Marxism has been in retreat – in intellectual and political circles – for more than a decade now. Its quality and status as a source of explanation and argument has come under sustained attack; and indeed its legitimacy as an element in the teaching of history and social science has been more frequently challenged – certainly in the school curriculum, and increasingly in the university one. All this, of course, represents a definite shift in the balance of intellectual forces from that evident only 15 to 20 years ago. Then Marxism was a self-confident intellectual current. Though almost always a minority element in history departments, it was then much more dominant in the social sciences; and in both intellectual fields, its leading scholars enjoyed a sufficiently strong general academic reputation as to warrant a presence in most leading debates. The work of the Marxist historians (from Christopher Hill and Eric Hobsbawm, through Edward Thompson and John Saville, to Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn) was widely recognised as rich and important; as, in social science, were the writings of Raymond Williams, Ralph Miliband, Nicos Poulantzas, Herbert Marcuse, Jurgen Habermas and so on. Not any more. These days less radical intellectual frameworks prevail. New icons hold the undergraduate imagination; and the writing off of Marxism is highly fashionable. Some of the non-Marxist counter-offensive is itself stimulating and radical. The debate within the feminist movement, the emergence of a set of green issues and concerns; all this is to be welcomed. Less attractive is the stridency of the newly revitalised Right, whose writings – at their most polemical – bring back to mind the intolerances of the McCarthyite past. It is with one of those intolerances that this chapter is primarily concerned.

First in the columns of The Salisbury Review, and then in a collection entitled Thinkers of the New Left, Roger Scruton wrote a series of damning essays on the work of a number of leading left wing intellectuals. In doing so, he formulated in the clearest of terms the general critique of left wing scholarship to which we are all now subject. He also raised a series of specific criticisms of the Marxist historians, to which again many of us are regularly exposed in our daily work as teachers and intellectuals. So a dialogue with Scruton has its value: both as an opportunity once more to defend the validity of a Marxist history, and also as a moment in which to reflect upon the limits, as well as upon the strengths, of the Marxism we would defend. The structure of this chapter reflects those twin values. It will first lay out the Scruton critique of Marxism, then engage in dialogue with it, and then draw from it lessons (not for Scruton but for Marxism).

The Scruton critique

In the opening and closing chapters of his 1985 collection, Thinkers of the New Left,2 Roger Scruton questioned the general value of a historiography deriving from what he termed the New Left, which he handled as a strand (and not the mainstream, as he observed, Thinkers, p. 6) of a broader Marxism. He then brought that general critique to bear on a bizarre collection of intellectuals – all labelled New Left – not just nonaligned Marxists such as Thompson, Williams and Anderson, but also orthodox Marxists, for example Althusser, liberals such as Galbraith and Dworkin, and a collection of the unclassifiable – Bairoch, Foucault, Laing, Wallerstein, Habermas, Sartre, and the long dead Gramsci and Lukacs. Here we will restrict ourselves to Scruton’s arguments on the New Left in general, and on the ‘marxist historians’ in particular.

The general critique

The Scruton critique was written from an explicitly right wing position: one variously described as British Conservative, ‘a politics of custom, compromise and settled indecision’ (Thinkers, p. 30) and as The New Right which, we were told, ‘believes in responsible rather than impersonal government; in the autonomy and personality of institutions; and in the rule of law’. It recognises a distinction between state and civil society, and believes that the second should arise, in general, from the unenforced interaction of freely contracting individuals; moderated by custom, tradition and a respect for authority and Law. Power, for the New Right, is an evil ‘only when abused’ (ibid., p. 203).

So here immediately, in one crystallisation, was a list of all the things which the New Left were not supposed to value sufficiently: responsible government (they were supposed to prefer the rule of the party); the role of institutions as buffers against state power (the New Left was supposed to treat the institutions of civil society as extensions of state power); and the importance of traditions and customary practices (the New Left was seen as pre-eminently concerned with change, equipped with too bleak a view of contemporary reality, and insensitive to the strengths of its existing practices). All this was taken to derive from the New Left’s supposedly simplistic view of power – its preoccupation with power as coercion,
and with the State as an agency of class domination. It was this naïveté which, according to Scruton at least, encouraged New Left thinkers to undervalue the importance (to individual freedom and social justice) of liberal political institutions and capitalist market forms.

So the basic criticism of the New Left which Scruton offered was that it lacked the insights of the New Right. More specifically however, the New Left stood condemned by him on four counts.

Firstly, according to Scruton, the New Left failed to recognise ‘the extreme complexity of political realities’ (ibid., p. 202); and in its willingness to simplify complex political tasks, demonstrated ‘a kind of moral impatience’ (ibid., p. 201) and an associated arrogance – an ‘assumption of a priori correctness’ (ibid., p. 210). For Scruton, the New Left intellectual was typically a Jacobin. He ‘believ[ed] that the world [was] deficient in wisdom and in justice’, and that the fault lay ‘not in human nature but in the established systems of power’ (ibid., p. 2).

Secondly, the imperviousness of New Left thinking to the complexity of reality, and to the necessary limits of human nature, meant – according to Scruton – that it was also closed to rational discussion. In Scruton’s view, ‘All of Marx’s theories have been essentially refuted’, and yet in the writings of the New Left, ‘the central Marxist claims recur constantly … neither refined nor qualified, but bluntly assumed as the incontrovertible premises of social analysis’. That, we were told, occurred because we were not dealing here with a ‘system of rationally held views’. Though Marxism claimed the status of science, it was ‘clear to any neutral observer that these beliefs have been placed beyond science, in a realm of absolute authority which [could] never be entered by the uninhibited’ (ibid., p. 5) – in the realm, that is, of ideology (ibid., p. 6), myth (ibid., p. 4), even fraud (ibid., p. 1). Scruton insisted that this failure to discuss with opponents, to open the mind to doubt and hesitation, was a rooted characteristic of the New Left’ (ibid., p. 207).

Thirdly such New Left arrogance and imperviousness was, moreover, entirely negative and destructive. Though New Left thinkers enjoyed the freedoms of western society, and were the products of its most affluent period, they used that freedom and affluence only to criticise the order within which they flourished, denouncing its virtues, ignoring its basically consensus nature and steadfastly refusing to specify in any detail the socialism with which it should be replaced. The Scruton ‘voice’ on this point was particularly scathing. ‘Despite this devotion to goals, the radical is extremely loath to tell us what he is aiming at. As soon as the question of “the new society” arises, he diverts our attention back to the actual world, so as to renew the energy of hatred’ (ibid., pp. 210–11): in this way ‘turning attention away from the difficult task of describing the socialist future to the easy holiday of destruction’ (ibid., p. 7).

Fourthly, Scruton assured the readers of The Salisbury Review that the quality of New Left scholarship and personnel was poor. Its writings in general were characterised by ‘shoddy rhetoric’ (ibid., p. 202) and by ‘turgid prose and sheer intellectual incompetence’ (ibid., p. 210). It had apparently been the unique achievement of New Left scholarship to make, ‘fury respectable and gobbledygook the mark of academic success’. Quantity and quality here were obviously in tension, since it had only been ‘with the hasty expansion of the universities and polytechnics, and the massive recruitment of teachers from this over-fished and under-nourished generation, [that] the status of the New Left was assured’ (ibid., p. 7).

These four characteristics of New Left thought and personnel had two general consequences for the character of New Left scholarship, according to Scruton. The failure of New Left intellectuals to recognise the necessary complexities of social reality predisposed them to grant too great a causal role to their central category – namely that of class. In Scruton’s view, Marxist scholarship was always ‘tempted to identify classes as agents, to whom actions and responsibilities [could] be ascribed and punishment allotted’ (ibid., p. 199). That in its turn put a ‘hidden agenda’ into left wing history (ibid., p. 4), obliging left wing historians to demonstrate that history was on the side of socialism. Defeats had to be explained away in that history only as setbacks on the road to a guaranteed future. New Left historians then produced history which was impervious to ‘disquieting facts’, to everything indeed ‘which [had] happened in recent decades’, a history which was only sustained to the degree that ‘less talented intellectuals [could] still appropriate the past, and re-shape it in accordance with the necessary doctrine’. In other words, and according to Scruton, left wing history was, in its essential structures, simply myth.

The deep deficiencies of New Left scholarship to which Scruton alerted the readers of The Salisbury Review then also predisposed left wing historians to excuse, or excuse away, excesses carried out in the name of their chosen historical project. In other words, left wing historiography suffered from double standards; tough on right-wing authoritarianism, soft on communism. For once classes were seen as historical agents, with purposes and collective moralities, the road was open (according to Scruton) to the expropriation of classes, and to ‘acts of retribution, expropriation and violence’. As he put it, ‘this pattern of thought leads as logically to the Gulag as the Nazi ideology of race led to Auschwitz’ (ibid., p. 199).

This was an important moment in the Scruton analysis of the New Left and its defects. Throughout his general critique, Scruton used the terms ‘New Left’, ‘Marxist’ and ‘socialist’ interchangeably, and took the east-
ern European state-socialist systems as unproblematic evidence of tendencies endemic to all forms of Marxist theory. In that way a rhythm of argumentation could be, and was, deployed; one that shifted repeatedly from theoretician to Soviet practice, and from theory now to practice at any point in the century. Yet such a rhythm could only slide over—it could not fully obscure—one particularly awkward point that might otherwise have struck at least the more perceptive of the readers of The Salisbury Review: namely that the vast majority of the New Left intellectuals under critique by Scruton were just as critical as he was of Stalinist totalitarianism. For Scruton to use the excesses of Stalinism as a critique of their intellectual positions, he had therefore to go one stage further—and assert that tyranny was a logical outcome of the application of their theoretical positions—whether they knew it or not. This is the key passage:

It is difficult to assess the practical consequences of political theories. Nevertheless—it is not unreasonable to suggest that the New Left, in attributing agency to that which does not possess it (to class and society) has connived at the removal of responsibility from that which does—from the state and the party... Nor should we dissociate the New Left from the attitude that communism has taken towards its opponents. The writings of Bahro, Gramsci, Lukacs and Althusser abundantly show that totalitarian thinking is implicit in the categories of social analysis that they employ. For such thinkers the opponent is never better than an opportunist. What he speaks is not reason but ideology... His claim to truth is discounted by the class interest which speaks through him... Whenever you encounter opposition, you encounter the class enemy, even if he is wearing some comforting disguise. This enemy is not to be argued with, he cannot utter truth; still less is he to be the object of a compromise. Only after his final elimination from the social order will the truth be generally perceived... The totalitarian structure of communist government is not an inevitable consequence of Marxist conceptions. Nevertheless... the inhuman politics of communism is the objective realisation of the Marxist vision of society, which sees true politics as no more than a mendacious covering placed over the realities of power.

(Thinkers, pp. 202, 205-6, 208, 209)

In arguing in that way, Scruton was well aware that he had 'lapse[d] from accepted standards of literary politeness' (ibid., p. 209). What he was less explicit about was that, having shut the door on a legitimate Marxist historiography in this way, he could then only approach historians operating within a Marxist tradition either as knaves or as fools. In fact he did both, as we will now see.
of a class that are here of greatest significance: language, religion, custom, association and traditions of political order — in short, all those forces that generate nations in the place of the contending individuals that would otherwise destroy them.

(Thinkers, pp. 12, 13–14)

So if the logic of Thompson’s analysis was so profoundly conservative, why did he not go the whole way, and break with the labour metaphysic? There is no epistemological/political rupture for Thompson, according to Scruton, because Thompson remained a sentimentalist about the working class and its potential, and he remained that — like all New Left thinkers — because his own self-definition, as part of a movement of human emancipation, required it. Scruton again:

Thompson’s sentimentalism of the proletariat is integral to his self-image. He sees himself as part of the great work of emancipation ...

In [the Open Letter ...] we witness the extent of the need which motivates Thompson’s writing, the need to believe in socialism, as the philosophy of the proletariat, and in the proletariat itself, as the innocent patient and heroic agent of modern history.

(Thinkers, pp. 14, 15)

Williams too — in Scruton’s eyes — was guilty of similar sentimentalism, though here without the protective wall of Edward Thompson’s willingness to confront uncomfortable facts. According to Scruton, Williams was able to sustain his argument that capitalism and consumerism were destroying community only ‘because of a supreme act of sentimentalisation, whereby he [hid] from the basic facts of life and history’ (ibid., pp. 59–60). He too subscribed to the ‘long-suffering, tender-hearted workers of E.P. Thompson, who need only the abolition of the capitalist in order to live together in spontaneous brotherhood, sharing the fruits of their labour’ (ibid., p. 60), but Williams lacked the Thompson rigour. His recent idiom was ‘self-referential, vague and sloganising’ (ibid., p. 62), ‘the jargon ... of a writer who [had] imprisoned his thought in language over which he exert[ed] no intellectual control’ (ibid., p. 65).

In other words, both men had come to believe the facticity of their own categories. Both had swallowed the music of their own prose; both talked of labour movements without establishing them; both gave the proletariat a historical mission which was a figment of their own organising categories. This was what Scruton meant by sentimentality: ‘the active falsification of the world so as to enoble the feelings of the falsifier’, ‘the making of the working class in the image of the left-wing intellectual’ (ibid., p. 65). In his view, both Thompson and Williams were guilty of that, and ought to have their work rejected, as sentimental foolishness, because of it.

The Marxist historian as knave: Scruton on Christopher Hill and Perry Anderson

There was little glorification of a past proletariat in Perry Anderson’s work, or in that of Christopher Hill, so the Scruton critique had to shift. Hill’s sins were twofold. One was the sin of being rich and privileged, living in Oxford, and yet writing so disparagingly of the society that privileged him (and the class of which he was a part). This was a minor theme in the Scruton tirade against Hill’s work, though it obviously stung. How else are we to explain the fire in this passage, ‘thus, like the upper class radicals of the Fabian Society, they bent their energies to depriving future generations of the culture which they held in trusteeship and which they were determined should be enjoyed for the last time’ (ibid., p. 130). Hill’s bigger sin as a Marxist historian was that of distortion. He apparently ‘proceeded to invent the seventeenth century in accordance with socialist requirements’ (ibid., p. 129); particularly when writing about Milton:

No work of Hill’s is more blatant in its manipulation of facts than the recent study of Milton ... in which the defender of parliamentary government, constitution and free enterprise, is portrayed as a crypto-Leveller, an armchair radical, suffering, along with the proto-socialists of his day, defeat at the hands of a ruthless establishment.

(Thinkers, p. 142)

The main focus of Scruton’s attack on the dishonesty of Marxist historiography is to be found in his chapter on Perry Anderson. Here too Scruton was obliged to concede quality. Anderson’s work — particularly his Passages from Antiquity — was, ‘erudite and imaginative’ (ibid., pp. 131–2), ‘influential and impressive’ (ibid., p. 134). ‘The range of Anderson’s historical knowledge [was] extraordinary’ (ibid., p. 135). Passages ... was ‘a tour de force of condensed erudition and detail’ (ibid., p. 137). Scruton conceded that for much of the time Anderson wrote good history, and congratulated him for drawing so heavily on non-Marxist sources. It was simply that the good history Anderson wrote was ‘give or take a few marxist asides, ... bourgeois history’ (ibid., p. 137). Anderson was a good historian when he was not being Marxist. Anderson’s sin was then to cheat, and to do so in two distinct but related ways.

First, Anderson wrapped up his good history in loaded categories. He adopted ‘a marxist terminology pregnant with the desired interpretation’, which carried unannounced into the writing ‘a massive commitment to the marxian theory of history, including all that is contentious in it, such as the theory of exploitation and the distinction between superstructure and base’ (ibid., p. 135). What Anderson did, according to Scruton, was, ‘to rewrite bourgeois history in Marxese ... which [was]
characteristics/tasks, insisting on a direct and simple determination of superstructure by base, and on an unproblematic and inexorable movement to socialism, as defining of Marxism: and he had to, because it gave him his one critical judgmental edge. For then, whenever Marxist historians explored the complexities and contingencies in those relationships, by that very act they invalidated the organizing framework of Marxist scholarship, and in consequence retained their Marxist credentials only by being foolish or dishonest.

For Scruton, with his very narrow notion of what Marxist history involved, the very act of writing empirically sensitive history rendered Marxism discredited: so we who try to do it still can only be—in the end—some mixture of the fool and the knave: but are we?

The response to Scruton

The answer must be ‘no’. It is just not true that all left wing historians are closed to dialogue with other traditions. Edward Thompson and Perry Anderson were (and are) not, as Scruton conceded. In fact, Scruton managed to sustain his own general characterisation of Marxism only by labelling Thompson and Anderson as ‘bourgeois’ whenever they did use broad sources; and then citing their openness to alternative perspectives as evidence of their sentimental or dishonest retention of Marxist categories. He couldn’t have it both ways however. Either Marxist historians were to be dismissed because they were closed to alternative views, or they were to be congratulated for their openness and willingness to dialogue. Only Scruton’s unquestioned premise of the uncontroversial superiority of conservative scholarship enabled him to criticise Perry Anderson for being both open and a Marxist; but that premise of uncontented superiority was an example of the very closed, ideological form of thought that Scruton wanted to lay at the door of Marxism alone. So in arguing in this way, he fell victim to his own form of critique; to the very sin of ideological thought to which he claimed Marxism was uniquely prone.

Nor did it advance a dialogue between traditions to collapse a variety of highly nuanced positions within one tradition, into a simplistic unity that was supposed to speak for the tradition as a whole. The Marxism that Scruton attacked was deterministic and reductionist in its theorising, and blindly pro-Soviet in its politics. It was the very Marxism that the New Left came into being to reject. It was therefore a grotesque distortion of the historical record (the test, you’ll remember, Scruton used to dismiss left wing history in general) to imply support for Soviet tyranny to the majority of the very thinkers who broke from orthodox commu-
nism on precisely this issue. Scruton’s collapse of New Left Marxism into Stalinist orthodoxy was legitimate only if there was something inevitable, inexorable, unavoidable in the use of a Marxist framework that led to Stalinism in practice and to determinism and economic reductionism in theoretical work. Yet that collapse was never argued for, only asserted, by Scruton – slipped into his analysis by his way of using evidence and categories. He moved from the party-class debate in Marxist theory to party domination of class in Stalinism. He collapsed Gramscian discussions of the role of civil society in buttressing capitalism into an argument about the preference of Russian Bolsheviks for party rule without civil liberties; and so on. Scruton, in other words, deployed the very slippages – of loaded categories, and the closing of eyes to uncomfortable facts – of which he accused Marxism.

Scruton, was also adamant that the Right did not have ‘to bear the onus of justification’. It was not for his lot to ‘show that the consensual politics of Western government [was] somehow closer to human nature and more conducive to man’s fulfilment than the ideal world of socialist emancipation’. ‘It [was] not for us to defend a reality which, for all its faults, [had] the undeniable merit of existence’ (Thinkers, p. 210); but that too was to claim too much. It was quite valid to tax the Left for the lack of detail on its alternative. It was quite another to present a glorified vision of the reality that alternative would replace. Scruton accused left wing thinkers of double standards – hard on the West, soft on the Soviets. Yet this the New Left were not. They were hard on both. If there was a double standard, it was Scruton’s; located in his attempt to shut out a critical relationship with western capitalism because its critics found it difficult to specify their alternative in detail. If science and not ideology is our objective as theoreticians, then on virtually any definition of the difference between the two it is vital to impose critical tests on realities as well as on futures; and Scruton did us no service by questioning the integrity and intelligence of those who try. If there was intolerance in this exchange, it did not lie with the Left, but with a mode of criticism – too often ad hominem in character – which in Scruton’s hands raised doubts not about arguments but about the integrity of those who placed them.

So the specific form of the Scruton critique seemed to fall on its own terms. It was built on the very ways of thinking and arguing – closed, based on unquestioned premises, intolerantly ideological – which it found so defective in Marxism. However, the content of the Scruton attack could be considered independently of the form in which it was put, and ought to be, because it raised important issues about the value of Marxist scholarship – issues which predated the Scruton writings and will long outlast them.

In particular it raised the question of whether or not there is a ‘hidden agenda’ to Marxist historiography, and whether ‘sentimentality’ is an unavoidable feature of Marxist scholarship. It raised the question of whether we, as historians of Marxism and social scientists, do actually over-use our central category of ‘class’, by treating it anthropomorphically as Scruton suggested: giving it a collective agency in history, and freeing it from structural constraints to the point at which our use of it challenges the organising premises of the Marxist from which our mode of analysis springs. So we do need to follow Scruton this far, and look again at the detail of the debate between Thompson and Anderson on class and the appropriate mode of its study because we will find, when we do, insights and guidelines there for our own scholarship, guidelines which Scruton was too blinkered to see.

Knives and fools on the question of class

As we noted earlier, Scruton gave unqualified support to Edward Thompson’s view of class as an ‘emergent phenomenon, which comes into being through the formation of a common class consciousness’ (Thinkers, p. 13) – of classes as historical entities which in some basic sense ‘make themselves’. We also saw that Scruton welcomed Thompson’s scepticism about any anthropomorphic vision of historical processes – his antipathy to a view of class ‘as a collective agent, which does things, opposes things, fights things and which may succeed or fail’ (ibid., p 14). The Scruton criticism of Thompson was that, in spite of his scepticism, he fell back on just such a view of class in order to be able to ‘attribute to the working class the historical role which left wing thought [had] always reserved for it’ as a revolutionary opponent of industrial capitalism. According to Scruton, in Thompson’s work ‘the implication that the working class was bound together by its opposition to capitalism is brought in by sleight of hand’ – a sleight of hand motivated by Thompson’s already mentioned ‘sentimentalisation of the proletariat’. Anderson was criticised by Scruton on other grounds – for recognising the threat to the integrity of the Marxist theoretical and political project constituted by the Thompson emphasis on class-consciousness as defining of class. Anderson’s position was successively characterised by Scruton as ‘Muscovite’, and as operating at that ‘level of intellectual dishonesty [in which] the difference between science and alchemy no longer matters’. Anderson was quoted, to be rejected out of hand; even though the quotation merely cited Thompson’s ‘conceptual error’ as being to: ‘amalgamate those actions which are indeed conscious volitions at a personal or social level, but whose social influence is profoundly involun-
sary... with those actions which are conscious volitions at the level of their own social incidence, under the single rubric of "agency". For Scruton, that statement was just 'emphatic meaningless' (Thinkers, p. 140). In his scorn Scruton failed to grasp that Anderson was here making an important distinction recognisable to much of sociology, Marxist or otherwise: between actions which, though voluntary in form, are socially determined in origin, and actions which lack that degree of social determination. That distinction is central to a Marxist understanding of class; by failing to grasp its importance Scruton ignored the enormous insights into the proper study of proletarian history that can be extracted from the vitriolic exchange between his leading knife and fool.

So what can be extracted? The first thing that a re-examination of the Thompson–Anderson debate provides is an opportunity to clarify the nature of a Marxist approach to class, free of the vulgar reductionism with which Scruton sought to tar it. Indeed it is only possible to grasp the importance of the debate if we begin by emphasising the Marxist heritage that Thompson and Anderson held in common. That heritage was a materialist one. Marxism builds outwards from a materialist ontology. Production, that is, is seen as central to human life. To reproduce themselves, men and women act on nature, progressively transforming their environment into the artefacts necessary for human existence, and in the process changing both the natural world and the nature of the people who act upon it. Around that perennial process of production, Marx argued, settle stable social relations – relations which then give underlying shape to all other aspects of the social order which that production sustains. According to a Marxist reading of history, thus far those social relationships have settled into a class form: with each method or mode of production consolidating antagonistic classes – those who produce and those who do not; those whose labour generates a surplus and those who expropriate that surplus as their own property. In Marxism, such social relationships are seen to be structural in kind. That is, they are borne by individuals within any one generation, but are not created by those individuals. They are inherited by the individuals who bear them, and are then reproduced by the social practice of those class-bearing individuals. For this reason class positions can, and indeed in the first instance need to, be studied in isolation from the patterns of consciousness to which they give rise, and from the class practices through which they are sustained.

None of that seemed to be in dispute between Thompson and Anderson. Where they did differ was in the importance they attached to the role of explicit theorising in the telling of a Marxist history of class, and in the weight they placed on class situation rather than class action as the focus of study. In the debate between them, Edward Thompson was rightly cautious about talking of classes in too abstract and timeless a way. He was uneasy with broad historical generalisations which treated classes as subjects with their own motives and goals, or which marched whole classes up and down history in great strides with no apparent renewal of personnel, experiences or ideas. He disliked modes of analysis which rode roughshod over the losers as well as the winners in the working-class story they told, or which were quick to spot the 'real' class interests which actually lay beneath every variegated idea, action, political force or cultural phenomenon sustained by proletarian people. That unease derived partly from a recognition that in the hands of historians the category of 'class' is an abstraction, a shorthand for a process that happens in the lives of ordinary people 'without volition or identity'. The substance of class is always simply men and women facing situations they did not choose, facing an overwhelming immediacy of relations and duties with only a scanty opportunity for inserting their own agency.

For Thompson, classes have no sphere of existence other than in the lives of those who compose them. For him, 'when we speak of a class we are thinking of a very loosely defined body of people who share the same congeries of interests, social experiences, traditions and value systems, who have a disposition to behave as a class, to define themselves in their actions and in their consciousness in relation to other groups of people in class ways'. A sensitivity to the historical detail of the lives of those people is then vital, since when in discussing class we find ourselves 'too frequently commencing sentences with IT, it is time to place (ourselves) under some historical control, or (we are) in danger of becoming the slaves of (our) own categories'.

Thompson's unease was grounded in more than the sense of class as a metaphor. It was grounded too in the recognition of what a historian actually finds when returning to examine the experience of a proletariat. As he noted at the beginning of The Making of the English Working Class, if we stop history at a given moment in time, if we drop a line down on one particular day, we do not initially see classes. What we actually see are a multiplicity of individual men and women in the pursuit of their own life goals, struggling individually (and occasionally collectively) to establish some degree of control over, ward off, contain or ultimately resolve, sets of problems, experiences and constraints that make up their daily material reality – the environment given to them, beyond their individual control, and in essence nothing more than the social ordering of the productive forces of their society. If we watch those men and women over a period of time, we see patterns in their social relationships, their institutions, their ideas and their behaviour. We see them making similar and persistent kinds of responses to their common experience of the social ordering of capitalist production: standard, similar and
persistent patterns of behaviour, clusters of attitudes and values and sets of institutions that link them to other people in similar situations in their own generation, that link generations of people over time and space that experience similar problems, and that divide such people throughout time and space from other people with a different relationship to the means of production, and a correspondingly different set of life experiences, life chances, and problems and interests. These regularities of behaviour, attitudes and institutions which emerge from a shared and similar experience of the social ordering of material production over time came, for Thompson, to constitute the substance of a class.

On this argument, classes make themselves as men and women live out their lives, and therefore to study class was for Thompson (and is for us) to study an active historical process which unifies an otherwise disparate and unconnected set of events. A class becomes simply a group whose similar position within the social ordering of production generates for them certain specific regularities of behaviour, attitudes and institutions; and it can be studied historically because it can only be recognised in the medium of time – as sets of people responding to problems known to their predecessors in ways which draw much of their inspiration from the ways in which earlier generations also responded. The analysis of any class therefore, and certainly of the working class, requires that we locate common sets of material experiences over time; that we find the groups drawn into those experiences, that we locate their sets of initial responses, and the pre-industrial origins of these responses, and that we explore how these initial reactions shape later ones. Classes conceived in this way, as actors in the medium of time, are thus to be understood and studied through the sense of class which they gather to themselves, and through the traditions of organisation and behaviour which they consolidate. The core of a class becomes the traditions which it sustains.

There are powerful lessons here for us. Classes do exist in the medium of time. They are constituted, generation by generation, by clusters of men and women in the pursuit of their lives; and they do consolidate around themselves consistent patterns of attitude, organisation and behaviour; but such insights, though powerful, can also mislead. By themselves they are not enough, and do not take us to the heart of the problem with which in their different ways Thompson and Anderson were both centrally concerned; namely the range of working-class political responses over time and space. For those responses change over time; and they differ, country from country. Classes studied alone, and in their own terms, give us no clue to why that should be so. Indeed, why talk of classes at all if self-definition is the only guide? That sense of class has been missing, even in the English labour movement (and certainly in others) for significant groups of workers at particular periods. Are people then not to be understood as working class just because (and when) they vote Tory, identify with Ulster loyalists or hate workers of a different colour? Even Edward Thompson did not want to argue that. There is a materiality to class which predates consciousness, and which has itself to be studied. There is class experience as well as class awareness, a class experience determined by the productive relationships into which individual members of that class are involuntarily placed. The working class is not the only thing which has a history. The capitalism which created and sustains it has a history too; and for that reason, if the working class makes itself, it does not do so, 'just as (it) please(s), under circumstances chosen by (itself), but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past' (Marx, Eighteenth Brumaire).

Thompson's critics have made much of this point. His proper objection to bad theory, to 'violent abstraction', to the imposition of a priori theorising on living history, and to the forcing of historical data into predetermined moulds on occasions seemed to them to slip into an opposition to theory itself. This tendency to resist theory as such was reflected in The Making of the English Working Class in the underplaying of economic processes in the formation of class experience. 'It is not that economic relations and changes in ways of producing [were] absent from Thompson's account. It was rather that their presence [was] assumed all the time. But the changes in economic relations [were] understood through their experiential or political effects, not, for the most part, in themselves'. The characteristic analytical move made by Thompson in The Making . . . according to Johnson, was 'to assume the force of economic changes, to insist upon the force of cultural and political processes too, but only to describe the latter in any detailed or active way'.

Yet a full Marxist history needs to be able to do more than this if it is to explain the range of working class history and politics. It needs to be able to locate class positions and class experiences independently of the patterns of consciousness and activity to which they give rise, and it needs to be able to situate those class positions and experiences in the wider social and economic processes of which they are only a part. For in the absence of such a wider consideration, any historical account runs the danger of detaching an understanding of class from its objective anchorage in determinate modes of production, and of identifying it instead only with consciousness and culture. That in turn would then encourage too narrow a focus of study, and would restrict the range of material which any adequate analysis of the working class has to stretch out to incorporate. This range has to be wide enough to take in the character, logic and development of modes of production, the interplay of old and new modes in particular social formations, the structure and character of all the classes created by those modes, the resulting legal and cul-
tural forms of the dominant classes, the situation of subordinate classes other than the working class, and the determinants of the material situation and composition of the working class itself.

In other words, and quite contrary to Scruton's argument, classes have to be understood first as objective material relationships. Without an understanding of just this sphere of given social relationships, class analysis lacks anchorage and focus. As Perry Anderson said of E.P. Thompson, 'in the absence of any objective framework laying down the overall pattern of capital accumulation in those years, there is little way of assessing the relative importance of one area of subjective experience within the English working class as against another. Proportions are wanting. Selectivity of focus is combined with sweep of conclusion'. As applied to the nineteenth-century working class as a whole, such a strategy of analysis would necessarily detach class struggle from the rhythms of capital accumulation, and explain it only in terms of a, 'simple dialectic between suffering and resistance'. Attractive as that dialectic may be to the committed historian, it is something which a full Marxist analysis of class has to avoid. Proletarian life was, and remains, far more complicated than that.

The weight of Scruton's argument was that, between them, Thompson and Anderson demonstrated the vacuity of the entire Marxist approach to class; but a more sophisticated reading of the debate suggests rather that what needs to be abandoned is not a Marxist history, but both a reductionist and a sentimental one. Marxist historians have to recognise the complexity of class experience and determination, be prepared to demonstrate the superior capacity of Marxism to handle that complexity, and readjust (if necessary) their practice as historians in order to capture and explain the complexity of class lost in more reductionist treatments of capitalism and its contradictions. In fact, a full and adequate Marxist analysis of class has always to do three things. It has to situate class in the complex of forces creating class relationships, and thereby *situate the class as agent*; it has to problematise the dominance of class definitions, and thereby *confront the question of consciousness*; and it has to insist on the existence of classes even when those class definitions do not prevail, and thereby deal with the *question of the structural determinants of collective action*. High-quality Marxist scholarship can — and does — build itself around just those three tasks. Thompson and Anderson's work, taken as a whole, covered just that agenda, with Thompson's focused on the first two of those three themes, and with Anderson's stretching out explicitly to encompass the third. Scruton missed the totality of what they were about, and by so doing failed to grasp the strength of the overall approach which they separately deployed.

Scruton accused Marxist historians of treating the working class as a thing, as a free actor with a specific historic mission (and of course there was plenty of bad Marxist history available to him to sustain that view); but a sophisticated Marxist understanding of historical processes has been — and remains — just as critical of that error as was Scruton himself. It was Edward Thompson after all who was the clearest of all on this, insisting that the definition of class, 'ultimately ... can be made only in the medium of time ... [that] class itself is not a thing, it is a happening'. Classes happen, he wrote, at a particular time and in a particular way; and if we are to understand them we have to study them first in their own time and place, as historical phenomena. What Thompson was less clear about was what we were to make of workers' capacities to live that history without adopting a class definition of their circumstances and interests. Yet as we know, it is just not inevitable that individual workers will unify their diverse life experiences around their experience as workers; that groups of workers will identify their shared experiences as constituting a class relationship, or that any class definitions so established will be given a specific revolutionary content in either theory or practice. Because class definitions have not always prevailed, and because revolutionary politics is a rarity in the general proletarian experience, Scruton would have us reject the whole theoretical framework and associated political project; but Marxism is not invalidated by the complexity of class. It would only be so were it unable to explain those complexities in ways that were consistent with its central propositions on the nature of modes of production and their attendant social formations. It can, and often has, generated explanations with just that consistency; explanations strongly associated with the very New Left figures Scruton chooses to condemn — with Anderson certainly, and of course with Gramsci.

There is therefore no need to apologise for the fact that a proper Marxist study of class carries with it an expectation that the proletarian experience will radicalise those exposed to it. There is enough empirical evidence on the tenacity and generality of class definitions to make the study of class and class consciousness of central concern to historians; and sufficient evidence of a tendency in proletarian politics for radicalism and revolution to sustain the importance of a set of Marxist questions on why that tendency has not yet been more marked. In any case, choices of theoretical approaches are determined by more than a process of ticking off proletarian politics against Marxist revolutionary aspirations. In the choice of a particular approach to the study of a class and its politics, complex judgments of many kinds are necessarily involved. After all, to use the term 'working class' — and to use it with a Marxist set of connotations — is to make a complex theoretical and comparative-empirical judgment about the overall character, history and imperatives of the world
order, and about the comparative position and experience of different national social groups within it. To say, for example, that the American working class is a ‘working class’ is to say that it occupies broadly the same position in the social relationships surrounding production as does another working class in another capitalism. It is to say too that the American and the other national economies are part of the same world system, and contain broadly the same set of economic contradictions and social differentiations — so that to be ‘working class’ in one country has broadly the same meaning and significance as in another. All that follows from this, for the inclusion in our study of classes that do not define themselves in class terms, is that we will have to explain why those non-class definitions exist (and assess their significance for the subsequent development of capitalism) and make that explanation and assessment in ways which are consistent with our general explanation of class politics elsewhere.

Whenever Anderson explored the complexity of the wider social processes and forces moulding working-class development and politics, Scruton accused him of abandoning ‘Marxist’ for ‘bourgeois’ history; but the accusation was spurious, for any Marxist historian concerned with the working class needs to come to the question of class and its history last rather than first. The first task of any proper Marxist analysis of class, as we saw earlier, is to map accurately the development of the capitalist mode of production and its attendant social forces, into which members of any one proletariat are inserted and to which they have to respond. If that mapping is to be done properly, it has to be done over time, by an analysis of the rhythms of capital accumulation, the stages of capitalist development and the overall shape of the emerging world capitalist system. As we do that, as we see the working class itself grow in size, organisation and activity, we will see too that its impact on those rhythms of development itself grows, so that working-class politics eventually becomes one of the factors shaping the capitalist world to which proletarian politics is a response. The proletariat was (and is) capitalism’s creation; and if we are to grasp its true character and potential we need an understanding of the contextual forces creating it, and giving it shape. Marx long ago said that:

history is nothing but the succession of the separate generations, each of which exploits the materials, the capital funds, the productive forces handed down to it by all preceding generations, and thus, on the one hand, continues the tradition activity in completely changed circumstances and, on the other, modifies the old circumstances by a completely changed activity.12

It is the recognition of this which commits us to a complex analysis of the interplay, over time and space, of society, class and party; to a probing of the constantly changing relationship between class situation and class-consciousness; and to an examination of the mutual interaction of capitalist trajectory, working-class experience and political response. It is that complex probing that constitutes the agenda of a full Marxist history of class.

The lesson we must take from the kernel of truth at the centre of the Scruton argument is not that class analysis is to be abandoned and a Marxist historiography rejected as inherently flawed. It is that the use of such an approach requires the most sophisticated and nuanced exploration of the totality of social forces released by the development of capitalism: an exploration firmly grounded on the recognition that — in capitalism as in other modes of production — the economic determines the social only ultimately, and in the last instance. It is also that Marxist historical scholarship needs to be defended for what it is — a historiography informed by a set of basic values and by a materialist understanding of the human condition. Scruton clearly lacks those values and works from a different (and to my mind, far more limited) ontology. That is his privilege. Histories have to be anchored in just those choices; but if it is his privilege, it is ours too and must be defended and fought for as such.

Notes

1. Scruton, R. (1985) Thinkers of the New Left, London: Longman; all subsequent page references refer to this text unless otherwise stated.
5. Ibid., p. 357.
6. Ibid., p. 357.
10. Ibid., p. 39.