

Week 4 Class

The core of E.P. Thompson's view on class is explained in the title of his book, *The Making of the English Working Class*. Class is something that can be *made* or *not made*, rather than something that is already out there. He firmly refused to regard class as a given structure that comes into existence automatically from the relation of production. According to him, class is not a stable sociological category. It is a historical process, of which the working people were both products and participant. The making of a class needs as much human agency and consciousness as a certain relation of production. In this point, he gives severe criticism against some dogmatic Marxist historians who mistook a historical phenomenon as a mathematical formula.

Thompson is no less critical of mainstream economic historians who turned their eyes away from the suffering working mass and instead praised the Industrial Revolution as a period of economic growth and living-standard rise. Thompson argues that those growth-rate-oriented historians of his times failed to see what those who lived the tough times really felt like. Illustrating in great detail the economic, political, and cultural environment of the working class, Thompson tries to support the catastrophic view of the Industrial Revolution by Karl Marx, the Webbs, and the Hammonds.

Thompson's critical stance against both dogmatized Marxists and growth-oriented economic historians can be understood better if we consider his intellectual and social career. While he was studying at Cambridge University, he joined British Communist Party in 1941. He volunteered for the after-WWII reconstruction in Yugoslavia and Bulgaria; studied history in the communist historians' group; and taught literature and history to working people. But he immediately broke with the party when the Soviet Union invaded Hungary in 1956. Later, he also devoted himself to the anti-nuclear movement. In short, he was a Marxist intellectual and activist with strong sympathy for working people and with strong antipathy against any attempt suppressing human beings and their agency.

We may also be able to place Thompson's critique against economic historians in the context of the long debate on the interpretation of the Industrial Revolution. The catastrophic view of the IR prevailed at the end of 19th century, focusing on the

deteriorated living condition of the working people. After WWII, however, the remarkable economic performance of Western countries in the 1950s influenced historians' evaluation of the IR. The IR was now seen as the beginning of the unprecedented growth of economy, and less attention was given to the working class. Economists and historians such as Rostow (p.195 footnote) embraced this interpretation and promoted the IR as a growth model that the third world countries (such as Korea) should follow. Publishing his book in 1963, Thompson seems to be writing against these changing interpretations of the IR and arguing that statistical data did not tell the whole truth in human relations. (The new interpretation that Thompson criticized was to be checked by another changing economic environment of the early 1970s, i.e. the oil crisis and the Club of Rome report "Limits to Growth.")

Reading Thompson's book reminds me again of the situatedness of historians in their time and place, just as Braudel's book did last week. Can his book be read also as a "love letter" (Prof. McCants's term) to English working class, a letter sent by a leftist historian writing in an age when the capitalistic forces began to prevail all over the world and the quality of workers' lives were concealed by the numerical growth rate of world economy? Reading Thompson also enabled me to better understand what Professor Rosalind Williams meant when she said to historians of technology, "In the history of technology, passion serves an epistemological purpose. Strong emotion acts as a probe. It takes historians into a subject and motivates them to keep digging further. Passion has been out of style, in the cool intellectual twilight of postmodernity, where the prevailing mood is to dissect with irony and the prevailing fear is to make naïve claims. Historians need to risk being uncool." In Thompson's writing, I definitely felt his "uncool" but sincere passion. And I begin to wonder how, then, the 21st century historians, writing in the age of the rosy economic prospect caused by the so-called Information Revolution, will evaluate the Industrial Revolution and the condition of working class?