

Student B:

Though this is a minor point, while reading both the Thompson and Perry portions I was struck by what seemed like heavy influence from the Annales school, and Braudel's "Mediterranean" in particular. On the most basic level, the three part structures of both books conform loosely to a structure-conjuncture-evenement format. The long-term influence of popular traditions form the "structure" in both cases, shorter term social phenomena are "conjunctions", and the relationship between social theory/theorists and Radical ideology/workers form the "evenements" sections in that they deal in detail with the interplay of theory and worker reality over time. Both authors lay stress on short-term trends in data that might be viewed only as long-term statistics in an economic study. Thompson's explanation of the gradually increasing but oscillatory Methodist enrollment (390) and Perry's discussion of the causes of short term trends in Shanghai strike data (66) are reminiscent of Braudel's exposition of short-term and local trends in the gradually increasing economic activity of the Mediterranean. Both authors also emphasize the dynamic aspect of history, a point that Braudel stresses repeatedly. The Annales emphasis on the broader social causes of historical change is seen in every aspect of "labor history", almost by definition. I'd like to briefly address several examples of general trends in labor history and social history in general shown in both Thompson's and Perry's analyses, as such trends are much more significant when established across more than one historical case.

Both Thompson and Perry give some primacy to the workers they study by arguing the contemporary point of view to be the most objective and emphasizing the importance of what people were thinking when a historical event happened for understanding that historical event. Perry places much emphasis on transcriptions of interviews conducted with Shanghai strikers 20-40 years after the fact, as in the comment of one former British Tobacco Company employee that during one huge Communist-led strike, she didn't know the strike had anything to do with Communists, but simply struck "because it seemed like the right thing to do" (150). This bolsters Perry's point that non-ideological concerns motivated many workers during strikes, and more generally that collective action spawned class consciousness at least as much as vice versa. In discussing the notion of "standard of living" as a measurable quantity, Thompson stresses that although "standard of living" does not necessarily correlate with economic indicators and will inevitably be biased if measured by some modern moral standard, it can be defined as the happiness of the people under study in the period being studied, as read through primary sources. The emphasis on the judgment of the worker as the most important and objective possible standard is an interesting aspect of these two authors' "labor history".

Thompson and Perry focus on the role of labor, as opposed to the role of the much larger political and economic forces often studied. Given the all-encompassing way in which the latter kind of study can be presented, I was interested to see Thompson and Perry demonstrate a wide range of events and trends which only took place thanks to aspects of the labor force. For example, Perry lays constant emphasis on the central role of native-place identity in mobilizing Shanghai workers, given that Shanghai labor was deeply stratified by native-place in almost every imaginable way. In a discussion which I found fascinating, Thompson

notes that the crucial problem in mobilizing English labor to work factories was instilling a sense of (mentally) internal discipline in the population which would give men the ability to perform monotonous tasks for long shifts. Though this point must be contentious, Thompson claims this discipline was provided by the Methodist ideology which came to pervade what would be the working class, laying the basis for industrialization. The obvious question is how English labor was won over to a belief system which enslaved it, and not any other of the numerous Protestant ideologies present at the time. Thompson's answer is that Methodism was preached for workers by other workers who had accepted it. Without the religious and moral zeal that were historically determined parts of the working class English consciousness at the time, workers would not have preached and Methodism could not have spread. Both these examples are strong counterevidence for the view that the actions of workers were largely determined by external forces.