

E. P. Thompson: A Flawed Conception of Class

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I FIRST READ *The Making of the English Working Class* as a radical-minded college student in the late 1960s. Its focus on “anonymous” working people certainly did inspire me and help launch me on my own subsequent studies of labor and laboring classes.

I assume, though, that all these years later — and especially in a discussion like the present one — I needn’t elaborate on the book’s many strengths. Others will do that very well. I want instead to talk about an important weakness in that book, one that I believe offers poor guidance both to labor historians and socialist-minded labor activists.

I’m referring here to the book’s famous and much-praised Preface and the discussion found there of the nature of social class — what it is, how to define and identify it, and (implicitly, at least) the part it should play in socialist politics.

The Preface begins by dismissing what it calls a misguided but “ever-present temptation” to think of a social class as something with an existence in objective reality, whether people recognize its existence or not. The error is to believe, Thompson wrote, “that class is a thing,” a thing that has “a real existence, which can be defined almost mathematically — so many men who stand in a certain relation to the means of production.”

Thompson denied that. “‘It’ [the working class] does not exist, either to have an ideological interest or consciousness....”

Rather, he said, “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.” And even more explicitly: “*Class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition.*” (emphases added)

So a class exists only insofar as (and only to the extent and in the way) that its members think it exists. Thompson drew practical conclusions from this general view. He explicitly rejected attempts to gauge the degree to which a class’s subjective evaluation of its own situation and needs coincided with the objective reality.

In the name of respecting the individuals, he ridiculed attempts by a “party, sect, or theorist” to “deduce the class-consciousness which ‘it’ [the working class] ought to have (but seldom does have) if ‘it’ was properly aware of its own position and real interests.”

Thompson suggested that his understanding of social class was also Marx’s and Engels.’ That was not true. For them, classes were created by socio-economic forces, and they had an objective reality independent of the self-perception of their members.

“The domination of capital has created for this mass [of people] a common situation, common interests,” Marx wrote of proletarians in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847). “This mass is thus

already a class as against capital, but *not yet for itself*.” In the course of struggles against capital, however, the members of this class come to understand, to recognize, the true nature of their situation and needs. It thereby “constitutes itself as *a class for itself*.” (emphases added)

In their analytical, journalistic and practical work in the labor movement, Marx and Engels constantly tried to identify (and fight for) “the class-consciousness which ‘it’ [the working class] ought to have.” Not to do so would have stripped much of their scientific and all of their political work of its value.

Consciousness and Conditions

All this is of great relevance to both historians and activists today. At the most general level, historical studies of popular consciousness that refuse to evaluate the degree to which that consciousness actually corresponded to (i.e. perceived, analyzed and responded to) reality are deficient at best. And that essentially idealist approach disarms us before the anti-Marxist but quite fashionable post-modernists and post-structuralists in academia.

More concretely, a refusal to compare and contrast workers’ actual consciousness at any given time with their real circumstances would leave labor historians unable to identify or account for the sources of any labor movement’s weakness — not least of all racism, national chauvinism and sexism. Labor activists who made the same mistake would find themselves reduced to passivity or simply to cheer-leading for whatever level or form of consciousness actually exists — instead of striving to raise that level to the one that they believe “it ought to have.”

E. P. Thompson made many great and lasting specific contributions to the study of working people’s history. But this attempt to lay out a general prescription for how to do that was, I believe, deeply flawed.

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P.S.

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