

Student C:

Reaction paper 2 - EP Thompson and Elizabeth J Perry

This may end up sounding naive, but the main point that I take away from this week's reading is: the working class is not a spontaneously developing phenomenon. I say that this may sound naive because after reading the two texts, I realize how many competing interests, contrary agendas, cultural variables, and social groups are actually involved in the working class as a cohesive phenomenon.

Previously, the idea of the working class as a unified social group seemed pretty obvious to me. Of course questions of labor would be paramount in the minds of poor, exploited working people, and of course these people would find a common bond in their response to those questions. Marxist theory as it is often portrayed, it seems to me, bolsters this oversimplification: if you put a bunch of people in a factory and overwork them, a class consciousness will emerge. Marx himself seems to suggest a rather systematic, prescriptive form of history (first you have "x" type of society, which leads to "y" type of society, and then -- and this hasn't happened yet, but no doubt will -- to "z" type of society).

Both texts, I think, are Marxist histories, in that they consider formation of concepts central to Marx (class, labor, capitalism). However, they are also criticisms of the prescriptive nature of his theories. Conspicuously absent from both texts are stories about actual workers reading the Communist Manifesto and rallying around it. Instead, the ideas and practices associated with the "working class" were very much created, in the face of profound fragmentation, by people who were not necessarily part of what would become the working class. The working class is not spontaneous or inevitable.

The idea that bad working conditions alone cause effective protests is criticized in both works. In fact, Perry argues, the connection between bad working conditions and labor protests is very complicated. She notes that workers don't necessarily rebel when they are exploited or when their economic situations are bad. In fact, workers tend to rebel more often when conditions are relatively better. Relatively better, of course, given that life was never very good. This observation links worker rebellion and protest to a complex economic backdrop.

There were profound divides in working communities that made the formation of a cohesive consciousness difficult. Perry points to native place origins as the primary alliance of many of the workers in Shanghai. These ethnic allegiances were compounded by the fact that job types were often divided along ethnic lines. Thompson discusses the divide between Irish and British workers in England, showing that an ethnic division of labor, similar in some respects to Shanghai, existed there. Despite his statement that "the process of industrialization is necessarily painful. It must involve the erosion of traditional patterns of life," the actual erosion of these traditions might be very slow (445). In both Shanghai and England, it took concerted effort to erode traditional ethnic groupings and replace them with working class consciousness.

Eroding these "traditional patterns" took a great deal more than simply exploiting the workers. Perry convincingly shows the importance of rival political agendas in mobilizing the working class. This raises another interesting point, which is that the working class is not necessarily a communist category. It can just as easily be a conservative grouping (in the case of Shanghai, for the GMD). As a result, in the nascent stages of class development, different groups were struggling for control over what they saw (rightly) as a potentially powerful constituency. Both political ideologies had to find ways to appeal to workers beyond the immediately visible divisions of ethnicity, native place origin, skill level, or workers' specific tasks in the division of labor.

But rather than one political ideology winning flat-out, in both England and Shanghai, groups with different cultural and political goals were forced to cooperate with each other in ways that were inevitably full of tension and instability. It took both the CCP and the GMD to effectively pull off a strike at the British American Tobacco Company, for example. To use a metaphor from chemistry, this uneasy cooperation shows just how high the activation energy of class consciousness is. In a way, labor exploitation is not the catalyst that causes working class consciousness to solidify out of a variety of preexisting factors. Rather, labor exploitation is one of those factors that must be present, but is not, in it self, enough.

The importance of cultural and social phenomenon, such as religion in England, and gangs in Shanghai, in the formation of the working class consciousness was also very striking to me. It further reinforced the point that many factors must converge to produce class consciousness. At first glance, many of these factors seem to be only tangentially related to labor and economics. Thompson shows how central the Methodist tenants of suffering and postponement of gratitude were in placating the workers. Perry shows how allegiance to gangs often came before allegiance to fellow workers, also preventing cohesion.

Thompson's definition of class consciousness,

"the new class consciousness of working people may be viewed from two aspects. On the one hand, there was a consciousness of the identity and interests between working men of diverse occupations and levels of attainment. . . . On the other hand, there was a consciousness of identity of the interests of the working class . . . as against those of other classes" (807)

is in reality very hard to attain. It requires the breaking down of previously paramount forms of identity (which I think never really go away), and their replacement with another, newer form of identity. It also requires that the members of this new group believe that their interests are similar to each others' interests and yet different from the interests of other groups. Both Perry and Thompson show the difficulty and tenuousness of both these aspects.