

One of the great controversies in the historiography of the English Industrial revolution concerns its effects on the workers' standard of living, their life-style and work culture, and attitudes toward the government and ruling classes. Bestriding this field like a colossus, for its ^{800 page} length as well as influence, is E.P. Thompson's The Making of the English Working Class. This classic history gives its readers, despite its flaws, an excellent "feel" for the beliefs and experiences of much of the English working class in the period 1790-1832.

Using a rather unorthodox Marxist approach, Thompson sets out his case for the radicalization of the English working class between the years 1790 and 1820 (p. 605, 77-78, 185). Thompson's Marxist unorthodoxy consists in seeing the formation of class consciousness as the result of cultural (esp. literary) influences as well, not just the result of the relations of production within large factories (p. 10, 13). The great advantage of this insight is that it allows Thompson to avoid the rigidities of Marxism that straightjacket many more traditional Marxists analyzing working class movements such as Albert Soboul, who saw the sans culottes' protests during the French Revolution as a backward-looking movement desiring a nation of petty proprietors, which was to be superceded by a factory proletariat.

By contrast with Soboul, Thompson greatly admires ^{intrinsically} the values and rhythms of workers' pre-industrial culture, and seeks to judge it by the standards of its time, not what was (or "ought") to come: "I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the obsolete' hand-loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity" (p. 12). Thompson overshoots this goal at times of trying to judge the past in its own context, such as in his discussion of Luddism generally, in particular where one of the assassins of the mill owner William Horsfall, George Mellor, gets transformed into a man of "heroic stature" (p. 592).

Thompson's work focuses largely upon radical movements and currents in the working class community (and their ties to middle class reformers), for he sees them as instrumental in creating the disciplined unity the working class often showed in its public protests and demonstrations (p, 183, 429, 75). Hence, he moves from the London Corresponding Society and the Paineites, to the influences of Methodism (good and bad, as seen from a Marxist perspective), to the Luddites and the post-Napoleonic war agitators such as William Cobbett and Henry Hunt, finishing up with Robert Owen's movement. In-between he deals with such issues as the conditions various types of workers lived under, such as the weavers and field laborers, and the standard of living controversy and the quality of life (culture as centered around doing the work itself).

Both course and review discuss the Marxist perspective of the working class. See Hobsbawm. Very good approach.

His history of the working class does not pretend to be fully "objective," in that he enthusiastically makes moral judgments.¹ Being a Marxist, he is fully of condemnatory judgments about industrial capitalism. My "favorite" of these--for its creative sarcasm--is found on page 318: "His (the worker's) share in the 'benefits of economic progress' consisted of more potatoes, a few articles of cotton clothing for his family, soap and candles, some tea and sugar, and a great many articles in the Economic History Review." Much of the time this bias is not serious, in that one can accept his general descriptions of developments without accepting the value judgments placed upon them. His attempts to place the best face possible upon Luddism are especially vexatious, for his desire to judge their surrounding community's work culture by the standards of their time neatly allows it to be fully justifiable. The problems resulting here are a result of the transition to an industrial order, not necessarily the latter intrinsically itself. He seems to believe in what has been called the "divine right of stagnation"-- if the majority of people do not wish to change in order to keep up with a competitor, they have the right to force him not to be different.

More generally, could the "workers" really be divorced from industrialization? Is this a bad thing?

Thompson's class work does an excellent job of covering the moods, the ideological currents, and increasing class consciousness of the English working class during the industrial revolution, but its value judgments are open to questioning.

¹ Thompson condemns the field of industrial sociology as a landscape blasted by moral