HSS 102  
Lecture 4

**Reading Key for E. P. Thompson’s Time, Work Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism (1967)**

E. P. Thompson in his classic essay titled *Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism* tracks the myriad ways in which the breakthroughs in mechanical time-keeping impacted on the everyday experience of time. He says, there emerged a change in apprehension of time with the rise of industrial capitalism, as “task-oriented” measure of time prevalent in the pre-industrial society gradually began to be dominantly replaced by the new measure of timing of labour [time orientation]. The demand for synchronization of labour in the new developments of manufacturing techniques, now combined with the already existing work-ethic of Puritanism, played a crucial role in fashioning the new industrial time-discipline, particularly in England. However, irregularity of the pattern of the work schedule – both diurnal and annual – continued to persist till the first decade of the nineteenth century. This irregularity drew the flak of mercantilists and moralists who continued to propagate “time-thrift” throughout the nineteenth century resorting to various strategies. They advocated even the necessity of withholding wages as a lesson for rooting out idleness. Wage-incentives were introduced as a strategy from the second half of the eighteenth century.

The new division of labour and various other surveillance measures led to new labour habits. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, sharp attacks were directed against popular customs, sports and holidays. These policies of time-discipline provoked the tendencies of backlash from the working group who were traditionally inclined to the task-oriented temporal rhythmic patterns in which their festivities played an important role. To strike a balance between these opposite tensions, Thompson suggests a synthesis of old and new styles of working where humane interests would prevail

The longish article thus sets before it a number of intriguing yet simple questions: How was time passed/spent before the generalization of industrial capitalism in every sphere of economic and social life? How did an inward notion of time come about? In some cultures, Thompson shows with remarkable clarity, time was associated with the rhythm of the nature. How did the abstract regime of clock in those spheres revolutionize time? What did the wrist/pocket watch mean to people belonging to different classes? How did the clock transform itself from a status symbol to a necessary commodity? What does the social biography of the clock tell us about the histories of habit? How did the old notion of industry understood as ‘hard work’ intersect with its new association with a certain form of economic organization of commodity production?

Thompson demonstrates that the new habits of work discipline was imposed to the society through a number of initiatives: changes in the division of labour (from simple to more complex and impersonal sort of division of labour), through the forms of religious preaching of the virtues of thrift and industriousness in the institutional spaces of reformatories, factories, schools, puritan churches, hospitals (these are “analogical spaces of discipline’), and through rigorous suppressions of medieval fairs and sports. A clear regime of norm was promulgated that progressively illegalized leisurely activities and segregated work from other aspects of life. A new knowledge of the utility of time and its value took root in the British society, which began to generalize itself in the 19th century as many other societies started taking the path to industrial capitalism in the 19th and 20th centuries. More often than not, the socialization of the new regime faced resistance. “How fare are we entitled” asks the master-historian, “to speak of any radical restructuring of man’s social nature and working habits”? Much before Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* became fashionable to the academia, Thompson opined that the new disciplinary regime acted through its progressive *internalization among masses*.

Thompson contrasts the industrial time discipline with the ‘preindustrial’ rhythms of time. He tells us that the notion of time in pre-industrial societies is marked by ‘task orientation’. The march of capital gave rise to what he calls ‘time orientation’. Let’s have a quick look at what, according to Thompson, are the salient features of this transformation.

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| Task Orientation | Time Orientation |
| The organization of time according to the necessity of performing particular tasks with comparatively less attention paid to time in labour: ‘The day’s task seems to disclose themselves by the logic of need’ says Thompson. Here, the nature of task determines time>> *time is task dependent* | Work organized by regular, coordinated, synchronized time discipline, the arrival of strict routine, registry books and attendance sheets>>*task becomes time-bound*…routines, deadlines and so on> “universalization of temporality as a measure of activity”. |
| Natural, concrete, heterogeneous, irregular, leisurely, humanly comprehensible time connected more with the location of the sun and the moon, harvest cycles, reproductive cycles. | Unnatural, abstract, tyrannical, internalized, induced to human mind by a set of analogical institutional practices. |
| Production for use: According to the Marxist tradition, use value is measured as ‘a function of the quantity and quality of what is objectified by concrete labour’. Hence, use value contains diverse, heterogeneous and concrete times>time is the function of events and not independent, and can be designated as good or bad. | Production for exchange: Exchange value is connected to the emergence of the abstract time which involves the regularization of productivity of the labour according to a new standardized labour time (clock-time). |
| Time passed. | Time is currency, moralized and monetized. It is spent. |
| A task would generally follow a period of less intense work until another cycle of intense work starts dictated by the rhythms of nature. | Tools of time discipline: division of labour, supervision, fines and incentives, bells and clocks. |