

### **The Changing Face of Marxist Historical Analysis**

While E.P. Thompson was undoubtedly a Marxist scholar, the kind of Marxism on display in his classic *The Making of the English Working Class* is not the kind of Marxist historical analysis employed by Karl Marx. Specifically, in Thompson's book we can see a move away from the historical materialism that characterized Marx's historical and theoretical works. This paper will outline the basic characteristics of historical materialism as found in Marx's scholarship, and compare this with the kind of Marxist analysis found in Thompson's work. Finally, these differences will be related to changes in the nature of the historical enterprise as detailed in Peter Novick's study, *That Noble Dream*.

"Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past."<sup>1</sup> This position was necessitated for Karl Marx by the historical materialist paradigm, which he created. According to historical materialism, society is based upon the structure (the material/economic reality of life) and the superstructure (ideology—religion, politics, etc.). Marx believed that the structure ("circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past") is the determining factor in the shaping of the superstructure in any given period. Given that social access to the structure will be inherently unequal, the task of the superstructure is to hide this fact, thereby allowing those with more access to the structure to stay in that position. However, Marx also believed that there is an inherent tension between the reigning ideology (superstructure) and the material reality (structure), which cannot last

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York, 1963), 15.

forever. When this tension becomes too large to hold, the structure and superstructure are torn apart (revolution) and reconstituted (the structure being shaped by the past and the superstructure being shaped by the modified structure). This process is repeated, but with a different outcome each time. In this way, historical materialism is both dialectical and deterministic.

Marx's materialist paradigm is utilized more concretely in one of his most famous economic passages, that describing the alienation of labor. In his examination of alienated labor, Marx explicitly distinguished himself from political economists who took as their starting principal a "fictitious primordial condition." Marx, of course, began with "an *actual* economic fact"—that the product of labor "has been congealed in an object, which has become material: it is the *objectification* of labor." The appropriation of these objects by others (in this case, capitalists) is estrangement, or alienation.<sup>2</sup> The tension between this alienation and the ideology of capitalism—that the accumulation of wealth is inherently good, that the unfettered market will regulate itself in the best interests of everyone—will lead to the next revolution.

Written over a century later, the work of E.P. Thompson represents a different kind of Marxism. Thompson's brand of Marxist historical scholarship retains the emphasis upon class conflict and economic disparity, but gives the superstructure a more determining role than had Marx. In addition, whereas previously ideology had been seen as being imposed upon the lower classes from above, Thompson presents a clash of several ideologies—working-class, aristocratic, and capitalist.

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1978), 70-72.

Thompson does not refuse the importance of the material conditions of life in his study of working-class formation (for instance, his examination of food riots in the late 18th century). However, the distance he places between his own work and historical materialism is evident on the first page of his preface, where he expresses the view that class is a historical phenomenon determined by both "the raw material of existence" and "consciousness." While "the relationship must always be embodied in real people and in a real context," this context can include ideology and consciousness as well as the material base—"In the end, it is the political context as much as the steam-engine, which had the most influence on the shaping consciousness and institutions of the working class."<sup>3</sup>

Thompson most forcefully demonstrates this point in his critique of previous historical accounts of the condition of the working class in the first half of the 19th century. It had become the fashion in British social historiography to illustrate that the condition of the working class actually improved during these years by showing an increase in the overall quality of life as defined by economic factors. Thompson ridicules this approach as a "fragmentation of our comprehension of the full historical process," an analysis which decontextualizes the economic data which it examines. According to Thompson, "It is quite possible for statistical averages and human experiences to run in opposite directions. A *per capita* increase in quantitative factors may take place at the same time as a great qualitative disturbance in people's way of life, traditional relationships, and sanctions." Thus, factors such as the imposition of industrial discipline and the disintegration of traditional family structures and roles led members of the

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<sup>3</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1963), 9, 197.

working class to feel worse about their situation even as it was quantitatively getting better (in some parts of the country).<sup>4</sup>

What led to the difference in paradigmatic assumptions between Marx and Thompson? There are undoubtedly many factors, but the disciplinary background provided by Peter Novick provides a possible answer. Novick demonstrates that 19th-century historians were devoted to an empirical methodology that sprang from the Enlightenment philosophy, and more specifically from the work of Sir Francis Bacon. According to Baconianism, "'observations' were sacred. . . . Error could only come from mistaken or overly hasty inference from never-to-be-doubted facts . . . Second, Baconianism meant scrupulous avoidance of hypotheses, scorned by Bacon as 'phantoms.' It was unscientific to go beyond what could be directly observed."<sup>5</sup> While Marx did not avoid hypotheses, he certainly viewed his work as scientific and his conclusions as based upon empirical "facts." Given that the structure (material base) of society could be directly observed (in the Baconian sense) while the superstructure could not, it made sense for Marx to focus on this aspect of society as the determining factor.

Thompson, on the other hand, wrote *The Making of the English Working Class* at a time in which such rigid empiricism was seen as an old-fashioned, and sometimes counterproductive, approach to the historical record. While Novick's study examines only the American historical profession, it does not seem unreasonable to assume that similar trends were occurring in Britain (or at least that Thompson was somewhat aware of what was happening across the Atlantic). Objectivity was no longer associated with strict empiricism; indeed, "a certain amount of perspectival relativism could be tolerated

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 204-211.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), 34.

without abandoning a larger commitment to objectivity."<sup>6</sup> In such a climate it was much easier for Marxist scholars such as Thompson to treat issues such as religion, politics and cultural mores on an equal level with such empirically reachable categories as the material base of everyday life.

Despite the difference in paradigms under which Marx and Thompson operated, Thompson can still be considered a Marxist for one simple reason: both Marx and Thompson were motivated to undertake their studies by the rampant inequality which they saw all around them, and which, they felt, demanded a response.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 415.