

Student A:

THOMPSON: ENGLISH WORKING CLASS

I really enjoyed E.P. Thompson's "The Makings of the English Working Class"; I think it does a great job of using social and cultural material to illuminate the contingent, historical process by which English workers came to know themselves as a "class." I especially liked the discussion of Owenism (pp. 779-806), in which Thompson shows how Robert Owen's ideas were reworked to match the experiences and goals of artisans, skilled workers, the "philanthropic gentry," the poor, the weavers, etc. (p. 803), and thereby laid the foundation for class consciousness that emerged in the 1830s. What struck me about it was how Thompson used a diverse set of sources to show that Owen's ideas were flawed and ultimately unsuccessful, but still gave rise to important ideas and movements. I also liked the way songs, hymns, poems and other literary material were worked into the book (most notably in "Christian and Apollyon," pp. 26-54); they enliven the narrative and help give substance to Thompson's claims about broad shifts in culture. From a methodological perspective, this is the aspect of Thompson's work that really stood out for me: the integration of cultural and economic/political history.

PERRY: SHANGHAI ON STRIKE

I thought Elizabeth Perry's thesis in "Shanghai on Strike," that native place loyalties could both limit the success of labor organization (by dividing workers into competing groups) and be an essential part of it (by providing organizational tools and traditions), was provocative, as was her discussion of the complicated negotiations among CCP, GMD, local gangs, native-place guilds, etc. The way she tells the story undermines simplistic narratives of worker liberation; like Thompson and Gutman (see below), she shows how "premodern" or non-industrialized cultures and traditions, specific to particular times and places, continue to structure the attitudes and behaviors of the working class long after industrialization has begun. (Of course, she also shows how labor was affected by organizational tactics, such as those of the CCP and GMD, and by consequences of industrialization itself, such as division of workers by skill and pay. But for me the most interesting part was the native-place story.)

GUTMAN: AMERICAN INDUSTRIALIZATION

Herbert Gutman's "Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America," one of the supplementary readings for this week, is a collection of essays about U.S. labor from about 1815 to about 1920. Among other things, the essays cover the relationship between Protestantism and the labor movement; the career of Richard L. Davis, a black coal miner and labor activist; the "rags-to-riches" myth, which Gutman argues was not (always) a myth; resistance to industrialization in a mid-Atlantic manufacturing town; and labor disputes on the railroad and in Pennsylvania steel mills and coal mines in the 1870s. The first chapter is a general overview of American work culture from about 1815 to about 1915.

One of Gutman's main arguments is that premodern work culture and work habits continued to affect American industrialization right up through the early 20th century because of immigration from diverse non-industrialized cultures, and because of the persistence of traditional values and social structures among native Americans. For instance, Americans from rural areas who worked at the Lowell textile mills at the beginning of the 19th century, he argues, had a great deal in common with South and East Europeans working in Pennsylvania steel mills at the end of the century (p. 75). Methodologically, Gutman's approach resembles E.P. Thompson's; in fact, he mentions Thompson as an important influence. He tries to relate the beliefs and habits of ordinary workers, as reported in newspapers, diaries, letters, etc., to broad social and economic changes. (In his preface, Gutman says that his work has been described as part of the "new social history," but he is uneasy about that label because "too much of it [new social history] is too narrowly classificatory, too narrowly statistical and behavioral" (p. xii). Gutman himself relies on statistics very little.)

I found Gutman's book less compelling than Thompson's or Perry's, but I did like what it shared with both of them: an attempt to show how industrialization, rather than being a monolithic

process driven solely by economics and politics, was actually strongly influenced by workers' cultures, traditions, social relations, etc.