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# THE CONCEPT OF “EXPERIENCE” AND THE MAKING OF THE ENGLISH WORKING CLASS, 1924–1963\*

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*Despite intense scholarly interest in the “Anglo-Marxism” that rose to prominence in Britain from the mid-1950s, its intellectual lineaments and lineages have yet to be fully accounted for. This is particularly the case with the concept of “experience,” which was a central category in the work of two of the most influential figures of the early “New Left” in Britain: Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson. This essay traces a conceptual history of “experience” from its emergence in Cambridge literary criticism during the 1920s and 1930s, and in the quasi-Marxist literary culture of the 1930s, to the confluence of these two currents in the work of Williams and Thompson. Reassessing the nature of each thinker’s engagement with Leavisite literary and cultural criticism, and of Thompson’s attempted reformulation of Marxism, it argues that recovering their widely differing usages of “experience” illuminates their distinctive conceptions of “culture” as a site of political action.*

“Experience” is one of the concepts most closely associated with the “Anglo-Marxism” that flourished in Britain from the late 1950s, yet it has remained as opaque to historians as it appeared to a subsequent generation of Marxist intellectuals.<sup>1</sup> As Martin Jay recounts in his survey of the concept in modern American and European thought, “experience” was a fundamental category for the early “New Left” in Britain—most prominently in the influential works of Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson, for whom in different ways it denoted a

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<sup>1</sup> The designation “Anglo-Marxist” follows Gareth Stedman Jones, “Anglo-Marxism, Neo-Marxism and the Discursive Approach to History”, in Alf Lüdtke, ed., *Was bleibt von marxistischen Perspektiven in der Geschichtsforschung?* (Göttingen, 1997), 149–209, esp. 156–61.

pristine, unmediated reality to which imagination or consciousness responded.<sup>2</sup> The subsequent turn towards “Western Marxism” among their successors on the New Left helped to undermine this usage of “experience” as the basis of a literary-humanist socialism. Terry Eagleton’s critique of Williams’s *Culture and Society* in 1976 emphasized the inescapable ideological content of “experience”, in contrast to Williams’s assumption of its freedom from determination—a line of critique that was subsequently pursued by the editors of *New Left Review* in a series of interviews with Williams himself.<sup>3</sup> Thompson’s deployment of the category came under attack from Perry Anderson, who complained of “the oscillations and uncertainties of usage” of the term in *The Poverty of Theory*, Thompson’s polemical critique of Althusserian Marxism, and from practitioners of cultural studies advocating alternative intellectual and political strategies.<sup>4</sup> Under these assaults, both thinkers recanted aspects of their earlier usages, attempting to preserve the validity of the category in modified forms.<sup>5</sup> Subsequent developments in historical practice further problematized aspects of Thompson’s usage, in particular by questioning the relation of political languages to supposedly prior, determinative realities of the kind he denoted by “experience”, and by drawing attention to modes of subjectivity that were excluded from the category in *The Making of the English Working Class*.<sup>6</sup>

Historical interest in the role of “experience” in Anglo-Marxism has maintained this focus upon its limitations, particularly in studies of Thompson’s influential work on class formation. One historian complains that “Thompson’s claims about experience as a theoretical category are so incoherent that one is tempted to discard the term entirely”, whilst a more recent critique of the concept sees it as “marred by both political ineffectiveness and semantic ambiguity”.<sup>7</sup> Studies that eschew this critical focus upon the lacunae and ambiguities of “experience”, conversely, have overlooked much of its conceptual

<sup>2</sup> Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2005), chap. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Terry Eagleton, “Raymond Williams: An Appraisal”, *New Left Review*, 95 (1976); Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London, 1979), 120–21. These debates are recounted by Jay in *Songs of Experience*, 199–211, to which I am indebted.

<sup>4</sup> Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism* (London, 1980), 26; Raphael Samuel, ed., *People’s History and Socialist Theory* (London, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> Williams, *Politics and Letters*, 120–21; E. P. Thompson, “The Politics of Theory”, in Samuel, *People’s History*, 396–408.

<sup>6</sup> See, in particular, Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class* (Cambridge, 1983), 16–22 and chap. 3; Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience”, *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (1991), 773–97, at 784–6.

<sup>7</sup> William H. Sewell Jr, “How Classes Are Made: Critical Reflections on E. P. Thompson’s Theory of Working-class Formation”, in Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland, eds., *E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (Cambridge, 1990), 50–77, at 63; Craig Ireland, “The

content and assumed that its meaning is self-evident.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the significance of the term in the “Anglo-Marxism” of the late 1950s and early 1960s has yet to be properly accounted for. In attempting to make good this deficiency I shall trace the lineages of the concept, and its assimilation of broader developments in English intellectual culture, to reveal crucial aspects of its usage by both Williams and Thompson: in particular its role as a junction between Marxism and various forms of anti-idealist literary criticism in each thinker’s work. I shall also challenge a latent assumption that “experience” retained a single, consistent meaning, which has distracted attention from its contestation and development over time. The distinctive usages of the concept developed by Williams and Thompson in the 1950s and early 1960s, and the broader differences in their theoretical orientations which it denoted, have received insufficient historical attention,<sup>9</sup> as have their subsequent convergence and Thompson’s later use of the category in a wholly distinct way in *The Poverty of Theory*. Indeed, this text is often treated as a theoretical exegesis of *The Making of the English Working Class*, eliding fifteen years of frenetic intellectual activity.<sup>10</sup>

The concept of “experience” had been central to successive critiques of idealist aesthetics in England, beginning with the application of social-science methodology to literary criticism by I. A. Richards in the mid-1920s. Richards’s formulation of the concept was adapted in the Leavises’ cultural criticism during the early 1930s, whilst an ostensibly more rigorously materialist usage appeared in the quasi-Marxist literary culture centring upon *Left Review* later in the decade. These were formative intellectual influences for Williams and Thompson, both of whom encountered the Leavises’ work as students either side of the Second World War and adapted the concerns developed in *Left Review* to their own cultural and historical thought. Tracing these lineages reveals the specific nature and purposes of the cultural politics they developed from the mid-1950s, which I shall argue were distinct and, in certain respects, opposed. For Williams, the concept of “experience” underwrote an expansion of the field of “culture”, the effect of which was to make the latter category all-encompassing, and thus to frustrate his attempt to establish a materialist basis for social and cultural criticism. Thompson’s usage

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Appeal to Experience and its Consequences: variations on a persistent Thompsonian theme”, *Cultural Critique*, 52 (2002), 86–107, at 105.

<sup>8</sup> Notably Dennis Dworkin’s account of its usage in the late 1950s and early 1960s, in *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham and London, 1997), 93–4. Dworkin addresses the complexities of the term only in Thompson’s later work at 233–4.

<sup>9</sup> Dworkin, Ireland and Jay both view Williams and Thompson as adopting broadly similar usages of the term: Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism*, 96; Ireland, “The Appeal to Experience”, 90; Jay, *Songs of Experience*, 196.

<sup>10</sup> Sewell, “How Classes Are Made”; Ireland, “The Appeal to Experience”.

of “experience” attempted to re-establish this materialism against both Williams’s culturalism and what Thompson saw as the “idealism” of Stalinist economic determinism. However, I argue that in crucial aspects of this analysis Thompson also relied upon a distinctively Leavisian concept of “experience”, the effect of which was to subvert his vision of historical agency and divorce working-class consciousness from the material basis he sought to restore to it in *The Making of the English Working Class*.

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“Experience” was the conceptual fulcrum of the “practical criticism” developed by I. A. Richards in the Cambridge school of English during the 1920s, in his attempt to place fashionable claims for the primacy of direct subjective apprehension within the systematizing framework of the social and psychological sciences.<sup>11</sup> In carrying out this operation, Richards claimed to be developing an alternative to the metaphysical paradigm which he believed aesthetics had occupied since Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*.<sup>12</sup> The proper concern of the critic, he declared, was not with the elucidation of qualities (such as “beauty”) which supposedly inhered in objects themselves, but rather with the “experiences” those objects evoked in the mind of their audience.<sup>13</sup> “Experience” in this sense was something that was both encoded in the work of art and immediately manifested in its audience; in both cases, it constituted some point of reference outside the work of art itself. Most importantly, Richards rejected the aestheticist belief that art constituted a discrete mode of “experience”,<sup>14</sup> and argued instead that the term denoted “any occurrence in the mind . . . equivalent to ‘mental state, or process’”.<sup>15</sup> The compass of aesthetics therefore extended to what he called “ordinary experiences”,<sup>16</sup> and the task of the critic was to discriminate between “the values of experiences and the reasons for regarding them as valuable, or not valuable”—a role which, rather than being confined to the arts, was potentially universal.<sup>17</sup>

Despite his rejection of aestheticism and embrace of “ordinary experience”, Richards’s claims for the role of literary criticism remained manifestly hierarchical. He did not actually conflate “ordinary” with artistic experiences,

<sup>11</sup> This intellectual fashion is discussed in Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford, 2006), 128–9.

<sup>12</sup> I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (London, 1924) (repr. 1925) chap. 2, esp. 11–12.

<sup>13</sup> Richards, *Principles*, 21–3.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 38 n., emphasis added.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

but treated them as discrete categories between which a connection was to be established. Furthermore, the arts remained paramount as they established the standard by which the value of all other types of "experience" would be determined. The immediate need for art to perform this role, in Richards's view, followed from the embattlement of cultural value by a growing population and an emergent commercial culture. The consequent divergence of popular taste and informed critical opinion had left "standards . . . much more in need of defence than they used to be"; and Richards darkly alluded to the "sinister potentialities" of new cultural forms—"the cinema and the loud speaker"—which, by evading the beneficent control of intellectual arbiters, curtailed the ability of art and criticism to fulfil their crucial function as a mechanism for regulating and structuring "experience".<sup>18</sup>

This combination of an inter-subjective conception of "experience" harnessed to a diagnosis of cultural decline was taken up by F. R. Leavis, whose early cultural criticism was elaborated within avowedly Ricardian categories. In the seminal essay *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* (1930), for example, Leavis's analysis proceeded directly from Richards's understanding of the arts as arbiters of "experience".<sup>19</sup> However, Leavis gradually developed a distinctive conception of "experience" and of the role of literature and criticism, which he began to elaborate in an essay in the first issue of *Scrutiny* exploring the lineaments of "The Literary Mind".<sup>20</sup> Here, Leavis established a normative sense of "experience" as the source of literary value: in its absence, "What we diagnose in expression, as inadequacy in the use of words, goes back to an inadequacy behind the words, an inadequacy of experience; a failure of something that should have pressed upon them and controlled them to sharp significance."<sup>21</sup> Experience, therefore, was a subjective condition that "should" stimulate felicity of linguistic expression, and cases in which such an effect was lacking indicated the derogation, or "failure", of this norm. In the same essay Leavis spoke of "experience" in terms of "a sustained, tense and living relation with the concrete",<sup>22</sup> and claimed that the remit of "the literary mind" extended beyond literature itself because so many were "incapable of particular experience at all" in this sense.<sup>23</sup> Their incapacity embodied a more general characteristic of "modern" societies, which Leavis explained in another early essay had suffered "a divorce from the relevant experience of the race" through their disregard of a literary tradition which ought to have supplied "the

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>19</sup> F. R. Leavis, *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* (Cambridge, 1930), 4.

<sup>20</sup> F. R. Leavis, "The Literary Mind", *Scrutiny*, 1/1 (May, 1932), 20–32.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 28.

consciousness of the age” and “a pervasive influence upon feeling, thought and standards of living” (standards which he characteristically insisted should extend beyond the customary economic usage of the latter phrase).<sup>24</sup>

The concept of “experience” that Leavis used in this sense was closely related to that of “life”, which was derived from the vitalist philosophy of Henri Bergson and from D. H. Lawrence’s popularization of continental *Lebensphilosophie*.<sup>25</sup> For Leavis, “experience” denoted the integrity of the subjective processes stimulated by literature that was specially attuned to its time, among those capable of its proper appreciation; “life” was the exalted moral condition to which this singular mental acuity would give rise. In *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932), Leavis criticized Romanticism for its failure to sustain these favoured conditions, claiming that it had offered instead merely a withdrawal or refuge from “the modern world”.<sup>26</sup> However, the innovations of T. S. Eliot constituted a breakthrough which again made it possible to write poetry “that shall be adequate to the ways of feeling, or modes of experience, of adult, sensitive moderns”,<sup>27</sup> and would thus enable the poet to resume his proper role of realizing the “potentialities of human experience” in a particular historical conjuncture.<sup>28</sup> By fulfilling this role the true poet became “more alive than other people, more alive in his own age”,<sup>29</sup> and could grant his readers access to “finer awareness” (or what two years previously Leavis had called “fine living”).<sup>30</sup> In Eliot’s case, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* was “poetry that expresses freely a modern sensibility, the ways of feeling, the modes of experience, of one fully alive in his own age,”<sup>31</sup> and which could therefore vouchsafe to its readers some measure of relief from the deficit of “relevant experience” which Leavis held to be characteristic of contemporary society at large.

<sup>24</sup> F. R. Leavis, “What’s Wrong with Criticism?”, *Scrutiny*, 1/2 (Sept. 1932), 132–46, at 134–5. On the account of modernity in the work of Leavis and other *Scrutiny* writers, see Christopher Hilliard, *English as Vocation: The Scrutiny Movement* (Oxford, 2012), chap. 2.

<sup>25</sup> The importance of “life” (and the problems of its definition) in Leavis’s thought is discussed in Guy Ortolano, *The Two Cultures Controversy: Science, Literature and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain* (Cambridge, 2009), 72–5. On the influence of Bergson on literary modernism in Britain, see Mary Ann Gillies, *Henri Bergson and British Modernism* (Montreal and Kingston, 1996). D. H. Lawrence’s most systematic exposition of “life” in this sense was attempted in *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922), in *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious and Fantasia of the Unconscious*, ed. Bruce Steele (Cambridge, 2004), 45–204.

<sup>26</sup> F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry: A Study of the Contemporary Situation* (London, 1932), chap. 1, “Poetry and the Modern World”.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 14; Leavis, *Mass Civilisation*, 4.

<sup>31</sup> Leavis, *New Bearings*, 76.

In the same year in which *New Bearings* appeared, some very different “modes of experience” were the subject of an extended study of popular literature by Leavis’s wife, Queenie. *Fiction and the Reading Public* had originated as a doctoral thesis supervised by Richards, and applied the principles of his literary criticism to the texts enjoyed by a reading public outside the “tiny minority” with which her husband was preoccupied.<sup>32</sup> For Queenie Leavis the titular reading public was actually a hierarchy of self-enclosed “reading publics”, corresponding to the “low-”, “middle-” and “high-brow” typology that was then prevalent in British cultural politics.<sup>33</sup> Her analysis of the problems raised by this stratification combined Richards’s understanding of poetry as an instrument of self-government with a quasi-vitalist conception of the ends that instrument was to serve in fostering genuine “experience” or “life”. In the more cohesive literary culture of the eighteenth century, she claimed, readers had been “sufficiently in command of wide first-hand experience to be independent of fiction . . . so that in their reading they did not ask to be turned away from life”.<sup>34</sup> This “command of wide first-hand experience” had been lost with the destruction of “the old culture of the English countryside” and its replacement by an industrial and suburban culture;<sup>35</sup> the degradation of “first-hand experience” therefore placed a premium upon its transmission by literature.<sup>36</sup> However, it was prevented from playing this corrective role by new cultural forms—the cinema, radio and popular newspapers and magazines—which instead encouraged a vicarious mode of cultural engagement that Leavis designated “substitute living”.<sup>37</sup>

Here “experience” was imparted with a moral significance as the guarantor of cultural authenticity: Leavis conceived it as the distinctive quality of a society in which a particular form of reflective, self-regulating subjectivity was possible, and which literature played a decisive role in sustaining. “The peculiar property of a good novel”, she declared, “is the series of shocks it gives to the reader’s preconceptions . . . it provides a configuration of special instances which serve as a test for our mental habits and show us the necessity for revising them.”<sup>38</sup> Following the loss of this kind of society during the nineteenth century, “experience” was a quality that survived only in (her favoured works of) literature;

<sup>32</sup> Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London, 1932).

<sup>33</sup> On the emergence and development of this typology, see Collini, *Absent Minds*, chap. 5, esp. 110–19; and John Baxendale, “Popular Fiction and the Critique of Mass Culture”, in Patrick Parrinder and Andrzej Gasiorek, eds., *The Oxford History of the Novel in English*, vol. 4, *The Reinvention of the British and Irish Novel 1880–1940* (Oxford, 2011), 559–70.

<sup>34</sup> Leavis, *Fiction*, 206.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

thus she distinguished “the novel which is an aesthetic experience” from mere “popular fiction”, and stated approvingly that Forster’s *A Passage to India* evinced “the tone of the artist who has experienced the spiritual state he is concerned to communicate, not guessed at it”.<sup>39</sup> Experience was, variously, “wide”,<sup>40</sup> “first-hand”<sup>41</sup> and “controlled”,<sup>42</sup> characteristics it implicitly helped to foster in the mental apparatus of its readers. Conversely, the recession of “experience” as an attribute of society, and its absence from popular literature, prevented the majority of people from attaining to an independent subjectivity:

the bulk of the reading public . . . has no means of knowing what it really thinks and feels: between the mind which has been fed on films, magazines, newspapers, and bestsellers, and a first-hand judgment or prompting, comes the picture of how to think, feel, or behave, derived from these sources . . .<sup>43</sup>

Since the majority were thus incapable of autonomous cognition, Leavis was able to adopt an ascriptive mode of literary criticism whereby best-sellers were taken as evidence of the inner lives of their audience. Thus she claimed that certain recent popular novels “excite in the ordinary person an emotional activity for which there is no scope in his life”, citing as evidence of this activity only the “emotional vocabulary” of the texts themselves.<sup>44</sup> This conflation of literature and audience enabled her to cite a fictional character as “an invaluable reference” for the effect of best-sellers upon their readers: in *Ulysses*, Gerty MacDowell “has a prescribed attitude provided by memories of slightly similar situations in cheap fiction, she thinks in terms of clichés drawn from the same source, and is completely out of touch with reality”. Joyce’s fictional rendition of the subjectivity formed by popular culture, Leavis claimed, “is typical of the level at which the emotional life of the generality is now conducted”.<sup>45</sup> As we shall see, this ascriptive account of the relationship between text and reader would exert a powerful influence upon subsequent usages of “experience”.

Queenie Leavis’s conception of literature as a medium in which valid forms of past “experience” could be conserved as the basis for contemporary subjectivity articulated the concern with cultural “continuity” that we have seen was also central to her husband’s work. In the textbook *Culture and Environment* (1933), jointly authored by F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson,

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 235, 251.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 206, 246.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 245.



literature was presented as a repository for “the picked experience of ages”<sup>46</sup>—a quotation from George Sturt—and thus as the remedy for “substitute-living” and other baleful subjective conditions induced by contemporary culture, including “compensation”, “distraction”, and “day-dreaming or ‘fantasying’”.<sup>47</sup> As Queenie Leavis had done, the authors conceived “experience” as a favoured set of subjective functions that were cultivated by literature, correcting the influence of an “environment” from which it had been catastrophically evacuated. The authors warned, “If one’s work allows no fulfilment of the personality, then the fulfilment one finds in Substitute-Living will most likely be pitifully unrelated to the possible conditions of actual life.”<sup>48</sup> To guard against such an eventuality, the authors proclaimed, “The aim of education should be to give command of the art of living.”<sup>49</sup>

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Shortly after Leavis and Thompson published their influential textbook, a new literary movement emerged which attempted to turn “experience” to a more thoroughgoing cultural materialism. In February 1934 a group of writers met at the Conway Hall in London to form a British section of the crypto-communist International Union of Revolutionary Writers, or Writers’ International (WI).<sup>50</sup> The principal business of the meeting was the adoption of a manifesto codifying the objectives of the new organization, pre-eminent among which was to repair “the decadence of the past twenty years of English literature and the theatre” by restoring the connection between literary intellectuals and “the struggle of the working class for a new socialist society.”<sup>51</sup> These aims reflected both the abatement of the schismatic social politics of the Comintern’s “Third Period” (1928–34) and the literary precepts recently laid down by Andrei Zhdanov at the first Congress of Soviet Writers.<sup>52</sup> The diagnosis of “decadence” also implicitly rebuked literary modernism for compounding a disjuncture between literature

<sup>46</sup> F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness* (London, 1933), 81, 82.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 99–103.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 99–100.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>50</sup> The control of the WI by the Comintern is attested by Charles Hobday in *Edgell Rickword: A Poet at War* (Manchester, 1989), 157–8.

<sup>51</sup> “Writers’ International”, *Left Review*, 1/1 (Oct. 1934), 38.

<sup>52</sup> On the British Communist Party during the so-called “Third Period” of the Comintern, see Andrew Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920–43* (Manchester and New York, 2000), chaps. 6–8; and Matthew Worley, *Class against Class: The Communist Party in Britain Between the Wars* (London and New York, 2002). Zhdanov’s dictates were

and society of which it had, itself, complained: the second issue of the WI's house journal, *Viewpoint*, charged Leavis, Eliot and John Middleton Murry with an aestheticism that it held to be tantamount to fascism.<sup>53</sup> In the first issue of *Viewpoint's* more celebrated successor, *Left Review*, the WI manifesto appeared alongside an article by Edgell Rickword accusing "Lawrence, Eliot, Joyce, Huxley, etc." of having "felt the death in the veins of the society they were condemned to live in, and expressed it in their despair or in their desperate romantic escapes."<sup>54</sup>

As a corrective to this modernist tendency to idealist escapism, the journal sought to restore the connection between literature and the working class by aligning itself with the recent vogue for "proletarian literature", running a series of writing competitions in which entrants were to present their "experience" in accordance with guidelines prescribed by the judges.<sup>55</sup> Entrants to one competition were instructed to set "actuality sharply on paper so that the writer can make the reader share his experiences";<sup>56</sup> in a subsequent competition, the judge noted approvingly of one entry, "The reader . . . is made to experience the unnatural physical state in which the writer finds herself when she cannot see properly";<sup>57</sup> and prospective entrants were later told that "writing, as such, must convey the sensation of living as well as its content . . . Writing is the essence of experience".<sup>58</sup> This account of the reader as actually undergoing the "experience" of the competition entrant seemingly displaced onto worker-writers the role as arbiters of inter-subjective experience that Richards had assigned to the artist. Thus Ralph Wright, the literary editor of the *Daily Worker*, wrote in a review of American proletarian literature for *Left Review*, "That art consists in the expression or transmission of experience is now I imagine, as always, commonly agreed", and insisted, against critics of proletarian literature, that "you cannot dogmatize upon the value of an experience as the basis for a work of art, but can only judge it by results".<sup>59</sup> The "experience" and the results were not so easily separable even in *Left Review*, however, and the apparent empowerment of

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reported in H. G. Scott, ed., *Problems of Soviet Literature: Reports and Speeches at the First Soviet Writers' Conference* (London, 1935).

<sup>53</sup> "Things Speak for Themselves", *Viewpoint*, 1/2 (July–Sept. 1934), 29–30.

<sup>54</sup> Edgell Rickword, "Straws for the Wary: Antecedents to Fascism", *Left Review*, 1/1 (Oct. 1934), 19–25, at 19.

<sup>55</sup> The writing competitions are also examined in Christopher Hilliard, "Producers by Hand and by Brain: Working-Class Writers and Left-Wing Publishers in 1930s Britain", *Journal of Modern History*, 78/1 (2006), 37–64.

<sup>56</sup> "Socialist Competition", *Left Review*, 1/4 (Jan. 1935), 129–30, at 129.

<sup>57</sup> Amabel Williams-Ellis, "Report on the Competition: First Instalment", *Left Review*, 1/9 (June 1935), 378.

<sup>58</sup> "Competition: 'What Life Means to Me'", *Left*, 2/15 (Dec. 1936), 826–9, at 826.

<sup>59</sup> Ralph Wright, "The New Tradition", *Left Review*, 2/6 (Mar. 1936), 276–7, at 276.

working-class cultural production in the writing competitions subsisted within an intellectual regime whereby worker–writers would have their “experience” structured and regulated by literary intellectuals, more or less as Richards had envisaged.

In effect, therefore, *Left Review* combined a modernist insistence upon the cultural authority of intellectual arbiters with a conception of class as a mode of “experience”, the latter corresponding to Raphael Samuel’s characterization of communist social rhetoric as appealing to “class in a metaphorical rather than a literal sense”.<sup>60</sup> The extent to which this could supply a genuinely materialist underpinning for culture was at best doubtful: as Samuel recalled, class in this sense tended to function primarily as a moral category.<sup>61</sup> Elsewhere in the journal, Alick West’s review of Dmitri Mirsky’s *The Intelligentsia of Great Britain* conceived of classes not as occupationally or economically constituted social groups, but as poles in a moral struggle joined by intellectuals in a particular historical conjuncture. West referred to “the simultaneous working of the capitalist and proletarian forces in the intellectuals”, to “the two-sided struggle in their minds”;<sup>62</sup> there were, he claimed, “proletarian forces fighting in every intellectual to-day”.<sup>63</sup> Edgell Rickword claimed that writers could only be understood in the light of “their class affiliation . . . and this is naturally essential in our present-day, when so many writers feel the division in themselves which operates in society”.<sup>64</sup> Likewise, when *Left Review* drew attention in October 1936 to Gollancz’s competition for “the best genuinely Proletarian novel by a British writer”, it was wholly in accord with the journal’s socio-literary principles, and with its concept of “experience”, that to be “genuinely Proletarian” was a quality demanded of the novel rather than of the writer.<sup>65</sup>

The writing competitions gradually assumed less prominence in *Left Review* as Rickword and his successor as editor, Randall Swingler, grew dissatisfied with the low standard of submissions.<sup>66</sup> They were abandoned in 1937 amid the journal’s adjustment to a more stringent Comintern policy following the first two Moscow Trials, and the articulation of proletarian “experience” was instead devolved upon the intellectual or artist. The lineaments of this shift were already visible in 1935 in the manifesto issued by the International Association of Writers for the

<sup>60</sup> Raphael Samuel, *The Lost World of British Communism* (London and New York, 2006), 171.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>62</sup> Alick West, “Mirsky’s One-Sided Picture”, *Left Review*, 1/8 (May 1935), 324–8, at 326.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

<sup>64</sup> Edgell Rickword, “Book Reviews”, *Left Review*, 2/1 (Oct. 1935), 41–4, at 44.

<sup>65</sup> “Working-Class Writing”, *Left Review*, 2/13 (Oct. 1936), 667.

<sup>66</sup> Hilliard, “Producers by Hand”; Hobday, *Edgell Rickword*, 169, 187.

Defence of Culture, into which the WI was incorporated:<sup>67</sup> whereas the earlier organization had extended a particular welcome to members of the working class seeking literary self-expression,<sup>68</sup> the new Congress addressed itself only to “writers” and assumed responsibility for promoting “works of distinction” or “the most eminent productions of contemporary literature”.<sup>69</sup> Swingler later explained the special importance of the writer in the first issue of *Left Review*’s successor journal, *Poetry and the People*:

The poet, like any manufacturer, is concerned with turning raw material into valuable social commodities. The raw material in his case is his own experience and the valuable product is the finished poem . . . the poet or anyone else is completely dependent upon his social situation for his experience. And so the importance and quality of that experience will depend upon the kind of social force in which he is implicated . . . He can only ally himself with the class which holds the future development of humanity in its hands.<sup>70</sup>

To exemplify the poet’s role as a medium for the most pertinent contemporary experience, communist literary theory had turned to historical studies situating literature within broader economic and social processes. Appraisals of Tennyson, Blake, Dickens and Shakespeare along these lines had appeared in *Left Review*,<sup>71</sup> and in 1940 Rickword contributed an essay on Milton to Christopher Hill’s symposium marking the tercentenary of the calling of the Long Parliament, casting Milton as the archetype of the intellectual *engagé* whose contemporary re-emergence was now a central concern of communist cultural theory.<sup>72</sup>

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Rickword’s study was one of the reference points for an essay on “Experience and the Creative Process” that was written later in 1940 by a Cambridge undergraduate named Raymond Williams. The essay sought to re-establish the grounds for a “materialist criticism of literature, which”, its young author

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<sup>67</sup> Hobday, *Edgell Rickword*, 160.

<sup>68</sup> “Writers’ International”, 38.

<sup>69</sup> “The International Association”, *Left Review*, 1/11 (Aug. 1935), 462–3.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Andy Croft, *Comrade Heart: A life of Randall Swingler* (Manchester and New York, 2003) 78.

<sup>71</sup> Douglas Garman, “Tennyson & His Age”, *Left Review*, 2/11 (Aug. 1936), 570–79; Randall Swingler, “The Imputation of Madness: A Study of William Blake & Literary Tradition”, *Left Review*, 3/1 (Feb. 1937), 21–8; T. A. Jackson, “Dickens the Radical”, *Left Review*, 3/2 (March 1937), 88–95; Jack Lindsay, “William Shakespeare”, *Left Review*, 3/6 (July 1937), 333–9.

<sup>72</sup> Edgell Rickword, “Milton: The Revolutionary Intellectual”, in C. Hill, ed., *The English Revolution 1640: Three Essays* (London, 1940), 101–32.

noted, "seems to offer the best hope of a general literary understanding".<sup>73</sup> Previous formulations of such an approach had "made enough mistakes to discredit entirely any movement with less intrinsic merit"; chief among these was the adoption of a biographical frame, as in Rickword's analysis of Milton and a study by Malcolm Cowley on Wordsworth, both of which failed to situate their subjects "in a real world of economic forces".<sup>74</sup> Those forces, Williams claimed, "are finally decisive" for understanding the poet's relation to his society (a judgement which perhaps reflects Williams's membership of the Communist Party at this time).<sup>75</sup> Paying proper attention to economics, as well as to psychology, linguistics and sociology, would enable the critic to develop "an adequate explanation of the creative process that lies between experience and expression."<sup>76</sup> "Experience" in this sense was a pre-linguistic field which comprised *all* the factors shaping cultural production in a given conjuncture (hence the highly synoptic, interdisciplinary approach to literary criticism for which Williams called). In this respect his formulation of cultural materialism extended beyond previous critiques of idealist aesthetics: the conflation of artistic with "ordinary experiences" that Richards had resisted was implicitly advocated by Williams, who also divested "experience" of the transhistorical normative content which the Leavises had imparted to it, and drew its parameters more widely than the quasi-modernist communism of *Left Review* had been willing to do.

According to his biographer, Williams "remained unaware" of Leavis at the time he wrote this essay,<sup>77</sup> and the contrast between their respective usages of "experience" therefore remained implicit. They were brought into the open following Williams's return to Cambridge after the Second World War, when he encountered Leavis by reading *Scrutiny* and befriending two undergraduates who were taught by him.<sup>78</sup> One of the two occasions at which Williams and Leavis coincided during this period was at a seminar in which L. C. Knights claimed that the term "neighbour" no longer held the meaning with which it had been invested in its Elizabethan usage.<sup>79</sup> Williams's denial of this, citing his own upbringing on the Welsh borders, was derided by his Leavisite friend Wolf Mankowitz as

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<sup>73</sup> University of Swansea, Papers of Raymond Williams, WWE/2/1/2/8, "Experience and the Creative Process".

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*; Dai Smith, *Raymond Williams: A Warrior's Tale* (Cardigan, 2008), 88.

<sup>76</sup> Williams, "Experience and the Creative Process".

<sup>77</sup> Smith, *Raymond Williams*, 115.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 218–19.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

“sentimental”, a judgement to which Leavis himself apparently indicated assent.<sup>80</sup> Williams’s use of personal reminiscence as an exegetical instrument was irrelevant to Leavis’s understanding of the “experience” that was embodied in literature, which, first, was “picked”—that is, comprised only what had been invested with value by critical arbiters—and, second, was “of the ages”—in other words Leavis’s declinism rendered *contemporary* “experience”, of the type Williams had invoked, by definition corrupt and therefore inadmissible. As his biographer points out, Williams subsequently attempted to illustrate the problems raised by Leavis’s concept of “experience” in a didactic short story entitled “A Fine Room to be Ill In” that was published in 1948, shortly after the incident in Cambridge.<sup>81</sup> The protagonist of this story, Mr Peters, is a teacher of literature and the “illness” from which he suffers is his morbid preoccupation with a Leavisian sense of “experience” at the expense of more immediate relationships. This is made clear in an exchange with his wife which begins with his complaints about—reprising the motif from Knights’s seminar in Cambridge—their neighbours:

“The point is,” he said to his wife, “that these people are really dead. Their daily actions are just like the routine visitations of a ghost . . . They just clank on regardless, up and down the crazy paving, hoping their tended vegetation will do their living for them.”

“Nonsense,” his wife answered. “They have their habits and their pleasures, just as you do. They’re just not your habits, that’s all.”

“They’ve got no contact with living experience, that’s the point,” said Mr. Peters.

“Oh, experience. That.”<sup>82</sup>

By these rather awkward means, Williams suggested that Leavis’s normative conception of “experience” was solipsistic and even intolerant (“They’re just not your habits, that’s all”), arguing instead for a much broader category that would include the quotidian concerns he had attempted to invoke in the seminar in Cambridge. The outline of the all-encompassing concept of “experience” which, ten years later, he would use to underpin the analysis of *Culture and Society*, can already be discerned in this early short story.

The work that would become *Culture and Society* originated around this time in a series of courses Williams designed for the Extra-mural Delegacy of Oxford University, perhaps beginning with a syllabus entitled “Literature and Society since 1800” which his biographer dates to 1947–8.<sup>83</sup> Despite his embrace of other

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>82</sup> Raymond Williams, “A Fine Room to be Ill In”, in Woodrow Wyatt, ed., *English Story, Eighth Series* (London, 1948), 63–78, at 76–7.

<sup>83</sup> Smith, *Raymond Williams*, 236–7.

aspects of Leavis’s pedagogical example,<sup>84</sup> Williams’s usage of “experience” in this document highlights his attempt to draw the parameters of that concept more widely:

The literature chosen for study . . . will be read as literature: as the record, that is, of detailed individual experience.

The social history will be studied as such, but perhaps with particular references to problems of community and relationships and similar complexes which radically affect individual experience.<sup>85</sup>

This syllabus indicates how, for Williams, the form of “experience” valorized by Leavis was limited by being accessible only through literature and excluding quotidian concerns such as “problems of community and relationships”. A development of this usage appeared in his essay “The Idea of Culture” (1953), which contained the first clear adumbration of the ideas that he was developing into *Culture and Society*. Here, Williams claimed to identify the major intellectual currents under whose sway “culture” supposedly became an abstraction over the course of the early and mid-nineteenth century, culminating in 1869 with Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*.<sup>86</sup> (By “abstract” Williams appears to have meant that culture ceased to denote a “process”—as in its original sense as a synonym for “cultivation”—and became a static, “achieved state”.<sup>87</sup>) For Williams, the emergence of this abstract conception of “culture” marked its divorce from the sphere of “experience” as he by now understood it, and in the fuller articulation of this thesis in *Culture and Society* it was the search for an idea of “culture” that would be materialist in this sense—that is, with its connection to quotidian “experience” restored—that formed the book’s focus. Thus, in the opening of his Conclusion, he stated that his objective was “to return [the meanings of “culture”] to immediate experience”.<sup>88</sup>

Prima facie, then, “experience” played a role in *Culture and Society* not dissimilar to that which Williams had developed for it over the previous eighteen years: that is, as an enlargement and unification of the pre-linguistic material sphere to which imagination responds. Discussing the Romantic poets, he urged

<sup>84</sup> Hilliard, *English as a Vocation*, 147–50, 153–5. Hilliard also notes the distinctions between the cultural politics of Leavis and other core *Scrutiny* writers, and those espoused by Williams, at 156–7.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Smith, *Raymond Williams*, 237.

<sup>86</sup> Raymond Williams, “The Idea of Culture”, *Essays in Criticism*, 3/3 (1953), 239–66, at 243–4.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 243. Whether Arnold had actually espoused such a view of culture is highly questionable: cf. Stefan Collini, *Matthew Arnold: A Critical Portrait* (Oxford, 1994; first published 1988), chap. 5, esp. 85.

<sup>88</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: Coleridge to Orwell* (London, 1958), 297.

that “these ideas that we call Romantic have to be understood in terms of the problems of experience with which they were advanced to deal.”<sup>89</sup> Similarly his critique of the social thought of John Stuart Mill relied upon a counterposition of “experience” to abstraction,<sup>90</sup> and in his assessment of T. E. Hulme’s essentialist view of human nature, “experience” was the bastion of empirically knowable materiality:

It is not that we may not speculate on this [“human nature”], but that if we accept it we are accepting something, which no man can ever experience as fact. We are then erecting a pseudo-category which prevents us from thinking adequately about culture at all, for to think about culture can only be to think about common experience.<sup>91</sup>

Accordingly, Williams declared, “Experience moves within an *actual* situation”, that the “acceptance of *actual* experience” represents a “commitment to a *real* situation from which by no effort of abstraction can we escape.”<sup>92</sup>

However, Williams’s usage of “experience” was ultimately paradoxical, in two principal respects. First, as we have seen, it was crucial to his use of it as a safeguard of materialism that it was radically non-exclusive and devoid of the normative content with which Leavis, in particular, had invested it; but at various points Williams was obliged to differentiate between valid and invalid “experience” on a basis that appears to be more or less arbitrary. His critique of Mill, for example, centred upon the latter’s ahistorical neglect of the “different orders of experience” from which ideas emerge in a particular conjuncture; yet later in the same passage, Williams himself adopts “our subsequent experience” as a *transhistorical* standard by which the value of Mill’s own thought may be assessed.<sup>93</sup> Similarly, in his celebrated discussion of the nature of communication as both transmission and response, Williams stated, “The minds of men are shaped by their whole experience, and the most skilful transmission of material which this experience does not confirm will fail to communicate.”<sup>94</sup> In other words, the “whole experience” of “men” is the safeguard of their autonomy towards the “transmissions” of large-scale communications media; but in order to operate in this way, it must *exclude* those transmissions and is thus seemingly not as “whole” as Williams wished to claim. More importantly, as Jay also observes,<sup>95</sup> in key passages of *Culture and Society* Williams simply conflated “experience” with “culture”, as in the critique of Hulme quoted above in which “to think

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., chap. 3, esp. 52.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 193 (emphasis added).

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 52, 65.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 313.

<sup>95</sup> Jay, *Songs of Experience*, 195.



about culture can only be to think about common experience”. His model of intellectual and cultural production was therefore based upon the interaction of two categories which are identical. “Experience” can no longer be recorded in “culture”, and “culture” cannot respond to “experience”; they are coterminous.

Nonetheless, Williams’s usage of “experience” resonated in the work of other thinkers who, unlike him, were self-consciously working within a Marxian framework—notably that of Stuart Hall, who was completing a D.Phil. on Henry James when he became one of the founding editors of *Universities and Left Review* in 1957. (The previous summer, Hall had read two chapters from the unpublished manuscript of *Culture and Society* whilst on holiday.<sup>96</sup>) Hall identified the distinctive challenge facing socialism in the late 1950s as the “withdrawal of culture from experience”, the same diagnosis from which Williams’s attempt “to return [the meanings of “culture”] to experience” had proceeded.<sup>97</sup> Hall subsequently explained the nature of this challenge in a controversial article analysing a “sense of classlessness” in contemporary Britain, in which the structural evolution of capitalism was held to be destroying the “whole way of life” of the traditional working class that Williams had described in *Culture and Society*.<sup>98</sup> This called for, among other things, a reconnection of socialist “theory” to working-class “experience”; but in Hall’s usage the latter term stood for a traditional, authentic mode of social being that was to sustain, and in turn be sustained by, political theory. “Unless the values of working class experience can find new forms and thrive in the new conditions of consumption and prosperity which we have been discussing”, Hall warned, “socialist ideas will eventually dry up and disappear”.<sup>99</sup> This sense of “experience” as a kind of classical working-class identity that was to be protected from the effects of a corrupting environment, for which Hall found support in Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy*,<sup>100</sup> can be seen as a Leavisian reformulation of the radically *anti*-Leavisian account of the working-class “way

<sup>96</sup> Smith, *Raymond Williams*, 399.

<sup>97</sup> Stuart Hall, “In the No Man’s Land”, *Universities and Left Review*, 3 (Winter 1958), 86–7, at 86. Hall offered a broadly similar analysis (with the same usage of “experience”) in the inaugural editorial of *New Left Review*: “Introducing NLR”, *New Left Review*, 1 (Jan.–Feb. 1960), 1–3.

<sup>98</sup> Stuart Hall, “A Sense of Classlessness”, *Universities and Left Review*, 5 (Autumn 1958), 26–32, at 29, 31.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>100</sup> See esp. *ibid.*, 26, where Hall explicitly cites the analysis in Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life, with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments* (London, 1957). On Hoggart’s debt to Leavisism see Stefan Collini, “Richard Hoggart: Literary Criticism and Cultural Decline in Twentieth-Century Britain”, in Sue Owen, ed., *Richard Hoggart and Cultural Studies* (Basingstoke, 2008); and Hilliard’s caveated assessment in *English as a Vocation*, 166–70.

of life” that Williams had developed in *Culture and Society* (indeed, Hall had quoted Leavis’s use of “experience” approvingly in a previous article).<sup>101</sup>

Hall’s analysis received a polemical rejoinder from E. P. Thompson, in an article which formulated the relationship between “experience” and class consciousness that would later underpin *The Making of the English Working Class*. Thompson had studied under a Leavisite English teacher at school before coming up to Cambridge to read both history and literature.<sup>102</sup> His early published work included pieces of literary criticism for the journal *Our Time*, edited by former luminaries of *Left Review*, in which he used the concept of “experience” in its conventional literary sense as the pre-linguistic referent embodied in poetry.<sup>103</sup> Rejecting Stuart Hall’s (and Hoggart’s) treatment of working-class “experience” as more or less inert, Thompson insisted that the making of class was an ongoing process in which “experience” was continually transmuted into consciousness:

What is at issue is the mind of the working-class: its consciousness of itself, its knowledge of its own potential strength . . . The resistance to the mass media comes not only from old strengths and traditions derived from the old working-class community; it is generated daily in the experience of working-people, and nourished by the active minority.<sup>104</sup>

Here, class formation required the unarticulated “experience” of the working class to be rendered lucid by a minority within it—in alliance, Thompson said, with “the intellectuals”.<sup>105</sup> This process corresponded closely to *Left Review*’s conception of class as a form of “experience” that had been encoded into literature under the superintendence of an intellectual cadre. Echoes of the Leavisism which Thompson had first encountered at school twenty years previously were also audible: his call for “intellectuals” to “bring to [the “workers”] hope, a sense of their own strength and *potential life*” evoked the vitalism of Leavis’s cultural criticism (although without the lapsarian temporal frame that Leavis himself, and Hall in his transposition of Leavisism, had adopted).<sup>106</sup>

Thompson’s critique of Hall exemplified the ideal of political activism that he had been attempting to develop since his departure from the Communist Party in 1956. In the immediate aftermath of that crisis, the theoretical gravamen

<sup>101</sup> Hall, “No Man’s Land”, 87.

<sup>102</sup> E. P. Thompson, *Making History: Writings on History and Culture* (New York, 1994), 254.

<sup>103</sup> E. P. Thompson, “Poetry’s Not So Easy”, *Our Time*, 6/11 (June 1947), 248–9; Thompson, “Comments on a People’s Culture”, *Our Time*, 7/2 (October 1947), 34–8; Thompson, “A New Poet”, *Our Time*, 8/6 (June 1949), 156–9.

<sup>104</sup> E. P. Thompson, “Commitment in Politics”, *Universities and Left Review*, 6 (Spring 1959), 50–55, at 54.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 44, 55.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 55 (emphasis added).

of Thompson’s critique of Stalinism had been that it was “idealist”:<sup>107</sup> its doctrine of economic determinism was founded upon “abstractions”, “scholastic formulations”, “deceptions” and “myths” that could not survive an encounter with “*real* men and women”.<sup>108</sup> Thompson’s political strategy centred upon facilitating that encounter, wherein the “experience” of the working class would provide an empirical grounding for the “ideas” of intellectuals and theoreticians. “The ideas of the New Left must engage with the great reserves of experience in industry”, he declared elsewhere; or, again, “The elaboration of a democratic revolutionary strategy . . . demands the exchange of ideas between specialists and those whose experience—in nationalised industry or in local government—enables them to see more clearly than the theorist the limits of the old system, the growing-points of the new.”<sup>109</sup> In other words, “experience” constituted the material foundation in Thompson’s template for political activism, much as it had been imagined in the tradition of Anglo-Marxism that had grown out of *Left Review*.

Thompson attempted to set these political prescriptions within a Marxian framework by treating “experience” as a determination of productive relations which preceded the emergence of fully articulated consciousness, whilst retaining the Leavisian sense of the category that he had invoked in his attack on Hall. (The latter allegiance was sometimes registered in his use of “life-experience” in place of the more conventional term.) This intellectual confluence was evident in an article in 1960 rejecting suggestions that the working class was being eroded by “affluence”.<sup>110</sup> The epigraph to this article—Ancient Pistol’s bathetic interrogative, “Under Which King, Besonian?”—had also been the title of a 1932 article by Leavis rejecting “the dogma of the priority of economic conditions” which he attributed to Marxist literary criticism, and arguing that the predominant challenge for cultural criticism was rather the preservation of a cultural tradition that had

<sup>107</sup> E. P. Thompson, “Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines”, *New Reasoner*, 1 (Summer 1957), 105–43, at 109, 135; Thompson, “Agency and Choice—1: A Reply to Criticism”, *New Reasoner*, 5 (Summer 1958), 89–106, at 96.

<sup>108</sup> E. P. Thompson, “Socialist Humanism”, 109 (emphasis added).

<sup>109</sup> E. P. Thompson, “A Pessay in Ephology”, *New Reasoner*, 10 (Autumn 1959), 1–8, at 6; “Revolution”, *New Left Review*, 3 (May–June 1960), 3–9, at 8.

<sup>110</sup> E. P. Thompson, “Revolution Again! Or Shut Your Ears and Run”, *New Left Review*, 1/6 (Nov.–Dec. 1960), 18–31. The quotation marks around “affluence” are Thompson’s own (23, 26, 29, 31); on the contemporary significance of this concept see Stuart Middleton, “‘Affluence’ and the Left in Britain, c.1958–1974”, *English Historical Review*, 124/536 (2014), 107–38.

become dissociated from “any economic, technical or social system”.<sup>111</sup> Under the same quotation, Thompson likewise rejected the “economic *reductionism*” that prevailed in contemporary debates over “affluence”, but distinguished this from “the Marxist concept of class”, which he claimed “is an *historical* concept, which bears in mind the interaction of objective and subjective determinants”.<sup>112</sup> This interaction, however, remained unmediated: “life-experience” was counted among the objective conditions determining class formation, and these were simply counterposed to the “subjective influences” (“political and cultural”) that enabled the self-conscious articulation of “common interest”:

For Marx, a class defined itself in historical terms, not because it was made up of people with common relationship [*sic*] to the means of production and a common life-experience, but because these people *became conscious of* their common interest, and developed appropriate forms of common organisation and action.<sup>113</sup>

This counterposition of “experience” to consciousness corresponds to the model of class formation adumbrated by Marx in *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847), with its distinction between the working class “in itself”, whose unity of interests against capital is consequent upon the development of production, and the class “for itself” which attains consciousness of those common interests and organizes itself in the “political struggle”.<sup>114</sup> Thompson returned to this counterposition throughout the essay, for instance in discussing the “adjustments of capitalist class consciousness to the experience of the war and of defeat in 1945”,<sup>115</sup> and in his depiction of an archetypal member of the working class at the turn of the 1960s:

in his life-experience there will be much which will impell [*sic*] him to question . . . the immorality of social life and the boredom of work, and the credentials of a society which offers him a lifetime of fifty-week years of labour in a confined environment for other people’s profit and tells him he has never “had it so good”.<sup>116</sup>

Here the self-forming process of questioning is distinct from an inherently unreflective “life-experience” which is antecedent to it. However, as the role

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<sup>111</sup> Thompson, “Revolution Again!”, 18; F. R. Leavis, “Under Which King, Bezonian?”, *Scrutiny*, 1/3 (Dec. 1932), 206, 210. The variance in spelling reflects the respective usages of Thompson and Leavis.

<sup>112</sup> Thompson, “Revolution Again!”, 23, 24 (emphasis in original).

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 24 (emphasis in original).

<sup>114</sup> Karl Marx, “The Poverty of Philosophy: Answer to the *Philosophy of Poverty* by M. Proudhon”, in *Karl Marx–Frederick Engels Collected Works*, vol. 6 (London, 1976), 105–212, at 211.

<sup>115</sup> Thompson, “Revolution Again!”, 27.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

assigned to "experience" in these passages indicates, Thompson's rebuttal of crude "economic *reductionism*" did not extend to a thoroughgoing re-formation of the conventional "Marxist concept of class", which we have seen he was claiming merely to re-establish. Instead, the "objective influences" which he denominated as "experience" remained the predominant determinant of class position, in relation to which "subjective" or "political and cultural" factors were secondary. As in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, the working class had to be constituted "in itself" by economic factors before it could become a class "for itself" in the political struggle against an opposing class. Accordingly, Thompson held that a decreasing espousal of working-class identity did not prevent people from "remain[ing] working people", and even asserted that "many working people are scarcely conscious of their class identity"—in other words, that this "identity" endured regardless of any imperfections of consciousness among those whom it encompassed.<sup>117</sup>

Thompson came to conceptualize this counterposition of "life-experience" to consciousness as the distinction between "experience" and "culture". As we have seen, the conflation of these two concepts had been a distinctive feature of *Culture and Society*, and it was directly criticized by Thompson in an extended critique of Williams's work in 1961. Thompson censured Williams for his avoidance of "any frontal encounter with historical materialism", and countered by citing the *Theses on Feuerbach*, the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, *The German Ideology* and *The Origin of the Family*, and by quoting *Capital*.<sup>118</sup> This disregard of Marx, according to Thompson, had resulted in the same error of "abstraction" which it had been Williams's purported aim to overcome.<sup>119</sup> In particular, he rejected Williams's all-encompassing notion of "culture", insisting,

Any theory of culture must include the concept of the dialectical interaction between culture and something that is *not* culture. We must suppose the raw material of life-experience to be at one pole, and all the infinitely complex human disciplines and systems . . . which "handle", transmit, or distort this raw material to be at the other.<sup>120</sup>

Once again, "experience" was used to denote the material basis of historical development, this time in contradistinction to Williams's thoroughgoing

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>118</sup> E. P. Thompson, "The Long Revolution", *New Left Review*, 9 (May–June 1961), 24–33, at 30–31.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 33 (emphasis in original).

culturalism: in a phrase that had been used by *Left Review* writers, it formed the unarticulated “raw material” of culture.<sup>121</sup>

Two years later, Thompson developed this usage of “experience” to underpin his model of class formation in *The Making of the English Working Class*. In the celebrated Preface to the book, his definition of class centred upon the twin categories of “experience” and “consciousness”: he explained, “By class I understand an historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness.”<sup>122</sup> The conception of “experience” as a form of “raw material” counterposed to fully articulated “consciousness” was now central to his definition of class as a historical relationship:

Class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.<sup>123</sup>

“Class”, therefore, emerges from the articulation of “experiences” (in a formulation which, as Joan Scott has observed, epitomizes Thompson’s universalization of a masculine account of class throughout the text).<sup>124</sup> As before, Thompson set this process within a conventional Marxist schema, in which “experience” denoted men’s presence within a given set of productive relations: an involuntary, pre-cultural sphere out of which “class consciousness” emerged. Thus, he explained, on the one hand, “The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born—or enter involuntarily.” On the other hand, “Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms”. Within this process, “experience” was not the sphere in which the “agency” of Thompson’s self-forming working class was exercised—he continued: “If the experience appears as determined, class-consciousness does not.”<sup>125</sup> In other words, “experience” was not used to gainsay the determining effects of productive relations, but was part of them: Thompson reproduced an orthodox Marxist account of class formation whilst insisting upon its capacity

<sup>121</sup> Cf. Swingler’s usage in *Poetry and the People*, above at n. 70. Entrants to one of the later writing competitions had similarly been informed, “Writing is the essence of experience; the product, not the raw material”—“Competition: ‘What Life Means to Me’”.

<sup>122</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), 9.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>124</sup> Joan W. Scott, “Women in *The Making of the English Working Class*”, in Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988), 68–90.

<sup>125</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 9.

to accommodate the “agency” of working people in a more or less unreformed state.<sup>126</sup>

Beyond the oft-quoted Preface, Thompson’s analysis was structured according to the distinction between “objective” and “subjective” influences upon class formation which he had emphasized three years earlier in *New Left Review*.<sup>127</sup> His analysis of “objective influences” in the central section of the book focused upon the development of productive techniques and the material strictures they imposed upon working people—“intensified exploitation, greater insecurity, and increasing human misery”—which Thompson discussed under the rubric of “experience, out of which the political and cultural expressions of working-class consciousness arose”.<sup>128</sup> Accordingly, in his account of the field labourers their “experience” encompassed the expropriation of land by Enclosure, a change in productive relations which was subsequently “fed into the urban working-class culture”.<sup>129</sup> Similarly, among the weavers, “the experiences of the years 1780–1830” were the merging of a variegated occupational formation “into a single group, whose status was greatly debased—that of the proletarian outworker”.<sup>130</sup> The term retained this sense throughout his account of “objective influences”, denoting the changing occupational “status” of working people in terms of their conditions and tenure of employment and their position within the productive process.

In this section of the work Thompson also combined this technical, Marxian coinage of “experience” with its established literary usage. In the latter sense, the term enabled him to open an affective field in the “Standard of Living” debate so that the “feelings” of contemporaries were brought under historical scrutiny,<sup>131</sup> circumventing the statistical empiricism of debates over wage indices (notably in chapter 10, the title of which explicitly juxtaposed “Standards and Experiences”). This aspect of Thompson’s analysis echoed F. R. Leavis’s rejection of purely economic valuations of the “standard of living”, and the account of the Industrial Revolution that Leavis had more recently offered in response to C. P. Snow’s “Two Cultures” lecture.<sup>132</sup> Thompson’s use of “experience” for this purpose could also be said to have drawn upon the theoretical apparatus of “social realism” developed by *Left Review*, establishing a point of access to the affective and intellectual worlds

<sup>126</sup> The orthodoxy of Thompson’s Marxism in this respect is also noted by Scott, “Women in *The Making*”, 69–70.

<sup>127</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 12.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>131</sup> See, e.g., *ibid.* 30, 116, 199, 319, 416.

<sup>132</sup> Leavis and Thompson, *Culture and Environment*, 57–63; Ortolano, *The Two Cultures Controversy*, chap. 4, esp. 150.

of an otherwise inscrutable working class. (Thompson's repeated claim to disclose a "reality" that eluded "the great empiricist" Sir John Clapham was likewise arguably homologous with *Left Review's* preference for realism over naturalism as the formal template for proletarian literature.)<sup>133</sup> Meanwhile, in its technical usage as a notation of changes in productive technology and relations, it enabled Thompson to undertake this restoration of subjectivity within the schema of class formation which, as we have seen, he had seemingly adopted from *The Poverty of Philosophy*, by simultaneously denoting his workers' presence in the pre-articulate realm of the class "in-itself" that had yet to achieve consciousness. This use of the concept to achieve a kind of affective insight within a conventional Marxist emphasis upon production was encapsulated in Thompson's statement that "[f]or most working people the crucial experience of the Industrial Revolution was felt in terms of changes in the nature and intensity of exploitation".<sup>134</sup>

Both elements of Thompson's analysis therefore conceived class consciousness in literary terms. The genesis of the working class was traced to its "foundation texts" (by Bunyan and Paine),<sup>135</sup> and Thompson himself adopted the role and tools of the literary critic in decoding the texts in which "the class experience" was inscribed, constructing exegetical stepping stones between extended quotations of contemporary testimony in the manner of Ricardian practical criticism. However, his identification of consciousness with literature was problematic inasmuch as it was thereby reserved to the articulate minority who developed "political and cultural expressions" of the formative "experience". The majority, who merely underwent those experiences (i.e. whose productive roles and relations were altered), remained a class "in itself" incapable of stepping over the threshold to become a class "for itself". The latter would therefore comprise only the minority which left literary artefacts, of various kinds, for the historian's interpretation, whilst the majority of the incipient working class was consigned to a sphere which Thompson designated "inarticulate" or "sub-political".<sup>136</sup> (The latter term, seemingly a euphemism for "sub-conscious", sometimes appeared with sanitizing quotation marks.<sup>137</sup>)

The "making" which Thompson traces is therefore primarily the process by which the "inarticulate" come to translate their "experience of the Industrial Revolution" into class consciousness, which his conceptual framework required should take the form of "political and cultural expressions". This remains undone at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when radicalism was merely "an

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<sup>133</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 214, 249, 213.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 31, 90.

<sup>136</sup> See, e.g., *ibid.* 59, 78, 94, 102, 181, 473, 605.

<sup>137</sup> E.g. *ibid.*, 59, 78.



articulate movement of protest, supported by widespread popular disaffection” (truly *popular* radicalism having been “made inarticulate by censorship and intimidation” during the Napoleonic wars).<sup>138</sup> During “the heroic age of popular Radicalism” (1815–19),<sup>139</sup> the minority and the majority draw closer, with the “generalised libertarian rhetoric” of Cobbett and Hunt accompanied by a “shift in the sub-political attitudes of the masses in the provinces”.<sup>140</sup> As a result, Thompson can permit himself the claim that “post-war Radicalism was *at times* less a movement of an organised minority than the response of the whole community.”<sup>141</sup> Here, the articulate rhetoricians are still remote from the “sub-political . . . masses”, but by claiming that they had come into closer alignment since the turn of the century, Thompson could impute a “popular” character to the radicalism of the late 1810s.

The masses finally emerge into articulacy—that is, into class consciousness—in the final chapter of the book, in which Thompson constitutes the working class as a Leavisian “reading public”.<sup>142</sup> In his account of “The Radical Culture” of the 1820s with which this chapter commences, Thompson emphasizes working-class practices of auto-didacticism and oral dissemination which take cultural production out of the hands of a minority and establish it as a collective faculty. As a result, articulacy is transformed into an attribute of an entire culture: Thompson speaks of “the articulate consciousness of the self-taught” and “the articulate culture of the working people”.<sup>143</sup> In such a culture, reading assumes an equivalence to writing as an activity by which “experience” was rendered into consciousness—a claim that was consonant with the Leavisian understanding of poetry as a medium in which the “experience” of a writer could be shared by the reader. (Thompson extended his account to popular song, theatre, and political prints, as a result of which even “the illiterate could also participate in this culture” and be brought within the compass of class consciousness—an extension which had been drawn by *Scrutiny* writers who saw in folk song an embodiment of “real, fresh experience” that might counteract the effects of mass culture.<sup>144</sup>) Thus Thompson declared that in the 1820s “the Radical and unstamped journalists were seizing the multiplying-machine [i.e. the printing

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 469, 451.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 603.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 604, 605.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 605–6 (emphasis added).

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 719, 727, 732.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 710, 740.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 737; Raymond O’Malley, “Folk-Songs in the English Room”, *Use of English*, 4/3 (1953), 169–73, at 169. See also David Holbrook, *English for Maturity: English in the Secondary School* (Cambridge, 1961), chap. 6.

press] on behalf of the working class; and in every part of the country the experiences of the previous quarter-century had prepared men's minds for what they could now read".<sup>145</sup>

As this statement indicates, however, the extension of consciousness to all participants in "the articulate culture of the working people" remained problematic for Thompson. If the Radical and unstamped journalists were acting "on behalf of the working class", that class would not be self-made, as he had claimed, but would delegate its historical agency to articulate representatives. In order to circumvent this theoretical impasse, Thompson adopted a distinctive procedure for interpreting the texts written by these articulate representatives, which reveals the purpose of his construction of the working class as a "reading public". As we have seen, Q. D. Leavis had adapted the Ricardian concept of "experience" to examine popular literature as though it disclosed not only the attitudes of its authors, but also the responses and underlying social being of its readers. Thompson, who cited Leavis's work in an earlier section of *The Making of the English Working Class*,<sup>146</sup> adopted her ascriptive mode of literary analysis in the final sections of the book so that the "experience" encoded in the writings of "the Radical and unstamped journalists" was attributed not to those writers themselves, but to the entire working-class-qua-"reading public". Thus Cobbett's *Political Register* was "a circulating medium which provided a common means of exchange between the experiences of men of widely differing attainments"—in other words, Cobbett himself as the author of the *Register* was merely a "medium" for the experience of his readers.<sup>147</sup> "Working-class experience" is conceived in a similar way as a quality embodied in John Wade's *Gorgon*,<sup>148</sup> and "the experience of the London trades" is held to be present in the political economy of Thomas Hodgskin, excerpts of which appeared in Gast's *Trades Newspaper*.<sup>149</sup> By adopting this Leavisian literary procedure, Thompson attempts to diminish the role of the articulate minority to that of mere proxies (or "mediums") for the transmission of "experience" that is not their own, and thus to validate his claim that the working class was "present at its own making": with its experience finally encoded into literature, it can be said to have attained class consciousness.

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<sup>145</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 733.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 746. See also 759: "When Cobbett considered the position of the artisan or the cotton-spinner, he extrapolated from the experience of the small masters who were being forced down into the working class."

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 769.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 778.

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By the time *The Making of the English Working Class* appeared, the accession of a younger group of New Left intellectuals led by Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn was already under way within the offices of *New Left Review*. This corporate and editorial transition soon gained an intellectual dimension, as the Gramscian account of English working-class history developed by Anderson and Nairn met with a caustic rejoinder from Thompson in which "experience" received a new inflection, to denote the distinctive paths of national development within which class formation took place.<sup>150</sup> Thompson and Williams subsequently attempted to reassert the concerns of an earlier "New Left" in the *May Day Manifesto* issued in 1967–8; the use of "experience" in the 1968 edition, edited solely by Williams, indicates that he had been brought closer to Thompson's analytical framework by his re-engagement with formal politics (accompanying, in Williams's recollection, a personal reconciliation between the two men after a period of estrangement).<sup>151</sup> Here, the concept was used to describe the material conditions faced by people in poverty or earning low wages,<sup>152</sup> and to denote an underlying pre-political condition the "fragmentation" of which was reflected in the proliferation of parties and campaign groups on the left.<sup>153</sup> Inasmuch as it was thus held to be distinct from politics, the scope of "experience" could be said to have receded from Williams's totalizing use of the category in *Culture and Society* ten years previously. There was even a suggestion, in his description of the ideal socialist party, that its leadership would articulate the "experience" of the members, somewhat in the manner of the "active minority" that had played such a pivotal role in Thompson's political and historical thought.<sup>154</sup>

Meanwhile, the prevailing interest in Althusserian structuralism further distanced Thompson from his successors on the New Left; his correspondence with Williams in the early 1970s includes an appeal to their "unanimity" on the relationship between "basis and superstructure" alongside complaints of their inability to establish a dialogue with "the young Marxists" and "Althusserians" [*sic*], who were attempting to develop a "systematized marxism".<sup>155</sup> Reflecting on their own work, Thompson told Williams,

<sup>150</sup> E. P. Thompson, "The Peculiarities of the English", in Ralph Miliband and John Saville, eds., *The Socialist Register 1965* (London, 1965), 311–62, at 312–13, 333, 359.

<sup>151</sup> Williams, *Politics and Letters*, 373.

<sup>152</sup> Raymond Williams, ed., *May Day Manifesto 1968* (Harmondsworth, 1968), 28–9.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 165–6, 182–3.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>155</sup> University of Swansea, Papers of Raymond Williams, WWE/2/1/16/356 (emphasis in original). This letter is dated only "29 May", but Thompson's references to a copy of *New Left Review*, 67 (May–June 1971), which had been left in his cottage in Wales, and to

I thought one of the more helpful things we were doing up to the early sixties was exactly breaking down that systematisation: accepting the (perhaps temporary) incoherence of an unsystematic collaboration of thought, out of which one had hoped more system might eventually come.<sup>156</sup>

His less collaborative engagement with the “Althusserians” in *The Poverty of Theory* brought a significant revision in his usage of “experience”. Having previously identified it with the “objective factors” shaping class formation, Thompson now assigned it a mediating role between social being and social consciousness, and even affected distaste at the description of it as “raw material” that he himself had employed fifteen years earlier.<sup>157</sup> As we saw at the beginning of this essay, when the dialogue for which Thompson hoped was subsequently joined by the editors of *New Left Review*, it proved difficult to establish much common ground; Thompson’s later attempt to clarify his usage of the term was accompanied by an almost rueful acknowledgement of its ambiguities.<sup>158</sup>

For the historian, the mere fact of those ambiguities should be of less interest than the plurality of meanings they comprise. As we have seen, the roles that Williams and Thompson respectively assigned to the concept of “experience” invoked differing aspects of its lineages in English cultural and political thought, in support of distinctive visions of social and cultural renewal. As Jay rightly observes, Leavisian cultural criticism was among the most important forebears of Anglo-Marxism in this respect (although his claim for the influence of Michael Oakeshott is less readily substantiated);<sup>159</sup> the quasi-Marxist theories of culture expounded in *Left Review* were similarly influential, and the theoretical contradictions in both Williams’s and Thompson’s work owe much to their attempts to reconcile the differing assumptions and sensibilities of this mixed intellectual heritage. Thus the political populism entertained by both thinkers contended with retained evaluative assumptions as to the significance of different types of “experience”; and, in their respective historical analyses, the attempt to resituate politics within the sphere of “culture” ultimately proved inimical to the materialism they both espoused. Williams, as we have seen, initially adopted “experience” as a non-hierarchical, historicist basis for a materialist theory of cultural production. However, his treatment of the category in *Culture and Society*

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the absence of a dialogue with the younger *New Left Review* group, indicate a date during the early 1970s.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Thompson, “Poverty of Theory”, esp. 197–201.

<sup>158</sup> E. P. Thompson, “The Politics of Theory”.

<sup>159</sup> Jay, *Songs of Experience*, 190–91. The influence of Oakeshott is suggested by a somewhat *post hoc* reference by Thompson in *The Poverty of Theory*, but there is little positive evidence for it in the work of either thinker.

made all “experience” sacrosanct and thus curtailed the scope of critique: his aversion to what he called “the dominative mood” left no standard by which the validity of contending forms of “experience” could be assessed.<sup>160</sup> Furthermore, his expansion of “experience” into a total category ultimately disengaged it from any material base, as Thompson observed, whilst obscuring the fundamental ideological content to which Eagleton later drew attention.

Thompson’s own use of “experience”, meanwhile, demonstrates the inherent evidential limitations that the attribution of “agency” to subaltern historical subjects encounters, enforcing a reliance upon an intercessor—in his case, the “minority” who transmitted the “experience” of the inarticulate to posterity. Consequently, his vision of a self-forming working class was dispelled as the primal “experience” found no historical existence outside its “political and cultural expressions”, and the distinction he had insisted Williams observe, “between culture and something that is *not* culture”, was discreetly elided in order that the working class could be constituted in the required manner. Thompson’s claim that the working class “was *present* at its own making”, rather than actually carrying it out, precisely encapsulates his account of its formation and the limits of his literary-historical methodology.<sup>161</sup> This effect of Thompson’s usage of “experience” also indicates the broader strategic cost of his polemical intellectual tactics (in respect of which his adoption of Leavisism could be said to have extended to matters of style as well as of substance.) As we have seen, he deployed “experience” against economism, culturalism and empiricism, with variations in meaning of greater or lesser subtlety; in the attempt to chart a course amid this assorted intellectual opposition, his greater objective of restoring the “agency” of the incipient working class was ultimately compromised.

These aspects of the work of Williams and Thompson become more clearly visible through the type of conceptual lens which “experience” offers to the historian. The general merits of this approach, particularly as the basis for a more sensitive account of the interactions between discursive and material processes, have recently drawn increased attention from historians.<sup>162</sup> They are especially pertinent to the category of “experience” which, as used by the thinkers examined here to denote something registered in, yet outside, the text, retains a special efficacy for historical inquiry in which a partial linguistic turn is executed within a traditional historical epistemology: combining, in a celebrated formulation,

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<sup>160</sup> Williams, *Culture and Society*, 317 and *passim*.

<sup>161</sup> Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, 9 (emphasis added).

<sup>162</sup> Jan-Werner Müller, “On Conceptual History”, in Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn, eds., *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* (New York, 2014), 74–93; and see Middleton, “‘Affluence’ and the Left”, 138.

“the autonomy of meaning and the irreducibility of experience”.<sup>163</sup> If such a combination is to be fruitful, Toews’s insistence upon the experiential origins of “the turn away from experience” must be accompanied by an acknowledgement of the manner in which the very category of “experience” itself is constructed and contested in political and historical debate, some aspects of which this essay has sought to illuminate.<sup>164</sup> The importance of this procedure has recently been underlined by the concept’s reappearance in studies of the British working class which, where they acknowledge critiques of its Anglo-Marxist usage, use them to extend rather than to curtail its theoretical compass.<sup>165</sup> A conceptual history of “experience” may therefore also supply the means by which its use in our own historical investigations can be evaluated, not least by drawing attention to the problems to which its previous deployments gave rise. In the case of Williams and Thompson, as we have seen, those problems went to the heart of their respective concerns, and a category once intended to establish a kind of cognitive identity between writer and reader ultimately had quite the opposite effect, serving instead to diminish understanding of their work among contemporary and historical audiences alike.

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<sup>163</sup> John E. Toews, “Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience”, *American Historical Review*, 92/4 (1987), 879–907.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 907.

<sup>165</sup> Ben Jones, *The Working Class in Mid Twentieth-Century England: Community, Identity and Social Memory* (Manchester, 2012), chap. 1, esp. 4–5; cf. the more uncomplicated usage of the category in Selina Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class, 1910–2010* (London, 2014).