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Marxist historians

The single most influential theorist for twentieth-century historical writing is undoubtedly Karl Marx. As Arthur Marwick has pointed out, ‘most historians have in some way or another been affected by some aspect of Marxist thinking’. This includes historians considered in other chapters of this book, for example, some historians of gender and the postcolonial historians of India. In this introduction, however, we will focus upon three historians of the British Marxist school, Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill and E. P. Thompson. All were members of the Communist Party Historians Group, established in 1947, but the latter two severed their relationship with the Communist Party following the invasion of Hungary by the Soviet Union in 1956. Their combined body of historical writing, most influential during the three post-war decades, encompasses a wide range of subjects and centuries, including broad syntheses of history, biography, intellectual history and ‘history from below’ – studies of the ‘common people’.

Raphael Samuel argues that the form that Marxist historiography took in Britain owed a great deal to its antecedents: ‘Marxist historiography was chronologically preceded by, and has always had to co-exist with, a more broadly based and less theoretically demanding “people’s history”’. Taking this one step further, Arthur Marwick suggests that Thompson and Hill share in what might be called the ‘main distinguishing characteristic of the contemporary British school of Marxist historians, an interest in ordinary people as such, rather than just in their political organisations or roles as revolutionary agents’. The term ‘history from below’, coined by E. P. Thompson in 1966, is often used to reflect this interest.

However, to conflate the broad body of social history with the work of Marxist historians may be to miss the very clear distinction between them. Harvey Kaye emphasizes the point that the British Marxist historians represent ‘a theoretical tradition’, the defining subject of
which is ‘the origins, development and expansion of capitalism as economic and social change’. Furthermore, their ‘core proposition . . . is that class struggle has been central to the historical process’. In contrast, social history has been fiercely criticized for its lack of explicit theorization, and a tendency to separate popular culture from the matrix of economic and political relationships in which it is embedded. In order to understand the theoretical basis for Marxist historiography, we need to look at the ideas of Karl Marx.

Karl Marx was born in 1818 in Trier, Germany and spent his early adult life in Prussia and France. In the 1840s Paris was a ferment of revolutionary socialist ideas and movements, culminating in the 1848 revolution. Many of Marx’s ideas about history emerged during this period, worked out in conjunction with his life-long collaborator, Friedrich Engels. Raphael Samuel rightly points out that Marx’s published writings were primarily ‘political interventions’ arising out of the ‘working class and revolutionary democratic movements in which Marx and Engels participated with such enthusiasm’. Always under threat from the Prussian authorities, Marx lived an itinerant life in the late 1840s, moving between Prussia, Brussels and Paris. Finally, expelled from Paris, he left for England in 1849 where he spent the rest of his life.

The theory of history for which Marx is known is not written down in one place, nor even developed coherently in a series of texts. References are to be found scattered throughout his writings, and more than one generation of Marxist scholars have debated their meaning. Helmut Fleischer has identified three different historical approaches within Marx and Engels’ writings, and these left an ‘ambiguous and often contradictory legacy’ to later Marxists. Bear this qualification in mind as we consider the main strands of Marx’s thought, and the concepts which have been most influential upon the writing of history.

Marx’s interpretation of human history is known as the materialist conception of history, or ‘historical materialism’. The basic principles were first developed in The German Ideology, written in 1846. Historical materialism locates the central dynamic of human history in the struggle to provide for physiological and material needs: ‘life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself’. Secondly, Marx argues the fulfillment of these

needs is not a deterministic process, but results from the interaction between material forces and human consciousness. The material world is the basis of human existence, but it is transformed by human activity. In the so-called productivistic conception of history, the economy is seen as the basis of culture, religion, and politics. Marx, however, argues that the material world is not simply a reflection of the human world, but is actively shaped by human activity. This materialist conception of history is the foundation of Marx’s political theory, which seeks to understand the forces that shape human society and to develop a theory of social change.

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needs is never completed, for ‘the satisfaction of the first need ... leads to new needs’. Marx identifies the way in which human material needs are met as the most important influence in human history: ‘the multitude of productive forces accessible to men determines the nature of society, hence, that the “history of humanity” must always be studied and treated in relation to the history of industry and exchange’. Consequently Marx believed that the economic structure of society formed the base upon which all other aspects of society rested. Most important are the forces of production – tools, technology, raw materials – which when combined with human labour power are transformed into goods to meet human needs. The interaction between raw materials and human labour creates relations of production between people, and these relations may rest upon cooperation or subordination. For Marx, the rest of society – the superstructure of political institutions and legal systems – was derived from the forces and relations of production. In other words, he does not ascribe an independent existence to the realm of human consciousness and ideas, but perceives these as arising out of our material existence. The premises and main ideas of historical materialism are concisely described in the following, frequently cited, statement from Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1859):

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. How, then, does human society change over the centuries? Marx separated human history into three historical epochs, each the product of a progressively more advanced mode of production: ancient society (Greece and Rome); feudal society; and capitalist (or modern bourgeois) society. Transition from one to another took place through a process Marx described as a dialectic. Each mode of production contained within it contradictions which would cause its downfall; and each successive stage of human history contained both a dominant class, and one which would overthrow it. In capitalist
society Marx anticipated that the proletariat, or working class, would eventually overthrow the bourgeoisie, and initiate another system of productive relations, a fourth epoch of socialism. His grand, overarching evolutionary theory of human history rested upon a dialectic of economic transformation. In placing economic relationships at the core of his philosophy of human history, Marx fundamentally differentiated himself from contemporaries, such as Leopold von Ranke.

The driving force in Marx's conception of history are classes, which arise from different economic roles in the productive process. In order to overthrow the dominant class, subordinate people must become aware of their oppression, and consequently the concept of human agency is critical to Marx's conceptual framework. Marx's theory, therefore, contains a kind of paradox: the dialectic of productive transformation (a consequence of the inner contradictions within the production process itself) is, nonetheless, dependent upon the consciousness and actions of men and women. The following sentence, taken from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1859), lies at the heart of the matter:

> 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.

This is an important phrase within Marx's work, for it challenges the economic determinism that can be seen as implicit within his formulation of historical change. Consequently, as Eric Hobsbawm has pointed out, 'the crucial argument about the materialist conception of history has concerned the fundamental relationship between social being and consciousness.' This might be described as one of the strongest unifying themes in the work of Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm and E.P. Thompson, to whose historical writings we will now turn.

Christopher Hill came to adulthood in the context of economic collapse and the rise of European fascism:

> The bottom fell out of our universe in 1931, the year I went up to Balliol. And there, the influence of undergraduate friends - a great deal of Marxist discussion went on in Oxford in the early thirties. Marxism seemed to me (and many others) to make better sense of the world situation than anything else, just as it seemed to make better sense of seventeenth-century English history.
The seventeenth century has been the subject of Hill’s historical writing, and his extensive body of published work includes biographies of Milton and Cromwell as well as the Marxist interpretation of the English Civil War of 1640 for which he is most widely known. Hill argued that the Civil War was a revolutionary turning point in the development of capitalism, not merely a constitutional or religious dispute:

The state power protecting an old order that was essentially feudal was violently overthrown, power passed into the hands of a new class, and so the freer development of capitalism was made possible. The Civil War was a class war... Parliament beat the King because it could appeal to the enthusiastic support of the trading and industrial classes in town and countryside, to the yeoman and progressive gentry, and to wider masses of the population.

Hill drew upon economic evidence to support his thesis, for example, using maps of England to illustrate that support for Parliament came from the ‘economically advanced south and east of England, the King’s support from the economically backward areas of north and west’. But here, as elsewhere in his writings, he also pays a great deal of attention to the world of ideas. A subsequent study focused upon the radical ideas which were able to emerge during the two decades between 1641 and 1660 when censorship was lifted and a flood of printed material emerged. That his research and writing does not rest upon a very narrow economistic perspective of class struggle is borne out by his assertion in 1958 that ‘we must widen our view so as to embrace the total activity of society. Any event so complex as a revolution must be seen as a whole. Large numbers of men and women were drawn into political activity by religious and political ideals as well as by economic necessities.

Over the next forty years Hill’s Civil War thesis was the centre of a major historical debate. One critique focused upon the application of class and class consciousness to this period. Peter Laslett, for example, rejected the use of the concept of bourgeois class consciousness before the onset of the industrial revolution. Hill later conceded that the revolution was not ‘consciously willed’ by the expanding rural and urban capitalist class, although he responded that ‘I think of class as defined by the objective position of its members in relation to the productive process and to other classes. Men become conscious of shared interests in the process of struggling against common enemies, but this struggle can go a long way before one can call it “class
consciousness", Hill continued to argue that the 'outcome [of the Civil War] was the establishment of conditions far more favourable to the development of capitalism than those which prevailed before 1640'.

Certainly the conceptualization of society in terms of economic class became much more widely accepted by historians for the period of industrialization, and one of the most fertile areas of research for Marxist historians has been labour history. During the 1960s and 1970s labour historians were polarized around a debate over the degree to which people of the working class have been able to act as agents in the making of their own history. This arose, in part, from historians' recognition that increasing proletarianization during the nineteenth century had not been accompanied by an increasingly radical political consciousness. On the contrary, working-class organizations, such as trade unions, were primarily reformist in intent. Attempts to explain this reformism frequently circulated around the ideas expressed in an influential essay by Eric Hobsbawm, first published in 1954, and republished during the 1960s.

Hobsbawm's argument rested upon the identification of an 'upper strata' of the working class whose level of security in terms of continuous employment and adequate wages separated them from the vast majority of labouring men. The perspective of this labour elite, he argues, was based upon 'the knowledge that they occupied a firm and accepted position just below the employers, but very far above the rest'. The effect of this proximity to the employers explains, according to Hobsbawm, the political attitudes of the labour aristocracy, 'its persistent liberal-radicalism in the nineteenth century... [and] also its failure to form an independent working-class party'. In Hobsbawm's analysis, the major determinant of political consciousness for this group was the economic factor of comparatively regular and high wages. Hobsbawm was widely criticized for drawing 'far too neat an equation between high wages and a quiescent labour force'. Furthermore, later research indicated that skilled workers were far less secure, well paid, or politically likely to follow their employers than Hobsbawm suggested. In his own defence, Hobsbawm stated that he had never sought to explain British 'reformism', only to establish the existence of a labour aristocracy. But on the matter of the relationship between wages and consciousness, he had not changed his mind, declaring that 'I remain sufficient of a traditionalist Marxist to stress its determination by the economic base... I was...
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perceived working class consciousness as structured by the economic, social and political environment, rather than as a product of human agency. From the structuralist perspective of Nairn and Anderson the ability of the working class to resist or form counter-ideology was perceived as minimal in the face of inescapable structural determination and capitalist ideological hegemony. This debate, over the relative strengths of structure and agency, continued within labour history for two decades, albeit on slightly different terms.

More recent criticism has centred around Thompson’s characterization of the role played by radical working class women, that of ‘giving moral support to the men’. Joan Scott has described the book as ‘a story about men, and class is, in its origin and its expression, constructed as a masculine identity, even when not all the actors are male’. Thompson was unrepentant, explaining in personal correspondence that ‘it was so gendered’. His position is largely supported by the research of James Epstein, who found that women’s intervention into public, male space was mediated in entirely traditional terms, and suggests ‘nothing to alter the picture of radical women playing an active but fundamentally subordinate and supportive role to men’. Nonetheless, Epstein concluded that Thompson’s account failed to give sufficient recognition to the limited participation women did achieve in the face of widespread opprobrium.

In later life E. P. Thompson refused to define himself simply as a Marxist, and argued that the best approach was a ‘theoretically informed empiricism’. Thompson strongly believed in the importance of evidence, tartly writing to *History Workshop Journal* in 1993 that ‘[w]riting history demands an engagement with hard evidence and is not as easy as some post-modernists suppose’. This leads us to the last critique of Marxist historiography, that written from a poststructuralist perspective. A number of Marxist historians ultimately rejected the structuralism of Althusser, and turned to the study of ideology and language divorced from any relationship with the material world. Historians such as Gareth Stedman Jones and Patrick Joyce reject the idea that past experience can be retrieved through the medium of language, and consequently the vocabulary of class and radical politics has become de-materialized. This is completely the opposite of Thompson’s own views about the process of writing history, which he saw as a dialogue between theory and evidence:

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**Notes**

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Marxist historians.

Historical practice is above all engaged in this kind of dialogue; with an argument between received, inadequate, or ideologically-informed concepts or hypotheses on the one hand, and fresh or inconvenient evidence on the other; with the elaboration of new hypotheses; with the testing of these hypotheses against the evidence, which may involve interrogating existing evidence in new ways, or renewed research to confirm or disprove the new notions; with discarding those hypotheses which fail these tests, and refining or revising those which do, in the light of this engagement.

The reading for this chapter is taken from E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*. Thompson’s interest in both literature (reflected in the biographies of the socialist William Morris, and the poet William Blake) and history is evident in the emphasis he places upon human consciousness in making sense of, and responding to, the profound social and economic upheaval of industrial capitalism.

In the extract from his work which follows, what do you think is Thompson’s hypothesis? To what kinds of evidence does he give particular weight in supporting his hypothesis? Why does Thompson attach so much significance to the views contained within the address of the journeyman Cotton Spinner? Does he see economic factors as paramount in the creation of working class consciousness? In this account do men make their own history, but in circumstances not of their own choosing?

Notes

1 Friedrich Engels correctly declared at Marx’s funeral that ‘his name will live on through the centuries and so will his work’, cited in David McLellan, *Karl Marx: The Legacy* (London, 1983), p. 7.


13 ibid., p. 49.
14 ibid., p. 50.
16 Marx and Engels, 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', *Selected Works*, p. 36.
17 ibid., p. 35.
22 ibid., p. 6.
27 Cited in Kaye, p. 126.
31 ibid., p. 274.
34 Hobsbawm, 'Debating the Labour Aristocracy', pp. 216, 220.
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44 ibid., p. 106.

Additional reading