

Andrew Jakabovics

Week 4-

In the preface to *The Making of the English Working Class*, E. P. Thompson summarizes as follows: “Class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition.” He posits that class emerges as a function of social and cultural relationships between like and unlike. Those who share similar experiences will share an affinity for one another, and the commonality of the experience will lead to self-identification with a class. In defining class in this manner, he restores agency to the proletariat, which had been dismissed by the Fabian orthodoxy and ignored by the economic historians. To some degree, however, he struggles with his own definition of class. “The working class made itself as much as it was made.” The economic changes in methods of production were imposed (Thompson’s term) on the working class, but that working class was not a tabula rasa. Thompson argues that members of the working class were heirs to the intellectual and political traditions of Bunyan and Paine. It was the dialectic between the two that formed the working class in England as it came to be by 1830. The fact that workers’ grievances were as much about the eradication of traditional customs, justice, independence, and other socio-political issues as about pure economic concerns lends credence to Thompson’s argument for a class consciousness that emerged from a set of political traditions, but it does not ascribe any greater degree of agency to the working class. “The people were subjected simultaneously to an intensification of two intolerable forms of relationship: those of economic exploitation and of political oppression.” He attempts to redeem himself from the seeming absence of agency by removing the inevitability of the outcome from the equation. There is no iron law that indicates that given the same set of socio-political, economic, and intellectual factors, the class consciousness that arose in England would emerge elsewhere. He explicitly rejects post facto determinism, but there is no way to falsify it. Agency must be sought in the “particular complex of human relationships.”

What is most important for me in reading Thompson is the struggle with moving from the individual experience to the collective. He admirably calls into question the ability to adequately describe phenomena using averages. It is the distribution of the data rather than the mean which is most instructive. This ties back into the issue of agency. I can easily ascribe agency to an individual, but in rejecting class as an entity (the “it” of the preface) there is no agency writ large. The weavers, the artisans, and the field laborers all had very different experiences, but at the end of the day, they become a single class. Likewise, from a political perspective, “at the end of the decade, when there came a climactic contest between Old Corruption and Reform, it is possible to speak in a new way of the working people’s consciousness of their interests and their predicament *as a class* (italics in original). Perhaps the greatness of the human mind lies in its ability to see, as appropriate, both the forest and the trees. Extracting common threads from individual narratives is necessary to provide a coherent summary and paint a broad picture, but we must not make the grave error of trying to impose the common experience and intuited trends onto specific individuals.