploitation, a clarity heightened by political repression – underlay the process of class formation.

The particular significance and subtlety of Thompson's argument lies in its demonstration that the apparent continuity of 'pre-industrial' forms can be deceptive. He argues that domestic and artisanal production were themselves transformed – even when they were not displaced – by the same process and the same mode of exploitation that created the factory system. In fact, it was often in outwork industries that the new relationship of exploitation was most transparent. This is, for example, how he answers arguments that attribute the hardships of 'industrialization' simply to 'displacement by mechanical processes':

it will not do to explain away the plight of weavers or of 'slop' workers as 'instances of the decline of old crafts which were displaced by a mechanical process'; nor can we even accept the statement, in its pejorative context, that 'it was not among the factory employees but among the domestic workers, whose traditions and methods were those of the eighteenth century, that earnings were at their lowest'. The suggestion to which these statements lead us is that these conditions can somehow be segregated in

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 224–5.

our minds from the true improving impulse of the Industrial Revolution – they belong to an ‘older’, pre-industrial order, whereas the authentic features of the new capitalist order may be seen where there are steam, factory operatives, and meat-eating engineers. But the numbers employed in the outwork industries multiplied enormously between 1780–1830; and very often steam and the factory were the multipliers. It was the mills which spun the yarn and the foundries which made the nail-rod upon which the outworkers were employed. Ideology may wish to exalt one and decry the other, but facts must lead us to say that each was a complementary component of a single process Moreover, the degradation of the outworkers was very rarely as simple as the phrase ‘displaced by a mechanical process’ suggests; it was accomplished by methods of exploitation similar to those in the dishonourable trades and it often preceded machine competition Indeed, we may say that large-scale sweated outwork was as intrinsic to this revolution as was factory production and steam.²⁷

Thompson undermines the ideological foundations of his anti-Marxist adversaries simply by displacing the focus of analysis from ‘industrialization’ to *capitalism*.²⁸ In other words, he shifts our attention from purely ‘technological’ factors, as well as from trade cycles and market relations – the typical refuges of capitalist ideology – to the relations of production and class exploitation. From this (Marxist) standpoint, Thompson is able to account for the historical presence of working-class formations in the early stages of industrialization, on the grounds that the essential capitalist relations of production and exploitation were already in place, and indeed were the pre-conditions for industrialization itself.

For a variety of reasons, then, Thompson cannot accept the simple proposition that the factory system produced, out of whole cloth, a new working class, nor the suggestion that the objective ‘assemblage, distribution, and transformation’ of the labour force had to precede the emergence of a class consciousness and culture ‘in response’ to it. He cannot accept that the making of the working class out of ‘heterogeneous groups’ had to await the completion of the process in which they were ‘assembled, distributed, and reduced to the condition of labour subsumed to capital, first in the formal

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 288–9; see also pp. 222–3.

²⁸ Elsewhere, Thompson explicitly questions the ‘suspect’ concept of ‘industrialism,’ which obscures the social realities of industrial capitalism by treating them as if they belonged to some inevitable ‘supposedly-neutral, technologically-determined, process known as “industrialization” . . .’, ‘Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,’ now available in his collection of essays, *Customs in Common* (London, 1991).

dependence of the wage-contract, ultimately in the real dependence of integration into mechanized means of production’. For one thing, if the relations of production and exploitation are the critical objective factors in constituting a mode of production, and if they provide the impulse for the transformation of labour processes, then the ‘formal subjection’ of labour to capital assumes a special significance and primacy.

The ‘formal subjection’ represents the establishment of the capitalist relationship between appropriator and producer and the pre-condition to, indeed the motivating force for, the subsequent ‘real’ transformation of production, often called ‘industrialization’. It acts as a determinative force upon various kinds of workers, and as a unifying experience among them, even before the process of ‘real subjection’ incorporates them all and ‘assembles’ them in factories.

In a very important sense, then, it is indeed ‘experience’ and not simply an objective ‘assemblage’ that unites these heterogeneous groups into a class – though ‘experience’ in this context refers to the effects of objective determinations, the relations of production and class exploitation. In fact, the connection between relations of production and class formation can probably never be conceived in any other way, since people are never actually assembled directly in class formations in the process of production. Even when the ‘assemblage and transformation’ of the labour force is complete, people are at best assembled only in productive units, factories, and so on. Their assemblage in class formations which transcend such individual units is a process of a different kind, one that depends upon their consciousness of, and propensity to act upon, a common experience and common interests. (More on this later.)

Thompson is perhaps being criticized for concentrating on the formal subjection at the expense of the real. There are indeed weaknesses in his arguments arising from his focus on the determinative and unifying force of capitalist exploitation and its effects on ‘pre-industrial’ workers, and his relative neglect of the specificity of ‘industrialization’ and machine production, the further ‘catastrophe’ occasioned by the completion of ‘real subjection’. Perry Anderson, for example, refers to the profound changes in working-class industrial and political organization and class consciousness after the 1840s, when the transformation was more or less complete – changes which, he suggests, Thompson’s argument cannot

explain.²⁹ But this is not the same thing as saying that Thompson concentrates on subjective rather than objective determinations – unless it is from the standpoint of ‘optimistic’ and ‘empiricist’ orthodoxies or capitalist ideology, in which the very premises of Marxist theory, with its focus on relations of production and class exploitation, can be dismissed altogether as ‘subjectivist’.

There are other more general theoretical and political reasons for denying that the making of the English working class was the ‘spontaneous generation of the factory system’. The basic theoretical and methodological principle of Thompson’s whole historical project is that objective determinations – the transformation of production relations and working conditions – never impose themselves on ‘some nondescript undifferentiated raw material of humanity’ but on historical beings, the bearers of historical legacies, traditions and values.³⁰ This means, among other things, that there are necessarily continuities cutting across all historical transformations, even the most radical, and indeed that radical transformations can be revealed and substantiated precisely – only? – by tracing them within continuities. Again, his own emphasis on the continuity of popular culture is intended not to deny but to identify and stress the transformations it undergoes.

This much is perhaps characteristic of any truly historical account, but there is more to Thompson’s argument than this. It is essential to his historical materialism to recognize that ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ are not dualistically separated entities (which lend themselves easily to the measurement of ‘necessity’ and ‘agency’), related to one another only externally and mechanically, ‘the one sequential upon the other’ as objective stimulus and subjective response.³¹ It is necessary somehow to incorporate in social analysis the role of conscious and active historical beings, who are ‘subject’ and ‘object’ at once, both agents and material forces in objective processes.

Finally, Thompson’s mode of analysis makes it possible to acknowledge the active role of the working class, with its culture and values, in ‘making’ itself. This role may be obscured by formulations which speak, on the one hand, of ‘the objective assemblage and

²⁹ Anderson, *Arguments*, pp. 45–7. Anderson refers here to Gareth Stedman Jones’s discussion of the ‘re-making’ of the English working class in the latter part of the nineteenth century, in ‘Working-Class Culture and Working-Class Politics in London, 1870–1890: Notes on the Remaking of a Working Class’, *Journal of Social History* (Summer 1974), pp. 460–508.

³⁰ Thompson, *English Working Class*, p. 213. ³¹ Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, p. 298.

transformation of labour force by the Industrial Revolution’, and, on the other – sequentially? – ‘the subjective germination of a class culture in response to it’. The acknowledgment of working-class self-activity is central not only to Thompson’s historical project but to his political one.

CLASS AS RELATIONSHIP AND PROCESS

Thompson’s concern, then, is to render class visible in history and to make its objective determinations manifest as historical forces, as real effects in the world and not just as theoretical constructs that refer to no actual social force or process. This means that he must locate the essence of class not simply in ‘structural *positions*’ but in *relationships* – the relationships of exploitation, conflict and struggle which provide the impulse to processes of class formation. Yet this very emphasis is often singled out as evidence of his voluntarism and subjectivism, his neglect of objective determinations. Clearly, his preference for treating class as relationship and process – rather than, for example, as a structure which *enters* relationships or *undergoes* process – demands closer scrutiny – and here I shall take more than the usual interpretive liberties in elaborating what may be more my own theory of class than Thompson’s.

‘Class as relationship’ actually entails two relationships: that between classes and that among members of the same class. The importance of stressing the relationship between classes as essential to the definition of class is self-evident when considered against the background of ‘stratification’ theories which – whether they focus on income distribution, occupation groups, status, or any other criterion – have to do with *differences*, *inequalities* and *hierarchy*, not relations. It is surely unnecessary to point out the consequences, both sociological and ideological, of employing a definition of class (if class is admitted as a ‘category of stratification’ at all) which factors out relations like domination or exploitation. Even more fundamentally, such categories of stratification may render class itself invisible altogether. Where is the dividing line between classes in a continuum of inequality? Where is the qualitative break in a structure of stratification?³²

³² For an important discussion of this point, see Peter Meiksins, ‘Beyond the Boundary Question’, *New Left Review*, 157, pp. 101–20, and ‘New Classes and Old Theories’, in Rhonda Levine and Jerry Lembcke, eds., *Recapturing Marxism: An Appraisal of Recent Trends in Sociological Theory* (New York, 1987).

Even the criterion of relation to the means of production is not enough to mark such boundaries and can easily be assimilated to conventional stratification theory. It is possible, for example, to treat 'relations to the means of production' as nothing more than income differentials by locating their significance not in the exploitative and antagonistic social relations they entail but in the different 'market chances' they confer.³³ The differences among classes thus become indeterminate and inconsequential. If classes enter into any relationship at all, it is the indirect, impersonal relationship of individual competition in the market place, in which there are no clear qualitative breaks or antagonisms but only a quantitative continuum of relative advantage and disadvantage in the contest for goods and services.

It is explicitly against class as a 'category of stratification' that Thompson directs much of his argument about class as a relationship, and precisely on the grounds that stratification theories tend to render class invisible.³⁴ The most obvious target of this attack is conventional anti-Marxist sociology; but Thompson often points out that there are affinities between certain Marxist treatments of class and these sociological conjuring tricks, to the extent that they are more interested in abstractly defined structural class *locations* than in the qualitative social breaks expressed in the dynamics of class relations and conflicts.

While the identification of antagonisms in the relation between classes is a necessary condition for a definition of class, it is not sufficient. That brings us to class as an *internal* relationship, a relationship among members of a class. The idea of class as a relationship in this sense also entails certain propositions about how classes are connected to the underlying relations of production.

The proposition that production relations are the foundation of class relations is certainly the basis of any materialist theory of class; but it does not by itself advance the issue very far. If we cannot say that class is *synonymous* with production relations, we are still left with the problem (which is generally evaded) of defining precisely the nature of the connection between class and its foundation in production.

The relations of production are the relations among people who

³³ See, for example: Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (New York, 1968), pp. 927-8. Rational choice Marxism has some striking affinities with this view.

³⁴ For example, Thompson, *English Working Class*, pp. 9-10.

are joined by the production process and the antagonistic nexus between those who produce and those who appropriate their surplus labour. The division between direct producers and the appropriators of their surplus labour, the antagonism of interest inherent in this relationship, no doubt defines the polarities underlying class antagonisms. But class relations are not reducible to production relations. First, the clear polarities (when they *are* clear) inherent in the relations of production do not account neatly for all potential members of historical classes. More fundamentally, even if individual appropriators owe their exploitive power to the *class* power that stands behind them, it is not classes that produce and appropriate. To put it very simply: people who are joined in a class are not all directly assembled by the process of production itself or by the process of appropriation.

Workers in a factory, brought together by the capitalist in a cooperative division of labour, are directly assembled in the production process. Each worker also stands in a kind of direct relationship to the particular capitalist (individual or collective) who appropriates his or her surplus value, just as the peasant is directly related to the landlord who appropriates his rent. A direct relationship of some kind can also be said to exist, for example, among peasants who work independently of one another but who share the same landlord, even if they do not deliberately combine in opposition to him.

The relationship among members of a class, or between these members and other classes, is of a different kind. Neither the production process itself nor the process of surplus extraction actually brings them together. 'Class' does not refer simply to workers combined in a unit of production or opposed to a common exploiter in a unit of appropriation. Class implies a connection that extends beyond the immediate process of production and the immediate nexus of extraction, a connection that spans across particular units of production and appropriation. The connections and oppositions contained in the production process are the basis of class; but the relationship among people occupying similar positions in the relations of production is not given directly by the process of production and appropriation.

The links that connect the members of a class are not defined by the simple assertion that class is structurally determined by the relations of production. It still remains to be explained in what sense

and through what mediations the relations of production establish connections among people who, even if they occupy similar positions in production relations, are not actually assembled in the process of production and appropriation. In *The Making of the English Working Class*, as we have seen, Thompson addressed himself to this very question. Here, he sought to account for the existence of class relationships among workers not directly assembled in the process of production and even engaged in widely divergent forms of production. In his account, it was indeed the relations of production that lay at the heart of these class relationships; but the determining structural pressures of production relations could be demonstrated only as they worked themselves out in a historical process of class formation, and these pressures could be apprehended theoretically only by introducing the mediating concept of 'experience'.

Class formation is particularly difficult to explain without resorting to concepts like Thompson's 'experience'. While people may participate directly in production and appropriation – the combinations, divisions and conflicts generated by these processes – class does not present itself to them so immediately. Since people are never actually 'assembled' in classes, the determining pressure exerted by a mode of production in the formation of classes cannot easily be expressed without reference to something like a common experience – a lived experience of production relations, the divisions between producers and appropriators, and more particularly, of the conflicts and struggles inherent in relations of exploitation. It is in the medium of this lived experience that social consciousness is shaped and with it the '*disposition to behave as a class*'.³⁵ Once the medium of 'experience' is introduced into the equation between production relations and class, so too are the historical and cultural particularities of this medium. This certainly complicates the issue; but to acknowledge, as Thompson does, the complexity of the mechanism by which production relations give rise to class is not to deny their determining pressure.

Thompson has been accused of idealism because of his emphasis on 'experience', as if this notion had slipped its material moorings. But his use of this concept is certainly not intended to sever the link between 'social being' and social consciousness or even to deny the primacy that historical materialism accords to social being in its

³⁵ Thompson, 'The Peculiarities of the English', in *The Poverty of Theory*, p. 85.

relation to consciousness. On the contrary, although Thompson sometimes distinguishes among levels of experience ('lived experience' and 'perceived experience'), his primary use of the term is as 'a necessary middle term between social being and social consciousness', the medium in which social being determines consciousness: 'it is by means of experience that the mode of production exerts a determining pressure on other activities'.³⁶ Experience in this sense is precisely 'the experience of determination'.³⁷ In fact, since Marx's concept of social being itself clearly refers not simply to the mode of production as an impersonal 'objective structure' but to the way that people live it (one can hardly avoid saying *experience* it), Thompson's 'experience' substantially overlaps with 'social being'.

The concept of 'experience', then, means that 'objective structures' do something to people's lives, and that this is why, for example, we have classes and not only relations of production. It is the task of the historian and the sociologist to explore what these 'structures' do to people's lives, how they do it, and what people do about it – or, as Thompson might put it, how the determining pressures of structured processes are experienced and handled by people. The burden of the theoretical message contained in the concept of 'experience' is, among other things, that the operation of determining pressures is a historical question, and therefore immediately an empirical one. There can be no rupture between the theoretical and the empirical, and Thompson the historian immediately takes up the task presented by Thompson the theorist.

Neither Marx nor Thompson nor anyone else has devised a 'rigorous' theoretical vocabulary to convey the effect of material conditions on conscious, active beings – beings whose conscious activity is itself a material force – or to comprehend the fact that these effects assume an infinite variety of historically specific empirical forms. But it can surely be no part of theoretical rigour to ignore these complexities merely for the sake of conceptual tidiness or a framework of 'structural definitions' which purport to resolve all important historical questions on the theoretical plane. Nor is it enough just to concede the existence of these complexities in some other order of reality – in the sphere of history as distinct from the

³⁶ Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, p. 290; also pp. 200–1. A conception of 'determination' similar to Thompson's is given a systematic treatment in Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 83–9.

³⁷ Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, p. 298.

sphere of 'objective structures' – which belongs to a different level of discourse, the 'empirical' in opposition to the 'theoretical'. They must somehow be acknowledged by the theoretical framework itself and be embodied in the very notion of 'structure' – as, for example, in Thompson's notion of 'structured process'.

Deductive 'structural definitions' of class cannot explain how people sharing a common experience of production relations but not united by the process of production itself come by the 'disposition to behave as a class', let alone how the nature of that disposition – the degree of cohesion and consciousness associated with it, its expression in common goals, institutions, organizations, and united action – changes over time. Such definitions cannot take into account the pressures against class formation – pressures that may themselves be inherent in the structure, the objective determinations, of the prevailing mode of production – and the tension between the impulses towards and against coalescence and common action.

The notion of class as 'structured process', in contrast, acknowledges that while the structural basis of class formation is to be found in the antagonistic relations of production, the particular ways in which the structural pressures exerted by these relations actually operate in the formation of classes remains an open question to be resolved empirically by historical and sociological analysis. Such a conception of class also recognizes that this is where the most important and problematic questions about class lie, and that the usefulness of any class analysis – as either a sociological tool or a guide to political strategy – rests on its ability to account for the process of class formation. This means that any definition of class must invite, not foreclose, the investigation of process.

Thompson's insistence on class as process again puts in question the accusation that he equates class with class consciousness, that, to put it another way, he confuses the phenomenon of class itself with the conditions that make class 'an active historical subject'.³⁸ The first point to note about this accusation is that it is itself based on a confusion: it fails to take account of the difference between, on the one hand, class consciousness – that is, the active awareness of class identity – and, on the other hand, forms of consciousness that are shaped in various ways by class situations without yet finding expression in a self-aware and active class identity. Thompson is

³⁸ Cohen, *Marx's Theory*, p. 76.

especially concerned with the historical processes that intervene between the two.

More fundamentally, to equate class with a particular level of consciousness, or with the existence of class consciousness at all, *would* be to identify class with one stage of its development instead of stressing, as Thompson does, the complex processes that go to make up the 'disposition to behave as a class'. Thompson's conception of class as 'relationship' and 'process' is directed against definitions which, at best, imply that there is one point in the formation of classes where one can stop the process and say 'here is class, and not before', or at 'worst and, perhaps more commonly, seek to define classes outside the medium of time and historical process altogether. This can be done either by 'deducing' classes from 'structural positions' in relation to the means of production or by 'hypostasizing class identities – great personalized attributions of class aspirations or volition – which one knows are at best the metaphorical expression of most complex, and generally involuntary, processes'.³⁹ Thompson's object, then, is not to identify class with a particular level of consciousness or organization which makes it a conscious political force, but rather to focus our attention on class in the process of becoming, or making itself, such a force.

Class as 'structure' conceptualizes away the very fact that defines the role of class as the driving force of historical movement: the fact that class at the beginning of a historical mode of production is not what it is at the end. The identity of a mode of production is commonly said to reside in the persistence of its production relations: as long as the form in which 'surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producer' remains essentially the same, we are entitled to refer to a mode of production as 'feudal', 'capitalist', and so on. But *class* relations are the principle of movement *within* the mode of production. The history of a mode of production is the history of its developing class relations and, in particular, their changing relations to the relations of production. Classes develop within a mode of production in the process of coalescing around the relations of production and as the composition, cohesion, consciousness, and organization of the resulting class formations change. The mode of production reaches its crisis when the development of class relations within it actually transforms the relations of production themselves.

³⁹ Thompson, 'Peculiarities of the English', p. 85.

To account for historical movement, then, means precisely to deny that the relation between class and the relations of production is fixed.

The structural definition of class, as Thompson suggests, often tends to attribute a kind of personal volition to class as 'It'. The other side of that coin is the tendency to attribute failures to some kind of personality defect in 'It', like 'false consciousness'. There is more than a little irony, then, in the fact that Thompson, when countering conceptions of this kind, is accused of subjectivism and voluntarism. What is presented as an objectivist alternative to Thompson turns out to be a more extreme and idealist subjectivism and voluntarism, which merely transfers volition from human agency – a human agency bounded by 'determining pressures' and drawn into 'involuntary processes' – to a more exalted Subject, Class, a thing with a static identity, whose will is largely free of specific historical determinations.

This transfer upward of subjective volition reaches its highest point in structuralist arguments. Althusserians, for example, purport to expel subjectivity altogether from social theory and deny agency even to class-as-It; but, in a sense, they merely create an even more imperious Subject, the Structure itself, whose will is determined by nothing but the contradictions in its own arbitrary personality. Arguments which appear to Thompson's critics as subjectivist and voluntarist – his conception of human agency and his insistence on historical specificity apparently at the expense of 'objective structures' – are those which he marshals *against* subjectivism and voluntarism and for a recognition of the objective determining pressures that impinge upon human agency. Far from subordinating objective determining pressures to subjectivity and historical contingency, his point is to set historical investigation against the kind of inverted subjectivism, voluntarism and idealism that creep into analyses which lack a firm historical and sociological ground.

THE POLITICS OF THEORY

Thompson has always worked from the premise that theory has implications for practice. His definition of class, with its emphasis on class as an active process and a historical relationship, was certainly formulated to vindicate class against social scientists and historians

who deny its existence; but it was also intended to counter both intellectual traditions and political practices that suppress human agency and in particular deny the self-activity of the working class in the making of history. By placing class struggle at the centre of theory and practice, Thompson intended to rescue 'history from below' not only as an intellectual enterprise but as a political project against both the oppressions of class domination and the programme of 'socialism from above' in its various incarnations from Fabianism to Stalinism.⁴⁰ His attacks on Althusserian Marxism were directed equally against what he perceived to be its theoretical deformations and against the political practice he found inscribed in them.

Thompson's critics have returned the compliment. In his concept of class and the historical project that rests upon it, they have often found a unity of theory and practice in which his 'subjectivist' theory of class underpins a 'populist socialism'. He has been criticized for being too quick to see, in any form of consciousness touched by class-determined life circumstances, the kind of class consciousness that suggests a readiness to act purposefully as a class. He exhibits, according to this criticism, a kind of 'populism' which treats as unproblematic the construction of a socialist politics out of popular culture.

Curiously, this judgment seems to unite defenders of 'orthodox' structural definitions of class with critics who maintain that Thompson has not gone far enough in pursuing the implications of his 'non-reductive' Marxism. So, for example, Stuart Hall has argued that Thompson conflates 'class-in-itself' with 'class-for-itself', and that inscribed in this confusion is a politics of 'too simple "populism"'.⁴¹ The 'catch-all category of experience', Hall argues,

⁴⁰ Bryan Palmer, in his very useful book, *The Making of E.P. Thompson: Marxism, Humanism, and History* (Toronto, 1981), has provided an illuminating general discussion of the relationship between Thompson as a social historian and as a political activist. Palmer has warned me against describing Thompson's work as 'history from below', on the grounds that the phrase has misleading 'American populist' connotations and has lost favour with historians. He suggests that it obscures the extent of Thompson's concern for the relations between 'top' and 'bottom' and, in particular his increasing interest in the problem of the state. I accept the warning against misrepresenting the nature of Thompson's concerns, but want to retain the term in the sense in which it is (still) applied to a historiographical movement, deriving much of its early impetus from the British Communist Party Historians Group in the 1940s and 1950s, that has sought to explore the broad social foundations of historical processes and to illuminate the role of the 'common people' in shaping history.

⁴¹ Stuart Hall, 'In Defense of Theory', in Raphael Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London, 1981), p. 384.

conflates the objective determinants of class with their appropriation in consciousness and seems to imply that “the class” is always *really* in its place, at the ready, and can be summoned up “for socialism”, without facing up to ‘all that is involved in saying that socialism has to be constructed by a real political practice’. Although it may not have been unambiguously obvious at the time of Hall’s writing, in retrospect, and especially in the context of his affinities with ‘post-Marxist’ theories, it seems clear that this argument, which opened a wider gulf between ‘objective structures’ and class-conscious class formations, was coming close to the absolute ‘non-correspondence’ between the economic and the political proposed by post-Marxists; yet it is based on much the same account of Thompson’s theory of class as that of Anderson or Cohen, and, apparently, on much the same dichotomy between structure and history. It is not insignificant, in view of the Althusserian flip of the coin to which I alluded in the previous chapter, that in this criticism of Thompson, Hall was writing in (qualified) defence of Althusser.

If, as I have argued, Thompson’s historical project is opposed to the conflation – or, what is in effect the same thing, the simple equation – of objective determinations and their expressions in consciousness, and if his focus on the process of class formation presupposes a distinction between them since it is concerned with the changing relations between them, he cannot be accused of conflating the ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ determinants of class, or structure and consciousness. The distinction between ‘class-in-itself’ and ‘class-for-itself’ is not, however, simply an analytic distinction between objective class structure and subjective class consciousness. It refers to two different stages in the process of class formation and two different historical modes of relationship between structure and consciousness – and, in this sense, Thompson certainly has a conception of ‘class-in-itself’, to which, for example, he alludes with his paradoxical formula, ‘class struggle without class’.

The question then is whether Thompson crosses the line between these two modes of class too soon, whether he is too quick, as Hall suggests, to perceive, in any form of consciousness touched by class-determined life circumstances, a readiness to act purposefully as a class. This question is above all a political one, and there is undoubtedly a danger here. Romanticism about the customs and traditions of the ‘people’ and about the radical promise contained in the mere difference and separateness of popular culture is not the

soundest foundation for building a socialist movement or assessing and overcoming the ‘people’s’ own resistance to socialist politics. But Thompson surely has no illusions about this, whatever his successors in ‘people’s history’ may think.

Thompson’s message is indeed political; but there is something else in his recovery of popular consciousness and the ‘making’ of class than a failure to recognize the difference and barriers between, on the one hand, popular culture, which arises directly out of experience – an experience of work, exploitation, oppression, and struggle – and, on the other hand, an active socialist consciousness which is painfully crafted by political practice. His historical project, his reconstruction of history as it is made by the working class as active agents and not simply as passive victims, grows directly out of the basic political principle of Marxism and its particular understanding of socialist practice: that socialism can come only through the self-emancipation of the working class.⁴²

This proposition implies that the working class is the only social group possessing not only an immediate interest in resisting capitalist exploitation but also a collective power adequate to end it. The proposition also implies a scepticism about the authenticity – or, indeed, the likelihood – of emancipation not achieved by self-activity and struggle but won by proxy or conferred by benefaction. There are no guarantees here; but however difficult it may be to construct socialist practice out of popular consciousness, there is, according to this view, no other material out of which it can be constructed and no other socialism that is consistent with both political realism and democratic values. Perhaps the point is simply that socialism will come about either in this way or not at all.

HEGEMONY AND SUBSTITUTIONISM

When Thompson launched his controversial attack on Althusserianism, one of his principal concerns was to counter the drift away

⁴² Thompson, for example, opposes his own work to the ‘Fabian orthodoxy, in which the great majority of working people are seen as passive victims of *laissez faire*, with the exception of a handful of far-sighted organizers (notably Francis Place)’ (*English Working Class*, p. 12). This ‘orthodoxy’ is, of course, not unrelated to the Fabian political programme, with its view of the working class as passive victims requiring the imposition of socialism from above, not by means of class struggle but through piecemeal reform and social engineering by an enlightened minority of intellectuals and philanthropic members of the ruling class.

from this democratic understanding of the socialist project on the part of Western Marxism, towards a theoretical abandonment of the working class as the principal agent of social transformation through the medium of class struggle, and a transfer of that role to other social actors, most especially to intellectuals. 'There is no mark more distinctive of Western Marxisms', he wrote,

nor more revealing as to their profoundly anti-democratic premises. Whether Frankfurt School or Althusser, they are marked by their very heavy emphasis upon the ineluctable weight of ideological modes of domination – domination which destroys every space for the initiative or creativity of the mass of the people – a domination from which only the enlightened minority or intellectuals can struggle free. ... it is a sad premise from which socialist theory should start (all men and women, except for us, are originally stupid) and one which is bound to lead on to pessimistic or authoritarian conclusions.⁴³

This kind of theoretical 'substitutionism' in its most extreme form can be achieved by doing what Stuart Hall accuses some Althusserians, though apparently not Althusser himself, of doing: treating all 'classes as mere "bearers" of historical process, without agency: and historical process itself as a process "without a subject"'.⁴⁴ But much the same effect is produced, Thompson suggests, by conceiving of class as a static category, and being less concerned about the historical process of class formation than about the deductive charting of structural class locations or the theoretical construction of an ideal class identity. These are the kinds of formulation that lend themselves far too easily to the dismissal of actual historical, and hence imperfect, forms of class consciousness as 'false' and therefore in need of substitutes.⁴⁵ If there is a political message inscribed in Thompson's theory of class, it is against the theorization of a 'substitutionism' in which the working class is not merely represented but eclipsed by its substitute.

Much of Thompson's work has been directed, explicitly or implicitly, against the view that hegemony is one-sided and complete, imposing 'an all-embracing domination upon the ruled – or upon all those who are not intellectuals – reaching down to the very threshold of their experience, and implanting within their minds at birth categories of subordination which they are powerless to shed and

⁴³ Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, pp.377–8

⁴⁴ Hall, 'In Defense of Theory', p.383.

⁴⁵ See, e.g., Thompson, 'Eighteenth-Century English Society', p. 148.

which their experience is powerless to correct'.⁴⁶ This, as he suggests, is a dominant theme in Western Marxism, this tendency to identify hegemony with the thorough absorption of subordinate classes into ruling class ideology and cultural domination (probably with the assistance of Ideological State Apparatuses), so that the construction of a counter-hegemonic consciousness and culture and the establishment of working-class hegemony must apparently be accomplished by free-spirited intellectuals.⁴⁷

Such a definition of hegemony accords well with theoretical constructions of class in which nothing exists between the objective constitution of classes by modes of production, on the one hand, and an ideal revolutionary class consciousness, on the other, except a vast empirical-historical (and hence impure and theoretically indigestible) spectrum of 'false' consciousness. But there is an added irony here, as I suggested in the previous chapter (and elsewhere): the flip side of this brand of Marxism is the post-Marxist abandonment of class politics altogether and its replacement by the politics of 'discourse'.

For Thompson, in contrast, hegemony is not synonymous with domination by one class and submission by the other. Instead, it embodies class *struggle* and bears the mark of subordinate classes, their self-activity and their resistance. His theory of class, with its emphasis on the process of class formation, is intended to permit the recognition of 'imperfect' or 'partial' forms of popular consciousness as authentic expressions of class and class struggle, valid in their historical circumstances even if 'wrong' from the standpoint of later, or ideal, developments.

It is one thing to mistake the mere *separateness* of popular culture for radical opposition, ready to be harnessed immediately to the struggle for socialism; it is quite another simply to mark out the space where the cultural writ of the dominant class does not run, and to identify 'popular' consciousness – however resistant it may be to the formation of 'true' class consciousness – as the stuff out of which a complete class consciousness must and can nonetheless be made. To deny the authenticity of 'partial' class consciousness, to treat it as false instead of as a historically intelligible 'option under pressure',⁴⁸ has important strategic consequences. We are invited

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 164. ⁴⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 163 n. 60.

⁴⁸ Raymond Williams, 'Notes on Marxism in Britain since 1945', *New Left Review*, 100 (November 1976–January 1977), p. 87.

either to look for surrogate agents of class struggle and historical change, or to abandon the field altogether to the hegemonic enemy. It is against these political alternatives, and their theoretical foundations in a concept of class as 'structure' or ideal identity, that Thompson sets his own theory of class as process and relationship.

Raymond Williams, in his 'Notes on British Marxism in Britain since 1945', wrote of his own stance in relation to the available choices confronting British Marxists in the 1950s and his rejection of the rhetorical populism which complacently ignored the implications of 'consumer' capitalism and the 'powerful new pull' it exerted upon the people. At the same time, he continued:

because I saw the process as options under pressure, and knew where the pressure was coming from, I could not move to the other available position: that contempt of the people, of their hopelessly corrupted state, of their vulgarity and credulity by comparison with an educated minority, which was the staple of cultural criticism of a non-Marxist kind and which seems to have survived intact, through the appropriate alterations of vocabulary, into a formalist Marxism which makes the whole people, including the whole working class, mere carriers of the structures of a corrupt ideology. ...⁴⁹

Against this trend, Williams insisted that 'there were still, and still powerful, existing resources':

To stay with the existing resources; to learn and perhaps to teach new resources; to live the contradictions and the options under pressure so that instead of denunciation or writing-off there was a chance of understanding them and tipping them the other way: if these things were populism, then it is as well that the British Left, including most Marxists, stayed with it.⁵⁰

Edward Thompson, for one, certainly stayed with it. His theory of class, the discovery of authentic expressions of class in popular consciousness and culture, represent an effort 'to live the contradictions and options under pressure ... instead of denunciation or writing-off'. His insistence on a historical and sociological account of working-class 'reformism', for example, instead of the ritual excommunication which denounces it from a vantage point outside

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* For a similar view, see Thompson, 'Peculiarities of the English', pp. 69-70, where he attacks schematic, unhistorical and unsociological conceptions of class, in particular, those which have produced ritual denunciations of working-class reformism, instead of an understanding of its 'deep sociological roots,' and have thus neglected a vital datum confronting any socialist political practice.

⁵⁰ Williams, 'Notes on Marxism', p. 87.

of history as the 'false consciousness' of a working class 'It', implies that we must understand the 'existing resources' in order to 'tip them the other way'.

There are, of course, dangers here too. 'To stay with the existing resources' can become an excuse for not looking beyond them; to acknowledge the 'deep sociological roots' of 'reformism' as a political reality that must be confronted may lead to accepting it as a limit on the horizons of struggle. It is one thing to acknowledge the authenticity of working-class 'options under pressure' and to be wary of the notion of false consciousness as an invitation to 'write off'. It is quite another to pass over the failures and limitations in many forms of working-class organization and ideology. There is certainly room for debate on the Left about where the line is to be drawn between accepting 'existing resources' as a challenge to struggle and submitting to them as a limit upon it.