

Labour Reading Group: 3/2-2014

Readings:

E.P. Thompson "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism" (1967)

Jonathan Parry "Lords of Labour: Working and Shirking in Bhilai" (1999)

Christian's introductory comments:

Let me start by saying something about why I proposed these readings. After our last meeting before Christmas I concluded that there was a certain interest in the group in reading some classic pieces during the spring semester and I thought we could start with Thompson's classic essay on "industrial work". Thompson has been extremely influential during the last five or six decades, and this essay on time and work-discipline is among his best known works.

I looked for a text written by an anthropologist that could be read together with Thompson and ended up with Parry's piece since it so clearly is a discussion and a critique of a number of aspects of Thompson's argument in "Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism". Parry's essay contains an ethnographically driven critique of Thompson's ideas.

Factory work, or industrial work, is an important category to think about in a reading group on labour. Much thinking in the social sciences seems often to be premised upon ideas about work that operate with waged factory work or industrial work as a model. Ideas about labour that in practice are ideas about factory work have been very influential. The perspectives of Marx and Engels constitute one example, as Anna Tsing claims in one of the pieces that we read last semester, her "Supply chains and the human condition".

On a more personal note, an essay that made a strong impression on me a long time ago is another of Thompson's classics, his "The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century". In his essay on the moral economy, he begins with explicit reference to Malinowski. In this essay on time and work-discipline, he starts with Evans-Pritchard on the Nuer. Thompson was inspired by parts of the classic British social anthropological project.

I will now proceed to say a bit about Thompson's argument. His essay is concerned with examining aspects of a process of change, what he describes as the transition to (mature) industrial society, or industrial capitalism. This transition, he argues, entailed a profound restructuring of work practices – "new disciplines, new incentives, and a new human nature upon which these incentives could bite effectively". And the transition, he seeks to demonstrate, was associated with changes in people's concepts of time, changes in "the inward notation of time". This could be formulated in another way. Thompson attempts to show that new labour habits or practices were formed through a series of different processes: through changes in the division of work; through changes in the supervision of labour; through uses of bells and clocks; through uses of money incentives; through new forms of preachings and education and schooling; and through the suppression of fairs and sports. Through all this, he argues, a new time-discipline was imposed. But, he discusses, how far did the propaganda

really succeed? “How far are we entitled”, he asks, “to speak of any radical restructuring of man’s social nature and working habits?” Thompson’s answer is that yes, the new discipline and ideas about time were indeed internalized. A new temporal knowledge and time consciousness took root in society with the development of industrial capitalism in England from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Thompson’s contrast in the essay is primarily with preindustrial society in the form of peasant society. He argues that the ideas about time that appear in such contexts are marked by “task-orientation”. And he argues that a community which is not industrialized, but where task-orientation remains the norm, seems to show less demarcation between “work” and “life”. Life and labour are intermingled, and the working-day gets longer or shorter according to the task.

But this fairly clear distinction between peasants and factory workers, as Thompson acknowledges, presupposes in reality that we speak about independent peasants or craftsmen. The real difference, Thompson claims, arises when labour is employed. Those who are employed experience a distinction between their employer’s time and their own time. And the employer must use the time of his labour and see that it is not wasted: not the task but the value of time when reduced to money is dominant. Time is now currency: it is not passed but spent.

A basic argument is that the industrial labour process, or large-scale factory organization of work, makes necessary a coordination and synchronization of labour tasks – a highly time-conscious organization of the production process or work. This is related to the use of machinery. In other words, Thompson seeks to make us see that the changes that he examines were related to changes in technology and production techniques that generated a demand for a greater synchronization of labour and a greater exactitude or precision in time-routines. But, and I think this is important, on pages 79 and 80 in the essay, he underscores strongly several points. First, he warns against operating with “one single, supposedly-neutral, technologically-determined, process known as ‘industrialization’.” Second, he claims that “It is also that there has never been any single type of ‘the transition’”. Why? Because, he says, changes are dependent on a whole series of processes – “the systems of power, property relations, religious institutions, etcetera” – inattention to which, he adds, merely flattens phenomena and trivializes analysis. And third, Thompson underscores that what he examines is not only the change to “industrialism” tout court, but to “industrial capitalism”. In other words, he emphasizes that the appearance of new ideas about time also had a lot to do with the emergence of time-measurement as an effect of the struggles between capital and labour. In brief, the argument is not technologically determinist. Rather it is deeply historical, focused on concrete, many-faceted history.

Let me now proceed to say something about Parry’s article. As said, Parry’s text is shaped as an ethnographically driven critique of Thompson’s argument about a form of revolutionary transformation from one type to another, from peasant society to industrial society.

Parry argues that the main catalyst behind the change, for Thompson, is “large-scale machine production which requires an elaborate synchronization of tasks and demands that the factory be kept in constant operation in order to repay the capital invested in it. And he claims that this whole way of operating with a distinction between types is related to the even broader opposition between production for use and production for exchange, which Sahlins – in his early work – in turn associates with a radical difference in the intensities with which labour is utilized. In contrast to the old

economy, the argument is (according to Parry), the modern economy is one in which labour is used and exploited with a new intensity in the quest for unlimited exchange value.

Parry also argues that although many historians and others have sought to qualify Thompson's dichotomizing picture, his image of a fairly sharp break between two productive regimes, two work regimes, much anthropological writing has, in many ways, adopted Thompson's model too uncritically.

Parry seeks to show that his own ethnographic findings from Bhilai and The Bhilai Steel Plant in India, one of the largest steel plants in Asia, in almost no way back Thompson's perspectives and arguments. What exactly in Thompson's argument about two different regimes does Parry problematize and question? At least the following four items:

First, Parry argues that Thompson's model rests on a form of romanticized picture of the old society, the peasants' world. Second, Parry also seeks to demonstrate with his ethnography that "much factory work cannot really be represented as the all-day everyday grind" so often outlined (by Thompson and others). Indeed, a good deal of factory work, argues Parry highly interestingly, should rather be described as "consisting in long fallow periods of comparative idleness punctuated by bouts of intense activity" – in other words, it should be represented more or less as Thompson represents pre-industrial forms of production and peasant societies, claims Parry.

Third, Parry argues that his data don't demonstrate any clear evidence of a sharpening division between "work" and "life". And fourth, according to Parry, we should acknowledge that, as he puts it, "Significant numbers of industrial workers in certain niches of the [industry-based or factory-based] labour market appear to be no less leisured than Sahlins's proverbially leisured hunter-gatherers" – and that it is not obvious that the shift from production for use to production for exchange has been accompanied by any marked intensification of labour.

There is also a second theme embedded in Parry's essay; this has to do with his examination of the contrast between the way in which labour is recruited and used in respectively the public and private sector factories in the Bhilai area. Here, I don't say anything about this part of Parry's discussion, although it definitely is highly interesting.

I would like to briefly mention a few points or sets of factors that I think have relevance for how we should see and assess the significance of Parry's critique of Thompson's general perspective, his argument about two different productive regimes and forms of temporal knowledge:

- In my view, Parry's ethnography from the everyday in these factories is extremely revealing and telling. But I don't think that he has much to say in this essay about the realities in the countryside. He is content to rely on factory workers' representations of life in agriculture. In addition: Thompson acknowledges that he refers above all to the independent peasant or craftsman. I suppose that the rural labour relations in the Bhilai area have been pretty hierarchical? exploitative?
- The state-owned steel plant in Bhilai that he mostly writes about has an enormously luxurious manning – a very large work-force. And Parry writes mostly about the everyday work in the factory among those who have a permanent job – and not so much about those

who are contract workers and seem to work more like Thompson's portrayal of factory workers suggests that factory workers work.

- Thompson's essay puts considerable weight, not only on effects of machine production, but also on English society's ideologues, preachers, moralists – historically constituted cultural processes. Parry has not so much to say about this type of processes – about the effects of religion, schooling, etcetera, on work-discipline and time consciousness.

Don't get me wrong. One of Parry's most basic points seems completely valid and extremely important. This is that we need to be entirely *ethnographic* in our studies also of forms of labour and labour regimes under industrial capitalism.

Finally, I believe that there is a certain limitation buried in the whole debate – or in both Thompson's and Parry's approaches. Both writers discuss only in terms of the distinction between the preindustrial peasant world and the industrial world – and as if the transformation to European or English industrial capitalism took place only as an internal European process of change.

As Mintz, for example, has shown in his influential *Sweetness and Power* (1985), we should think more about the plantation, the Caribbean plantation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the closest thing to industry at the time. Mintz argues that in terms of labour division, work-discipline, and demand for synchronization of labour, the sugar plantation powered by slaves, with its integration of field and factory, was "industry" – that industry started, not in England, but in England's colonies, and a century before it is conventional to say that the industrial revolution took off. Others have argued that models of thinking and of organizing, for example, forms of organizing labour, often were developed by Europeans in the colonies and subsequently travelled to the Western core, European centers. In other words, Thompson invites us to be interested in concrete historical studies of how new labour habits and forms of work-discipline emerged and ultimately helped transform ideas about time. We should not only be interested in peasants and free proletarians – but also in slaves, how slavery work entailed changes in work, work-discipline, and perhaps ultimately time consciousness. Both Thompson's text and Parry's avoid taking the possible effects of colonialism into account.

Some comments from the discussion:

- Parry's ethnography and argument are highly interesting – but his text doesn't seem to be able to wholly undermine the relevance of Thompson's basic views. Both texts seem to have something valid to tell us.
- The use of the word "life" – in the distinction between "work" and "life" – seems deeply problematic. Isn't work (part of) life? What about using different words – and distinguish for example between "work" and "leisure", "work" and "family life", and so on?
- Parry's essay reminds us of something important: the fact that people – here factory workers – can be genuinely "proud" of their work and job even though outside observers may think that they the work that they do is of little value, lack dignity. All sorts of work may be intimately tied to experiences of identity.