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Theory, History, and Methodological Positivism in the Anderson–Thompson Debate

Abe Walker

In the normally restrained world of academic discourse, the Anderson–Thompson debate stands out as a break with the dominant culture of self-abnegation and humility. Over the course of three years (1964–1966), noted Marxist historians Perry Thompson and Edward Thompson launched a series of spirited attacks on each other that reach a level of virulence rarely approached in scholarly publication.¹ Yet the sheer violence of this debate masks the fact that something important was at stake, with implications for historians of both the Marxist and non-Marxist variety, as well as for historically-oriented sociologists.

With the recent resurgence of interest in comparative–historical sociology, both Anderson and Thompson have been written out of the canon, for reasons that are somewhat unclear. For one, neither held a conventional academic position, but neither did Barrington Moore, who is widely regarded as one of the preeminent comparative–historical sociologists. Both are unabashedly Marxist, but comparative–historical sociology has long had many adherents who locate themselves within the Marxian tradition, even if they are not identifiably “Marxist.” Neither was trained as a sociologist, but comparative–historical sociologists generally eschew disciplinary distinctions, embracing history and political science as well as sociology. I will argue in this paper that the issues raised by Anderson and Thompson deserve to be repositioned at the center of the comparative–historical project. In the process, I will position Anderson and Thompson against four other luminaries of comparative historical sociology: Charles Tilly, Immanuel Wallerstein, Theda Skocpol, and Craig Calhoun, all of whom have weighed in on the debate (Tilly and Wallerstein lean towards Thompson, while Skocpol and Calhoun are more sympathetic to Anderson). I will argue that the Anderson–Thompson debate cuts to the core of existing disputes within comparative–historical sociology. Anderson and Thompson deserve to assume their proper place not at the margins but at the center of the comparative–historical project. Finally, I will demonstrate that while the substantive disagreements between Anderson and Thompson are important, their debate was – in the last instance – an argument about methodology.

Edward Thompson was not, strictly speaking, a comparative historian. Thompson’s best known and most-cited work, *The Making of the English*

Working Class, is not a comparative study at all. Instead, it is a lengthy exposition of working class development in a *single nation*, spanning a seven-hundred-year period. Thompson's writing style usually approximates what a historian might term "thick description"—a painstakingly detailed narrative which attempts to recreate and give life to working-class movements and cultures that had been neglected by mainstream historians. When it was first published, *MEWC* was a truly groundbreaking work for several reasons. First, it pioneered the detailed study of groups long neglected by mainstream historians—the poor, the peasants, and the incipient working class. Along with fellow working-class historians George Rude and Fernand Braudel, Thompson was a pioneer within the field today known as social history. Second, since poor people rarely leave behind an official record, it relied on non-traditional "texts"—songs, poems, stories, and journalistic accounts—to a much greater extent than had been done previously. Third, and most important for the purpose of this essay, it came as a direct challenge to the dominant trend at the time in British history: to heap praise upon Continental working class movements (especially the French), while largely dismissing the British working class. It was this third innovation that later drew the ire of one Perry Anderson.

The Debate

Three fundamental theses sustain *MEWC*. The first is co-determination, or the notion that the working class "made itself as much as it was made." Here, Thompson is clearly challenging the myth of a meek, submissive English working class. He observes that although British working-class movements never coalesced into a party, and although their revolutionary efforts were abortive at best, British history is checkered with working-class riots, revolts, uprisings, and rebellions. The apparent timidity of working-class movements is as much a consequence of extraneous historical conditions as endogenous inadequacies. Indeed, much of *MEWC* is devoted to chronicling the forgotten history of British working-class movements, as if to defend them in the tribunal of history.

Thompson's second thesis, *consciousness*, is the idea that "class happens where some men, as a result of common experiences, feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men" (Thompson 1964: 9–10). In this sense, class is not a static object of study, but an *event* that *happens* under particular circumstances. By implication, workers who suffer from false consciousness or fail to understand their class position do not truly comprise a class.³ In the process, Thompson introduces two key variables that tend to be missing from traditional accounts of class formation: ideology and culture. Thompson's fundamental intellectual project in *MEWC* is to uphold the creative activity and autonomy of English radicalism against those who would describe it as a passive object of industrialization.

Lastly, Thompson, in asserting that the English working class was essentially completed by the early 1830s, puts forward the idea of *closure*. After the 1830s, the English working class is properly described as no longer "in the making" but "made." However, the class was unmade in the period between the 1850s and the 1870s.

Anderson would take issue with each of these theses in turn, although the bulk of his argument concerns a critique of the third and final thesis (closure), which is a historiographical matter, not a theoretical concern.

The 20-mile channel separating Britain from continental Europe may as well be an ocean: Britain lags behind the rest of Western Europe on nearly every social measure, has a comparatively weak labor movement, and, of particular interest to Perry Anderson, has no viable anti-capitalist political parties.³ Anderson's "Origins" reads as an extended lamentation on the current state of British politics. The titular "present crisis" refers to the Conservative Party's 13-year winning streak in national politics, which would draw to a close with the election of a Labour government only months after Anderson's article was published. Nevertheless, by the early 1960s, the Labour Party, wracked by internal crisis, was a shell of its former self and no longer an "authentic" working-class formation (if it ever had been). To be sure, Gaullist France was no workers' paradise either, but the Socialist (SFIO) and Communist (PCF) Parties remained viable oppositional forces throughout the 1960s, and both were far to the left of Britain's Labour. More to the point, the French labor movement in the 1960s was the envy of union militants worldwide, while British unions were relatively quiescent. In Anderson's admiration for the militancy and (relative) successes of the French working class, his Francophilia is palpable. Anderson embodies the stereotypical self-hating Brit.⁴

In a review essay on Anderson, Theda Skocpol and Mary Fulbrook write: "France represents the central line of evolutionary advance. From antiquity onward, the histories of the French core approximate most clearly the Marxist concepts of key modes of production and their progressive succession" (Skocpol 1984: 199). But a problem emerges when Anderson conflates his "model" (orthodox Marxist working-class formation) with the closest actually-existing approximation (France). Clearly, France deviates in important ways from Marx's preordained historical model. But in much of Anderson's writing, France functions practically as a stand-in for Marxist teleology. In this view, Britain is deficient because it fails to follow the preordained "script."

Anderson conceives of French history as the shining example of revolutionary purity in three respects: (1) the French bourgeoisie at the time of the Revolution was fully developed and provided an appropriate target for proletarian rage; (2) the social democratic state that emerged after the Jacobins was an ideal model for an early proletarian movement; and (3) contemporary French communism is the proper embodiment of a mature proletarian movement. Even before the advent of capitalism, Northern France always conformed more closely to the archetypal feudal system than any other region of the continent. In this sense, French history achieves "holistic integrity, functional systematicity, and continuity" (Skocpol 1984: 32). In contrast, Britain proves itself inadequate in each of these respects. The English civil war occurred far too early, the political system that emerged in its wake was attenuated, and contemporary British Marxism was (and is) isolated and marginal.

Anderson has a number of other serious complaints about Thompson. While he does not dispute the essential facts of Thompson's exhaustive account, he

is dismissive of movements that result in failure, whatever their potential. Put simply, Anderson is far more interested in outcomes than in process. Most fundamentally, Anderson disputes Thompson's concept of class, which he considers insufficiently economic. Anderson writes: "The thrust of [Thompson's] argument is still to detach class from its objective anchorage in determinate relations of production, and identify it with subjective consciousness or culture ... It is better to say, with Marx, that social classes may not become conscious of themselves, may fail to act or behave in common, but they still remain, materially, historically—classes" (Anderson 1980: 43). Instead, Anderson argues for a "concept of class as an objective relation to the means of production, independent of will or attitude" (Anderson 1980: 38). Here, Anderson quotes G. W. Cohen who argues that "a person's class is established by nothing but his objective place in the network of ownership relations ... His consciousness, culture and politics do not enter the definition of his class position" (Cohen 1978: 73). (As usual, Anderson is probably overstating his case in this passage for the sake of polemic.) Finally, Anderson criticizes Thompson's notion that class struggle might exist without class *per se*. For Anderson, Thompson's definition of class is far too "voluntarist and subjectivist," for "classes have frequently existed whose members did not identify their antagonistic interests in any process of common struggle" (Anderson 1980: 40). Put differently, Anderson posits that classes exist objectively—even when people fail to behave in class ways.

Anderson's "Origins" is essentially a two-case comparison between the "British model" and the "French model." Although Anderson frequently refers to the "continental" pattern, it is clear that "continental" is merely a proxy for "French," since Germany and Italy are themselves merely inferior approximations of the French pattern. Moreover, Anderson positions the French model at the center of his analysis. Even though he spills more ink discussing the British pattern, this is mainly for the purpose of illuminating its inadequacies as against the French example of revolutionary perfection. In this sense, the French pattern is ideal-typical (in the normative sense of the term); it is the model against which all other possibilities must be evaluated. Anderson's model of British exceptionalism clearly refers not only to difference, but to British *inferiority*. Scholars like Aristide Zolberg (2009) who study exceptionalism debate whether exceptionalism implies distinction or merely difference. In this case, there can be no question that Britain's "exceptionalism" refers to its inferiority.

Thompson's rebuttal to "Origins" comes in *Poverty*. In general, Thompson does not dispute the facts of Anderson's account, although he takes issue with some of Anderson's historiographical assumptions—especially his periodization.⁵ But Thompson's main line of (counter-)attack is methodological. He claims that cross-national comparisons are only meaningful insofar as pre-existing conditions are themselves comparable. In other words, the French model cannot be meaningfully applied to foreign turf. Given Britain's unique class structure, agrarian population, geographical isolation, and a host of other factors, all of which pre-date industrialization, Britain could not have been reasonably expected to follow the French pattern. His observations here approximate Aristide Zolberg's (2009) view

of difference. As Ira Katznelson and Zolberg have written, there is a tendency within history to set up a single “model” of working-class formation against which all actual historical experiences are judged as “exceptional” or “deviant.” The remainder of *Poverty* consists of a commentary on the misappropriation of Althusser by Anderson (of which more later).

Finally, Anderson gets in the last word with *Socialism*. On the first pages of *Socialism*, Thompson is charged with “paranoia and bad faith,” “virulent travesty and abuse,” “reckless falsification” (Anderson 1966: 1, 2). The brunt of Anderson’s critique is concerned with what he considers a mischaracterization of his ideas by Thompson. He writes, “far from evincing the class reductionism of which Thompson accuses us, we—once again—*explicitly and categorically rejected it*” (Anderson 1966: 10; emphasis in original). But Anderson then proceeds to take aim at Thompson’s understanding of class, which he considers too malleable. Anderson may not be a proper class reductionist in the pejorative sense, but he clearly has in mind a more essentialist, objective view of class than does Thompson (as evidenced by his reliance on the “analytic Marxism” of Cohen). Anderson’s attempt to dismiss Thompson by pointing to their commonalities therefore appears misguided.

Anderson scores more points with his attack on Thompson’s crude populism, writing, “concrete analysis of class or social groups ... is relinquished for a perpetual, sententious invocation of ‘the people’—that is, exactly the terminology of populism”; and continuing: “where ‘the people’ rather than concrete, determinate social groups are continually invoked as the victims of injustice and the agents of social change, it becomes natural to speak of the role of this people as a nation with a pre-eminent destiny among other peoples” (Anderson 1966: 34). But more to the point, “the people” is a vague grouping that functions much more readily as a rhetorical device than as an operationalizable category. Anderson’s stylistic criticism of Thompson is a veneer for his more important methodological criticism.

Commentary

If the Anderson thesis is reductionist, it is far less so than some of his contemporaries—for example James Hinton, who criticized Anderson “for assertion of primacy to the political and ideological factors”—practically the opposite of Thompson’s critique. Anderson is somewhere in the middle of the spectrum of class formation literature, distant from both the economic determinist and the interpretivist extremes. Even an extreme interpretivist like Aronowitz cautions against overemphasizing the cultural component of collective action. Speaking of the social historians who followed Thompson (though he might as well be commenting on Thompson himself), Aronowitz writes, “their own historiographic interventions emphasized the importance of cultural formation in the historical process perhaps more strongly than they actually meant, in opposition to the determinism of the economic historians, even the Marxists among them” (Aronowitz 1993: 96). Therefore, Thompson’s critique rings somewhat hollow. On this and other issues, Anderson and Thompson have much more in common than they deign to admit.

Other commentators have noted that the differences between Anderson

and Thompson are likely overblown. As Susan Magarey notes, “Edward Thompson repudiated the label ‘culturalism’ when it was applied to his work; Perry Anderson has never laid claim to the label ‘structuralist’” (1987: 630). Yet Thompson has come to embody the culturalist tradition within British Marxism, while Anderson’s polemic in *Arguments* emerged as the most visible representative of structuralism. It should be noted, however, that Thompson’s rejection of the “culturalist” label was in part a reaction against Raymond Williams, who had proudly accepted the “culturalist” label and from whom Thompson hoped to distance himself.

To fully understand Thompson’s relationship to culturalism, a closer reading of his major theses is necessary. The most oft-quoted passage in *MEWC* is one of several definitions of class that Thompson offers in his introduction. Taken out of context, it seems to validate the structure/agency dichotomy that has become popular in recent years:

Class is not a category but a process. Classes arise because men and women, in determinate productive relations, identify their antagonistic interests, and come to struggle, to think, and to value in class ways; thus the process of class formation is a process of self-making, although under conditions which are “given.” (Thompson 1964: 107)

This excerpt merits some analysis since it is so central to Thompson’s argument. While the relations of production are *determinate* (as in, having been definitely settled), they are not *determinative* (as in, having the power to define the future). The men and women involved in the struggle must develop an understanding of class antagonism, but more important they must act in “class ways.” Therefore, class happens as a result of emergence of class-based activity. Thompson deftly combines the objective component (productive relations) and the subjective component (class consciousness and class action) of class formation, while clearly placing more stock in the latter. In a move that foreshadows Deleuze, Thompson refers to class as a “process” or a “becoming,” once again emphasizing its dynamic nature.

In *History and Class Consciousness*, Georg Lukács famously distinguished between class-in-itself and class-for-itself. The former refers to the “objective” identity of the working class, as determined by productive relations. The latter connotes the emergence of a social body that self-identifies as the working class. Thompson allegedly eliminates this distinction. More precisely, he seems to dismiss the category of “class-in-itself” entirely, and reduce the category of “working class” to nothing more than “class-for-itself.” For Thompson the working class does not fully exist until it achieves class consciousness. Put differently, at least during his strongest moments, Thompson seems to completely reject the “objective” dimension of class, in favor of its “subjective” component.

Criticisms of Thompson often attack a gross caricature of his actual argument. Thompson did not ignore the real, grounded, “objective” conditions of class formation—in fact, he remained keenly aware of their continued

importance. Likewise, he did not present class as a mythical, free-floating concept. But in granting the primacy of cultural components of class formation, Thompson apparently challenged a sacred dogma of Marxist orthodoxy.

Some critics even reduce the Anderson–Thompson debate to lingering grudges about a struggle for the control of the *New Left Review* (NLR). The NLR, co-founded by Thompson in 1960 and initially edited by cultural studies pioneer Stuart Hall, quickly became the leading English-language voice for dissident (anti-Stalinist) Marxists. Its early years were marked by a series of power struggles that were often played out on its pages. With regard to Anderson and Thompson, the facts are quite clear—Thompson hired Anderson to head up the NLR in 1963. Within one year, Anderson had fired Thompson, realigned the board of directors in his favor, and assumed directorship of the journal himself. Thompson remained a prominent figure in the British neo-Marxist milieu, but never reassumed control of the NLR, so there is no shortage of bad blood between the two men. At times, the debate leans toward comedy, as in Thompson Dickensian caricature of Anderson.⁶ But the real point of tension centers on another prominent intellectual in the European Marxist scene—one Louis Althusser.

In the 1960s, Thompson succeeded in persuading a significant number of Marxist intellectuals to all but disown Althusser. In an obvious reference to Althusser's base–superstructure dichotomy from "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," Thompson writes, "historical change eventuates, not because a given 'basis' must give rise to a correspondent 'superstructure,' but because changes in productive relationships are experienced in social and cultural life, refracted in men's ideas and their values, and argued through in their actions" (Thompson 1978: 22). Today, the Anderson–Thompson debate deserves being revisited in light of the recent return to Althusser, led by such prominent thinkers as Derrida, Butler, and, in his own way, Foucault. Like Althusser, these scholars displaced the subject as the crucial agent of history. If the intellectual tide is now swinging back towards Althusser, might that portend a *left* reading of Anderson's defense of Althusser's structuralism against Thompson's (now somewhat less trendy) Marxist humanism? Or is Anderson's Althusser significantly different from the Althusser that has recently been embraced by the academic left? These questions deserve further analysis.

Althusser is often cast as a crude economic determinist. Imprudent statements like the following lend credence to that characterization: "The class struggle does not go on in the air ... it is rooted in the mode of production and exploitation in a given class society. The emphasis reverts continually towards the economic base. To contend that social formations typically derive their unity from the diffusion of values, or the exercise of violence, across a plurality of individual or group wills is to reject the Marxist insistence on the ultimate primacy of economic determinations of history" (Althusser 1969: 34). At first glance, this rigidly deterministic view seems to align closely with some of Anderson's writing: "The problem of social order is irresolvable so long as the answer to it is sought at the level of intention ... It is, and must be, the dominant mode of production that confers fundamental unity on a social formation, allocating their objective positions

to classes within it, and distributing the agents within each class" (Anderson 1978: 55). But Althusser's intention was not to position the economy at the center of social life, even if some of his statements, when taken out of context, give that impression. Rather, he will best be remembered for his questioning the primacy of the Hegelian subject, and his contributions to the revival of anti-humanist philosophy.

Althusser famously posited an "epistemological break" between the naively humanist "early Marx" (of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*) and the more sophisticated "late Marx" (of *Capital*). In his view, the authentic Marx emerged at or about 1852. In his reading of Marx, the development of entire societies could be determined, though only "in the last instance," by the economy. In his famous phrase, which is often crudely taken out of context, history is a "process without a subject." It is not difficult to understand why Thompson, whose theories leaned so heavily on the autonomous human subject, would wholeheartedly reject Althusser. Yet even Althusser was not the rigid economic determinist that Thompson and his humanist followers tried to depict. In *Poverty*, Thompson goes to lengths to depict Althusser as the consummate Stalinite, and Anderson as his lackey, but the men's records tell a quite different story. Althusser was outspoken in his criticisms of the USSR before it was popular to do so, and he broke with the French Communist Party over their position on the events of May 1968, among other issues. (True to form, Althusser rejected the label "structuralist.") Furthermore, Anderson himself was anything but an orthodox Althusserian. Under his tenure at the NLR, a number of articles formulating criticisms of Althusser were published, and Anderson does the same in his own books. Britain at the time was rife with orthodox Althusserians, but Anderson was not one of them. Indeed, if one desired to attack Althusser vicariously *via* one of his followers, one could hardly have picked a worse target than Anderson.

Indeed, the cultural studies baton would be passed off in the late 1970s and early 1980s to Stuart Hall's Centre for Cultural Studies, who attempted a synthesis of Thompsonian cultural history along with (their own version) of Althusserianism. There were important methodological differences between the Thompson and Hall camps, which exacerbated antagonisms on both sides. Rather than pouring over historical documents, as Thompson had done in preparing *MEWC* and his other major works, Hall's followers tended to be theoretically oriented, shunning painstaking empiricism in favor of pure theory.

There is a danger that the entire debate might be reduced to a question of free will versus determinism (or what sociologists often call "structure vs. agency"). The reality is both more sophisticated, and more petty, and not only because neither Anderson nor Thompson are adequate representatives of these respective "positions." Although Thompson is clearly aligned with the "agency" pole, his "deep historicism" is considerably more complex. Thompson forcefully asserts the primacy of history over theory, and makes the admittedly tautological case that arguments about historiography can best be evaluated against the backdrop of historical fact. What begins as a defense of Marxist history quickly becomes a defense of the historical enterprise in general, as he insists on the determinate

properties of (historical) facts. Thompson's attack is not on theory *per se*, but on a proto-postmodern relativism. Thompson argues against both crude empiricism (he would unquestionably take issue with the "socio-economic status" variable that most quantitative sociologists use as a stand-in for class) and against unprincipled theoreticism (à la Althusser). Instead, he pushes for a cautious, historically-grounded empiricism.

Thompson's position on determinacy is complex to say the least. While in one passage he writes, "People were so hungry that they were willing to risk their lives upsetting a barrow of potatoes. In these conditions, it might appear more surprising if men had not plotted revolutionary uprisings than if they had" (Thompson 1964: 592), he seems to contradict himself elsewhere, as when he critiques the "abbreviated and 'economistic' picture of the food riot as a direct, spasmodic, irrational response to hunger" (Thompson 1964: 528). So as much as Thompson argues against the notion that rebellion is an instinctual preconscious response to hunger, he strives to maintain the causal connection between deprivation and revolt.

So Anderson the neo-positivist uses Althusser in his economic determinist mode as a weapon against Thompson. But in a certain sense it is Althusser the *anti-humanist* who delivers a more searing critique of Thompson—a side of Althusser that Anderson clearly chooses to ignore, for it slices both ways. Surely Anderson understands that, were he to invoke Althusser the anti-humanist, his own project would likewise be dead in the water.

Thompson and Sociology

MEWC could not be more different from the dominant strains of comparative-historical sociology. Thompson was attacked anew in the 1980s and 1990s by a new generation of scholars, most of them too young to have witnessed his debates with Anderson firsthand. Yet their critiques were very much in the tradition of Anderson—they were *methodological* in nature. Craig Calhoun argued that Thompson "does not much examine *structural positions* of workers within the economy as a whole" (Calhoun 1982: 21; my emphasis). The eminent British sociologist Anthony Giddens similarly criticized *MEWC* for "[collapsing] the spectrum of *conditions* which actually led to the formation of the English working class ... into an opposition between protest and resistance largely internal to the ideas and behavior of the members of the working class themselves" (Giddens 1987: 212; my emphasis). Robert Murphy accuses Thompson of defining class as "an act of will rather than by *objective situation*" (Murphy 1986: 256) and insinuates that Thompson's working class "disappears" when it loses consciousness. (This is of course a gross exaggeration and an incredible oversimplification of Thompson's quite nuanced argument.) By now, these critiques should be familiar. Calhoun, Giddens and Murphy argue for the primacy of "structural positions," "conditions," and the "objective situation." They are simply rehearsing the arguments Anderson made twenty years earlier, with only the slightest variation.

But historians like Thompson are under no obligation to generalize, and Thompson makes no claim to comprehensiveness. A detailed examination of the

economic conditions of early industrial Britain might be a useful project—but it is not Thompson's. To turn the tables, mainstream historical sociology might stand to benefit from the careful, "micro-level" analysis that Thompson does so well. One gets the sense that Calhoun, Giddens, Murphy and Thompson's other critics are superimposing their own set of sociological standards over of a completely disanalogous study. If Thompson is to be judged by any standards, it is only fair that they be the standards required by his intellectual project.

Similar problems emerge when authors attempt to merge Thompson with other comparative–historical luminaries. For example, Alvin So and Muhammad Hikam (1989) try to synthesize Thompson and Wallerstein to produce a third, composite method. Although exiled to the semi-periphery at SUNY Binghamton, Wallerstein's influence on comparative–historical sociology is immeasurable. So and Hakim devote twenty pages to exploring connections and possible alliances between the two men. They depict the two as intellectual siblings, and even propose an analytical technique they call "class struggle analysis," designed to fuse the two authors at the hip. Yet So and Hikam's reasoning seems a bit forced—Wallerstein's world-system analysis represents grand theory if there ever was one. Thompson's obsession with working-class poetry could not be further removed from Wallerstein's efforts to design an all-encompassing model of global capitalism.

Eventually, So and Hakim's true intentions are laid bare—to subordinate Thompson to a Wallersteinian approach, even as they purport to remain faithful to both. So and Hikam (1989) accuse Thompson of "a-structural analysis; subjectivism; and unclear class boundaries." Drawing on Craig Calhoun's *The Question of Class Struggle*—a book-length diatribe against Thompson—the authors argue:

The spectrum of conditions which actually led to the formation of the English working class are collapsed into an opposition between protest and resistance largely internal to the ideas and behavior of the members of the working class themselves. (1989: 461)

So and Hikam further criticize Thompson, arguing that "struggle to form (or before forming) a class should not be conceptualized as class struggle because the goal of class formation may not materialize" (1989: 455). So struggle by a putative "class" prior to the "moment" of class formation (as defined by Thompson) is not actually class struggle since it is uncertain at that point whether or not a class will emerge. Despite their best intentions, this modification probably creates more problems than it resolves. For one thing, Thompson never suggests that there is a "single, definable moment" of class formation. Rather, as he asserts numerous times, class formation is a process. Some classes might form more successfully than others, but nowhere does he suggest it is possible to isolate the turning point at which a pre-class formation becomes an actual class. Second, So and Hakim's definition of class struggle only emerges after the fact, once it is finally clear that a class has, in fact, been formed. This seems to grant the historian special power to distinguish

class struggle from not-yet-class-struggle. Finally, their definition assumes that unsuccessful or partially successful struggle is not actually class struggle.

But there is another problem here. Despite *MEWC's* title, Thompson acknowledges that British workers rarely self-identified as a "working class." Instead, they used the much broader descriptor "productive class." This term refers not only to the proletariat, but to an ad hoc class alliance that included petty-bourgeois elements and remnants of the pre-industrial era, including store owners, small-time manufacturers and self-employed artisans. Indeed, the "productive class" comprised the vast majority of British society, excluding only large manufacturers, major landowners, nobility, and royalty. That British people failed to draw class boundaries more narrowly is a problem, in Aronowitz's view. The point is not that the working class should forgo cross-class alliances (even Marx predicted that the petty-bourgeois would eventually view their interests as more closely aligned with the proletariat than with the capitalists), but that the workers must self-identify as a class before they can build coalitions. Proletarians have a fundamentally different relationship to capitalist production than do small-business owners or craftsmen, and understanding this relationship is a prerequisite for successful class formation. But to what extent does the idea of a "productive class" bleed into Thompson's own definition of the working class? For Craig Calhoun, Thompson's loose definition of class leads him to include some workers who ought to be considered petty bourgeois. Aronowitz is quite forgiving, but Calhoun is far more pointed: "so much of what Thompson calls 'the making of the working class' is the reactionary radicalism of the artisanate" (1982: 103). There is some truth to this critique, but in my view it stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of Thompson's intellectual project.

Thompson's work begs the question: What might it mean to treat class not as a *unit of analysis*, or as an operationalizable category, but as a conceptual frame to be employed for the purpose of explaining and interpreting social relations? This project may be beyond the bounds of mainstream sociology, but it is a worthwhile one. Even when presented the opportunity to more precisely define and delimit his concept of class, Thompson refuses.

Theda Skocpol's mapping of the field offers some insight here. In the concluding chapter of her edited collection, Skocpol (1984) sketches out three major methodological strategies for comparative-historical sociology. These consist of (1) a deductive approach, (2) an interpretive approach, and (3) an analytical approach. To grossly oversimplify her complex argument, deductive scholars map individual case studies on general models, interpretive scholars explain case studies without reliance on model-making, while analytical scholars combine these two strategies. (Skocpol clearly favors strategy 3, and locates herself within this tradition.) According to Skocpol, Anderson favors strategy 1, while Thompson confines himself strictly to strategy 2. Thompson's critics (Calhoun, So and Hikam, et al.) work within strategies 1 and 3, and seek to criticize Thompson on these bases, without recognizing that his work lies within strategy 2. Their critique, which is based on their standards, not Thompson's own, therefore falls flat.

Thompson ultimately has a complex and tenuous relationship to mainstream

sociology. Thompson's assertion that classes are "made" has reached the point of a certain orthodoxy among class theorists and sociologists. His short preface is probably among the most quoted texts in the field, and for a sociologist to write about class without mentioning Thompson would approach heresy. In terms of the respective impacts on sociology, Thompson clearly takes the prize, with Anderson reduced to a mere footnote, if he deserves mention at all. In a catch-all textbook the eminent British sociologist Anthony Giddens has written:

E. P. Thompson could be described as the sociologists' historian. There are few historians whom sociologists are more fond of quoting ... The affinity which sociologists feel for Thompson's work can be explained ... by reference to Thompson's concern with problems of class formation and class consciousness. (Giddens 1987: 203)

But Giddens pointedly neglects to mention that the feeling was not mutual. Indeed, Thompson seemed to harbor a deep-seated resentment toward sociology. His introduction ranks among the more powerful and angry critiques of sociology written to date. After rereading *MEWC*, one begins to wonder how many of Thompson's admirers have any sort of familiarity with the text at all. While sociologists constantly cite *MEWC*'s fifteen-page introduction, in which he lays out the theoretical underpinnings of his argument, few deign to wade into the body of the text, and fewer still emulate Thompson's method. Of course, it doesn't help that Thompson's introduction includes a series of spirited jabs at sociology, like this one: "the finest-meshed sociological net cannot give us a pure specimen of class, any more than it can give us one of deference or of love" (Thompson 1963: 9).

Statements like these leave Thompson vulnerable to the claim that he fails to define class boundaries. Taking his metaphor a bit too literally, Murphy counters, "it would be helpful to know whether Thompson is using a finely-meshed net which catches almost everyone in the 'working people,' or a wide-meshed net which catches virtually no one, or what in fact his 'working people' net does catch" (Murphy 1986: 255). Of course, this quip completely misses the point: Thompson deliberately refuses to define class in a neat, bounded, and "measurable" way. This is not an omission on his part, but rather is characteristic of his overall method. It seems Thompson has expanded the concept of class struggle by including in it not just the struggle *after* forming a class, but also the struggle *to form* a class (or even the struggle *before forming* a class). So class moves from an analytical category to a heuristic device—a move that foreshadows the anti-positivist critique of the human sciences.

Within sociology, positivism has been and remains the dominant strain. The explosion of cultural studies, science studies, and post-second-wave feminism in the 1980s and early 1990s briefly seemed to challenge the positivist orthodoxy, only to be reabsorbed by the 2000s. Today, even the American Sociological Association's unorthodox theory section is controlled by methodological positivists. Although methodological positivism is usually associated with quantitatively-

oriented sociologists, George Steinmetz (among others) has argued that qualitative sociologists commit the same crimes with blunter weapons. Few sociologists openly stake a claim to the legacy of Auguste Comte, but his specter still haunts the discipline's hallowed halls. Even the most qualitatively-oriented sociologists adhere to methodological positivism to an extent that is unmatched in the humanities. For Steinmetz, positivist social science has a number of key features, but the necessary condition for epistemological positivism, or its "common denominator ... is the orientation to regularity determinism or covering laws" (2005: 285). That is, positivists assume for every event y there is an event x or set of events $x_1 \dots x_n$ which can be neatly predicted based on y . To be sure, not all positivists adhere rigidly to this formulation, but according to Steinmetz, this logic constitutes an "epistemological unconscious," which structures and delimits the possibilities for sociological thought even when it is not explicitly invoked. Secondly, positivists adopt a hardline scientific naturalism, or the assumption that "the social world can be studied in the same general manner as the natural world" (2005: 283). In the process, social scientists borrow many of the tools of natural science, with its requisite emphasis on prediction and willful ignorance of concept, time and space dependence. Critics of positivism claim that social scientists should reject the presuppositions of the natural sciences and create new methodologies appropriate to their unique objects of study.

On the other hand, history, as a discipline, has long tread the fuzzy boundary between the humanities and the social sciences. Not quite systematic enough to be a social science, but too obsessed with "truth" and "facts" to join the humanities, history occupies a wasteland within the academy. Thompson, for his part, clearly seeks to move history away from its social scientific counterparts but does so from within the framework of Marxist history, where a somewhat different but no less doctrinaire positivism reigns supreme.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Marxism was eclipsed by Erik Olin Wright and the self-described "analytical" Marxists, whose intellectual project centered on recuperating Marxist categories for quantitative sociology. Countless gallons of ink were spilled on such critical tasks as "proving" Marx's labor theory of value, as though the successful completion of this task would vindicate Marxism once and for all. But Wright's approach, which Aronowitz (2003) dismisses as "social cartography," explicitly ignores the cultural dimensions of class formation. Likewise, Wright has no interest in history; rather than explain when and how classes form, his analysis is consumed with accounting for class relations at a given moment.

In a similar vein, empirically-oriented sociologists typically operationalize class using the variable "socio-economic status" (SES)—itself an aggregate of income, net assets, occupational prestige, and education level. Following Thompson, a number of critical sociologists have argued that while SES might be an adequate measure of (Weberian) status, it does not accurately measure class, since it completely ignores ideology, consciousness, and history—the "subjective" components of social class. Of course, "class consciousness" never appears on the General Social Survey and would be difficult to input into SPSS. "Measuring"

consciousness can only be achieved through the kind of deep historical narrative that Thompson attempts in *MEWC*—completely foreign to most sociologists, even those of a qualitative orientation.

For these reasons, as impressive as *MEWC* is, it might not meet the standards of academic rigor that pervade contemporary sociology. As a discipline, sociology has a structuralist bias. Even “cultural sociologists” have drawn the ire of “cultural studies” scholars (often located in the humanities) for overemphasizing the structural dimension of social life. One even wonders if *MEWC* would even meet the minimum expectations of a typical dissertation committee. If there is a single defining characteristic of sociology, it is the impulse to build models, create categories and generalize across multiple cases. Only the postmodernists at the fringe of the discipline have completely rejected generalization as a worthwhile strategy. The sociologist who rejects the discipline’s holy triumvirate—modeling, generalization, and comparison—is by most accounts not a sociologist at all.

The other problem with Thompson’s method from the perspective of mainstream social science is his understanding of time. While statisticians can compare fixed points along a timeline (using a time-series analysis or a cohort study), they cannot easily measure the dynamic nature of historical processes. But, of course, historical processes (like class formation) are constantly in transition. As the Heisenberg principle famously states, one cannot study sub-atomic particles themselves but only their effects. Modern sociology lacks the ability to deal with time-in-motion. Time-series and cohort-based analysis are still atemporal insofar as they are premised on observing social phenomena at a *fixed* moment in time. On the other hand, there is a sense of temporality in Thompson’s writing that few sociologists even approximate. Early in his career, Thompson penned an often-overlooked essay entitled “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism” (1967) in which he explains the rise of the clock, and the modern concept of time itself, in the context of the capitalist revolution and working-class resistance. Thompson argues that bosses eliminated the pre-modern notion of time—which was basically task-oriented—and replaced it with regimented factory time—with an emphasis on subdivision and precision—for the purpose of extracting maximum labor from the new proletariat. The idea of time *itself* was radically transformed. In one of his more convincing moments, Thompson argues that class cannot be measured ahistorically: “If we stop history at a given point, then there are no classes but simply a multitude of individuals with a multitude of experiences but if we watch these men over an adequate period of social change, we observe patterns in their relationships, their ideas, and their institutions. Class is defined by men as they live” (Thompson 1964: 11). This rigid insistence on the dynamic nature of class is appealing rhetorically, but it presents an insurmountable challenge to the cottage industry that has organized around the notion that class exists as a static category, outside of time.

One final question remains: what use do sociologists have for history? If Thompson’s *MEWC* is only tolerable when eviscerated and subsumed under the rubric of a demonstrably sociological frame, what is it actually worth *on its own terms*? The most prominent comparative–historical sociologists—Moore, Skocpol, Tilly, Wallerstein—wield grand theory like a sledgehammer. Similarly, Anderson’s

essays, along with his masterworks *Lineages* and *Passages* are predicated upon the assumption that a particular model—one in which the working class achieves “full” development—is preferable. In contrast, Thompson offers nothing in the way of grand theory but instead offers a theory of pure historical contingency that is anathema to most historically-oriented sociologists. But it should be no surprise that, in the process of fusing two disciplines with asymmetrical properties, one will be forced to bend. As Sewell (1996) has keenly observed, making sociology historical cannot simply be a question of increasing the number of data points. It may even be the case that, against the wishes of mainstream comparative–historical sociologists, history and sociology are not entirely compatible. Taking history seriously will require abandoning old assumptions, adopting new methodological orientations, and in the process, overturning many of the foundations of sociology itself.

¹ What has become known as the Anderson–Thompson debate refers to a series of books and articles spanning five years. In chronological order, they are Thompson’s book *Making of the English Working Class* (1964, hereafter *MEWC*); Anderson’s review article “Origins of the Present Crisis” (1964) in the *New Left Review* (hereafter “Origins”); Thompson’s response “Peculiarities of the English” (1965) in the *Socialist Register*, later republished with minor edits in an essay collection entitled *The Poverty of Theory* 1978 (hereafter *Poverty*); Anderson’s rebuttal “Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism” (1966) in the *New Left Review* (hereafter “Socialism”); and a reissue of Anderson’s previous essays with a new introduction, called *Arguments Within English Marxism* (1980, hereafter *Arguments*). The tone of these articles becomes gradually more antagonistic as time passes. For the sake of simplicity, I will ignore the contributions Tom Nairn made to the debate.

² This notion of class closely parallel Georg Lukács’ (1971) distinction between “class in itself” and “class for itself,” although Thompson does not use this terminology, probably because Lukács’ book was not available in English translation at the time.

³ If Anderson were to update his piece today, he might note that Britain has led the pack of Western European democracies in the movement toward Americanization, dramatically scaling back its already diminutive welfare state.

⁴ On the other hand, while Thompson’s stated objective is to rescue the British working class from charges of immaturity, he sometimes goes too far, and finds himself making claims about British superiority. If Anderson is a Francophile, Thompson is an unrepentant Anglophile. His project is to reclaim a specifically British cultural history. Thompson is ultimately something of a British nationalist. In the final analysis, the Anderson–Thompson debate is clouded by the specter of nationalism.

⁵ They disagree over the nature and timing of the bourgeois revolution. For Thompson, this revolution dissolves into a series of events that stretches back to the twelfth century and continues, as an ongoing process, until the nineteenth century. For Anderson, the English

aristocracy remained well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (in the sociological, not titular sense).

⁶ Anderson, having a less refined sense of humor, seems to prefer crass insults to literary allusions. At one point, he accuses Thompson of a performance “laden with self-delighted pirouettes, and constant sacrifices of accuracy and sobriety...” (1966: 6)

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