# Was E.P Thompson a Marxist?

## INTRODUCTION

Edward Palmer Thompson, owing to his masterpiece, The Making of the English Working Class, is arguably one of the greatest Marxist historians of all time.[[1]](#footnote-0)In the book’s preface, Thompson asserts the phrase “working class” is descriptive and ideally evades as much as it defines by loosely bundling discrete phenomena together. While Thompson transformed the perception historians had of social class, what he was precisely about may still raise questions as to whether he really was a Marxist or not. For instance, he, on one hand, focused on the details of the working class and often surprising culture of the pre-industrial England.[[2]](#footnote-1) He also focused on the numerous ways that the working people who occupied the lowest stratum of English society envisaged themselves and created their own educational and political organisations in the second half of the 18th century. On the other hand, other Marxist historians primarily focused on the large capitalism structures.[[3]](#footnote-2) Thompson further notes that neither the middle class nor peasants, who made up the most segments of England’s working population, were organised socially by skill and, more remarkably, distinct political repertoires, cultural traditions and songs. In fact, they were not a class but actually became one, effectively explained by the “making” to which Thompson refers in the title of his book. This paper will show that a reading of Thompson’s writings and direction of his actions effectively render him a Marxist.

## CONTEXTUALISING THOMPSON IN MARXISM

Contemporary literary criticism does not exhaustively take on Marxism and among the few Marxist critics read are Fredric Jameson.[[4]](#footnote-3) There is general consensus in literary circles that the contribution of Marxism to modern understanding of literature cannot be overlooked. Yet a deeper analysis shows that most contemporary critics seem to tolerate Marxism as opposed to embracing it, rendering it useful only for as long as it stays marginal.[[5]](#footnote-4) Such critics, the notable examples being Hillis Miller and Northrop Frye, typically approach Marxism through mostly negative commentary that serves the purpose of keeping it marginal.[[6]](#footnote-5) Interestingly, Thompson is a self-described Marxist yet he brings forth many of the same points that make the larger parts of these literary critics. Questions about Thompson being a Marxist came at a time when the attack on Marxism seemed more of a questionable excuse for despair, yet he (Thompson) corrected it (Marxism) without giving up its trust in political action and historical comprehension.[[7]](#footnote-6) Thompson brings forth perspectives that challenge contemporary critics in such a way that he earns their confidence that history is an instability they cannot only control but even understand. Therefore, while Thompson’s works openly show his criticism of the idealistic naivety of some Marxists and historical political cruelty, he essentially remains a Marxist.

Thompson understands class as an historical phenomenon that unifies several dissimilar events that seem unconnected in terms of consciousness and experience. In that context and unlike other Marxists who approach class as categories or structures, Thompson emphasizes that class is something that happens in human relationships.[[8]](#footnote-7) Perhaps this better explains why Thompson insists that class is a notion of historical relationship and similar to any other relationship, it will evade analysis when attempts to stop it are made. According to Thompson, even the strictest form of sociological approach cannot provide the ideal perspective of class better than it can give that of love or esteem. Rather, the relationship ought to be embodied in real people as well as real contexts.[[9]](#footnote-8) Further, as Thompson explains, it is not possible to have distinct classes whereby each features independent beings and still bring them into relationship with each other. A critical analysis of Thompson’s fundamental contribution may be described as a more insightful understanding of class consciousness to further expand on the narrower conception of class in itself by Marx. Essentially, Marxism defines class as a category of people on the basis of their relation to the property system. Thompson’s view, however, explained what was missed in Marxist theory and demonstrated how the transition to “class for itself” was achieved from “class in itself”.[[10]](#footnote-9)

When understanding is restricted to this view, however, it risks being too simplistic. For instance, Thompson demonstrates through The Making of the English Working Class the degree of contingency attached to the historical making of the English working class when the process is considered in cultural detail. However, findings that the process is contingent also have a negating effect on the Marxist idea that the connection between the structural position of a group in its social consciousness and property system has not only a necessary but direct connection.[[11]](#footnote-10) Then, another related reason shows that Thompson’s account of class significantly surpasses that of Marx in the context of the emphasis placed on the independent agency of the working people of England. More importantly, it is demonstrated that their ideas, organisations and political tactics did not merely derive from the structural status of capital and labour; rather, they resulted from very specific creativity, leadership and popular mobilisation acts.[[12]](#footnote-11)

## CLASS FORMATION ACCORDING TO THOMPSON

It is imperative to note that Thompson explicitly argues for four major theoretical propositions on how class was formed, and these theories distinguish him from other Marxists. The theories are that class is an historical phenomenon; class is a result of experience; workers are conscious and active participants in the process of class formation; and, finally, class is defined by consciousness.

### Class is a Historical Phenomenon

Thompson actively opposes the deductive formalism and static definitions of class given by Marxists and structural-functional sociologists. Essentially, he insists that class is historical. Marxists and structural-functional sociologists view class as a structure and category, but Thompson argues that it happens in human relationships. In explanation, he points out that stopping history at any given point will reveal that there are no classes but only multitudes of individuals with multitudes of experiences.[[13]](#footnote-12) However, if the multitudes are observed over an era of social change, a pattern in their relationships, ideas and institutions can be established. Therefore, people define class while they live their own history and, according to Thompson, that is the only definition of class. From this argument, it is evident that Thompson does not believe that the notion of class can arise without considering historical relationships.[[14]](#footnote-13) Therefore, class only exists in time and can only be understood in historical terms. Approaches to class that are not historical will only distort and wipe out their object.

### Class is a Result of Experience

In reaction to (and against) Stalinist formulations, Thompson insisted that class can only be considered as an outcome of experience. He was ideally opposed to the largely deductive and abstract Stalinist formulations that assumed class was a mathematical synonym of a multitude of workers who had a specified relation to means of production.[[15]](#footnote-14) With this assumption, it is possible from the Stalinist perspective to infer the class consciousness that the working class needs to have but hardly ever had since they were not properly aware of their position and factual interests. Thompson, however, took the opposite direction and insisted that experience is the key element of class in the context of its definition by people as they live their own history.[[16]](#footnote-15)

### Workers are Conscious and Active Participants in the Formation of Class

Thompson insists that the working class formed an active process that owed much to agency as it did to conditioning.[[17]](#footnote-16) This argument was made against a back drop of highly determinist Marxist arguments regarding the formation of class. The Marxist argument was that factories produced a working class just as mechanically as they produced products. Notably, non-Stalinist labour historians also exhibited negligent curiosity as to what was actually felt and done by the workers and conventional historiography forms enabled them to write institutional histories of the Independent Labour Party or trade unions.[[18]](#footnote-17) However, before Thompson, none of them knew how to authoritatively document the history of a class. A significant contribution by Thompson to historiography was showing how workers could be afforded voices and be constituted as a communal agent in their historical narrative.

### Consciousness Defines Class

Thompson argues that class happens when, out of shared or inherited experiences, men feel and express the identity of their interests both amongst themselves and against others of differing or opposing interests. Unlike what Marxism proposes, Thompson argues that the feeling and expression of an identity, rather than objective identity, is what makes a class.[[19]](#footnote-18) Without consciousness, there can be no class and it is on this point that Thompson argues against the Stalinist mathematical definition of class as the relation between men and the means of production.

## COMMUNIST HISTORIAN VERSUS HUMAN SOCIALIST

Thompson’s “conversion” from a communist historian to a human socialist can also locate where he stands: whether a Marxist or not. In the 1950s, he was a member of the Communist Party Historians Groups, where he grew to become one of its most prominent members. His initial works were informed by the intellectual foundations that created a journal called “Past and Present” that was based on the initiatives of notable Communist historians such as George Rudé, Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton and Eric Hobsbawm.[[20]](#footnote-19) These Communist historians shared a common interest to break away from dominant conservatism that characterised the contemporaneous academic field of Britain, and the journal offered a debate forum conspicuously open to non-Marxist historians. British Communist historians, unlike their French counterparts, were less supervised by the authorities and, hence, were in the forefront of opposing the official line of Communism.[[21]](#footnote-20) Following the 1956 report on Stalin by Khrushchev and the bloody Hungarian suppression of the uprising in Poland and Hungary, Thompson fell out with the Party leadership, effectively denouncing the Soviet regime. Here, it is critical to note that Thompson faced a serious dilemma as to whether to take sides with the party leadership that upheld suppression or support the uprisings by the workers. To Thompson’s lasting credit, he opted to support the workers and advocated for the socialism of liberating individuals rather than one of the police and secret speeches.[[22]](#footnote-21)

It is worth noting that the 1956 experience gave Thompson’s political outlook a permanent mark. He set out to restore the commitment of Marxism to the real struggles of real men and women against a political system that considered itself as Marxist. Thompson’s idea was to reinstate the core of socialist politics and theory which are embodied in the working people, their fight to stop oppression, their self-activity, and their defeatsandvictories.[[23]](#footnote-22) He further noted that this core of socialist politics and theory was precisely what was pushed underneath the weight of a system of belief and bureaucratic decrees by Stalinist politics. Here, one gets the flow of argument Thompson is taking: Stalinism was not only a socialist theory, but also a practice that had lost the humanity ingredient by focusing on the interests of the leadership as opposed to the social realities that define the lives, working and struggling of the people. The solidity of this flow of thinking is in the way Thompson reveals that Stalinist theory is premised in an idea or axiom, and then facts, people and institutions are broken down and manipulated to align them with the idea.[[24]](#footnote-23) This approach links back to the central theme of Thompson’s theoretical and political ideologies that fought against the bourgeoisie tendencies to relegate human beings together with their historical experiences and social relations to mere relations between things through social life is absolutely determined. Thus Stalinism, as a socialism form that eliminated the humanity ingredient, failed to consider that humans ultimately determined their history regardless of how conditioned they may be via objective situations.[[25]](#footnote-24)

It is evident that the fight against Stalinism by Thompson was fought against a backdrop of libertarian communism.[[26]](#footnote-25) It is from this perspective and with the emphasis on the living struggles for the self-emancipation of the working people that resolutely shaped and strengthened his view Marxism. For instance, a reader of The Making of the English Working Class will most probably notice Thompson’s fervent firmness that in the history-making process, the working class also inadvertently make themselves. The working class agency and self-activity, as the most impactful themes of the book, distinguished Thompson sharply from many of who were seen as Marxist historical analysts in an era wherein Stalinism controlled the left internationally.[[27]](#footnote-26) In fact, the preface to The Making of the English Working Class explicitly outlines the unique way of his approach to the class and class struggle matters. Effectively, he contrasted his approach with the perfunctory greediness of Stalinist historiography. From his own explanation, the author described the title of his work, The Making of the English Working Class, as a way of depicting an active process that owes to conditioning as much as it owes to agency.

It has already been argued that Thompson understands class as an historical phenomenon that unifies several dissimilar events that seem unconnected in terms of consciousness and experience. Ideally, he sets himself apart from other Marxists who approach class as categories or structures, and his insistence rests on the notion that class is something that happens in human relationships and one can prove it has actually happened.[[28]](#footnote-27) From this, his explanation that human relationships can only be personified in real people and under real contexts is understood. For instance, typical capitalist views of history alienate humans from their history and instead emphasise on material changes (and even great figures) such as opening trade routes and building of factories. In stark contrast and in an effort to verify the elementary dignity of the labourers that made history, Thompson opted to focus on the activity and struggle of the ordinary working people as the key aspect in the historical process.[[29]](#footnote-28) Essentially, he further sets himself apart from other Marxists by acknowledging that the people at the bottom class matter because their struggles, ideas and aspirations in attempts to improve their living conditions influenced the making of the English working class just as much as did market competition and capital accumulation patterns.

Thompson and Marx differ on their fundamental construction of class. According to Marx, a class is defined by its historic place in the production system, the way they relate to the means of production and the role they play in the social organisation of labour.[[30]](#footnote-29) The most outstanding point of this definition is that the way individuals relate to the means of production determines their class. Thompson, on the other hand, does not dispute the historical part but, most importantly, emphasizes on human relations as part of that history. When this view is critically analysed, it does not necessarily render Thompson a non-Marxist; rather, it portrays him as attempting to expand the narrow and simplistic approach taken by Marx and Marxism. Thompson noted that Stalinism lost sight of the fact that humans ultimately made their own history regardless of how conditioned they may be via objective situations. Similarly, Marx also argued that an individual’s class is determined by objective reality rather than their own opinion. However, Thompson differs with Stalin and Marx through his acknowledgement of the role of the labourers in making the English working class. Ideally, Thompson refuses to overlook the influences of people’s struggles, ideas and aspirations in attempts to improve their living conditions on the making of the working class. This approach is unlike that of Marx and Stalin who only focused on market competition and capital accumulation patterns.

Thompson makes efforts to restore meaning to the common people’s activity by aiming to reify the inclination of conventional historical analysis.[[31]](#footnote-30) With the presentation of history as series of related events that fully determine the fate of each other, the inevitable consequence is the loss of the human agency dimension and forgetting of class relations. In fact, Thompson provides a highly illustrative case of how the events cannot be alienated from social relations of class but are instead saturated with them. For example, a poor harvest can be considered as an event beyond human control, but Thompson argues that when investigated critically, the bad harvest could easily result from complex human relationships in the context of power, law and ownership.[[32]](#footnote-31) He further notes that phrases such as the cycle of strong ebb and trade flow must be viewed suspiciously because there definitely is a social relations structure behind the trade cycle. The cycle fosters some sort of expropriation such as profit, rent and interest while it outlaws others such as feudal dues and theft. Equally importantly, some forms of conflict such as competition and armed warfare are legitimised while others such as political organisation, trade unionism and riots are inhibited.[[33]](#footnote-32)

Looking at these arguments from a perspective of critical analysis, it is evident that Thompson distinguishes himself from other Marxist historians by acknowledging that issues such as power, law and ownership were never simply handed over but always contested. Essentially, he does not simplistically perceive the working class as a passive group that came into being simply by reacting to external events that sealed its fate. Notably, Thompson is careful not to present the working class as simple puppets of religious leaders even in his discussion of the role religion played in diverting and blunting class struggle.[[34]](#footnote-33) While he notes that ideologies are never absorbed by adherents in absolute measures, he reminds Marxist historians that the working class injected their own values of solidarity, mutual aid and neighbourliness into chapels. Thompson brings forth the reality that the English working class was not organised socially by skill, political repertoires, cultural traditions and songs. They were, in fact, not a class but became one. In this remarks, Thompson effectively differs from other Marxists by explaining that the “making” of a class is possible through human relations.[[35]](#footnote-34)

## THOMPSON’S HISTORIOGRAPHY

It is imperative that Thompson’s goals as a contemporary social English historian is considered. For one, his works, and particularly The Making of the English Working Class, were significant in the creation of the social history field, whereby he came up with a historical writing paradigm that provided guidance to many historians. Thomson’s goal is nearly ethnographic as he appears to aim at discovering the multiple culture and multiple thoughts that flowed through the multiple segments of the English working.[[36]](#footnote-35) His writings and direction of his actions portray him as a historian who regarded ideology and ideas with great seriousness. He recognises that the English Methodism ideas and freedom rhetoric were extremely significant among the English working people. Thompson in particular recognises how the organisational modes and ideas were linked to Methodism were, in turn, formative for the consciousness being formed by the working class.[[37]](#footnote-36)

In all his works, Thompson expresses his concept of the crowd’s moral economy just as importantly as he acknowledges foundations of high culture. The concept of moral economy can ideally be viewed as the notion of shared sets of norms underlying social behavior in popular culture.[[38]](#footnote-37) This, again, brings forth the significance Thompson associates with human relations unlike other Marxists who strictly focus on relations with production means. He identifies peoples’ grievances, riots and strikes as critical indicators of consciousness and political behavior. Equally importantly, he attempts to show that the popular 18th and 19th century disturbances were governed by different norms about justice, price and social obligation. Here, it is imperative to note that all these sets of norms were widely observed and enforced. For example, Thompson was a strong believer that the “bread riot” was never just an impulsive or chaotic event.[[39]](#footnote-38) In fact, it becomes a key theme that he describes about the perception of the working class. The bread riot, according to him, was the function of a perception that condemned political oppression in equal measure as it criticised exploitation.

Viewed from another angle, the idea of working class consciousness by Thompson differs from Marx’s class because Thompson’s version cites justice and liberty the same way it does material factors and deprivation. Ideally, economic exploitation in the production system and the political context played equally important roles in shaping the working class’s consciousness as well as institutions.[[40]](#footnote-39) The concept of relationships comes up again; the working class was simultaneously subjected to political oppression and economic exploitation, which were both forms of intolerable relationships. This historiography culminates in the working class consciousness, which is an essentially coherent political and social viewpoint that supported a solidarity and equality and political inclusion. Through their experiences, the working class created an image of how the society was organised.[[41]](#footnote-40) However and more importantly, Thompson acknowledges that the picture they created was a political one. He argues that the working class learned to view themselves as part of a history of disagreements between the House of Commons and the ambiguously defined industrial classes. Thompson, therefore, later became part of a class consciousness that was overly defined. From this, rather that viewing Thompson as a non-Marxist, it is justifiable that he is considered as part of a maturing crop of Marxists that entailed a working class that accommodated both new and old battles through their own understanding.

It is difficult not to appreciate that the way Thompson attributes the active characteristics to the English working class is more important than the way he uses the term “agency” and indeed what represent his view of working class. From an analyst’s point of view, the use of the word “making” in the title of The Making of the English Working Class summarises Thompson’s view that the process was not only of self-creation but also self-definition for the working class. Essentially, they became agents through the creation of their own myths, identities, literatures and organisations.[[42]](#footnote-41) Simply put, they were the agents of their own destinies. Thompson’s approach may also be understood as, rather than being opposed to Marx and Marxism, is designed to appreciate the humanist element of social history. He is openly critical of Marxists who perceive the working class as an inhuman statistical bloc, and Marx actually fits into this group of Marxists since he does not acknowledge human relations. While Marx insists on portraying the working class as mere victims and consequences of history, Thompson presents them as agents who actually had their own making under control. It is also imperative to note that Thompson does not use the term “classes” as he does “working class”. To an analytical reader of his work, this implies the growth of a working class consciousness.

Perhaps it is important to ask what Thompson meant with his claims that the English working class had already been made in the early 1930s. First, the working class had not only defined itself as a class but also conceptually divided itself from the middle class, effectively developing a meticulous critique of the capitalist society and property relations.[[43]](#footnote-42) Put in another way, the working class had developed a class discourse and a working class movement at the same time. Thompson notes that this movement had distinct institutions, such as embryonic political parties, trade unions, clubs and newspapers affiliated with it.[[44]](#footnote-43) The significant point to note is that masses of workers were mobilised into struggling for working class goals with self-consciousness as the main motivating factor of these institutions. One cannot fail to notice how Thompson insistently offers a powerfully experiential account of the emerging working class movement in his works. Unlike other Marxists, he insists there is a close relationship between the discourse and the movement and explains that the militants developed and disseminated the working class within the working class institutions.[[45]](#footnote-44) Then, it was the notions that the working class discourse contained that influenced and motivated the working class movement.

## CONCLUSION

Thompson is a Marxist. The arguments he presented were not meant to fight Marxism, but on the contrary, he aimed to expand the simplistic approach to class as presented by Marx and Marxism. While Marxism insists on the relation between workers and the means of production, Thompson adds the humanistic element by insisting on human relations. Viewed in another way, Thompson’s idea of class can be argued to be a much deeper or expanded version of Marxism. Going by the four prepositions he gave on the formation of class, Thompson may appear to be fighting Marxism but, in fact, all the four prepositions build on what Marx had earlier theorised.

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