

Student: (Jennifer Yum):  
Labor History: EP Thompson

Picking up from last week's discussion of the Annales school, I could see the continuing theme of long-duree in Thompson. In particular I'd like to break Thompson's analysis into several types of processes that prove in the end that the making of the English working class was complicated and multifaceted.

1) Industrialization as a process: Thompson writes that the process of industrialization "must involve the erosion of traditional patterns of life" (445). The notion of erosion is particularly evident in his discussion of child labor. Although child labor was not new to England, this fact should not, by all means, be used to justify the general exploitation of children during this period. (He calls it a conspiracy—334). What was unfortunate about this new form of labor was its intensity. While in the past children answered to a parent or master, children in the mills were thrown into a new context where "machinery dictated environment" (335). In other words, labor lost its personal face. This example leads into Thompson's effective critique of empiricist historians. Thompson argues against one-sided, quantitative assessments. He makes a key historiographic point that studies based solely on empirical data (i.e. rise of per capita income) are lacking because they ignore the equally significant social, cultural and political dimensions. Further, this criticism is especially relevant to England where "the changing productive relations and working conditions of the Industrial Revolution were imposed, not upon raw material, but upon the free-born Englishman" (194). What I found to be most interesting is the way Thompson adds the element of human agency to a period that had stripped the working man of his individual identity, reduced him to merely operating the main means of production—the machine. The process of industrialization is presented from the vantage point of the worker, through an effective psychological, social analysis.

2) Consciousness as a process: The mass of English urban workers did not become the English working class overnight. I found that Thompson made some of his most compelling points on class consciousness when he used minor wording changes to highlight major conceptual differences. Take his discussions of "freedom versus unfreedom," (199) and "way-of-life versus standard-of life" (211). In the first example, Thompson writes that less personal working relationships granted the worker liberty to control his own free time. However, only after having the opportunity to utilize their freedoms did workers run into the endless web of political limitations—be they from the employer or the State. I interpreted this as saying that class consciousness came only after multiple cycles where optimism was met by disappointment. Thompson also notes that it was only when "bread-and-butter" issues were resolved that working men began to question the values of "justice," independence," security, and family economy (202). Indeed, the standard of life," based on quantities and stats, may have improved. Examining the way of life, however, is more useful in understanding how class consciousness was born in England. And though he admits that literary sources are not always the most reliable, they are still crucial in grasping the larger picture: from 1790 to 1830, English workers experienced decline in their standard of living. The seeds of antagonism, which Thompson cites as key to the development of the "new class consciousness," are born only after grievances lead to the call for an entirely new system. Before classifying themselves as a class, they had to realize that capitalism was a system (806-807). And to reduce the

making of the English working class consciousness to strictly economic terms is not only incomplete but does not make sense.

3) Industrial Revolution as a process in human history: Throughout the book, Thompson inserts personal comments on what he feels history should represent as a discipline. He notes that historians cannot, and should not, wholly divorce themselves from value judgments. They, with the advantage of hindsight, must view history and unveil how we came to the present. Historians must answer “those questions of human satisfaction, and of the direction of social change” (444). I thought it was interesting to see the Industrial Revolution under the mindset that we are the end-product. I then asked myself whether we, as a part of this living history, cannot avoid adding a certain degree of opinion into our historical analysis. I found Thompson’s book to be much more readable, the accounts livelier than I did *The Mediterranean*. One of the main reasons was that Thompson was not weary to insert his own critiques into his academic study. He clearly adheres to Marxist paradigms. His remark that child labor was a most of the shameful events in our history, or his overall effort to depict the working class as a heroic culture, do not detract from his analysis but rather add intensity to a classic work in the field of labor history.