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ARTICLE

CLASS AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS ACCORDING TO E. P. THOMPSON

DANIEL CUNNINGHAM¹

ABSTRACT

In this article, I extract a theory of class from E. P. Thompson's historical works of the 1960s and 1970s, focusing especially on his 1963 magnum opus *The Making of the English Working Class*, the articles later collected in the 1991 volume *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture*, and the essays "The Peculiarities of the English" and "Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?" In the first section, I argue, following Ellen Meiksins Wood, that Thompson developed a genuinely historical materialist theory of class formation as a "structured process" that moves from class struggle to class consciousness, a theory that complicates the frequent description of Thompson as a "voluntarist." In the second section, I take a more critical position toward Thompson's understanding of class, discussing a tension between this notion of class as structured process and his numerous invocations of class as a form of "lived experience" whose diversity and unpredictability exceed theorization. This tension aside, Thompson claims that, in the case of the nineteenth-century English working class, to which he dedicated so much research, lived experience coincided with the more general structured process he posits. In the third section, therefore, I more fully elaborate on this specific process of class formation as Thompson portrays it, identifying and discussing three intertwined threads: (1) a movement from a past-oriented defense of traditional institutions to a future-oriented demand for reforms, (2) the development of oppositional, class-specific pedagogical institutions and practices, and (3) the creation of a distinct class culture (which Thompson closely aligns with the achievement of class consciousness) that is aware both of itself and of its antagonism with other classes.

Keywords: E. P. Thompson, class, class consciousness, historical materialism, British radicalism, socialism, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century history

In 1964, E. P. Thompson stood at a crossroads. His involvement with the New Left movement and with the journal *New Left Review*, both of which he had done as much as anyone to create, had come to a mutually grudging end. (He had done much to create the grudges too.) But he had also just published the book that would cement his legacy as one of the greatest historians of the twentieth century, *The Making of the English Working Class*—and only in the process of writing it had he discovered that he was or wanted to be a historian at all. The book's

1. I am grateful to Iaan Reynolds for reviewing a draft of this article.

renown would soon win him a position in formal academia, something he had never much expected or hoped for; this new position would remove him from the life that, for seventeen years, had consisted of tutoring adults with the University of Leeds extramural education program and passionate political organizing, first within the Communist Party of Great Britain and then, after the multifaceted crisis of the Left in 1956, as a founder of the aforementioned New Left, which emerged as an attempt to convert that crisis into political promise.²

As he stood at this crossroads, Ralph Miliband and John Saville, editors of the newly launched *Socialist Register*—a byproduct of the same dramatic shakeup at *NLR* that had severed Thompson's ties there—sought from him a contribution to their second issue. They had also asked him to contribute to their first issue; in fact, they had wanted him to serve as editor alongside them. Thompson was, while at times a difficult person, an old friend and the most recognizable figure among the British Left intelligentsia, and his talent and prestige might have aided the fledgling journal's cause. Thompson served as neither editor nor contributor for the first issue of *Socialist Register*. But bygones were bygones, as they often had to be with him, and here, again, were its editors beseeching him to give them something for the second issue.³ In his communications with them, Thompson said repeatedly that he was thinking of writing something theoretical about *class*.⁴ He had, after all, just completed a large and successful book about the history of a particular class, and he was at the time the most respected socialist theoretician in Britain; this goal made sense. But a theoretical discussion of class is not what he submitted. While it does contain some important passages on that topic, "The Peculiarities of the English" is more broadly an interpretation of modern British history deployed as a polemic against those—Perry Anderson and his allies—who had recently won the power struggle at *NLR*, the consequences of which Thompson, Miliband, and Saville were still reckoning with.

"The Peculiarities of the English" is also a kind of prospectus of the historical scholarship that would occupy Thompson for the next decade and a half. He was, for this period, engaged in intensive study of England in the years between the "compromises of 1688 and 1832."⁵ The first compromise ended a half-century of conflict between the forces of Parliament, dominated by the landed and increasingly capitalist rural gentry, and those of an aspirant royal absolutism that looked to Bourbon France as its model. The second compromise, following a tumultuous period of popular unrest, issued in the Reform Act, which is most notable for its expansion (though not its universalization) of manhood suffrage, and for Thompson, it coincided with the achievement of "class consciousness" (the title of the final chapter of *The Making of the English Working Class*) by the world's first

2. Scott Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory: E. P. Thompson, the New Left and Postwar British Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 93–105. See also Roger Fieldhouse, "Thompson: The Adult Educator," in *E. P. Thompson and English Radicalism*, ed. Roger Fieldhouse and Richard Taylor (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 25–47.

3. Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 105–13.

4. *Ibid.*, 107, 112.

5. E. P. Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English," in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), 247.

proletariat. In what follows, I want to examine the products of these years of study—including *The Making of the English Working Class*, the essays from the 1960s and 1970s that were later compiled in the volume *Customs in Common*, and a few other texts⁶—while remembering that this is what Thompson did instead of writing that theoretical essay about class. What theory of class emanates from this eclectic but focused historical oeuvre, and is that theory still relevant today?

In section 1, I will discuss the theory of class formation contained in Thompson's work on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English history as a theory of agency. In section 2, I will point out a tension between this theory of class formation and Thompson's insistence on the empirical diversity of class as lived experience, and I will relate this tension to manifestations of such lived experience today. In section 3, I will elaborate in more detail the process of class formation, culminating in class consciousness, as Thompson presents it in the case of the English working class. I will conclude by briefly considering how Thompson's understanding of class might apply to the present.

I. CLASS AND AGENCY

Thompson is sometimes associated with “voluntarism,”⁷ and he did consistently defend the capacity of people, especially the poor and excluded, to shape history. But merely labeling his views on historical agency as voluntarist—especially if one thereby means non-Marxist, crypto-liberal, or idealist—misconstrues his sophisticated position on human agency and its conditions. Nowhere is that position more compelling than as it pertains to his understanding of class.⁸ While he cautions, in “The Peculiarities of the English,” that “agency lies . . . not in class but in men,”⁹ the most robust kind of agency, for him, is that of a diverse array of people united by consciousness of shared interests, and a class in its most complete

6. Thompson's other major historical works from this period are the interrelated books, both published in 1975, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* and *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England*. The former is by Thompson alone and was initially planned as a chapter of the latter, which compiles studies by him and several of his graduate students. Although interesting and important in many ways, they are only tangentially relevant to my theme.

7. Hamilton, for example, lists voluntarism among Thompson's most “hardcore” values: “Thompson was a confirmed voluntarist” who held that “‘the people’ were to be motivated not by appeals to their ‘objective interests’ or similar economic language, but by ‘subjective factors’—that is, by a vision of a better world and by ideas like justice and liberty” (*The Crisis of Theory*, 40). While Hamilton's book is excellent and considers much archival material that few researchers have accessed, this declaration obscures more than it clarifies. What motivates “the people” and what conditions enable them to attain historical agency are different questions, as Thompson knew well. See also Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, 229, 270, and Wade Matthews, “The Poverty of Strategy: E. P. Thompson, Perry Anderson, and the Transition to Socialism,” *Labour/Le Travail* 50 (Fall 2002), 233. Perry Anderson's indictment of Thompson's inapposite voluntarism, in his book-length response to “The Poverty of Theory,” is more nuanced and is somewhat justified by the text that is its immediate target, but it does not apply to an account of agency that is more cognizant of Thompson's historical praxis such as I attempt to sketch here. See Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism* (London: New Left Books, 1980), 16–25.

8. For a related discussion that situates Thompson's views on class and agency within the historical and sociological debates of his day, see Gerard McCann, *Theory and History: The Political Thought of E. P. Thompson* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), 72–110.

9. Thompson, “The Peculiarities of the English,” 296.

form is, for him, precisely the achievement of this conscious unification among diversity.¹⁰ According to Thompson,

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 a *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.¹¹

This power of a fully formed class, he notes repeatedly,¹² can arise only under certain socioeconomic and political conditions: it cannot simply conjure itself into being.¹³ The study of how such objective conditions developed in dynamic interaction with the development of the world's first working class toward class-conscious agency was, in fact, the main purpose of his historical writings of the 1960s and 1970s,¹⁴ as I will discuss in this section.

The 1978 article "Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?"¹⁵ is the nearest Thompson came to writing that theoretical discussion of class that "The Peculiarities of the English" was not. In the decade and a half separating the two essays, he was focused primarily on the eighteenth century and, in particular, on the early history of the English working class whose journey to class consciousness he had chronicled in his magnum opus. The essay considers what kind of reality "class" can be said to have had prior to "industrialization," given that, "before this occurred, there was no class-conscious working class; no class conflict . . . but only fragments of proto-conflict; as an historical agent the

10. See Thompson's criticism in "The Peculiarities of the English" of Anderson's and Tom Nairn's treatment of class: "It—the bourgeoisie or working class—is supposed to remain the same undivided personality . . . throughout whole epochs; and the fact that we are discussing different people, with changing traditions, with changing relationships both as between each other and as between themselves and other social groups, becomes forgotten" (280). See also McCann, *Theory and History*, 85.

11. Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English," 295.

12. For example, in "The Peculiarities of the English," Thompson notes that "attention must be paid to the autonomy of political or cultural events which, none the less, are causally conditioned by 'economic' events" (290). For similar statements, see "The Peculiarities of the English," 294, and, "The Poverty of Theory," in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, 106–7. See also E. P. Thompson, "The Patricians and the Plebs," in *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1993), 83.

13. According to McCann, "what was emphasized throughout Thompson's historical research was the reciprocation between the objective and subjective elements which compelled the development of capitalism. His chosen task, however, was to assess in more detail the understated subjective elements of this process within its totality" (*Theory and History*, 87–88).

14. See Nina Power, "Thompson's Concept of Class: The Flesh and Blood of Self-Emancipation," in Fieldhouse and Taylor, *E. P. Thompson and English Radicalism*, 145.

15. E. P. Thompson, "Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?," *Social History* 3, no. 2 (1978), 133–65. This article was published in the same year as "The Poverty of Theory" and can be seen as a bridge between Thompson's historical studies of the 1960s and 1970s and his battle with Althusserian theory during the late 1970s and the 1980s. Indeed, its approach is both more theoretical than the former and more historical than the latter. As such, it has interesting affinities with "The Peculiarities of the English." Curiously, Thompson did not include "Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?" in *Customs in Common*, but he did interpolate large sections of it into "The Patricians and the Plebs," a version, substantially expanded for that volume, of the 1974 essay "Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture," *Journal of Social History* 7, no. 4 (1974), 382–405.

working class did not exist.”¹⁶ Nor, he adds, did the “middle class” exist: in the eighteenth century, there was no “purposive, cohesive, growing middle class of professional men. . . . Such a class did not begin to discover itself (except, perhaps, in London) until the last three decades of the century.”¹⁷ In parallel fashion, he finds the 1790s—as English society absorbed the shock of the French Revolution and grappled with the new possibilities and dangers it introduced—to be the decisive point when the working class, too, truly began to understand itself as distinct and its interests as antagonistic to those of “the gentry,” who then “lost their self-assured cultural hegemony”¹⁸ over those whose labor they depended on. Both middle class and working class thus began to recognize themselves as such at about the same time, as he also asserts in the preface to *The Making of the English Working Class*:

In the years between 1780 and 1832 most English working people came to feel an identity of interests as between themselves, and as against their rulers and employers. This ruling class was itself much divided, and in fact only gained in cohesion over the same years because certain antagonisms were resolved (or faded into relative insignificance) in the face of an insurgent working class.¹⁹

With such recognition, Thompson writes in “Eighteenth-Century English Society,” “we move out of the eighteenth-century field-of-force and enter a period in which there is a structural reordering of class relations and of ideology. It is possible, for the first time, to analyse the historical process in terms of nineteenth-century notations of class.”²⁰

The phrase “field-of-force” here references a metaphor that Thompson proposes for the “class” structure of eighteenth-century Britain:

When analyzing [eighteenth-century] gentry-plebs relations one finds not so much an uncompromising ding-dong battle between irreconcilable antagonists as a societal “field-of-force.” I am thinking of a school experiment (which no doubt I have got wrong) in which an electrical current magnetized a plate covered with iron filings. The filings, which were evenly distributed, arranged themselves at one pole or the other, while in between those filings which remained in place aligned themselves sketchily as if directed towards opposing attractive poles. This is very much how I see eighteenth-century society, with, for many purposes, the crowd at one pole, the aristocracy and gentry at the other, and until late in the century, the professional and merchant groups bound down by lines of magnetic dependency to the rulers, or on occasion hiding their faces in common action with the crowd.²¹

16. Thompson, “Eighteenth-Century English Society,” 134.

17. *Ibid.*, 142.

18. *Ibid.*, 165.

19. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Random House, 1966), 11.

20. Thompson, “Eighteenth-Century English Society,” 165.

21. *Ibid.*, 151. This passage is among those reproduced in 1991 in “The Patricians and the Plebs,” wherein Thompson extends and defends the “field-of-force” metaphor, showing that it still then stuck with him as a helpful way of thinking about the eighteenth-century arrangement of “class struggle without class.” See Thompson, “The Patricians and the Plebs,” 73, 89, 93. See also the discussion in Theodore Koditschek, “The Possibilities of Theory: Thompson’s Marxist History,” in Fieldhouse and Taylor, *E. P. Thompson and English Radicalism*, 80–84. Koditschek here valuably explores the Gramscian theoretical underpinnings of Thompson’s historical work.

This metaphor helps Thompson to explain how he can use “the terminology of class conflict while resisting the attribution of identity to a class”²²—in other words, how there can be “class struggle without class.” For the central claim of this article is that *class struggle precedes class as such*. As he puts it,

Class . . . is inseparable from the notion of “class-struggle.” In my view, far too much theoretical attention (much of it plainly a-historical) has been paid to “class,” and far too little to “class-struggle.” Indeed, class-struggle is the prior, as well as the more universal, concept. . . . [P]eople find themselves in a society structured in determined ways (crucially, but not exclusively, in productive relations), they experience exploitation (or the need to maintain power over those whom they exploit), they identify points of antagonistic interest, they commence to struggle around these issues and in the process of struggling they discover themselves as classes, they come to know this discovery as class-consciousness. Class and class-consciousness are always the last, not the first, stage in the real historical process.²³

The metaphor of magnetic “fields-of-force” refers to the kind of class struggle specific to the eighteenth-century English society within which nineteenth-century industrial capitalist society, with its sharper class antagonisms and its eventual class consciousness, was still coming to be.

Eighteenth-century England, in Thompson’s portrayal, was thus a period of disarray between two periods characterized by more rigid class structures, “a transitory phase” during which “economic rationalization nibbled . . . through the bonds of paternalism.”²⁴ And this disarray afforded opportunities to the soon-to-be working class for mobility and bargaining:

For a hundred years the poor were not altogether the losers. They maintained their traditional culture; they secured a partial arrest of the work-discipline of early industrialism; they perhaps enlarged the scope of the Poor Laws; they enforced charities which may have prevented years of dearth from escalating into crises of subsistence; and they enjoyed liberties of pushing about the streets and jostling . . . , a generally riotous and unpoliced disposition which astonished foreign visitors, and which almost misled them themselves into believing that they were “free.”²⁵

Though fleeting, this period of indeterminacy between the better-defined class arrangements of feudalism and capitalism provided a crucial element in the historical experience of the English working class: the experience, precisely, of *agency*, however limited. This foretaste of agency established a baseline of expectations upon which further development toward fully class-conscious agency would build.

As Ellen Meiksins Wood argues, Thompson thus supplies a *theory of class formation*—a theory built of (she quotes “The Poverty of Theory”) “concepts appropriate to the investigation of process.”²⁶ According to Wood, whereas other

22. Thompson, “Eighteenth-Century English Society,” 151.

23. *Ibid.*, 149.

24. Thompson, “The Patricians and the Plebs,” 38–39.

25. Thompson, “Eighteenth-Century English Society,” 165.

26. Thompson, “The Poverty of Theory,” 45, quoted in Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2016), 79.

theorizations of class, especially those of Althusserian provenance,²⁷ pose it as a structure that undergoes historical processes, Thompson sees class as itself a “structured process.”²⁸ Class is not a theoretically deducible position within a mode of production, nor is it a purely cultural mode of identification that one can voluntarily assume or discard; it is, to reference one of the basic principles of historical materialism, a movement from a particular form of “social being” (a form determined, at its limits, by the set of social relationships constituting a mode of production) to a particular form of “social consciousness”²⁹ (*class consciousness*, if the process reaches completion) mediated by historical “experience,” which includes the contingency and unpredictability of events as well as the inheritances of cultural tradition.³⁰ Thompson writes in “The Peculiarities of the English” that “the problem is to find a model for the social process which allows an autonomy to social consciousness within a context which, in the final analysis, has always been determined by social being.”³¹ Thus, while (confronted with the structuralist fashions of his day) he often emphasized the elements of agency and will in historical processes, these elements always remained circumscribed within the limits set by the conditions of “social being” from which any such process must begin.

This insertion of historical experience between Marx’s dichotomy of social being and social consciousness *temporalizes* and *historicizes* what could otherwise be misconstrued as an atemporal, ahistorical reflection theory, for which, at all times and in all places, forms of consciousness simply reflect underlying socioeconomic conditions, which they should be interpreted as “matching.” Such a theory, besides giving the historian little of interest to do, cannot account for the local “peculiarities” and seeming paradoxes that arise constantly in historical research. The dyad of social being and social consciousness by itself, then, is merely synchronic, while Thompson’s insistence on the mediating factor of historical experience introduces and in fact *prioritizes* diachronicity.³² Indeed, it implies that social being, the starting point of any process of formation, itself has

27. According to Thompson, “Althusser and I appear to share one common proposition: class struggle is the prior concept to class; class does not precede but arises out of struggle. But the coincidence is only an apparition” (“The Poverty of Theory,” 106). Thompson goes on to argue that even class struggle, as Althusser understands it, results mechanically from structural “contradiction” (ibid., 107).

28. Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism*, 79.

29. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, ed. Maurice Dobb, transl. S. W. Ryazanskaya (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 20–22.

30. Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism*, 96. See also “The Poverty of Theory,” wherein Thompson claims that “experience is a necessary middle term between social being and social consciousness: it is experience (often class experience) which gives a coloration to culture, to values, and to thought: it is by means of experience that the mode of production exerts a determining pressure upon other activities” (98). Anderson’s remarks on Thompson’s invocations of “experience” are among the weakest of his criticisms, as he overwhelmingly understands “experience” in an epistemological sense, accusing Thompson of overestimating the wisdom—whether individual or collective—it effects (*Arguments within English Marxism*, 25–29). While some passages, especially in “The Poverty of Theory,” merit this criticism, the latter is situated within Anderson’s discussion of *historical agency* in Thompson’s work, and it seems to me more relevant to that topic that “experience,” when Thompson poses it between “social being” and “social consciousness,” stands for the element of *contingency* in historical processes, as I have specified.

31. Thompson, “The Peculiarities of the English,” 291.

32. See McCann, *Theory and History*, 127–30.

a history, that, while a story must have a beginning, the selection of that beginning ultimately derives from the needs of narrative, of lending coherence to the manifold of evidence,³³ and that, in fact, both social being and social consciousness are analytical snapshots of the synthetic flow of historical experience, the prior category. We can say the same of the other conceptual triad that has emerged here: class struggle, class, class consciousness. Since class is not a thing but a happening, it embraces the whole movement from a specific instance of class struggle to a specific manifestation of class consciousness; these are analytical snapshots of the synthetic flow, the historical experience, of class.³⁴ The task of the historian is not to become transfixed by such snapshots but, with their assistance, to reveal the reality of and to make sense of the experience underlying them.

Thompson thus formulated a theory of class that is consistent with “a truly historical materialism,”³⁵ and for this reason, among others, I join Wood in considering him “the closest thing we have to a theorist of historical materialism as I understand it.”³⁶ More than any occasional remarks made in polemical contexts, this theory of class development elaborated in his historical scholarship is Thompson’s account of human agency. In “Socialist Humanism,” which was published in 1957 just as he was beginning to work on *The Making of the English Working Class*, he decries the Stalinist “denial of the role of individuals as agents in history.”³⁷ But, in the same essay, he argues at much greater length that historical agency is not a metaphysical quality of humanity but the very *aspiration* of socialism, and indeed of history writ large, an aspiration only realizable through the collective effort, over many generations, of overcoming humanity’s “victimhood to blind economic causation.”³⁸ In a sequel essay, “Agency and Choice,” Thompson again lambasts the Stalinist “denial of the creative agency of men, when considered not as political or economic units in a chain of determined circumstances, but as moral and intellectual beings, in the making of their own history.”³⁹ But he asserts that it is only by “a voluntary act of social will,” whose “emergence” is “possible” only when certain “conditions” have become “mature,” that human agency can “surmount in any significant way the

33. Thompson, “The Poverty of Theory,” 28–30.

34. Thompson is regrettably inconsistent on this point. At times, as in the above declaration that “class and class-consciousness are always the last, not the first, stage in the real historical process,” the two terms seem to be inseparable and to mark the completion of a process. Similarly, in “The Poverty of Theory,” he writes, “we cannot put ‘class’ here and ‘class consciousness’ there, as two separate entities, the one sequential upon the other, since both must be taken together—the experience of determination, and the ‘handling’ of this in conscious ways” (106). At other times, as we have seen, “class” denotes the whole “happening,” the active process of class formation of which class consciousness represents an extremity of maturation. My intent to derive a coherent theory from such conflicting statements has inclined my interpretation toward the latter position. See also Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, 39–43.

35. Power, “Thompson’s Concept of Class,” 144.

36. Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism*, 13.

37. E. P. Thompson, “Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines,” *The New Reasoner* 1 (Summer 1957), 105–43, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/thompson-ep/1957/sochum.htm>.

38. *Ibid.*

39. E. P. Thompson, “Agency and Choice 1: A Reply to Criticism,” *The New Reasoner* 5 (Summer 1958), 89–106, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/thompson-ep/1958/agency1.htm>.

limitations imposed by ‘circumstances’ or ‘historical necessity.’”⁴⁰ Determinism and voluntarism are not metaphysical but historical alternatives, and the development of a class toward class consciousness is a movement from the one to the other.

II. CLASS AS STRUCTURED PROCESS AND CLASS AS LIVED EXPERIENCE

But we must also notice some tension between Thompson’s understanding of class as a general process of development, including prescriptive stages, and particular examples of class as unique experiences—an instance of the broader tension between theory and history that increasingly preoccupied him, taking center stage in his critical engagement with Althusser. Thompson himself makes a similar distinction in “Eighteenth-Century English Society”:

If we return to class as a historical category, we can see that historians can employ the concept in two different senses: (a) with reference to real, empirically observable correspondent historical content; (b) as a heuristic or analytical category to organize historical evidence which has a very much less direct correspondence. In my view the concept may properly be employed in both ways; nevertheless, confusion often arises when we move from one sense to the other.⁴¹

As we have seen him suggest, the English working class became a class in the fullest sense only in the nineteenth century when it attained class consciousness and historical agency. He implies that, at that point, the empirical and heuristic senses of “class” coincided not only in the imputation of the observing historian but also in lived experience. When studying class in the nineteenth century,

the concept not only enables us to organize and analyse the evidence; it is also, in a new sense, *present in the evidence itself*. We can observe, in industrial Britain or France or Germany, class institutions, class parties, class cultures, etc. This historical evidence has in its turn given rise to the mature concept of class and has, to some degree, marked it with its own historical specificity.⁴²

That is, the “heuristic,” “organizing” concept of class is derived from the “empirical . . . content” of European capitalist societies. In a footnote, he quotes Eric Hobsbawm: “Under capitalism class is an immediate and in some sense a directly *experienced* historical reality, whereas in pre-capitalist epochs it may merely be an analytical construct which makes sense of a complex of facts otherwise inexplicable.”⁴³ These passages echo the statement of intention from the preface to *The Making of the English Working Class*: to present “a biography of the English working class from its adolescence until its early manhood,”⁴⁴ suggesting, along with his invocations of “maturity,” that Thompson thought of class formation as

40. Ibid.

41. Thompson, “Eighteenth-Century English Society,” 148.

42. Ibid.

43. Eric J. Hobsbawm, “Class Consciousness in History,” in *Aspects of History and Class Consciousness*, ed. István Mészáros (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), 8, quoted in Thompson, “Eighteenth-Century English Society,” 148n34.

44. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 11.

following a prescribed course of development comparable to that of a living organism.

Might we not reply to this model of class formation in the same terms that Thompson, in "The Peculiarities of the English," used to reply to Anderson's and Nairn's Francocentric model of "bourgeois revolution"? Against them, Thompson wrote, "I am objecting to a model which concentrates attention upon one dramatic episode—the Revolution—to which all that goes before and after must be related; and which insists upon an ideal type of this Revolution against which all others may be judged."⁴⁵ Has Thompson not, in similar fashion, implied that class in modern Europe, especially modern England, is *the* (experience of) class "against which all others may be judged"? If the "mature" concept of class most properly corresponds to the experience of class in capitalist society, then what does it mean to say that "class, as it eventuated within nineteenth-century industrial capitalist societies, and as it then left its imprint upon the heuristic category of class, has in fact no claim to universality. Class in that sense is not more than a special case of the historical formations which arise out of class struggle"?⁴⁶ What does it suggest, moreover, about those "blind alleys," "lost causes," and "losers" whom Thompson so famously wanted his magnum opus to "rescue . . . from the enormous condescension of posterity"?⁴⁷

I do not mean to recapitulate poststructuralist complaints about essentialism or Eurocentrism. There is, in fact, something essential about the historical experience of class in capitalist Europe, and especially in capitalist England, not because of any cultural supremacy but because of causal priority: because of the degree to which, largely through the vehicle of colonialist imperialism, European (and especially English) capitalism influenced the subsequent history of the rest of the world and, *a fortiori*, other experiences of class within capitalism. (This causal priority does not mean that other experiences of class simply replicated European models; it only means that they would not have occurred as they did without the direct impact of European intervention.) I mean only to indicate that Thompson's theory of class formation as "structured process" conflicts with his emphasis on class as diverse, lived experience, a conflict not resolved by distinguishing between its "heuristic" and "empirical" senses. In "The Peculiarities of the English," in fact, he stresses that "classes do not exist as abstract, platonic categories, but only as men come to *act* in rôles determined by class objectives, to feel themselves to *belong* to classes, to define their interests as between themselves and as against other classes."⁴⁸ In "Eighteenth-Century English Society," he elaborates:

Class eventuates as men and women *live* their productive relations, and as they *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. So that, in the end, no model can give us what ought to be the "true" class formation for a

45. Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English," 257.

46. Thompson, "Eighteenth-Century English Society," 150.

47. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 12.

48. Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English," 261.

certain “stage” of process. No actual class formation in history is any truer or more real than any other, and class defines itself as, in fact, it eventuates.⁴⁹

Just within these few sentences, Thompson both asserts the empirical open-endedness of the lived experience of class, its ultimate resistance to theoretical modeling (“class defines itself as . . . it eventuates”; “no model can give us”) and sets specific theoretic parameters to what qualifies as the lived experience of class (“rôles determined by class objectives”; “define their interests as between themselves and as against other classes”). He thus posits a “structured process” for class formation—class struggle, class, class consciousness—identifying the nineteenth-century English working class as a model instance, the first instance, of that process; but he also goes to great lengths to show that social formations that do not fully attain to that model nonetheless exist “in class ways”⁵⁰ and possess their own kinds of historical agency, indeed suggesting, at his most “empirical,” that they are just as rightfully called “classes” as is the model case.

Wood surmises of Thompson, in a different but related context, that “perhaps he has adopted these ambiguous formulae because he has always seen himself as fighting on two fronts at once: against the anti-Marxist denial of class, and against those Marxisms that deny the working class its proper self-activity by postulating for it a predetermined ideal consciousness.”⁵¹ She stresses not Thompson’s designation of class consciousness as the capstone of a “mature” class but “his intention of demonstrating the determinative effects of class ‘situations’ even where ‘mature’ classes do not yet exist.”⁵² Ultimately, the conflict between class as structured process and class as lived experience cannot be resolved by devising a better, more capacious theory of class in general; it can be resolved only in the historian’s (or the sociologist’s, or the political scientist’s, or, most importantly, the political actor’s) practice, only in the unfolding of events: the problem is how to correctly judge when new “empirical” phenomena have overtaken the “heuristic” concept, which itself emerged from the observation of precedent empirical phenomena.

This is indeed a salient political problem today. For the period during which the “mature” concept and the conscious experience of class coincided was, in historical perspective, rather brief. In a way, it ended when Thompson’s career as a historian began: in 1956,⁵³ when the political movement focused on the advancement of a class-based agenda began to lose any credible claim to shaping the future of humanity as a whole and retreated, where it survived, into a more plural, parochial, and defensive posture. The anti-colonial socialist movements, to which in the ensuing decades the revolutionary torch passed, drew their energy from dynamic combinations of class, ethnic, and nationalist identification. We still

49. Thompson, “Eighteenth-Century English Society,” 150.

50. *Ibid.*, 147.

51. Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism*, 72.

52. *Ibid.*

53. According to Hobsbawm, Thompson’s “original passion had been for literature rather than history as such, although he was marginally involved in the [Communist Party] Historians’ Group. It was 1956 that made him primarily into a historian” (*Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* [London: Abacus Press, 2002], 214). See also David Goodway, “The Making of *The Making*,” in Fieldhouse and Taylor, *E. P. Thompson and English Radicalism*, 53–54.

today experience class belonging, class conflict, and class-based exploitation directly, but rarely and impermanently as prior to other kinds of belonging, conflict, and exploitation, and so the prospects for large-scale, world-changing political mobilization on a class basis are faint. This circumstance bespeaks a disjunction between the concept and the experience of class. The concepts of “working class,” “capitalist class,” “exploited class,” and “ruling class” have plenty of current, lived experience to which to attach: using different terms, you can convince most working and/or poor people of their exploited status, if they aren’t already aware of it. But these concepts have lost their mass appeal, have become unattractive, seem to belong to a past generation; the issue, in other words, is precisely that people today “live their productive relations,” “in class ways,” but do not “define their interests as between themselves and as against other classes.” This senescence was already implied in Thompson’s identification of “mature” class and “mature” class consciousness with a specific historical case, even as he, in the same breath, sought to evade the natural results of that identification. Is it possible for people today to behave “in a class manner,” like Thompson’s eighteenth-century plebs, in ways that might be conducive to advancing socialism in the twenty-first century, without the unifying “class consciousness” most perfectly attained between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries? Since class struggle precedes class and class consciousness, perhaps the class struggles of the present are prologue to a new and more “mature” arrangement of class and to a new form of class consciousness; perhaps we are in another period when “fields-of-force” are being realigned into more determinate structures of antagonism. But if so, we are not much better equipped to foresee what this new arrangement and this new form will be than were the jostlers in the eighteenth-century crowd.

III. THE “LOGIC” OF CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

We have seen that, after he finished the great study of the nineteenth-century English working class that made him a famous historian, Thompson, for the next decade and a half, directed his attention farther back in time, to the prior history of that class in the eighteenth century. By reversing that backward movement—comparing the articles on the eighteenth century he wrote during the 1960s and 1970s with his investigations of the nineteenth century in *The Making of the English Working Class*—we can specify the process by which English workers acquired class consciousness and so really became a “class” in the “mature” sense. Such specification has not only historical but also theoretical value, for, as Thompson claims in the preface to *The Making of the English Working Class*, “we can see a *logic* in the responses of similar occupational groups undergoing similar experiences, but we cannot predicate any *law*. Consciousness of class arises in the same way in different times and places, but never in *just* the same way.”⁵⁴ This notion of a “logic” of process shows Thompson’s awareness of the problem we have just identified, though it does not entirely solve that problem. It invites us to look to a particular case for generalizable patterns of the development

54. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 10.

of class consciousness while also warning us not to hypostatize these patterns as “structures” preceding or determining historical experience—especially that of class struggle, the highly variable experience that, on Thompson’s account, generates class itself and conditions the consciousness that evinces its maturity.

I think this process, as Thompson presents it, involved three major, intertwined threads: first, a movement from the past-oriented defense of traditional institutions, such as demanding the protection of customary rights, to the future-oriented reform of present institutions, such as demanding the expansion of the franchise; second, the development of an oppositional pedagogy; and third, the consolidation of a self-aware and distinctive working-class culture. These moments do not succeed each other as strictly discrete steps, but we will see that they do build upon each other in a cumulative and overlapping way.

From Defense of Traditional Institutions to Reform of Present Ones

Anyone familiar with Thompson’s historical work will recognize this recurring pattern of class formation as he understands it. The growth of a political consciousness, of group agency and identity and a set of concrete goals, begins with the perception of a threat to an institution that was previously taken for granted.⁵⁵ Thompson’s studies of the eighteenth-century crowd and its “moral economy” foreground this dawning perception. Faced with the increasing exposure of their subsistence goods to the price fluctuations of free markets, crowds would form and take it upon themselves to “set prices”—that is, to intimidate, punish, and terrorize vendors into offering their goods at more accessible prices.⁵⁶ On Thompson’s account, such price-setting crowds usually did not simply steal the goods they needed; they would instead take them by force while giving the vendor the compensation they thought appropriate. For their purpose was to defend what they saw as fairness, to reset a traditional, moral-economic equilibrium that had been disrupted by spreading capitalist relations.⁵⁷

A frequent touchstone for this mass enforcement of fair marketing practices was the *Book of Orders*, which was established “between 1580 and 1630”: “These emergency measures were employed in times of scarcity in the last years of Elizabeth, and put into effect . . . in the reign of Charles I, in 1630.”⁵⁸ They mandated that “farmers . . . send ‘convenient quantities’ to market to be sold ‘and that at reasonable price.’”⁵⁹ These statutes “empowered magistrates (with the aid of local juries) to survey the corn stocks in barns and granaries; to order quantities to be sent to market; and to enforce with severity every part of the marketing, licensing and forestalling legislation.”⁶⁰ The eighteenth-century invocations of these Elizabethan laws exemplify Thompson’s paradoxical assessment that this “culture is rebellious, but rebellious in defence of custom”⁶¹—specifically custom that had

55. See McCann, *Theory and History*, 93–95.

56. E. P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” in *Customs in Common*, 224.

57. *Ibid.*, 224–33.

58. *Ibid.*, 224.

59. *Ibid.*

60. *Ibid.*, 225.

61. E. P. Thompson, “Introduction: Custom and Culture,” in *Customs in Common*, 9.

fortified a more authoritarian and oppressive social order than the one it was marshaled to contest. The rebels of the eighteenth century deployed traditional expectations of aristocratic-gentry paternalism as a weapon; they sought to enjoy the best of both worlds, the one passing away and the one coming into being, for their unique situation in history gave them access to experience with both:

One may suggest that if the rioting or price-setting crowd acted according to any consistent theoretical model, then this model was a selective reconstruction of the paternalist one, taking from it all those features which most favoured the poor and which offered a prospect of cheap corn. . . . [I]n one respect the moral economy of the crowd broke decisively with that of the paternalists: for the popular ethic sanctioned direct action by the crowd, whereas the values of order underpinning the paternalist model emphatically did not.⁶²

Thus, as Thompson hypothesizes in his late response to critics of his work on “the moral economy of the crowd,” the frequency of food riots in eighteenth-century England, as well as later in continental Europe, China, and India, might be seen as a symptom of a transition between two modes of production.⁶³

As this best-of-both-worlds selectivity suggests, the customs that served as the particles around which class consciousness might pearl were not always of genuine antiquity but could be what Hobsbawm called “invented traditions.”⁶⁴ To some extent, the whole cultural formation of “paternalism” fell into this category: “Paternalism as myth or as ideology is nearly always backward-looking. It offers itself in English history less as actuality than as a model of an antique, recently passed, golden age from which present modes and manners are a degeneration.”⁶⁵ Thompson cites literary examples of this nostalgia for a decayed paternalism from John Langhorne’s 1774 *The Country Justice*, from Roger de Coverley around the start of the eighteenth century, from Shakespeare, and from Thomas More: “Always paternalist actuality appears to be receding into an ever more primitive and idealized past.”⁶⁶ For the militant crowd of the eighteenth century, this myth had come to function as a rule of engagement governing a hostage scenario in which social order was the hostage, the “moral economy” of fair pricing the desired compensation.

According to Thompson,

while this moral economy cannot be described as “political” in any advanced sense, nevertheless it cannot be described as unpolitical either, since it supposed definite, and passionately held, notions of the common weal— notions which, indeed, found some

62. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” 212.

63. E. P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy Reviewed,” in *Customs in Common*, 293–94.

64. Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1–14. Thompson himself uses this term to characterize the notorious “wife sales” of the English poor, which “may not have been invented until the late seventeenth century and possibly even later” and which dwindled away throughout the nineteenth century; as with other “invented traditions,” they were “not an ancient custom of forgotten origin transmitted down the centuries” but a result of “the pressure of new needs seeking for a ritual as outlet” (“The Sale of Wives,” in *Customs in Common*, 442).

65. Thompson, “The Patricians and the Plebs,” 23.

66. *Ibid.*, 24.

support in the paternalist tradition of the authorities; notions which the people re-echoed so loudly in their turn that the authorities were, in some measure, the prisoners of the people.⁶⁷

This was not yet class consciousness, but it was an advance in collective self-consciousness that harbored the potential to develop into class consciousness.⁶⁸ Farther along in that development, we can see the cycle repeated from a more advanced starting-point in the institutions of the “free-born Englishman”⁶⁹ and in the direct actions of the Luddites,⁷⁰ both famously explored by Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class*. A similar pattern maintains in the battles over the imposition of a strictly measured capitalist working day upon a peasantry accustomed to a loose and malleable work schedule, as he discusses in the classic essay “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism,”⁷¹ in popular actions against enclosures of the commons, as he shows in “Custom, Law and Common Right,”⁷² and in the outbreaks of organized deer-poaching excavated in *Whigs and Hunters*, wherein he characterizes “deer as symbols . . . of an authority which threatened . . . customary agrarian rights.”⁷³ In all of these cases, objective changes in the mode of production (the spread of capitalist marketing practices and property relations) determined the historical experience of a group, which then responded to these changes by recourse to cultural traditions; but invoking these traditions under new conditions transformed the significance of the traditions themselves, making them into elements of a new form of consciousness: social being, historical experience, social consciousness.

I must emphasize that we are talking not about transformations in the minds of individual persons but about processes working themselves out across several generations. By 1832, when Thompson takes “class consciousness” to have dawned for the English working class, this cycle of invoking an old tradition in a new context, yielding a new form of collective consciousness, had given way to positive political demands for institutions with no precedents in English tradition, such as union rights, voting rights, and the abolition of hereditary privilege. He records a moment in 1818, on the eve of “class consciousness,” when the radical writer John Wade directly criticized “arguments derived from the ‘good old times’”: “‘We really think we cannot better advance the cause of Reform than by excluding from the consideration of the subject, all allusions to a former state of

67. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” 188–89.

68. According to McCann, “popular agitation struggled to reimpose the legitimate moral economy and the limitations of a customary system contemptuous of the profiteering of the emerging *laissez faire* system. The political education acquired throughout the conflict of this period served as a crucial, if contentious, transitional experience for radicals, providing the crowd with a self-consciousness and intellectual response to exploitation. An ideology of struggle was being expressed in a seminal form, and spheres of conflict were becoming increasingly defined as class confrontation” (*Theory and History*, 81).

69. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 77–101.

70. *Ibid.*, 547–602.

71. E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism,” in *Customs in Common*, 352–403.

72. E. P. Thompson, “Custom, Law and Common Right,” in *Customs in Common*, 97–184.

73. E. P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* (London: Allen Lane, 1975), 35.

society,” for “much of the ‘*ancient lore* that has been raked together’ was part and parcel of severely repressive legislation *against* the labourers.”⁷⁴ Half a century of escalating class struggle lay behind this observation.

Oppositional Pedagogy

We can also, moving from Thompson’s studies of the eighteenth century to those of the nineteenth century, trace a development in institutionalized learning, beginning with his discussion of traditional “apprenticeship,” very broadly understood:

Apprenticeship as an initiation into adult skills is not confined to its formal industrial expression. It is also the mechanism of inter-generational transmission. The child serves her apprenticeship to household duties, first to her mother (or grandmother), then (often) as a domestic or farm servant. As a young mother, in the mysteries of child-rearing, she is apprentice to the matrons of the community. It is the same in the trades without formal apprenticeship. And with the induction into these particular skills comes an induction into the social experience or common wisdom of the community.⁷⁵

Means of such “transmission” arise naturally from the collective struggle for survival, and their diffusion throughout all areas of social life reflects the holism of a society wherein “it is impossible to show where ‘economic’ relations ended and ‘personal’ relations began, for both were imbricated in the same total context.”⁷⁶ The persistence of traditional pedagogy in eighteenth-century England—again, a transitional zone between two modes of production—mirrors the persistence of this holism despite the beginnings of its disintegration: “Although social life is changing, and although there is much mobility, change has not yet reached that point at which it is assumed that the horizons of each successive generation will be different; nor has that engine of cultural acceleration (and estrangement), formal education, yet interpolated itself significantly into this generational transmission.”⁷⁷ The form of a society’s pedagogy thus expresses its relationship to its projected future: it corresponds to the rate and degree of expected social change.

As these laborers were transformed by the advance of capitalist production relations into a working class, such “transmission”—the mere implantation of time-honored capacities, agnostic of any future obsolescence—no longer so corresponded. The forms of pedagogy available to workers split along two tracks: on one side, as the last quotation references, “formal education,” which social improvers (especially Methodist evangelists⁷⁸) increasingly insisted on as necessary for the maintenance of a productive, sanitary, and obedient workforce, and, on the other, new institutions arising out of the working class itself—“organic” forms of pedagogy, in the Gramscian sense—or being reoriented to the benefit of their distinct class consciousness. To these latter institutions Thompson devotes the first section of the concluding “Class Consciousness” chapter of *The Making of the English Working Class*:

74. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 770.

75. Thompson, “Introduction: Custom and Culture,” 7.

76. Thompson, “The Sale of Wives,” 445.

77. Thompson, “Introduction: Custom and Culture,” 7.

78. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 375–79.

There were, scattered throughout all parts of England, an abundance of educational institutions for working people, even if “institution” is too formal a word for the dame school, the penny-a-week evening school run by a factory cripple or injured pitman, or the Sunday school itself. In the Pennine valleys, where the weavers’ children were too poor to pay for slates or paper, they were taught their letters by drawing them with their fingers in a sand-table. If thousands lost these elementary attainments when they reached adult life, on the other hand the work of the Nonconformist Churches, of friendly societies and trade unions, and the needs of industry itself, all demanded that such learning be consolidated and advanced. . . . One of the most impressive features of post-war Radicalism was its sustained effort to extend these attainments and to raise the level of political awareness.⁷⁹

Such “political awareness” was necessary for the organized collective actions of Luddism, Chartism, and trade unionism, and it could arise only through concerted and sustained effort, for recognizing one’s exploited place within the new social order, grasping how the capitalist system worked, depended on “the ability to handle abstract and consecutive argument,” which “was by no means inborn; it had to be discovered against almost overwhelming difficulties—the lack of leisure, the cost of candles (or of spectacles), as well as educational deprivation.”⁸⁰

I have argued elsewhere that the ideology of a ruling class operates through the *cultivation* of subjectivities—a gradual, contested, open-ended process localized in specific encounters and practices, drawing on pre-existing cultural inheritances, and heavily reliant on the manipulation of the affects.⁸¹ Such ideological cultivation strives, through pedagogical means, precisely to occlude class consciousness. But Thompson’s account of the English workers’ journey toward class consciousness foregrounds willful practices of *counter-cultivation* that work to undo or to pre-empt ideological cultivation by the ruling class. An amusing example is “The Bad Alphabet for the use of the Children of Female Reformers.” These “Female Reformers” “pledged themselves ‘to use our utmost endeavour to instil into the minds of our children a deep and rooted hatred of our corrupt and tyrannical rulers,’” and to that end, they taught the children their letters thus: “B was for Bible, Bishop, and Bigotry; K for King, King’s evil, Knave and Kidnapper; W for Whig, Weakness, Wavering, and Wicked.”⁸² This practice combines the fundamentals of literacy, and thus of reasoning, with affective cultivation indexed to a specific episode of class struggle: learning the letters was prerequisite to, or at least conducive to, “the ability to handle abstract and consecutive argument,” but the educators also directed their pedagogy to the end of training their students’ reflexes vis-à-vis authority; learning the alphabet could set up a defense within the developing subject against ideological cultivation by the ruling class. As etymology suggests, such contests of ideological cultivation and

79. Ibid., 716–17.

80. Ibid., 713.

81. Daniel Cunningham, “Ideology, History, and Political Affect,” *Constellations* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12678>.

82. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 717–18.

counter-cultivation are the lifeblood of *culture*, the active element in its establishment and maintenance.

Class Culture

As we have seen, for Thompson, the process of formation of the English working class accelerated in the 1790s with the shock that the French Revolution applied to the eighteenth-century system of opposed “fields-of-force.” But to that incompletely distinct “class” arrangement, or “class struggle without class,” belonged forms of collective consciousness and of oppositional workers’ culture that were not yet class consciousness and class culture. Thompson describes the “moral economy” of the price-setting crowd and the “customary consciousness”⁸³ formed in defense of popular traditions (invented or otherwise) as moments in a progressive separation of middle- and lower-class cultures during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The “confrontations” between these diffuse instances of collective consciousness and the solidifying class consciousness of the middle class—the latter expressed increasingly by ideological cooptation of the new political economy, which allowed landowners to convince themselves that the most naked exploitation of the poor was in fact for their own good⁸⁴—were “prefigurements of subsequent class formations and consciousness,” wherein “the fragmented débris of older patterns are revived and reintegrated within this emergent class consciousness.”⁸⁵ Much of his work on eighteenth-century England seeks to expose the formation of “a radical disassociation—and at times antagonism—between the culture and even the ‘politics’ of the poor and those of the great.”⁸⁶

We can thus notice that “culture” is present all throughout the “structured process” that moves from social being to social consciousness, and from class struggle to class consciousness, through the mediation of historical experience, though its significance changes from the start to the completion of that process. At the start, especially as custom, culture allows subjects to ascribe meaning to the relationships that constitute the “social being” specific to a mode of production, such as relationships of deference to superiors and of cooperation or competition with peers. But, as Thompson stresses, in a period of transition such as the eighteenth century in England, “far from having the steady permanence suggested by the word ‘tradition,’ custom was a field of change and contest, an arena in which opposing interests made conflicting claims.”⁸⁷ In such contexts, customs—particles of culture—become strategic outposts in the battle for the future. And, at the end of the process, the constitution of a distinct and self-aware *class culture* marks the achievement of “maturity” and of the class consciousness that accompanies

83. Thompson, “Introduction: Custom and Culture,” 15.

84. According to Thompson, “ideas are handled roughly by parties, institutions, social processes. The ideology of Victorian *laissez faire* millowners was not the same thing as the thought of Adam Smith and Bentham; the middle-class seized on certain ideas only—and these often imperfectly understood—and adapted them to their own interests” (“Socialist Humanism”).

85. Thompson, “Introduction: Custom and Culture,” 12.

86. Thompson, “The Patricians and the Plebs,” 22.

87. Thompson, “Introduction: Custom and Culture,” 6.

it. “We may thank them for these years of heroic culture,” according to Thompson.⁸⁸ This is the last sentence of the original edition of *The Making of the English Working Class*, “culture” the last word. It echoes a fuller discussion in the book’s preface:

Class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born—or enter involuntarily. Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms. If the experience appears as determined, class-consciousness does not.⁸⁹

So, in a way that recalls Hegel’s *Phenomenology*,⁹⁰ a distinct class culture represents the achievement of a kind of freedom or agency—and not the mere appearance of it by which the eighteenth-century food rioters were “almost misled”—that can arise only through oppositional struggle and through the arduous work, required by that struggle, of comprehending conditions given as unchosen, as determinative of the class standpoint: again, social being, historical experience, social consciousness.

Thompson recognizes two criteria of the achievement of class consciousness and the class culture that embodies it: they require both negative opposition to an other and positive awareness and affirmation of self, moments both of against-another and for-itself. He elaborates these points in the “Class Consciousness” chapter of *The Making of the English Working Class*:

The new class consciousness of working people may be viewed from two aspects. On the one hand, there was a consciousness of the identity of interests between working men of the most diverse occupations and levels of attainment, which was embodied in many institutional forms, and which was expressed on an unprecedented scale in the general unionism of 1830–4. This consciousness and these institutions were only to be found in fragmentary form in the England of 1780.

On the other hand, there was a consciousness of the identity of the interests of the working class, or “productive classes,” *as against* those of other classes; and within this there was maturing the claim for an alternative *system*.⁹¹

On Thompson’s account, this achievement of a class-conscious culture with both negative and positive valences arose, in the case of the English working class, amid the widespread agitations for the Reform Act of 1832, the legislative answer to long-standing calls for universal manhood suffrage.⁹² The workers became a class for-itself through their organization around this central democratic

88. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 832.

89. *Ibid.*, 9–10.

90. See Thompson’s “Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski”: “I am not competent to pursue the difficult question as to Hegel’s historical method, a method which sometimes—as in the *Phenomenology*—commands the historian’s respect, and at other times—as in the *Logic*—provokes his indignation” (“An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski,” in *The Poverty of Theory*, 349).

91. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 807.

92. The 1832 Reform Act also for the first time explicitly codified women’s *ineligibility* to vote.

demand, “a symbol whose importance it is difficult for us to appreciate,” which “implied . . . equality of citizenship, personal dignity, worth.”⁹³ It also, for many working-class radicals, implied social revolution,⁹⁴ “an alternative *system*” they thought would surely result from allowing all working men to vote. One of the reasons the Reform Act did not produce this result was also what, according to Thompson, formally cemented the English workers as a class against-another: before it could get through Parliament, the Reform Act had to be revised to limit suffrage among home renters to those who paid at least ten pounds annually, a stipulation that excluded much of the working class. So, the turmoil around 1832, “twelve months in which revolution was possible,”⁹⁵ achieved very moderate democratizing progress legislatively, but, socially, it achieved much more: it formalized the exclusion of the poor *qua* poor, setting the stage for the later emergence of Chartism and militant trade unionism in whose milieu the thought of Marx and Engels would blossom.

These three elements compose a carefully considered and assiduously studied “structured process” with its own “logic”: the process of attaining class consciousness as it occurred among the workers of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England. The question remains how universally this process can be said to apply. But the openness of that question is not a failure of theory; it is an invitation and guide to further research on other processes of class formation—the necessary result of thinking with “concepts appropriate to the investigation of processes.”

IV. CONCLUSION

I have sought to show that Thompson’s scholarship of the 1960s and 1970s suggests a genuinely *historical-materialist* theory of class, which I have sought (in section 1) to articulate *qua* theory. Such a thing could only have resulted from the immersive study of history, not from sociologicistic ratiocination and not from at last finding just the right way of interpreting Marx and Engels, who, as Thompson liked to emphasize, developed their own most powerful theories by carefully studying history. But, as I have also discussed (in section 2), deriving theory from historical research brings its own perils: such a procedure can supply no authoritative standard or universal method of generalization—that is, it cannot tell us when a specific historical process and the manifold lived experiences it comprises yield concepts applicable to other cases. This is simply because, while it follows certain patterns of causation and thus possesses certain “logics,” history is also ceaseless, unpredictable change. I have sought (in section 3) to elaborate the logic of the development of class, from an instance of class struggle to a manifestation of class consciousness, as Thompson presented it in one important case.

This effort is not merely an exercise in interpretative synthesis: the three elements of the “logic of class consciousness” I have identified surely have relevance far beyond eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, and I believe

93. *Ibid.*, 827.

94. *Ibid.*, 828.

95. *Ibid.*, 808.

recognizing and isolating them can be useful for understanding today's political realities. In the United States, for example, much of the working class has become disenchanted with formal higher education because of its high price and perceived remoteness from ordinary life and work, and this trend has contributed to the capture of working-class allegiance by right-wing demagogues. But it could also open a space for new forms of oppositional pedagogy to help win that allegiance back for the Left, whose agenda better reflects their true interests. Organizing to that end would also contribute to the rehabilitation of a distinct working-class culture not made of lies, conspiracism, and apocalypticism, as is the culture in which much of the US working class currently participates. The more difficult issue, however, is how to approach certain "traditional institutions"—the nuclear, heterosexual family; religion; gun ownership, and so on—attachment to which fuels much of the right-wing "culture war" agitation that distracts working-class Republican voters from basing their political decisions on issues more genuinely relevant to their well-being. Even so, there are other traditional institutions whose defense is more conducive to the assertion of just demands and the formation of class consciousness: most obviously, *unions*, whose recently revived militancy is perhaps the greatest reason for optimism about current American politics (even while numerical union membership still stands at a historic low⁹⁶). Communion with nature can also serve as a politically promising traditional institution, which much of the largely rural population of American conservatives already feels an attachment to and whose defense can help to motivate the transition to a more sustainable and fair economy. In all of these instances, hope depends on clear assessment of social being, meaning especially economic and demographic conditions; attention to specific historical experiences, with which recent American history is replete; and the recognition that *durable* political achievements require the cultivation of a distinct working-class consciousness, however much its corresponding culture in the twenty-first century might differ from those of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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96. United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, news release no. USDL-24-0096, 23 January 2024, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/union2.pdf>.