

The Making of the English Working Class by E.P. Thomson

Reviewed by Pete Sweeney for SIS500 Professor Guy

It was with great pleasure that I discovered I was reading a book analyzing the industrial revolution and its effects that concerned itself primarily with human agency. Indeed, the making of the English Working Class paints a profoundly human picture of the process and results of the industrial revolution in England. Thomson does not narrate statistics, he paints lives.

The work does indeed contain statistics and factual analyses, but in the portion of the work assigned, it spends significant amounts of time criticizing certain authors who dismiss or mitigate the harsh impact of industrialization on the nascent English working class by pointing out that economic averages improved here or there. Thomson begins by taking exception to the figures themselves, asserting that some of the averages take no account of relative population density- it was unclear to me whether he could provide a definitive alternative economic picture, but Thomson did not concern himself with haggling over figures. "In the scrutiny of credit facilities or the terms of trade, where each event is explicable and appears also as a self-sufficient cause of other events, we arrive at a post-facto determinism." Thomson's larger point is that the transition was a "catastrophic experience" that cannot be reduced to figures indicating material well-being. So not only do we have a work that provides a picture of human agency, decision making, and political context driven by both, we have a work that is not materialist in its values or its agenda. An emotional work, and exhortative work; in its introduction, Thomson posits that where the English working class "failed", Asian and African working classes might succeed by taking the lessons he proposes to provide.

The Making of the English Working Class is informed by an implicit- actually, fairly explicit- counterfactual. During his discussion of the French Revolution and ensuing Napoleonic Wars, Thomson posits that "the revolution *which did not happen* in England was fully as devastating" as the French Revolution. In the context of my incomplete reading of the work, it's difficult to say whether Thomson covers this thesis adequately; in the pages I read it served as an intriguing hypothesis left hanging. Nevertheless, in Thomson's view, the English working class failed to revolt against the dominance of the capitalist "masters,"

and the consequences were profoundly negative in terms of political rights, non-material standards of living, community support, and family life.

From time to time Thomson repeats that he does not posit a viable, painless alternative transition to industry. Change, to his view, entails pain, and the prior system also had its own exploitations. He admits that people tend to resist change of whatever class and prefer traditional modes, once ensconced, to whatever new system looms, ha ha. Nevertheless, he believes that the new system was worse for the working class than the system that preceded it. "For most working people the crucial experience of the Industrial Revolution was felt in the terms of changes in the nature and intensity of the exploitation."

It's difficult to argue this point. It appears that where the transition from hunting and gathering to agriculture sometimes involved a decline in admittedly subjective living standards, the transition from agriculture to industry likewise entailed the reduction of certain non-material (and frequently material) benefits available in agricultural communities. While Thomson's work relies heavily on anecdotes and contemporary observations, and emotionally charged ones at that, it is difficult to dismiss them on that basis, as he provides them in such quantity, and at such length, and that we are forced to admit that the resistance movements he cites were very real. When real numbers are to hand, he deploys them; for example, in certain poor areas, he asserts a 50% child mortality rate between the ages of 0-5, hardly a picture of radically improved living conditions. Thomson paints a picture of a working class reeling back and forth between poverty and stability, from union status to scab, from small capitalist to bondsman, without security or mutuality or any predictable career path. He largely ignores the small capitalist (or the big one) except to quote from their vile theories about how poverty entailed industriousness.

This is, to my mind, a gap in the work, perhaps filled elsewhere; clearly the Industrial Revolution created an ideology that happened to serve the elite's interests- which revolution has not? But in the fluid situation Thomson describes, in which the boundaries between "master" and "servant" were so fluid, it would be helpful to learn more about exactly what the interests were of the aspiring capital class, not solely in terms of greed but of fear. Because the picture Thomson paints of England at the time is of a society near-hysterical with fear of the unknown, and one senses it in the maniacal missals of the rulers as much as in the desperate tactics of the ruled (which Thomson paints brilliantly- his

discussion of competitive structures of the begging class– the “land navy– could be a work by itself.) But while Thomson describes the ideology of the English Industrial Revolution as “of the masters’ alone,” who suffered from an “atrophy of conscience,” I don’t feel that his occasionally hamfisted dismissals of Smithian laissez faire in favor of vague endorsements of union activity provide much to go on for African and Asian elites. Of course I do at this point have the benefit of a hindsight on Asian and African development that Thomson did not when the work was first published.

We can admit to the atrophy of conscience, clearly, without positing that the ruling classes had a particularly more enlightened conscience before? We can certainly detect in Thomson the same note sounded by Pomeranz– that European capital markets were hardly perfect markets or even particularly “fair,” and I’m not sure anyone is arguing with this. Thomson drops a wonderful bomb when he points out the way in which the poor were taxed on consumption for the benefit of the rich, but he doesn’t note that this is the very entrance by which a classic liberal would attack the system. Capitalism, they would say, was not the problem, it was rent-seeking behavior by people who happened to also be capitalists. Certainly Thomson himself provides plenty of support for this as he paints a picture of a society of capitalists with little concept of stimulating consumption by raising wages. When they did stimulate consumption, they did so in destructive ways; for example, the publicans who only gave work to those who spent more than half their wages in the pub.

It would have been extremely enlightening to see a broader picture of the tax structure and how worked in the aggregate to transfer money from the poor to the rich as Thomson asserts. It would have been nice to estimate the general tax burden the poor person bore. But this is math, averages, and perhaps Thomson is uninterested, but if he is going to proffer unionism as the solution, he needs to provide a bit more.

Thomson does not shy from using emotional language; the enclosure movement was “class robbery,” he talks of “violence done to human nature”. This is wonderful, and my first reaction to completing the work was one of entirely healthy rage. His pictures of the role mainstream Methodism played is pejorative and perhaps in this day of political correctness might be considered a form of religious bigotry, but he does qualify it with pictures of socially active Methodists and their offshoots. He also illustrates an intriguing contrast between the Methodist clergy and the Irish Catholic priesthood in terms of class loyalties.

The clergy had “employers” too, and their theological positions served to promote the interests of whomever that employer happened to be. Although again I am made quite nervous by Thomson’s essentialist description of Irish society in England, which paints the Irish in terms of all their most familiar English stereotypes– quick to anger, drunk, and full of blarney– but I will leave cheap accusations of racial insensitivity to others as I consider Thomson profoundly sensitive, if not politically correct, on this issue.

Finally, Thomson denies any fundamental inevitability to the Industrial Revolution in England; “the breakdown of custom and of trade unionism was directly influenced by State intervention.” I hope to complete the book and find these prescriptions elucidated, as in the sections I read, the unions seem to do as much harm as good– great if you could get into a union, but they created a class of outsiders who could not therefore access work. Even if the prescriptions are not detailed, however, it is instructive, viewed through the lens Thomson provides, to see companies like WalMart adopting the same essential philosophy towards their employees as English manufacturers; if we pay our employees too much, they won’t have to shop here. Also the picture of manufacturers keeping their employees so poor that their employees had to turn to state subsidy to survive; another form of rent-seeking through tax. One can attack capitalism or classic liberalism as a theory and I believe there is a debate to be had. But it seems to me most obvious, and well-illustrated by this work and by my admittedly shallow knowledge of economics, that many capitalists as individuals, are far better served by a rent-seeking market that extracts taxes and state-advantage while avoiding any actual competition. To read the history of the English Industrial Revolution is to read the birth of corporate welfare. It is not a pretty sight.