

II. OPTIMISM

Thinking Like a Marxist

FOR ME, BECOMING A historian was intricately bound with an exposure to Marxism. At first, this was an extremely messy and piecemeal encounter. As I suspect is common for many of my particular generation, early familiarity with Marxist theory came only haphazardly—not through much of a reading of Marx and Engels themselves, let alone from any systematic education or political socialization, but through various kinds of secondhand or vicarious translation. That meant partly the omnipresent political languages circulating through the student movement of the late 1960s, partly the burgeoning left-wing literatures of the same time, and especially the firsthand practical scenes of my own political activity. Unlike some of my friends, I had no prior connection to Marxist ideas through family or party membership or some earlier intellectual epiphany. Like many children of 1968, I learned initially through doing. I acquired my Marxism on the job, collecting theory on the fly.

My most sustained acquaintance with Marxist theory came in a rather untheoretical manner, through the writings of the grouping now called the British Marxist historians—for example, Eric Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels* and *Labouring Men*, George Rudé's pioneering studies of popular protest in *The Crowd in the French Revolution* and *The Crowd in History*, and (as already mentioned in chapter 1) Edward Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class*.¹ Perhaps the most exciting single new work to appear in this respect while I was a student was *Captain Swing* by Hobsbawm and Rudé, which reconstructed the agricultural laborers' uprising of 1830 through an inspiring combination of empirical excavation, quantification, empathy, and critical

materialist analysis of the development of British capitalism.² My choice of undergraduate college wasn't irrelevant to this acquaintance, for not only was Balliol the active center of the student Left in Oxford, but it was also the college of Christopher Hill, one of the most eminent British Marxist historians. Without directly molding the intellectual culture of the Balliol undergraduate historians, Hill's presence gave a kind of legitimacy and encouragement for the kind of history I slowly realized I wanted to do.³

For the British New Left, however, this British Marxist historiography seemed scarcely on the map.⁴ Student radicalism's main home in Oxford was not history but philosophy, politics, and economics, which held the place sociology occupied in less archaic institutions. The emergent new Marxism flourished in social and political theory, anthropology, philosophy and aesthetics, literature and film, psychiatry and social work—anywhere, it seemed, but the corridors and seminar rooms of history departments. The emblematic handbooks for student radicals published by the mass paperback houses Penguin and Fontana between 1969 and 1972—*Student Power* (1969), *Counter Course* (1972), and *Ideology in Social Science* (1972)—treated history manifestly as a poor relation.⁵ The benchmark critique of established historiography by Gareth Stedman Jones, "The Pathology of British History" (later reprinted as "History: The Poverty of Empiricism" in *Ideology in Social Science*), held little place for the contributions of the older generation of Marxists, whose theoretical understanding seemed far too passé. The locus classicus for such disdain was Perry Anderson's brilliant indictment of English intellectual formations in "Components of the National Culture," originally published in the summer of 1968. Finding no indigenous basis for a viable social theory on the continental European pattern, Anderson saw history as one of the primary sites of that deficit. The British Marxist historians were not mentioned.⁶

My attention to Marxism during the late 1960s was initially not much more than a belief in the efficacy of "social and economic factors." If pressed, I'd have invoked a series of axioms to explain what I thought this meant—for example, the determining effects of material forces on the limits and potentials for human action or the linking of the possibilities of political change to what happens in the social structure and the underlying movements of the economy. If the goal was the analysis of whole societies and their forms of development or an

understanding of what made them work, pass into crisis, and occasionally break down, this robust conception of the sovereignty of the economy and its associated class relations seemed a very good place to start. For these purposes, Marx's famous 1859 preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* was the touchstone: "The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness." Equally well known is Friedrich Engels's statement "According to the materialist conception of history, the ultimately determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life."⁷

Of course, writing history as a Marxist involved much more than this. In the grand Marxist scheme of things, human society advanced from lower to higher stages of development, demonstrating ever-greater complexity in the forms of organization of economic life and in securing the key transitions—between feudalism and capitalism and thence to socialism—through the upheaval of a social revolution. Moreover, the main motor of change was class conflict. Under capitalism, Marxists viewed such conflict as necessary and systemic, a permanent and irreducible feature of social life, deriving from the unavoidable antagonisms of mutually incompatible, collectively organized class interests centered around production. In a capitalist society, the core social relationship was defined by the wage, making the working class the most numerous social grouping and the indispensable agency for any movement seeking progressive political change. The workers' collective mobilization relayed to the political system pressures that created the openings for reform and even, in the most extreme crises, for revolution.

Under the circumstances of the late 1960s, for a young left-wing historian frustrated by the fact-grubbing theory-averseness of so much of the academic discipline, the Marxist approach seemed very attractive. Energized by the politics of the time—not just by the extraordinary ferment of ideas surrounding the explosions of 1968, but also by the remarkable wave of labor militancy sweeping Europe in the years that followed—I warmed to a body of theory capable of locating these events on a larger historical map. Marxism's objectivist aura—its claim to be a science of society—was also appealing. Furthermore, during the 1960s, the Marxist tradition had itself become the scene of

exciting debates, critiques, and innovations. Whether in international, party, or theoretical terms, Marxism was diversifying and renewing itself. Its dogmatic retrenchment behind the arid and churchlike orthodoxies of the Stalinist era was coming to an end. For anyone seeking to fashion a general understanding of how societies hold together or change, it offered a powerful combination of standpoints—a theory of societal development permitting the periodizing of history, a model of social determinations proceeding upward from material life, and a theory of social change based on class struggles and their effects.⁸

With all hindsight, I can now recognize the second of these features—the foundational materialism—as especially arresting. Marxists classically reserved a first-order priority—ontologically, epistemologically, analytically—for the underlying economic structure of society in conditioning everything else, including the possible forms of politics and the law, of institutional development, and of social consciousness and belief. The commonest expression for this determining relationship was the architectural language of “base and superstructure,” in which the spatial metaphor of ascending and sequential levels also implied the end point in a logical chain of reasoning. This metaphor could be very flexibly understood, leaving room for much unevenness and autonomy, including the discrete effectivity of the superstructure and its reciprocal action on the base, especially for the purposes of any detailed political, ideological, or aesthetic analysis. But ultimately, such analyses still rendered account to the “final-instance” social determinations emanating from the economy and the social structure.

Amid all the other excitements and challenges I experienced while learning to think like a Marxist, this metaphorical expression was the recurring key. Yet here was a fascinating paradox. Marxism’s fundamental materialist commitment to the primacy of social determinations formed both my most stable intellectual starting point—defined by an almost bedrock certainty—and the place where all the most creative disagreements among Marxists could now be found. Inside the hitherto closed worlds of Marxist theory, in fact, the 1960s opened a time of rampant heterodoxy, as virtually all the most influential Marxist thinkers began grappling with precisely those questions of ideology, consciousness, and subjectivity that the tradition had previously approached all too reductively, through an interest-based analysis cen-

tered around class. This was true whether the theorists concerned were inside the Communist parties themselves or around the edges of the various socialist parties, whether they moved in the intellectual netherworld of the burgeoning sects and groupuscules or lacked organized affiliations altogether. In other words, even as the power of Marxism's materialist analytic started to ground my understanding of politics, all the most exciting discussions among Marxists seemed pre-occupied with the difficulties of making that classical materialism of base and superstructure work.⁹

In other words, Marxist ideas were finally breaking out of the self-referential isolation of the Cold War, a process hugely assisted by the great expansion of higher education in the 1960s and the associated boom in left-wing publishing. The student movements and wider political mobilizations of the time played the obvious role in helping this to happen, but two other kinds of impetus can be mentioned. One came from the increasingly systematic translation of continental European theory, both classical and contemporary, which encouraged a new internationalizing of Britain's isolated and parochial intellectual culture. For the first time, not just the Marxist canon but also the writings of Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, and other classic social theorists became more widely available in the English-speaking world, not just via translations and cheap mass-produced editions, but, more important, via critical commentaries and integration into undergraduate and graduate curricula. Likewise, there was suddenly increased access to a wide range of contemporary German, French, Italian, and Eastern European philosophy, aesthetic theory, sociology, and political theory.¹⁰

Equally important for me was a kind of broad-gauged cultural dis-sidence extending across large areas of British intellectual life and the arts, including cinema, popular music, literature, poetry, theater, and television. The directly politicized version of this history is rightly associated with one strand of the rise of the British New Left during the later 1950s. Its focus on aspects of youth culture, the consequences of postwar affluence, and the changing terms of social self-identification fed eventually, by the 1970s, into the invention of the new interdisciplinary field of cultural studies. In this sense, the left-wing intellectual radicalism surrounding 1968 fed as much off the transgressive rebelliousness within popular culture as off the freshly accessible French, German, and Italian theory. The resulting

confluence was “a mixture of high French intellectual culture and low American popular culture,” in which the latter was “epitomized by Hollywood cinema, preferably B movies, also of course American popular music—jazz and particularly rock ‘n’ roll.”¹¹ The boundary-pushing experimentalism of much television drama, satire, arts programming, and social commentary during the 1960s was another part of this story. The plays of David Mercer, Harold Pinter, Ken Loach, and Dennis Potter exposed and denounced the injuries and injustices of class long before I’d read a word of Marx.¹²

Both movements of change—the often esoteric theoretical writings of continental European Marxists and the cultural criticism of the British New Left—converged on problems of ideology. Older Marxisms from the interwar years were either revisited or freshly discovered from this point of view—for example, in writings by Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch, the Frankfurt school, Walter Benjamin, and Antonio Gramsci—while such contemporary writers as Jean-Paul Sartre, Lucien Goldmann, and Louis Althusser were now extensively translated and addressed. In the process, as Perry Anderson argued in his anatomy of this distinctively “Western Marxism,” the accent shifted from political economy to philosophy, culture, and aesthetics, thereby allowing a far more extensive engagement than before with questions of subjectivity (or “consciousness,” as the language of the time preferred).¹³ A powerful current of socialist humanism, inspired by readings of Marx’s early philosophical writings of the 1840s emphasizing concepts of “freedom” and “alienation,” further reinforced this trend. Bitterly fought disagreements about these readings—especially concerning the so-called epistemological break that may or may not have separated the “young” from the “old” Marx—were soon to divide Western Marxists into mutually hostile camps. But for a while, the concurrence was far greater than this impending divisiveness.¹⁴

These extremely abstract discussions of freedom and alienation within Marxist theory helped empower more practical efforts at concretely grounding an understanding of politics in the complexities of personal experience and everyday life. This is where the various “culturalisms” of the first British New Left had their important effects. Some of the New Left’s driving political urgencies were more readily assimilable to the established Marxist frameworks—for example, the doubled critiques of Communism and social democracy arising from

the 1950s, the analysis of the new forms of capitalist prosperity and the consumer economy, or the search for an antinuclear internationalism beyond the twin camps of the Cold War.¹⁵ But that advocacy was also motivated by a set of concerns that resisted the given forms of class-based analysis. As Stuart Hall has explained, such discussions were calling the boundaries of politics themselves into question.

We raised issues of personal life, the way people live, culture, which weren't considered the topics of politics on the Left. We wanted to talk about the contradictions of this new kind of capitalist society in which people didn't have a language to express their private troubles, didn't realize that these troubles reflected political and social questions which could be generalized.¹⁶

One figure who exceptionally united both sets of concerns, the philosophical renewal of Marxist thought with a cultural critique of life in the late capitalist present, was Raymond Williams. A specialist in modern drama, employed in the discipline of English, Williams was best known for his general works *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* and its companion volume, *The Long Revolution*, published in 1958 and 1961. In these books, he developed an avowedly “oppositional” account of the impact of the Industrial Revolution on British society, by using a history of the idea of culture. He showed with great subtlety how elitist fears for the defense of civilized values against the vulgarizing consequences of industrialism and democracy had always been disputed by more generous conceptions of culture as a faculty of the whole people. Combining close readings of the canonical English writers and social commentators with pioneering social histories of education, the reading public, the press, and other cultural institutions, he proposed an amplified and extended understanding of culture. This encompassed not only a society's formal values and highest artistic achievements (“the best which has been thought and said”) but also the generalized commonalities of its “whole way of life” and the associated “structures of feeling.”¹⁷

Williams moved amphibiously between the domains of high theory and popular culture. For my own part in the late 1960s, he epitomized everything that inspired me to become a historian but that had absolutely nothing to do with the influence of professional historians or with the authorized rules and practices of history as an already formed discipline.¹⁸ It's worth saying something more extensively

about this place Raymond Williams made for himself beyond the conventional boundaries of academic life (that is, outside the given institutional patterns of the disciplinary organization of knowledge in the universities), because the type of interdisciplinarity—or, perhaps better, “adisciplinarity”—he represented was another key ingredient of the intellectual conjuncture I’m trying to describe for the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In Williams’s case, this included a biographical dimension that I also found appealing. As the son of a railwayman and trade unionist on the South Wales borders, he stood out among the 1930s generations of student Marxists by his working-class pedigree. He went directly from the university into the army during World War II; then, after resuming and completing his studies, he went straight into adult education, where he taught from 1946 to 1961. His journey through grammar school and Cambridge University as a “scholarship boy” prefigured one of the primary sociocultural narratives defining the promises of prosperity in postwar Britain, which joined working-class provincial origins to professional middle-class destinations in a bargain of assimilation and upward mobility. For Williams, negotiating this “border country” (to use the title of his first novel) was made still more complex by the extra dualisms of Wales versus England and Oxbridge university establishment versus adult education. He was part of the last generation of left-wing male intellectuals in Britain before the almost total professionalizing of higher education initiated by the big university expansion of the 1960s. In common with such historian contemporaries as Edward Thompson, Thomas Hodgkin, Henry Collins, Royden Harrison, and J. F. C. Harrison, who helped shape the emergence of social history (and most of whom were Communists for portions of the era between the 1930s and 1950s), he spent the first half of his career in adult education, on the fringes of the academic world proper, only receiving his first university appointment, at Cambridge, in 1961.¹⁹

During his earlier career, Williams developed a complex and hesitant relationship to Marxism. He was formed politically in three successive conjunctures—first, the period of Popular Front and antifascist campaigning closed by the international crises of 1947–48; next, the Cold War years, which, for Williams, were a time of political isolation and distance from the recognized contexts of Marxism; and finally, the heyday of the first New Left, extending from the crisis of

Communism in 1953–57, the Suez debacle of 1956, and the rise of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in the late 1950s to the explosion of the student movement around 1968. With the appearance of *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution*, which made him into an acknowledged standard-bearer of the New Left, Williams took up a singular place in British intellectual life: a now fully credentialed academic, speaking from the central institutional spaces of the dominant culture (including Cambridge University, the Arts Council, and the British Broadcasting Corporation), he was yet an “unassimilated socialist” in an “infinitely assimilative culture,” who was simultaneously independent of the existing socialist parties, whether the Labour Party or the Communist Party. This entailed an angular and uncomfortable stance. In Edward Thompson’s words, it required “put[ting] oneself into a school of awkwardness . . . [making] one’s sensibility all knobbly—all knees and elbows of susceptibility and refusal.”²⁰

The doubled nature of Williams’s intellectual persona was crucial for my generation’s sense of our own possibility. On one front, in a sustained critique that ran through the center of *Culture and Society*, Williams challenged the legitimacy of the dominant culture’s entrenched description of itself—in the lineage of Matthew Arnold, T. S. Eliot, and F. R. Leavis—as “the great tradition.” Against that “official” discourse of cultural value, which privileged the calling of an austere and embattled minority of the high-minded in preserving the authentic goods of life against the corrupting and destructive effects of “commercial” or “mass” society, Williams countered with a democratic conception of a society’s common pursuits, of culture’s “ordinariness” in that sense. But on the other front, Williams rejected the available forms of a Marxist alternative during the 1950s, deformed as they were by the consequences of Stalinism and the Cold War. He rejected both the political culture of “manipulation and centralism” he’d come to associate with the “style of work” of the Communist Party and the economic patterns of thinking characteristic of orthodox Marxism.

As for Marx, one accepted the emphasis on history, on change, on the inevitably close relationship between class and culture, but the way this came through was, at another level, unacceptable. There was, in this position, a polarization and abstraction of economic life on the one hand and culture on the other, which did not seem to me to correspond to the social experience of

culture as others had lived it, and as one was trying to live it oneself.²¹

This ambivalence notwithstanding, during the 1960s, Williams entered into continuous conversation with the full range of European theoretical Marxisms and produced in the process a diverse and original body of writing on the relationship between social history and cultural forms, whose standpoint he named “cultural materialism.” His 1973 essay “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,” whose argument became hardwired into the 1977 book *Marxism and Literature*, was especially influential here.²² Breaking decisively with older deterministic and functionalist readings of culture’s relationship to the economy and its social interests, Williams developed an argument about culture’s own materiality. Rather than seeing culture as separated from material life, simultaneously tethered by social determinations yet moving above them, he stressed the very practical and concrete ways in which culture was always lodged inside social relations and forms of material practice.

By “cultural materialism,” Williams meant not only the precise social and institutional conditions and relations through which cultural meanings were themselves produced, but the constitutive presence of cultural processes for all other practices of a society, including not only politics and social interactions but also the complex operations of the economy. In that sense, according to Williams, the architectural metaphor of base and superstructure, with its imagery of the clear and physical separation of levels as well as its implications of logical priority, was actively misleading. However necessary it may be to separate cultural meanings from their social contexts for the purposes of abstraction, they can only ever be encountered together, fused and embedded in what Williams called “specific and indissoluble real processes.”²³ Language, meanings, and signification should all be seen as “indissoluble elements of the material social process itself, involved all the time both in production and reproduction.” In that case, culture’s relation to other things—work, market transactions, social interests, practical activities, and so forth—is always already embedded. That relationship can only be theorized, by means of “the complex idea of determination,” as the exertion of pressures and the setting of limits, in processes that run actively in both directions.²⁴

The argument is getting ahead of me a little here: my own tentative

reconnoitering of Marxism in the late 1960s hardly betrayed much inkling of the problems Raymond Williams was trying to attack. Yet looking back, I'm fascinated by how rapidly the climate of awareness seems to have moved. A key milestone, both for myself and for the broader discussions, was the publication, in the spring of 1971, of the first substantial translations from Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, which gave vital impetus for Williams's project of opening Marxism for more complex forms of cultural analysis—for "culturalizing" it, one might say.²⁵ This occurred during my first year in graduate school at the University of Sussex, by which time I was seriously reading Marx and Engels, properly discovering the Western Marxists, and subscribing to *New Left Review*.

In other words, even as I acquired my classical Marxist outlook, the most important Marxist discussions were already escaping from the old understandings grounded in the metaphor of base and superstructure. I choose Raymond Williams to exemplify this escape, partly because he addressed the problem through a body of original and creative historical work, partly because the latter converged importantly with the oeuvres of the British Marxist historians mentioned earlier. As the followers and sympathetic critics of that grouping came to appreciate, its underlying materialist credo had proved no impediment to producing social and cultural histories of great subtlety. Christopher Hill's work, in particular, centered on the intricacies of the relations among political conflict, popular piety, and social order in the seventeenth-century English Revolution, focusing on theological debate, literary history, and rival programs of spirituality rather than on sociologies of class interest per se, while moving ever further from the moorings of any straightforwardly "social interpretation."²⁶ It was no accident that Hill had reviewed an earlier selection of Gramsci's writings, published in 1957 as *The Modern Prince*, or that Eric Hobsbawm was an early English-language commentator on Gramsci's thought. For many years, the main guide to Gramsci's idea of "hegemony" in English was another British Marxist historian, Gwyn Williams, who had published a much-cited article on the subject in 1960.²⁷

Interest in Gramsci's heterodox writings proved the hidden catalyst for much of the emergent social history at the turn of the 1970s. It was clearly behind Robbie Gray's contribution entitled "History" in the *Counter Course* volume, for example, even if that influence occurred

mainly off the page.²⁸ Taking the older Marxist historians as a practical model, while learning from the new debates, my generation of left-inclined historians initially dealt with theory in an eclectic and embedded way. Yet we rarely escaped theory's reminders; they were in the air we breathed. I can think of two further examples. The first was a volume I stumbled on by accident in Blackwell's one afternoon in 1969, called *Towards a New Past*, edited by Barton Bernstein. It contained the essay "Marxian Interpretations of the Slave South," by Eugene Genovese, whose writings on the history of slavery I'd begun reading in the *New York Review of Books* around the same time. His call for "a break with naïve determinism, economic interpretation, and the insipid glorification of the lower classes," in the name of a more complex understanding of culture and ideology, was perhaps my first serious encounter with Gramsci's ideas, an interest I could then pursue through another of Genovese's essays, "On Antonio Gramsci," published in 1967.²⁹ The second example was a critique of radical historiography in the United States, published by Aileen Kraditor in *Past and Present*; it took a similar Gramscian standpoint.³⁰

If Raymond Williams anticipated many of these theoretical departures, he also offered what was for the time a quite rare example of interdisciplinary practice. In this capacity, he was largely self-taught, lacking, through most of the 1950s, either the academic or the political contexts of collaboration that might have provided collective or institutional supports. Any historians of that time who were interested in giving their studies greater theoretical or contextual breadth faced the same problem. This situation was to change a little with the mid-1960s, when some of the new universities included interdisciplinarity in their pedagogical and curricular design.³¹ Otherwise, historians looking for contact with sociologists, anthropologists, or literary scholars were generally on their own. Where not actively hostile, the bulk of the historical profession took a dim view of such ambitions.³² For those of us trying in the late 1960s to become self-conscious about how we approached our work, whether by interrogating and refining our particular conceptual tools or by devising an overarching theoretical framework, the best help always came from the outside.

During my years as a student in Oxford, it was completely clear to me that history was insufficient by itself, that it needed "theory," and that other disciplines had to be enlisted for this purpose. In the context of the time (when claims for history's social and political relevance

were invoked so irresistibly in materialist terms), this meant turning principally to sociology and political science, less frequently to anthropology, but at all events to the general repertoire of critical social science. There was a catholic quality to this commitment. For example, among my undergraduate contemporaries in philosophy, politics, and economics, Claude Lévi-Strauss and other French structuralists attracted a lot of interest; and the presence in Balliol of Steven Lukes ensured that traditions of thought descending from Durkheim were taken extremely seriously.³³ But there were no doubts about the main orientations: turning to theory meant, above all, turning to the great source of interdisciplinarity (or, more accurately, the great incitement to cross-disciplinary or, perhaps, pan-disciplinary knowledge)—namely, Marxism.

Three Sources of Social History

In 1971, Eric Hobsbawm ended a famous essay on the state of the discipline by saying it was “a good moment to be a social historian.”³⁴ That was certainly my own feeling when embarking on graduate work in October 1970. The very scale of the developing activity was impressive—with new journals launched, standing conferences and subdisciplinary societies founded, curricula redesigned, special chairs established, and ever greater numbers of dissertations under way. Social history had certainly existed before. But the ambition was now enlarged. To call oneself a social historian in Britain no longer automatically spelled an interest in trade unions or the poor law or meant that one would be shunted off into obscure sidings of economic history departments or excluded from the main thoroughfares of the profession. Despite the persisting conventions of middle-brow coffee-table publications and a continuing genre of popular history, the term *social history* no longer necessarily implied the colorful and nostalgic evocation of “manners and morals,” as the editors of the *Times Literary Supplement* still wanted to see it. During the coming decade, in fact, social history would fast outgrow its earlier subaltern status inside the historical profession itself. Indeed, there were few areas of the discipline to which the coming generations of social historians would neglect to lay claim.³⁵

The most interesting feature of social history as it emerged into the

1970s, flagged in the title of Hobsbawm's essay ("From Social History to the History of Society"), was its new generalizing or totalizing potential. In the past, the term *social history* might easily have implied indifference to a society's political institutions or the business of government and the character of the state. Its sectional attentiveness to the "social" as a subspecialism of the discipline had not implied any necessary commitment to generalizing about society as a whole. Until recently, the category of the social historian had implied something specialized and narrow, even antiquarian. Thus, it became something of a novel departure when some social historians started claiming the totalizing possibilities as the specific virtue of their field. They began declaring an interest in particular practices (such as trade unionism or poor relief) less for their own sake than for their bearing on the character of the social formation at large. They talked increasingly of "structures" and "social relations." They now tried to situate all facets of human existence in the aggrandizingly materialist contexts of their social determinations. As the first editorial of the new journal *Social History* maintained, they wanted to "be as much concerned with questions of culture and consciousness as with those of social structure and the material conditions of life."³⁶ But there was little hesitancy about where the main lines of explanation began.

As I suggested in chapter 1, there were three significant influences on the growth of social history in the English-speaking world: the British Marxist historians, the *Annales* school in France, and post-1945 U.S. and British social science. All three converged on a materialist model of causality that might also be called "structuralist." Its terms implied a master concept of "society" based on the sovereignty of social explanation, in which the lines of determination ran predominantly upward and outward from the economy and its social relations to everything else. It also implied an integrated or holistic account of the social totality. All three approaches believed actively in cross-disciplinary fertilization. Each was certainly borne by a politics.

The British Marxist Historians

For me, the foremost of these three influences was the first. Considered from a vantage point inside the 1960s themselves, the British Marxists were not at all as cohesive or separated a group as the subsequent commentary can easily imply. As individuals, they were cen-

trally connected to the various wider networks whose coming together had gradually solidified the basis for social history's emergence—above all, around the journal *Past and Present* and in the Society for the Study of Labour History (launched in 1952 and 1960, respectively), but also in the growth of new specialisms (such as the Urban History Group, formed in 1963), the founding of separate economic and social history departments at a number of universities, the progressive social science connections running through the London School of Economics, and so forth. Moreover, other individuals without the same Marxist affiliations—most notably, Asa Briggs—were equally important for social history's origins in the 1950s.³⁷ Nonetheless, drawing on the shared outlook they acquired from the Communist Party Historians' Group between 1946 and its disbandment in 1956–57, the Marxists exercised definite and disproportionate influence on the forms social history acquired in the course of its emergence.

Among others, the Historians' Group included Christopher Hill (1910–2003), George Rudé (1910–93), Victor Kiernan (born 1913), Rodney Hilton (1916–2002), John Saville (born 1916), Eric Hobsbawm (born 1917), Dorothy Thompson (born 1923), Edward Thompson (1924–93), Royden Harrison (1927–2002), and the much younger Raphael Samuel (1938–96).³⁸ Not many from the group taught at the center of British university life in Oxbridge or London. Some were not historians by discipline: for example, a book by the older Cambridge economist Maurice Dobb (1900–1976), *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (1946), had focused a large part of the group's initial discussions. Others in the group held positions in adult education: Rudé and Thompson, for example, secured academic appointments only in the 1960s—Rudé by traveling to Australia to do so. The main impulse of the group came from politics, a powerful sense of history's pedagogy, and broader identification with democratic values and popular history. A leading mentor was the nonacademic Communist intellectual, journalist, and Marx scholar Dona Torr (1883–1957), to whom the group paid tribute with a now-classic volume called *Democracy and the Labour Movement*, published in 1954.³⁹

Some of these scholars displayed extraordinary international range. This is well known of Eric Hobsbawm. His interests embraced British labor history, European popular movements, Latin American peasantries, and jazz, while also recurring to the study of nationalism, cap-

italism's successive transformations as a global system, the relationship of intellectuals to popular movements, the history of Marxism, and other grand themes. He became best known, perhaps, for his series of unparalleled general histories, which covered the modern era from the late eighteenth century to the present in four superb volumes.⁴⁰ Among his comrades, Victor Kiernan was also a true polymath, publishing widely on aspects of imperialism, early modern state formation, and the history of the aristocratic duel, as well as British relations with China and the Spanish Revolution of 1854, with an imposing wider bibliography of essays on an extraordinary range of subjects.⁴¹ George Rudé was a leading historian of the French Revolution and popular protest.⁴² Two other members of the group worked almost exclusively on British topics but enjoyed massive international resonance over the longer term—Raphael Samuel as the moving genius behind the History Workshop movement and its journal, Edward Thompson through his great works *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), *Whigs and Hunters* (1975), and *Customs in Common*, the last of which incorporated agenda-setting essays and lectures originally written in the 1960s and 1970s.⁴³

But this British Marxist historiography was also embedded in some very British concerns. Inspired by A. L. Morton's *People's History of England*, which had been published in 1938 at the height of Popular Front campaigning, the group's early goal was to produce a social history of Britain capable of contesting the pedagogical, cultural, and general ideological dominance of established or official accounts.⁴⁴ While this ambition was never realized as such, the oeuvres of the various individuals nonetheless came to aggregate by the end of the 1960s into an impressive collective contribution of exactly that kind—including, notably, Rodney Hilton on the English peasantry of the Middle Ages, Christopher Hill on the seventeenth-century English Revolution, John Saville on industrialization and labor history, Dorothy Thompson on Chartism, and, of course, Edward Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm on the general course of popular history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁴⁵

In that sense, the legacy of the Historians' Group was intensely focused on national themes. For younger historians placing themselves on the British left in the later 1960s, this was most famously true of Edward Thompson's vigorous general essay "The Peculiarities of the English," published in 1965 as a counterblast against a general inter-

pretation of British history advanced by two Marxists of the “second” New Left, Tom Nairn and Perry Anderson.⁴⁶ Thompson’s writing in the aftermath of leaving the Communist Party had also converged with the cognate works of Raymond Williams (discussed earlier in this chapter), whose *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution* proposed their own general interpretation of modern British history. Both Thompson and Williams were seeking to recuperate the national past in self-consciously oppositional and democratic fashion, wresting control of the national story from conservative opinion makers of all kinds and rewriting it around the struggles of ordinary people in a still unfinished democratic project.

During the 1950s, these British concerns were centered most strongly on two areas. On the one hand, the Historians’ Group decisively shaped the emergent phase of labor history, most obviously through Hobsbawm’s foundational essays collected in 1964 in *Labouring Men*, but also via the influence of John Saville and Royden Harrison and in the collective setting established by the founding of the Labour History Society in 1960.⁴⁷ This rapidly burgeoning context of new scholarship became broadly organized around a chronology of specific questions about the presumed failure of the labor movement to realize the trajectory of radicalization projected by Marx’s developmental model, laying out for labor historians and social historians an enduring problematic that dominated well into the 1980s.

Connected with this, on the other hand, the Historians’ Group also shaped the historiography of capitalist industrialization in Britain, most notably through the standard of living controversy between Hobsbawm and Max Hartwell during 1957–63, over whether industrialism had improved or degraded the living standards of the working population.⁴⁸ Saville’s first book on the social destruction wrought by the capitalist transformation of British agriculture provided a Marxist counterpoint to the depoliticized mainstream accounts of “landed society” offered by G. E. Mingay and F. M. L. Thompson, a project further continued by Hobsbawm and Rudé in their study of the 1830 agricultural laborer’s uprising.⁴⁹ Both Edward Thompson’s *Making of the English Working Class* and Hobsbawm’s general British economic history, *Industry and Empire*, powerfully addressed the general question. At the same time, neither of these momentous contributions (to labor history and to the critique of capitalist industrialization) was thinkable without the prior labors of the earlier twentieth-century

pioneers of social history in Britain—namely, the Webbs, G. D. H. Cole, R. H. Tawney, and the Hammonds.⁵⁰

But the vision of these Marxist historians was the opposite of parochial. While doing his pathbreaking research during the 1950s in Paris, Rudé had worked with the grand old man of the history of the French Revolution, Georges Lefebvre, and his future successor Albert Soboul. Kiernan practiced an eclectic version of global history long before “world history” became a recognized part of the profession’s organization and teaching. Hobsbawm enjoyed incomparably diverse connections across Europe and Latin America. Another Communist, Thomas Hodgkin (1910–82), not a member of the Historians’ Group, vitally influenced African history in its nascent years, again from the margins of the profession, in adult education.⁵¹ Hobsbawm’s work developed in dialogue with colleagues in France—not only with the Marxist-aligned Lefebvre, Soboul, and Ernest Labrousse, but also with Fernand Braudel and his colleagues of the *Annales* school.

On an international scale, Hobsbawm and Rudé transformed the study of popular protest in preindustrial societies. Rudé meticulously deconstructed older stereotypes of “the mob,” using the French Revolution and eighteenth-century riots in England and France to analyze the rhythms, organization, and motives behind collective action. In the process, he laid down a pioneering sociology of the “faces in the crowd.” Hobsbawm analyzed the transformations in popular consciousness accompanying capitalist industrialization—in studies of Luddism and pretrade union labor protest; in his excitingly original commentaries on social banditry, millenarianism, and mafia; and in essays on peasants and peasant movements in Latin America. He pioneered an extraordinarily fertile and long-running conversation between history and anthropology. He helped redefine how politics might be thought about in societies that lacked democratic constitutions, the rule of law, or a developed parliamentary system.⁵²

The biggest step undertaken by the Historians’ Group—the step that ultimately had the widest professional resonance—was the development of a new historical journal, *Past and Present*, launched in 1952. Subtitled symptomatically *Journal of Scientific History*, it was an extremely self-conscious effort at preserving dialogue with non-Marxist historians at a time when the Cold War was rapidly closing such contacts down. The original editor and instigator of the initiative was John Morris (1913–77), a historian of ancient Britain, who was joined

by Hobsbawm, Hill, Hilton, Dobb, and the archaeologist Vere Gordon Childe (1892–1957), all Marxists, together with a group of highly distinguished non-Marxists, including the ancient historian Hugo Jones (1904–70), the Czech historian R. R. Betts (died 1961), the Tudor-Stuart historian David B. Quinn (born 1909), and the complete generalist Geoffrey Barraclough (1908–84).

From the start, contacts with Europe were crucial for the outlook and success of the new journal. Connection with Eastern Europe brought articles from the Soviet historians Boris Porshnev and E. A. Kosminskii and from J. V. Polisensky and Arnost Klima in Czechoslovakia. The French connection brought articles not only from Lefebvre and Soboul but also from historians associated with the journal *Annales*. Six years later, in 1958, the journal's editorial board was broadened to dilute the original Marxist dominance, taking in the early modernists Lawrence Stone (1919–99) and John Elliott (born 1930), the medievalist Trevor Aston (1925–86), the archaeologist S. S. Frere (born 1918), and the sociologists Norman Birnbaum and Peter Worsley (born 1924). With this extremely important reconfiguration, the subtitle now changed to *Journal of Historical Studies*.⁵³

In the guiding vision brought by the Marxist historians to the intellectual project of *Past and Present*, the term *social history* referred to the attempt to understand the dynamics of whole societies. The ambition was to connect political events to underlying social forces. During 1947–50, the Historians' Group had focused on the transition from feudalism to capitalism and on a complex of associated questions—the rise of absolutism, the nature of bourgeois revolutions, agrarian dimensions of the rise of capitalism, and the social dynamics of the Reformation. Hobsbawm's 1954 two-part article "The General Crisis of the Seventeenth Century" prompted the salient discussion of *Past and Present*'s first decade, the various contributions to which were subsequently collected, under Trevor Aston's editorship, in the 1965 volume *Crisis in Europe, 1560–1660*.⁵⁴

The debate energized historians of France, Spain, Sweden, Germany, Bohemia, Russia, Ireland, and the early modern era more generally, as well as historians of Britain. It connected the seventeenth-century political upheavals to forms of economic crisis graspable in pan-European terms, in what Aston called "the last phase of the general transition from a feudal to a capitalist economy."⁵⁵ It built a case for studying religious conflict in social terms, a more general project

that also carried through a number of other early debates in the journal, including especially that on science and religion. It grasped the nettle of trying to conceptualize the histories of societies as a whole, with profound implications for how later historians were able to think about these various problems—best exemplified perhaps in the long-lasting resonance of J. H. Elliott’s far-reaching contribution “The Decline of Spain.” The debate reemphasized the convergence between *Past and Present* and *Annales*, because Hobsbawm’s initial intervention had relied extensively on scholarly work sponsored under Fernand Braudel. Above all, the debate featured the exciting and constructive possibilities of the “comparative method.”⁵⁶

It’s impossible to exaggerate the enduring contributions to the rise of social history made by *Past and Present* during its early years. While the journal was directly sustained by the particular Marxist formation grounded in the Historians’ Group, the outlook of its editorial board translated into a series of commitments that shaped the most ambitious historical discussions in the discipline at large well into the 1970s. First, the journal was committed to internationalism. It brought new and exciting access to European work into the English-speaking world, aided by the editors’ political networks and the direct exchanges with France and Eastern Europe, while building on the impetus provided by the 1950 International Historical Congress in Paris and its newly created Social History Section.

Second, Hobsbawm and his comrades urged the comparative study of societies within an overall framework of arguments about historical change, posed explicitly at the level of European or global movements and systems. This commitment grew directly from the classical Marxist perspectives learned during the 1930s and 1940s, crystallized from the working agenda of the Historians’ Group, and recurred in the annual *Past and Present* conference themes from 1957. Some of those themes are reflected in the titles “Seventeenth-Century Revolutions,” “The Origins of the Industrial Revolution,” “Cities, Courts, and Artists (Fifteenth to Nineteenth Centuries),” “War and Society, 1300–1600,” “Colonialism and Nationalism in Africa and Europe,” “History, Sociology, and Social Anthropology,” and “Work and Leisure in Pre-Industrial Society.” *Past and Present* assembled an inventory of many of the most exciting areas of research and debate defining the attractions of the discipline for aspiring historians of my generation by the end of the 1960s.

Third, encouraged by the axiomatic Marxist recognition of the indivisibility of knowledge, *Past and Present* pioneered interdisciplinary collaborations with sociologists and anthropologists. While at one level simply a new form of the intellectual Popular Frontism of the journal's founding impulse, this dialogue with non-Marxist social scientists notably accelerated after 1956–57, when, with the exception of Hobsbawm, most of the Marxist historians left the Communist Party. Such discussions offered an alternative source of ideas and approaches, given the newly perceived incompleteness of a partially deauthorized Marxism. The model of open-minded materialism in this respect, grounded in a self-consciously cross-disciplinary synthesis of “historical sociology,” was embodied by twenty-four-year-old Philip Abrams (1933–81), who joined Hobsbawm as an assistant editor in 1957. Educated during the 1950s in the intellectual-political universe of the first British New Left, rather than the Popular Front Communism of the 1930s, Abrams brought a very different generational formation to the journal, one shaped far more by the critical sociologies of postwar Britain.⁵⁷ In comparison, Peter Worsley, who displayed the most free-ranging and eclectic of cross-disciplinary dispositions and whose historical sensibility accompanied a training in anthropology, field research in the Pacific and Southeast Asia, and a university appointment in sociology, had been in the Communist Party until 1956, formative years that continued to mold his many varied publications.⁵⁸

Fourth, for the Marxist architects of *Past and Present*, social history went together with economics—whether via the master category of structures taken from the *Annales* school in France or via Marxism and the materialist conception of history. Within history as an academic discipline, where social history became disengaged from the “manners and morals” mode of popularizing or from projects of “people’s history,” it invariably became coupled with economic history, as in the new departments of economic and social history created in some British universities during the 1960s.

Finally, the Marxist historians’ commitment to dialogue and debate—to bringing Marxist approaches not only into the center of discussions among historians in Britain but also into much broader intellectual circulation, as an essential bridge for both international exchange and generous cross-disciplinary explorations—profoundly enriched the intellectual culture of the discipline just at the point of

the great expansion of higher education in the 1960s, which produced such a notable leap forward in the volume, range, and sophistication of scholarly historical research. In that sense, the conditions of takeoff for the late twentieth-century growth of historical studies were not simply assembled by the creation of national research bodies, the founding of new universities, and the growth of funding for research. Those conditions were also to be found in the hard and imaginative labors of the group involved with *Past and Present* and in the politics of knowledge they pursued.

The Annales School in France

It was no accident that the impetus for social history in its late twentieth-century form came from well outside the mainstream of the profession. In the case of the British Marxist historians I've just described, that momentum grew from the labors of a cohort of radicals mainly in their thirties, drawing inspiration from a set of political experiences in and around the Communist Party between the late 1930s and the aftermath of the World War II. Often securing at best an uncertain foothold in the profession, they nonetheless delivered much of the energy and ideas behind social history's emergence. By the 1960s, the lessening of the Cold War's ideological hostilities and the slow effects of institution building had gradually drawn these British Marxists into a much broader supportive milieu. But the force of the general point remains: social history's impulse came from the margins.

We can detect the same effect even more clearly earlier in the twentieth century. Because the discipline was founded in the later nineteenth century, statecraft and diplomacy, warfare and high politics, and administration and the law held sway over history teaching at the university level. The earliest social histories were written beyond the walls of academia altogether, either through the labors of private individuals or in the alternative settings of labor movements. After 1918, stronger potentials emerged from the more propitious political climate, once again usually abetted from the outside. In Britain, the key for that process was the creation of the Economic History Society and its journal, *Economic History Review*, in 1926–27. In Germany, it was an impressive flowering of sociology during the Weimar Republic.

France was a more complicated case. By the late nineteenth century, the French Revolution's centrality for the country's political cul-

ture had already created an institutional space for studying the revolutionary tradition, and the resulting attentiveness to popular politics and the presence of the masses was inherently encouraging to social history. Successive occupants of the Chair for the History of the French Revolution at the Sorbonne, from Albert Mathiez (1874–1932) through Georges Lefebvre (1874–1959) to Albert Soboul (1914–82), sustained a strong line of social-historical research.⁵⁹ Another key figure, Ernest Labrousse (1895–1988), pioneered the quantitative study of economic fluctuations as an essential condition for understanding the nature of revolutionary crises. By this work, he situated 1789 in an economic conjuncture for which the history of prices and wages, bad harvests, and unemployment delivered the key.⁶⁰ His general model compared the successive crises of 1789, 1830, and 1848. His analysis worked upward from price movements and the structural problems of the economy, through the wider ramifications of social crisis, before finally ending in the mishandling of the consequences by government.

As in Britain and Germany, an early impulse to social history in France came from economic history and sociology, but this occurred with far greater resonance among French historians than in the other two countries. For *The Great Fear*, his remarkable 1932 study of the countryside's popular turbulence on the eve of the 1789 revolution, Georges Lefebvre read the crowd theories of Gustav Le Bon, the social theory of Émile Durkheim, and the ideas about collective memory from his Strasbourg colleague Maurice Halbwachs. Going back to the turn of the century, the influence of the economist François Simiand (1873–1935) had been central to this distinctive French symbiosis of history and social science. In a seminal article of 1903 published in the new journal *Revue de synthèse historique*, Simiand disparaged the traditional *histoire événementielle* (history of events) and attacked what he called the historians' three "idols of the tribe"—politics, the individual, and chronology.⁶¹ The journal concerned had been founded three years earlier in 1900, by the philosopher of history Henri Berr (1863–1954), in furtherance of an interestingly ecumenical conception of social science. Among Berr's younger supporters were Lucien Febvre (1878–1956) and Marc Bloch (1866–1944), who joined the *Revue* in 1907 and 1912, respectively.

Lucien Febvre's dissertation on Philip II and the Franche-Comté, published in 1912, was palpably indifferent to military and diplomatic

events. In it, he located Philip II's policies in the geography, social structure, religious life, and social changes of the region, centering his account on the conflicts between absolutism and provincial privileges, nobles and bourgeois, Catholics and Protestants. He inverted the usual precedence, which viewed great events from the perspective of rulers and treated regional histories as effects. Region became the indispensable structural setting, for which geography, economics, and demography were all required. Appointed to Strasbourg University in 1920, Febvre collaborated there with Marc Bloch, who, before the war, under Durkheim's influence, had already rejected traditional political history. In 1924, Bloch published *The Royal Touch*, which sought to illuminate conceptions of English and French kingship by analyzing popular belief in the ability of kings to heal the skin disease of scrofula by the power of touch.⁶² This remarkable study freed historical perspective from simple narrative time, reattaching it to longer frames of structural duration. It practiced comparison. It also stressed *mentalité*, or the collective understanding and religious psychology of the time—for example, against the contemporary “commonsense” question of whether the king's touch had actually healed or not.

These twin themes—structural history (as opposed to political history or the “history of events”) and the history of mentalities (as opposed to the history of formal ideas)—gave coherence to the Febvre-Bloch collaboration. In subsequent books on Martin Luther and the bases of popular unbelief, published in 1928 and 1942, Febvre switched to studying the mental climate he thought specific to the sixteenth century.⁶³ Bloch, conversely, moved from an archaeology of mind-sets to the archaeology of structures, in his great classics *French Rural History: An Essay on Its Basic Characteristics*, published in 1931, and *Feudal Society*, which appeared in 1939–40.⁶⁴ His holistic account of feudalism, which aspired to a picture of the whole environment by combining analysis of the “mental structures” of the age with its socioeconomic relations, departed radically from prevailing work on the topic. He insisted on comparison, making Europe, not the nation, into the entity of study. He exchanged conventional chronologies based on the reigns of kings for a more challenging framework of epochal time, the famous *longue durée*. He shifted attention from military service, which provided the dominant approach to feudalism, to the social history of agriculture and relationships on the land. He moved away from the history of the law, landholding, kingship, and

the origins of states in the narrow institutional sense. All of these moves came to characterize “structural history.”

In 1929, Bloch and Febvre made their interests into a program by founding a new journal, *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, which began acquiring prestige with their move from Strasbourg to Paris. But not until after 1945—with the founding of the Sixth Section of the École Pratique des Hautes Études for the Social Sciences, with Febvre as its president—did *Annales* really take off, tragically boosted by Bloch's execution by the Nazis in June 1944 for his role in the Resistance. Bloch's indictment of French historiography's narrowness merged into the enthusiasm for a new start after the war, sharpened by his arraignment of the rottenness of the old elites, who capitulated in 1940 and collaborated with the Nazis under Vichy. The change of the journal's name to *Annales: économies, sociétés, civilisations* in 1946 signified this enhanced vision. The Sixth Section also placed history at the center of its new interdisciplinary regime, endowing it with a leading place among the social sciences, a place unique in the Western world. Sociology, geography, and economics—all vital influences for Bloch and Febvre—were joined by structural anthropology and linguistics in the guise of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–), Roland Barthes (1915–80), and Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002). The term *histoire totale* (total history) became identified with *Annales*.

Febvre's assistant was Fernand Braudel (1902–85), who followed him into both the presidency of the Sixth Section (1956–72) and the directorship of *Annales* (1957–69). Braudel's career was framed by two monuments of scholarship: *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, published in 1949 but mainly researched in the 1930s; and the three-volume *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century*, completed in 1979.⁶⁵ In these great works, Braudel schematized his mentors' complex practice. His three temporalities or levels of analysis functioned as a materialist grand design, shrinking great men and big events into the sovereign causalities of economics, population, and environment. The causal logic moved upward from the structural history of the *longue durée*, through the medium-term changes of conjunctures, to the faster-moving narrative time of the traditional *histoire événementielle*. The ground floor contained landscape, climate, demography, deep patterns of economic life, long-run norms and habits, the reproduction of social structures, the stabilities of popular understanding, and the repetitions of everyday life. At the

second level, the rise and fall of economies, social systems, and states became visible. Only at the third stage of the presentation could one find human-made events, comprising the familiar military, diplomatic, and political histories that *Annales* wanted to supplant. In this thinking, the “deeper level” of structure imposed “upper limits” on human possibilities for a particular civilization, while crucially determining the pace and extent of change. This was the historian’s appropriate concern. “Events,” in the old and conventional sense, were mainly epiphenomenal or a diversion.⁶⁶

In a sense, Braudel’s rendering of the ideals of *Annales* realized one of social history’s default purposes—the dethroning of kings—while divesting it of all progressivist or “whiggish” narrative design. That uplifting quality was exchanged for a very different model of progress, seeking to render the world knowable through social science. In the Braudelian notation, that meant economics, demography, geography, anthropology, and quantitative techniques. In the French context of the politics of knowledge, moreover, during the Braudel era, *Annales* history became counterposed against the historiography of the French Revolution, where progressivism and the great event remained alive and well. Mentalité solidified into an implicit master category of structure. Braudel’s project was imposingly schematic. His works were ordered into a reified hierarchy of materialist determinations, locating “real” significance in the structural and conjunctural levels and impoverishing the third level to the most conventional and unanalytic recitation of events. Reciprocity of determination—so challenging in Bloch’s work on feudalism—now disappeared. The recessiveness of religious conflict and the other spectacular dramas of the early modern age was startling. Yet Braudel’s magnum opus on the Mediterranean had few parallels in the sheer grandiosity of its knowledge and design.

If we consider the emergence of social history comparatively, country by country, *Annales* had a remarkable institution-building role.⁶⁷ Uniquely in Europe, it provided those efforts with a long continuity going back to the 1920s. It both established protocols of historical method and understanding and endowed a cumulative tradition of collective discussion, research, training, and publication. Interdisciplinary cohabitation was always essential, and—again uniquely—history was at the center. During the 1950s, quantification became soldered into this intellectual culture: one characteristically dogmatic statement declared, “from a scientific point of view, the only social history

is quantitative history.”⁶⁸ It emerged into the 1960s with several hallmarks: history as a social science; quantitative methodology; long-run analyses of prices, trade, and population; structural history; and a materialist model of causation. Certain key terms—*longue durée*, *mentalité*, and, of course, *histoire totale*—passed into the currency used by historians elsewhere.

Under Braudel, *Annales* became a magnet for “new” history in France. Its influence extended outward into Italy, Belgium, and Eastern Europe, especially into Poland, where many connections developed. The journal also opened dialogues with historians in the Soviet Union. Until the 1970s, however, the school’s works were mainly known in English through Bloch’s *Feudal Society*, which was translated in 1961—although Philippe Ariès’s maverick history of childhood also appeared in English in 1962. Not until the 1970s did the real work of English-language transmission begin, with the translation of Braudel’s *Mediterranean* in 1972 and of a selection of articles from *Annales* edited by Peter Burke in 1972.⁶⁹ Burke then became a principal impresario of the further reception—publishing commentaries, managing translations, reviewing the various works as they appeared, and publishing his own versions of the *Annales* approach. By the end of the seventies, a full-scale guide by Traian Stoianovich had appeared, and Immanuel Wallerstein had established the Fernand Braudel Center in Binghamton, with its new journal, *Review*.⁷⁰

Between the 1930s and the 1960s, the dispositions of *Annales* paralleled those of the Marxist historians in Britain. Shared conviction in the value of materialist forms of analysis provided the obvious common ground, just as the Braudelian grand design contained obvious echoes of Marx’s 1859 preface. Not only the common appeal of social and economic history but also the excitement of entering a common project of societal understanding could allow Marxists and the followers of *Annales* to converge, as the experience of Labrousse and Lefebvre in France itself implied.⁷¹ In the prevailing ideological climate of the 1950s and under the dominant academic conditions of the time, this was in itself enough for some basic solidarity: “[T]here could be no History if it were not for Social History,” Labrousse declared.⁷² When the British Marxists launched *Past and Present* in the unpropitious circumstances of the early 1950s, Braudel and the *Annalistes* became their natural associates. The motivating commitments behind that enterprise were to be found not just in the guiding philosophical perspec-

tives, which might seem rather prosaically orthodox when explicated, but far more in the detailed works of scholarship they produced, which might have a great deal in common with those of the non-Marxist colleagues across the English Channel. For this reason, any strict demarcations between the British Marxist historians and the historians of *Annales*—especially during the 1950s—make little sense.⁷³

Social Science History

What was history's more general relationship to social science in the mid-twentieth century? Another feature of the intellectual conjuncture of the late sixties, I'd argue, was its ecumenicalism, a quality not disconnected from the distinctiveness—and efficacy—of the radical political movements of the time. Although dogmatism of various kinds came quickly into play, I mainly remember the open-endedness of the intellectual discovery; the sense of experiment and assay; the readiness to explore, to pick and choose, to try any ideas that worked. While avidly sampling the Marxist historiography that happened to come my way, for instance, I initially made little distinction between Marxist and other kinds of materialist sociology. Precisely for the purposes that interested me most, such as an understanding of ideology or theories of power and the state, which orthodox Marxism had notably neglected, it seemed important to cast a wide net. This openness wasn't exactly indiscriminate. But for a while, many flowers bloomed.⁷⁴

Both *Past and Present* and *Annales* had pioneered a certain practice of interdisciplinary scholarship. As suggested earlier in this chapter, the creation of the Sixth Section of the École Pratique des Hautes Études in 1946 registered the institutionalizing of traditions that had been part of French academic life from the start of the century. Uniquely, the prestige of *Annales* allowed history to be instated at the very center of the postwar social science complex in France, a placement further reinforced in 1962 by the founding of Braudel's Maison des Sciences de l'Homme. The interactions between history and social science in Britain were, by comparison, more piecemeal and pragmatic. As Marxists lost confidence in the self-sufficiency of their ideas during the crisis of Communism in the mid-1950s, for example, it became easier to seek sustenance elsewhere; the dialogue between historians and varieties of non-Marxist sociology and social anthropology became strengthened as a result. The involvement in *Past and Present* of Philip

Abrams, Peter Worsley, and the anthropologist Jack Goody was especially notable in that regard. Eric Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels*, originally given as the Simon Lectures under the auspices of the anthropology department at the University of Manchester at the instigation of Max Gluckman, was a pathbreaking demonstration of what talking and listening to other disciplines could enable.⁷⁵

During the 1950s, the United States witnessed a peculiarly one-sided version of such a dialogue. A succession of Social Science Research Council reports—issued in 1946, 1954, and 1963, respectively—had exhorted historians to learn from sociologists, but the imagined conversation seemed annoyingly one-way: for admittance to the club, historians needed to adopt the social scientists' available theories and methods.⁷⁶ In this first phase of later twentieth-century interdisciplinarity, historians tended to be extremely self-effacing, to say the least. They wrote their own histories, but not always under conceptual conditions of their own choosing. In particular, the massive prestige of using developmentalist frameworks based on modernization theory to describe social change across time—indeed, the presumed superiority of such frameworks—reached a climax in the late 1950s and early 1960s, during the research boom of the postwar capitalist prosperity; it was abetted by Marxism's seeming atrophy as an intellectual tradition in the English-speaking world. For historians, the main sites of the resulting interdisciplinary conversation were a series of new journals. Aside from *Past and Present*, they included *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, founded in 1958 in Chicago and then taken to the University of Michigan by the British medievalist Sylvia Thrupp; the *Journal of Social History*, launched in 1967 by the generalist social historian Peter Stearns; and the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, founded in 1970 by the early modernist Theodore Rabb and the political scientist Robert Rotberg.⁷⁷

Historians turned to sociology most successfully and self-consciously when borrowing techniques, rather than theory per se. Family history provided one of the best illustrations of this process, pioneered programmatically in Britain by Peter Laslett's *The World We Have Lost*, published in 1965. Demanding a new "social structural history" that embraced whole societies and focused on the "structural function of the family" in the transition from "preindustrial" to "industrial" times, Laslett (1915–2001) helped form the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure (founded in 1964),

which he proceeded to guide with evangelical zeal.⁷⁸ Imbued with the certainties of quantifying and the hubris of science, the new demographic historians aspired to recast the defining ground of the discipline. But despite impressive methodological sophistication, Laslett's main achievement paradoxically became an argument about the absence of change—namely, his so-called null hypothesis regarding the nuclear family's continuity across the caesura of industrialization. He used this hypothesis to lay one of the classic modernizing myths of postwar sociology—the belief that family forms followed a long-term pattern of progressive nucleation.

Demographic historians became masters of falsification, dismantling ungrounded claims in dialogue with contemporary sociology.⁷⁹ But their ability to retheorize social change beyond the technics of the immediate debates remained far more limited.⁸⁰ The strongest explanatory program for demographic history remained that of the leading voices of the third generation of the *Annales* school, for whom population had become the prime mover of social change, most notably in Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's study of the peasantry of Languedoc.⁸¹ Ironically, given the default cautions of Laslett's null hypothesis, the first two general histories of the family in the 1970s, by Edward Shorter and Lawrence Stone, presented bold teleologies of modernization, as in Stone's thesis of the "rise of affective individualism."⁸²

The larger promises of family history were realized more effectively in studies of "protoindustrialization," a concept that was capturing the attention of many social historians by the mid-1970s. The key work on this subject, by the German historians Peter Kriedte, Hans Medick, and Jürgen Schlumbohm, accomplished what Laslett and the demographers apparently shied away from—the reconnecting of family history and population studies to a larger argument about the origins of capitalism and the social history of industrialization.⁸³ By arguing that precisely the continuity of household organization facilitated the development of cottage industries through a process of protoindustrialization, the three authors showed how Laslett's "null hypothesis" might finally be put to work. They resituated it in the larger contexts of economy and society. In earlier criticism of Laslett's project, Edward Thompson had argued, "How is it possible to get very far with the discussion of household or family if we don't know whether the households were of serfs or freemen, fishermen or bakers, nomadic shepherds or miners,

were cultivating rice or silk or chestnuts, what kind of inheritance customs determined the transmission of land, what kind of dowries or marriage settlements, what customs of apprenticeship or migrant labor."⁸⁴ Measured against these necessary social-historical concerns, the nuclear family debate, with its more specific terms, increasingly appeared to be an issue of staggering unimportance.

Above all, therefore, Kriedte, Medick, and Schlumbohm succeeded in mobilizing the history of the family for social history's larger totalizing ambition. In common with others interested in protoindustrialization—for example, David Levine, Wally Seccombe, and Charles Tilly—they managed to bring the burgeoning field of family history out of its self-made technician and subdisciplinary ghetto.⁸⁵ They drew creatively on the literatures in a wide variety of cognate fields—the transition from feudalism to capitalism, peasant studies, the history of popular culture, and so forth—to produce an unusually rich and well-integrated account of the family and its shifting place in society. The openness of their theory was especially refreshing. For their specific purposes, the three coauthors drew eclectically on a varied repertoire of influences, producing an interesting mix of German social theory; French, British, and North American anthropology; and Anglo-Marxist social history (including, most notably, the work of Edward Thompson). In this last respect, Medick's work, in particular, edged toward the terrain of popular culture and the neo-anthropological study of "plebeian" everyday life.⁸⁶

I dwell at some length on the example of family history because it offers a paradigm case for the emergence of the social science variant of social history. Most obviously, it illustrates the analytical power and excitement that merely appropriating the techniques and methodologies of the social sciences could confer. Family reconstitution, census analysis, sophisticated quantification, the promise of computerized technologies, the new divisions of labor enabled by elaborate research teams, and the benefits of the associated infrastructure of long-term and large-scale funding—all these factors opened unimagined possibilities for the study of ordinary social life. The historiography of the family also revealed the materialist epistemology common to most versions of the interest in social history as it accelerated toward the 1970s. It suggests, once again, how easily Marxist and non-Marxist influences could converge for the early generations of enthusiasts and practitioners.

In its frequent technicist predilections and tendencies toward narrowness, however, the field also contained one of social history's recurring tensions—that between the social historian's totalizing aspiration and the practical foreshortening of interest around more limited contexts and monographic concerns. Moreover, historical demography showed, in an extreme form, the dangers of privileging “quantitative” approaches to the study of social life, to the virtual exclusion of “qualitative” approaches. Despite everything else the Cambridge Group achieved during the sixties and seventies, we learned little from them about the texture of “family life and illicit love in earlier generations” (to quote the title of another of Laslett's books).⁸⁷

Urban history provided a similar microcosm. Here, again, was a freshly invented subdisciplinary field that subsisted on methods and approaches learned from the social sciences and allowed interdisciplinary collaborations to thrive. It enabled the posing of fundamental questions concerning the nature of the changes producing the modern world. It was certainly vulnerable to narrowness and empiricism, but it provided an obvious bridge to general societal analysis. Its British pioneer, H. J. Dyos (1921–78), formed the Urban History Group inside the Economic History Society in 1963, then launched the field with an international conference at his academic home, the University of Leicester, in September 1966.⁸⁸ The associated *Newsletter* became institutionalized into the *Urban History Yearbook* in 1974, further transmuted into the journal *Urban History* in 1992. Substantively, urban history brought issues of place, environment, and setting actively into the orbit of social history, rather than passively, as they had been treated before.

Dyos was a tireless proselytizer, combining social science rigor with expansively eclectic thematics, whose compass embraced all aspects of the city's history: its changing political economy and spatial organization; the social histories of the built environment, land sales, mass transit, labor markets, slum dwelling, and suburbanization; and the architectural history and the cultural analysis of urban images and representations. Dyos purposefully approached the history of urbanization as a site where social scientists, humanists, and historians would all be able to meet. After his tragically premature death, a memorial volume in his honor impressively confirmed this transdisciplinary potential.⁸⁹ Quite independently, of course, the urban com-

munity study was also becoming established as the main vehicle for studying class formation and the rise of the working class.

The history of youth and childhood was yet another field invented by social historians during the 1960s, coalescing from the opportunities seeded by comparable transdisciplinary efforts. The impetus came from historians of population and family, especially among early modernists, who delivered on one of social history's most exciting promises, the calling into question and dismantling of established commonsense beliefs about the seeming naturalness of the most familiar social arrangements and institutions—in this case, the late twentieth-century understanding of childhood as a sharply demarcated stage of life or state of being. New research—with the extraordinarily influential *Centuries of Childhood*, by Philippe Ariès, at its head—showed the basic categories of the human life course to have actually been historical creations, defining childhood, in particular, as an artifact of the specifically modern era.⁹⁰

An interest in youth subcultures was inspired by the student radicalism and general youthful rebelliousness of 1968. In freely cross-disciplinary ways, scholars drew partly on work at the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, partly on radical criminology and the sociology of deviance.⁹¹ Such work further intersected with new social histories of crime, punishment, law, and imprisonment, which, during the late sixties and early seventies, burgeoned into one of the most popular growth areas of research.⁹² The attraction, once again, was the handle such studies provided for analyzing the larger questions of social and political order. Scholars entering this field were certainly moved by the positivist excitements of social science methodology, which promised the ability to measure change, establish patterns, and specify causal relations. But also at work was a powerful dynamic of populist identification through “history from below.” Here, the British Marxist historians again provided inspiration. As so often, Eric Hobsbawm's writings—on “primitive rebellion,” “social banditry,” and “social criminality”—scouted the basic terrain.

The excitements and potentialities of social science history during the 1960s were epitomized in, above all, the person and work of Charles Tilly. Born in 1929 and trained in sociology at Harvard during the 1950s, Tilly stood for a vision of historically dynamic macrosociological analysis of societal change on the most ambitious of scales. His first book, *The Vendée*, published in 1964, was a pioneering achieve-

ment of archivally grounded historical sociology, which connected the distribution of political allegiance during the French Revolution to regionally specified patterns of socioeconomic life. One leading strand of Tilly's work concerned the changing interrelationship between capitalist development and state making, which he analyzed with attention both to the expansion of state capacities between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries and to the demographics of proletarianization. But by the 1970s, Tilly was best known as the preeminent sociologist and social historian of collective action, whose changing bases and forms of rationality he charted in relation to the impact and growing penetration of capitalist markets and national states.⁹³

Tilly's most grandiose projects—on France between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries and on Britain from the 1750s to the 1830s—sought to uncover the key shifts in the long-term patterns of collective action, while reconstructing the coherence, rationality, interests, and conceptions of justice driving the actions of ordinary people. In response to the complex dialectic between the growth of capitalism and the national state's increasing penetration of social life, Tilly argued, popular actions moved away from older forms of protest—such as the food riots, tax rebellions, and *charivaris* (or “rough music”) of the first half of the nineteenth century—and regrouped around industrial strikes, public demonstrations, and associated social movements. This epochal shift followed an earlier one in the mid-seventeenth century, through which collective action had refocused from primarily local arenas onto national ones, basically in response to the state's expanding efforts to extract taxation and other resources. By exhaustively and systematically examining the shared interests, forms of organization, and opportunities for action available to ordinary people across these changing contexts (conceptualized as varying “repertoires of contention”), Tilly brilliantly illuminated the rise of modern popular politics. His were also studies of almost industrial proportions, based on painstaking longitudinal research and requiring big resources, large teams of workers, and huge machineries of quantitative production.⁹⁴

Taken as a whole, Tilly's work forms an extraordinary achievement. It was not always clear that the substantive results of the French and British studies justified the gargantuan efforts and expenditures involved or that the industrialized research methods met the exacting standards historians try to bring to the gathering and use of evidence.

More damagingly, those studies also remained notably blunt in relation to questions of popular culture, meaning, and ideology, whose importance received a low priority in Tilly's thinking.⁹⁵ But as the primary architect of historical sociology in the United States as it emerged from the 1960s, Tilly made lasting contributions that remained unimpeachable, doing more than any other individual to show historians how to use theory while simultaneously historicizing sociology. His impact on social historians trained in the United States since the 1960s is incalculable.

From a vantage point circa 1970, Tilly's achievement mapped very closely onto the distinctive contribution of the British Marxist historians. That he shared some of their basic commitments—for example, to internationalism, comparison, and interdisciplinarity—was obvious. His studies of collective action paralleled very closely George Rudé's work on the crowd. Their systematic quality complemented the aggregate achievement of Eric Hobsbawm's more essayistic analyses in *Labouring Men*, *Primitive Rebels*, and elsewhere. Tilly's interest in state making and the rise of capitalism mirrored the seminal *Past and Present* debates around those questions, as did his allied interest in revolutions. Tilly and the British Marxists clearly shared the same commitment to writing a theoretically driven history of whole societies changing across time. The doubled genealogies of social history during the 1960s—identifying with the people and learning from social science—were common to both of them. Above all, they shared the desire to ground an understanding of politics at the highest levels of government and the state in imaginatively and systematically conducted social histories of ordinary life. At the very end of *The Contentious French*, Tilly said:

[The] connection of the largest processes transforming France and the collective action of ordinary people exposes the fallacy of treating “violence,” “protest,” or “disorder” as a world apart, as a phenomenon distinct from high politics, as a mere reaction to stress. There lies the most important teaching of popular collective action: it is not an epiphenomenon. It connects directly and solidly with the great political questions. By the actions that authorities call disorder, ordinary people fight injustice, challenge exploitation, and claim their own place in the structure of power.⁹⁶

Edward Thompson

One Communist Party Historians' Group alumnus not involved directly in the launching of *Past and Present* was Edward Thompson—although he did join its editorial board later, in the 1960s. Known first for his sprawling and energetic study of the life and thought of William Morris, published in 1955, and then for his leading role in the first British New Left, Thompson came to prominence as much for his public political stands as for his scholarly work, in an impassioned duality of commitments that the rest of his life further sustained.⁹⁷ Above all, he came to inspire several generations of social historians with his magnum opus, *The Making of the English Working Class*; published in 1963, it appeared in its Pelican paperback edition in 1968. A remarkable combination of historical retrieval, oppositional grand narrative, and moral-political crusade, this book was, in Hobsbawm's words, an "erupting historical volcano of 848 pages," or, as Gwyn Williams called it, "less a book than one continuous challenge."⁹⁸

Remarkably (given the comprehensive professionalizing of scholarly historical writing well under way when it was published), *The Making* was researched and written entirely from outside the university, while its author was teaching in adult education in Leeds. Thompson was "[a] brilliant, handsome, passionate, and oratorically gifted activist" for the Communist Party until 1956;⁹⁹ on leaving the party in protest at the Soviet invasion of Hungary, he became a leading voice of the British New Left. For the rest of his life, he engaged zestfully and prolifically in various kinds of public polemics, most importantly in the international peace movement during the 1980s, of which he became an especially eloquent and charismatic voice. He created the Center for the Study of Social History at Warwick University in 1965, the only time he held a regular university appointment; he directed the center until 1971, when he resigned. His time there was notable not just for the intellectual excitement surrounding his seminars on the social history of crime, the customary cultures of rural England, and the commercial-capitalist transformation of eighteenth-century society but also for his political critique of the business model of the university, which he published in the midst of a major crisis at Warwick that rocked the British academic world more generally in the spring of 1970.¹⁰⁰ This combination of professional margin-

ality, public upstandingness, and intellectual radicalism was essential to Thompson's aura.

A panoramic account of the self-making of the working class, *The Making* avowedly derived from Marx its concentration on the cultures, experiences, and political resistance of the working class in the half century before 1832. Thompson's work also advanced an eloquent counternarrative to gradualist versions of British history as the triumphal march of parliamentary progress, a conventional story from which popular uprisings, government coercion, and civil strife—all the rich and turbulent histories of democratic mobilization in extra-parliamentary spheres—had largely been banished. Instead of this polite and complacent success story of the farsighted extension of voting rights to ever-widening circles of the population, Thompson sought to reground the history of democratic gains in an epic recounting of the necessary popular resistance against violence, inequality, and exploitation. In one of the most quoted lines by a historian in the late twentieth century, he famously declared, "I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' handloom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity."¹⁰¹

Thompson's book was also an antireductionist manifesto—attacking narrowly based economic history, overdeterministic Marxism, and static theories of class. For Thompson, class was dynamic, eventuating through history. It was a relationship and a process, rather than an inert description of social roles or the distribution of positions in a social structure. It resulted from a common consciousness of capitalist exploitation and state repression, graspable through culture. It implied a strong conception of collective agency, whose importance Thompson reasserted against the more deterministic versions of Marxism and other economic sociologies then prevailing in the history of the Industrial Revolution. Playing deliberately off the "base and superstructure" couplet and the primacy of "social existence" over "consciousness" expounded by Marx in his 1859 preface, Thompson instated "agency" as the missing third term, upholding the necessary inventiveness of collective action beyond all the "conditioning" exercised by the economy and its social interests. The working class, as *The Making's* fourth sentence so tersely put it, "was present at its own making."¹⁰²

In emulating Thompson, the movement away from labor's institutional study and toward social histories of working people gained enormous momentum, rapidly encompassing the parts of life that historians of parties and trade unions had rarely tried to reach, except in antiquarian and colorful ways. Spurred by Thompson's achievement, younger generations of aspiring historians entering the profession during its growth years of the later 1960s and early 1970s found new subjects, while tackling the old ones in a radically innovative spirit. This heady recasting of the agenda, which was also a change of temper, became obvious from the evolving activities of the Labour History Society after its foundation in 1961, both through the pages of the Society's *Bulletin* and in the themes of its annual conferences. Labor history transmuted into an expansive version of its former self, in restless conversation with all the other emergent subspecialisms of social history. Its range now seemed unlimited—encompassing not just the workplace, in all its practices and customs, but housing, the family, nutrition, leisure and sport, drinking, crime, religion, magic and superstition, education, song, literature, childhood, courtship, sexuality, death, and more.

In the course of the 1960s, Thompson's work moved back in time. His social history of property crimes and the law in relation to the bases of England's early eighteenth-century political order, *Whigs and Hunters*, together with the work of his Warwick students gathered in *Albion's Fatal Tree* (both published in 1975), explored the transformations of customary culture beneath the onslaught of a rapidly commercializing capitalism and its forms of penetration into the countryside.¹⁰³ Two ground-laying essays, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism" and "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," were published in *Past and Present*, whose editorial board Thompson joined in 1969, and a third, "Rough Music," appeared in *Annales*. Two others followed in the *Journal of Social History* and *Social History* during the 1970s, as did his legendary lecture "The Sale of Wives," which remained long unpublished. Though not finally assembled together as *Customs in Common* until shortly before his death in 1993, these works cumulatively transformed perceptions of the transition to industrial capitalism every bit as powerfully as had *The Making*.¹⁰⁴ In the process, they further defamiliarized the older grand narrative of the Industrial Revolution. Moreover, *Albion's Fatal Tree* argued that crime and punishment should be considered "central to

unlocking the meanings of eighteenth-century social history,” and a host of exciting new work soon vindicated this claim.¹⁰⁵

Thompson’s impact helped two vital initiatives on the margins to form, whose longer-term effects both mirrored the earlier dynamics of the influence of the Communist Party Historians’ Group and crucially surpassed its substantive range, organized forms, and political intent. One of these was the Social History Group in Oxford, which convened on a weekly basis between 1965 and 1974, in the borderlands of the university’s official life. This seminar’s organizers were a younger generation of leftists, including the Marxist author of *Outcast London*, Gareth Stedman Jones (born 1942); a specialist on Spanish anarchism, Joaquín Romero Maura (born 1940); and a young and already highly respected historian of Nazism, Tim Mason (1940–90), who was, for a time, an assistant editor at *Past and Present*. These men were inspired by a fourth member, the somewhat older Raphael Samuel (1934–96), who had been a schoolboy recruit to the Historians’ Group, had left the party in 1956 to become a key energizer of the New Left, and then took an appointment as tutor in history at Ruskin, the trade union college based in Oxford but not part of the university, where he taught from 1961 to 1996.¹⁰⁶

Linked to the ambitions of the Oxford Social History Group and conceived initially to bring Ruskin students into wider contact with other historians, the annual History Workshops organized by Raphael Samuel and his students became a vital engine of social history during the coming period. Starting modestly with “A Day with the Chartists” in 1967, the meetings escalated within several years to become elaborate weekend events with international participation, given obvious momentum by the political radicalisms of 1968. By 1972, two thousand people were converging on Ruskin for the year’s workshop. The first few themes fell recognizably within labor history, but the new expansiveness of social history was apparent by 1972 (“Childhood in History: Children’s Liberation”) and 1973 (“Women in History”). The first thirteen workshops met in Oxford at Ruskin College itself; after 1979, the workshops started migrating around the rest of the country. They inspired a series of pamphlets (twelve altogether during 1970–74) and an imprint of more than thirty books between 1975 and 1990. The group’s flagship became *History Workshop Journal*, which began publishing in 1976.

In common with *Social History*, another new journal founded in the

same year, *History Workshop Journal* sought to reenergize the commitments inaugurated by the earlier generation of Marxist historians through *Past and Present*.¹⁰⁷ But far more than a project of the politics of knowledge within the discipline alone, the History Workshops crystallized a wider set of ambitions, which were more akin to an earlier and unrealized goal of the Communist Party Historians' Group—producing a “people’s history” capable of contesting the official or predominant ideology of the national past. This meant partly attempting to democratize the practice of history, both by building on Ruskin’s labor movement connections and by further embedding support of the History Workshops in a community-based network of local activities.

But the History Workshops also sought to establish a more visible public presence, both locally and nationally, by intervening politically where questions of history were in play—most substantially, for example, during the debate over the national curriculum in the 1980s. The annual workshops were more like popular festivals than academic conferences; they were attended by diverse contingents of nonacademics as well as university historians and were borne by an ebullient and iconoclastic political esprit. In Samuel’s words, they were inspired by “the belief that history is or ought to be a collective enterprise, one in which the researcher, the archivist, the curator and the teacher, the ‘do-it-yourself’ enthusiast and the local historian, the family history societies and the industrial archaeologists, should all be regarded as equally engaged.” Samuel further explained:

It has also stood by the idea of enlarging the vocation of the historian to take in perceptions of the past, arguing that the novelist and the story teller, the film maker and the caricaturist are at least as worthy of critical attention as the professional scholar. . . . At a time when we are bombarded with images of the past on all sides, when questions of the self and of subjectivity, of nationality and identity, clamor for inclusion on the scholarly agenda, historians cannot ensconce themselves in a problematic of their own making—least of all, those like socialists who are supposed to believe that knowledge is indivisible, and understanding a creature of its time.¹⁰⁸

Among all of the older generation of Marxist historians, Edward Thompson had been closest to practicing an earlier version of this ideal, during his seventeen years in adult education and in the succes-

sive political contexts of the Communist Party and the New Left. Less by direct example than by the momentum of the broader historiographical departures he inspired, as well as by individual encouragement, he also influenced the beginnings of the second new initiative needing to be mentioned, the emergence of women's history in Britain. Although the first initiatives for this occurred only in the course of tense and often angry contention, such pioneers as Sheila Rowbotham (born 1943), Anna Davin (born 1940), Sally Alexander (born 1943), and Catherine Hall (born 1946) all emerged from the History Workshop milieu in various ways, drawing important support and inspiration both from the workshops themselves and from involved older mentors, such as Thompson.¹⁰⁹ Plans for the first National Women's Liberation Conference, which met at Ruskin in 1970, had originated in discussions at the 1969 History Workshop, and the seventh workshop, in 1973, eventually took "Women in History" as its theme. In other words, the possibilities for social history's emergence—whether in general or for a particular area, such as women's history—were entirely bound up with the new political contexts of 1968.

Thompson's influence was also international. *The Making* shaped North American, African, and South Asian historiographical agendas—no less than it shaped studies of class formation in Britain and Europe. His eighteenth-century essays had perhaps even greater resonance in this respect, especially "The Moral Economy," which influenced scholars working across national histories in diverse regions of the world and formed the basis for a retrospective international conference held in Birmingham in 1992.¹¹⁰ In the course of the 1970s, social history became internationalized in the full sense envisaged by the British Marxist historians who had founded *Past and Present*, through a growing proliferation of conferences, new journals, and active processes of translation. In one network of particular importance, for example, Thompson and Hobsbawm became central participants in a series of roundtables on social history organized in the late 1970s by Braudel's Maison des Sciences de l'Homme and the Göttingen Max Planck Institute of History, which brought together scholars from France, Italy, West Germany, and elsewhere.¹¹¹

Thompson's first love was the English literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The first time I saw him, with the Balliol student history society in 1969, he talked about Coleridge and

Wordsworth in “The Apostacy of the Poets”—having left on the train (or perhaps a plane) the talk on William Blake that he meant to give. He was the very polar opposite of a dry-as-dust archive-grubber or a shriveled policer of knowledge, yet his erudition stretched into arcane aspects of social and cultural history and recondite corners of the archive that were only captured for dissertations and monographs years later. He was extraordinarily charismatic. I remember him lecturing on “rough music” in the assembly hall of the Brighton Cooperative Society in 1971, filling the stage with his intellectual fire and largeness of presence, prowling occasionally away from the rostrum, passing a hand through a shock of hair, every gesture holding the crowd. A storyteller of brilliance, he passed effortlessly from poetics to analysis and back. He released phrases like lightning shafts and thunderbolts, calling up Jerusalem with the sheer compelling exuberance of his physical and moral eloquence. Thompson’s intellectual impact was inseparable from this kind of magnetism and restlessness.¹¹²

How would I distill Edward Thompson’s importance in the late 1960s and early 1970s for my personal sense of the generational breakthrough to social history then occurring? As I already mentioned in chapter 1, I first read *The Making of the English Working Class* in the winter of 1968–69, when my attention was very far from the official classroom and its curriculum. The desiccated and hollowed-out learning of the Oxford Modern History School was leaving me cynically unconvinced that becoming a historian was still a future I wanted to acquire. Discovering Thompson’s book allowed me to reconstruct my sense of history’s importance. It was so inspiring because it provided access to a potential counternarrative that was different from the story of national stability and successful consensus, of gradualist progression toward a naturalized present, that everything in the insidiously assimilative intellectual culture of postwar Britain invited me to accept. Thompson’s book showed me the instabilities in that account, which could be retold against the grain in some very different ways. There were a number of particular aspects to this.

First and foremost, Thompson’s was an oppositional history. It uncovered suppressed traditions of popular democracy that could be mobilized for the purposes of challenging the official version of the British past as the placid and gradualist romance of parliamentary evolution. His book also unearthed the existence of a revolutionary tradition. Forged in the radical democracy of the Jacobin movements of the

1790s, then driven underground by repression, this continuity sustained itself as an “illegal tradition,” conjoined with the emergent labor militancies of the new industrializing economy, and resurfaced in the radicalisms of the 1810s. It showed that British society and its institutions had only ever been secured from popular struggles against injustice, violence, and exploitation. In so doing, it built on the achievement of Thompson’s fellow Marxist Christopher Hill, who, during these same years, successfully redefined the seventeenth-century civil war as the English Revolution. For a young historian like myself, raised on the patriotic guff and John Bullism of Arthur Bryant’s histories of Britain during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, this insistence on the generative necessity of societal conflict for the realizing of progress was emancipating. Democratic goods, it seemed clear, came only as a result of collective action, mass politics, and insurrectionary resistance against a coercive, corrupt, and narrowly based political system.

Second, in a related effort, Thompson also reclaimed certain national cultural traditions for the Left—most notably, the visionary writings of William Blake and the major poets of the 1790s and early 1800s, together with the romantic critique of industrialism and other utopian moments of cultural criticism. Over the longer course of the nineteenth century, this critical countertradition also included the ideas of William Morris, to which Thompson had devoted an earlier enormous book. His work here converged with that of a fellow standard-bearer of the New Left, Raymond Williams, whose own comparable works, the hugely influential *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution*, had just been published. In those books, Williams’s “primary motivation in writing” had been “oppositional.” His goal was “to counter the appropriation of a long line of thinking about culture to what were by now decisively reactionary positions.” Williams explained:

There was a question for me whether I should write a critique of that ideology in a wholly negative way, which at one time I considered, or whether the right course was not to try to recover the true complexity of the tradition it had confiscated—so that the appropriation could be seen for what it was. In the end I settled for the second strategy. For it allowed me to refute the increasing contemporary use of the concept of culture against

democracy, socialism, the working class, or popular education, in terms of the tradition itself. The selective version of culture could be historically controverted by the writings of the thinkers who contributed to the formation and discussion of the idea.¹¹³

Third, Thompson opened up the ambiguities and complexities of cultural history.¹¹⁴ *The Making* passionately pursued the ways in which large-scale experience—in this case, the doubled consequences of capitalist exploitation and political repression between the 1790s and 1820s—became handled by ordinary people in cultural ways, focusing, in particular, on the political beliefs and popular traditions available to them in everyday life. For its time, this enterprise was extremely daring. In the early 1960s, outside some discussions beginning around *Past and Present*, there was virtually no conversation between historians and anthropologists. Thompson's attention to ordinary values, ritual practices, and the symbolic dimensions of everyday life suggested a form of historical ethnography soon to be realized more richly in his writings on time and work discipline, "rough music," and the moral economy. Thompson later reflected that in focusing on such subjects as "paternalism, riot, enclosure, and common right, and on several popular ritual forms," he was seeking to understand the "non-economic sanctions and the invisible rules that govern behavior quite as powerfully as military force, the terror of the gallows, or economic domination."¹¹⁵ More broadly, Thompson's work foregrounded the legitimacy of popular culture, which dominant historiographies had always refused to acknowledge and which the Left had also been surprisingly reluctant to see. Thompson's influence fed powerfully into the prehistories of cultural studies.¹¹⁶

Fourth, an important part of Thompson's foregrounding of culture was a kind of populism, a politics of empathy, borne by an intense and vehement valuing of the lives and histories of ordinary people. Identifying with the people in such a manner presupposed a readiness for entering their mental worlds, for getting inside past cultures, for suspending one's own context-bound assumptions. Thompson's discussions in *The Making* and, even more, in the eighteenth-century works often began from the close analysis of specific cases as symbolic moments, which he approached as the "crystallized forms of more general features of a social formation."¹¹⁷ This was classically true of his essay "Rough Music," of the readings of anonymous threatening

letters in *Albion's Fatal Tree*, and of his article "Moral Economy." Another example was the analysis of millenarianism in *The Making*. Retrieving the meanings behind such arcane and exotic appearances required reconstructing their hidden rationality, and in the staid and stultified climate of British historical studies in the earlier 1960s, this had the capacity for taking one by surprise, for defamiliarizing one's own assumptions and making them strange. Hearing Thompson do this in his lecture on "rough music" was utterly invigorating. Very few others were doing such work.¹¹⁸

Fifth, Thompson refused the "base and superstructure" model. His thinking here paralleled that of Raymond Williams. Where Williams spoke of "specific and indissoluble real processes" through which the economic and the cultural were always imbricated together, Thompson saw class as simultaneously "an 'economic' and . . . a 'cultural' formation," in which the one could never receive "theoretical priority" over the other.¹¹⁹ For both men, "the cultural" worked directly inside the economic realm of production and market transactions. So far from being "natural" or unfolding accordingly to its own discrete logic, economic rationality of a capitalist kind needed to be historically constructed. It presumed the destruction of an earlier set of relations grounded in the customary practices of the moral economy. Thompson proposed the concept of a "plebeian culture" to capture this emplacement of popular culture "within its proper material abode":

plebeian culture becomes a more concrete and usable concept, no longer situated in the thin air of "meanings, attitudes and values," but located within a particular equilibrium of social relations, a working environment of exploitation and resistance to exploitation, of relations of power which are masked by rituals of paternalism and deference.¹²⁰

Sixth, Thompson's *The Making* belongs in direct lineage with the interest of the Communist Party Historians' Group in the history of capitalist industrialization and the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Beginning life in the later 1950s, as the putative first chapter of a general textbook on the history of the British labor movement, *The Making* picked up the threads of two unrealized projects of popularization initiated by the Historians' Group ten years before: a Marxist history of the British labor movement and a general history of British capitalism.¹²¹ In this sense, its companion texts were Hill's and

Hobsbawm's volumes in the Pelican Economic History of Britain series, Hobsbawm's essays in *Labouring Men*, Saville's *Rural Depopulation*, and so forth. Thompson's angry and broad-gauged critique of orthodox economic histories of the Industrial Revolution particularly highlighted affinities of this kind. It leveled a double challenge to those conventional accounts. It decisively problematized the simplistic category of "traditional" or "preindustrial" society through which the transition to the modern world was then conventionally thought; and it was the first general social history of capitalist industrialization "from below"—that is, from the standpoint of its victims.

Finally, by pioneering research on popular protest, customary culture, and the transformations wrought by industrialization, Thompson opened out the understanding of politics. His studies of the new popular-democratic radicalisms generated between the 1790s and 1830s, followed by his patient reconstruction of the plebeian culture of the eighteenth century (in all its turbulent self-assertiveness), marked out a space in which "politics" could be found in all sorts of disconcertingly unexpected ways. *The Making* is full of such rereadings, finding the expression of collective values about the nature of the good society in a variety of practices and manifestations that the "enormous condescension" of conventional political historians had rarely admitted into their stories—from the desperately improvised "rituals of mutuality" on which community depended to the mass outbreaks of millenarianism and the direct action of General Ludd. In that sense, *The Making* belongs with two other key texts of the late 1950s and early 1960s that defined new ways of looking at popular politics, Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels* and George Rudé's *The Crowd in History*.

This is where Thompson's work as a historian connects most directly to the broader character of the period I'm trying to describe. His achievement in this particular respect was inseparably linked both to the cultural insurgencies of the 1960s and to the distinctive rethinking of politics already initiated by the first New Left. The efflorescence of social history about to occur, which Thompson's writings did so much to inspire, presupposed a radically deinstitutionalized understanding of politics, in which the possible sources of a popular oppositional impulse were now sought away from the recognized arenas of parties, polite associations, and parliaments, in a wide variety of non-institutional settings. Among the latter, everything from street violence, rioting, types of criminality, and industrial sabotage to forms of

mental illness and the general flaunting of social rules came to be claimed for their dissentient political meanings, including even “apathy” and indifference to politics itself.¹²² This expanded conception of “the political,” which was about to be blown even further apart by feminist critiques of domesticity, sexuality, and personal life, became one of the most important enduring consequences of the upheavals of 1968. Thompson’s influence was a vital source of sustenance here as well.

Conclusion

What were the entailments of the “optimism” inscribed in this chapter’s title? In the first place, they included, simply and straightforwardly, the belief in knowledge. This meant the desire—impatient and headstrong, but also ethically impassioned—to make the world knowable through history. This was perhaps the latest version of an aspiration going back to the pioneering social science of the mid-nineteenth century and continuing through the founding disciplinary consolidations of the early twentieth century, some of them (as in the pre-histories of *Annales*) explicitly linked to the collaboration of a few innovative historians. The same ambition informed the strongest initiatives toward a social history in the 1950s and 1960s, which I’ve tied to the convergent efforts of three distinct tendencies—those of the British Marxist historians, the *Annales* school in France, and Charles Tilly and some other Anglo-American sociologists. In the second place, these intellectual developments conjoined with a series of political departures. The radical politics of the sixties were inseparable from the historiographical story. The breakthrough to social history was unimaginable without the sense of political possibility beckoning during the later 1960s, the excitement of a new political world beginning to open up. For me, at least, thinking these things together was an essential part of the time. Good history meant good politics, just as bad politics produced bad history.

All of this added up to a particular sensibility, which was also profoundly the sensibility of 1968. One of the most important things about Thompson was that he was a leading member of a left-wing intellectual generation in Britain who had not sold out but—especially in Thompson’s case—continued to live truthfully within an ethics of

commitment that seemed worth trying to emulate. Despite his incorrigible grandiosity and occasional bad behavior, Edward Thompson was a beacon of intellectual fortitude. He was a brilliant historian. He held a place for a certain kind of eloquent, troublemaking, disobedient, and creative disrespect for the rules and decorums that the hierarchies of power and prestige require us to perform. As a generation of young historians arguing for a new way of practicing our discipline, we were uniquely lucky to have had him.