

## Individual Statements on E.P. Thompson

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## *Individual Statements on E.P. Thompson*

### **Jesse Lemisch:**

WHEN I BEGAN MY RESEARCH on the politics and ideas of Jack Tar in Revolutionary America, back in the 1950s, US history was a desert, a sterile place that worked on the almost unchallenged assumption that things that we would later come to see as popular movements from the bottom up were just outbursts of irrationality and drink, with mobs manipulated from above rather than acting on their own and for their own reasons. It was a heresy to go against this consensus.

I struggled with these questions and then – after I wrote my dissertation but before I wrote “Jack Tar in the Streets”(1968) – I came upon the US edition of *The Making of the English Working Class*. Somehow understanding that a historic event was taking place, I inscribed the date inside the cover, “October 26, 1964.” Six months later, I was on the train from London to Yorkshire. I had come to London primarily to correlate Admiralty records concerning impressment of American seamen with events that my research had turned up in American sources. In this endeavour, I had had next to no guidance and a fair amount of discouragement: “there are no sources,” said Yale historian Edmund Morgan. After Yale, I got a job at the University of Chicago. Like a good junior faculty member, during my stay in London I arranged to visit Cambridge as the guest of my Chicago colleague, Daniel Boorstin – a right-wing ideologue masquerading as historian: he saw early American Quakers and other dissidents as engaged in a “quest for martyrdom.” He was playing the don that year. At the last minute, I heard from Chicago that Edward had written me an enthusiastic letter with an invitation to come to Yorkshire. Encouraged by this, I cancelled my Boorstin visit and spent a wonderful and memorable time with Edward and Dorothy – one of the first Americans to make this pilgrimage.

Not long thereafter, I was fired by the University of Chicago because – said the eminent chair who also ran a campus military intelligence unit (William H. McNeill) – “your convictions interfered with your scholarship.” I have never doubted for a minute that I took the correct fork in the road in deciding to cancel Boorstin and instead visit the Thompsons. It seems almost a moment out of Bunyan. When I was fired, Edward remained loyal, and, when it came, refused an invitation by the Chicago department to join it for a time on a visiting basis. (Earlier, when they had asked me if I had any ideas for hiring an English historian, they responded to my suggestion by saying “Edward Who?”) Down through the years after that, Edward was a powerful influence on the re-writing of American history by such people as Herb Gutman, Alfred Young, David Montgomery and the cohort that came afterwards. We read, studied and taught *The Making* and in the classroom and in the libraries the Thompsonian

phrases rumbled around in our heads, guiding us as we defined our research. At the same time, Thompsonian terms resonated with the rising movements of the Sixties: Agency, Moral Economy, Time, Work-Discipline, “legitimizing notion of right.”

Edward had an enormous impact on how we in the United States rethought our history, and at the same time he was a vibrant exemplar of the joining of the English and American lefts. A peak moment that stands out in my memory occurred at the memorable Anglo-American Labor History Conference at Rutgers in 1973. I chaired a session that involved Edward, some of his British colleagues, and Americans who had been influenced by him. From the platform, Edward told the story of our meeting at the Bradford train station in 1965. He recalled that I had asked over the phone, “But how will we recognize each other?” As he told the story, he recalled that he had walked into an almost totally empty station to see “a scruffy fellow” sitting on an attaché case to which was pasted a red sticker that read “Let’s Get out of Vietnam.” How, indeed, would we recognize each other? When Edward recalled this in 1973, I held up my successor attaché case, which bore the same slogan, eight years later. The crowd stood and cheered for the cause, for Anglo-American Labour History, and for our New Lefts.

### **Alice Kessler-Harris:**

I WAS IN MY SECOND YEAR of graduate school when E.P. Thompson published *The Making of the English Working Class* in 1963. At the time there was no identifiable field of Labour History in the United States academy. Such work as there was tended to focus on trade unions and generally came out of economics departments. My own dissertation, which was about the history of Jewish immigrant workers in the 1890s, fell into the then rather filio-pietistic field of immigration history. But I was lucky. I came under the wing of an early twentieth-century historian named Charles (Pete) Forcey, a Wisconsin PhD and graduate school friend of Herbert Gutman’s. Pete Forcey introduced me to Gutman around the time that Gutman introduced Thompson to America.

Thompson (I only later learned to call him Edward) did two things for US historians: he redefined class in a way that opened that once ostracized term to usage among Americanists; not unrelatedly, he legitimized the field that became labour history. The two are deeply intertwined in multiple ways, among them, their receptivity to gender as an important explanatory variable. This was almost certainly not the aim of Thompson or his generation of historians, whose conception of historical change rotated around more formal political activity than we now conceive. Yet without Thompson’s persuasive reformulation, we Americanists might not so readily have incorporated gender or women.

In his oft-quoted definition, Thompson identified class as a “social and cultural formation, arising from processes which can only be studied as they work themselves out over a considerable historical period.” Explicitly rejecting the notion that class was a structure, Thompson insisted that it was “defined by men as they live their own history.”<sup>1</sup> His explicit use of the male subject in that sentence and throughout the book has drawn appropriate criticism. Joan Wallach Scott eloquently took him to task. Appreciative of his willing inclusion of a handful of female activists and leaders, Scott argued that Thompson’s use of language “created a sense of class that though described as universal was indelibly male.”<sup>2</sup> The criticism was echoed by Catherine Hall, who noted that Thompson theorized class identity with a male subject.<sup>3</sup> I don’t disagree with these assessments, and yet I note that in opening the door to a meaning of class that incorporated the daily lives of ordinary people, Thompson introduced a new realm of power that specifically and inevitably included women.

Class and class consciousness, Thompson insisted, did not emerge exclusively from the realm of production, but were rooted in the breadth of human experience and the social roles played by actors. This formulation moved a generation of self-defined labour historians to explore the customs and belief systems embedded in the social organizations of workers, in their community lives, and in the families that sustained them. Family formation, social reproduction, migration and mobility aspirations, all became subsets of a new labour history, each of them the objects of investigation. Under these circumstances, historians could no longer assign women to peripheral roles in class formation; rather, their participation, as family and community members, in shaping behaviour and transmitting values became central to conceptions of evolving class consciousness. Political activities, historians began to suspect, arose as much from gendered ideas of masculinity and femininity, of respectability and independence, of appropriate and inappropriate jobs and wages, as from relations to production.

By the late 1960s, just half a decade after *The Making of the English Working Class* entered our reading lists, labour historians, who might earlier have paid attention to women only when they were engaged in wage-work, began to notice workers, male and female, who worked in paid and unpaid positions inside the home as well as in factories and pits. They noted as well that workers imbibed the cultures of their ethnic, racial, and religious communities, their rural or traditional backgrounds, and their extended kin networks. Tracing the dispersion of culture, and its relationship to the changing values and expectations

1. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York 1963), 11.

2. Joan Wallach Scott, “Women in *The Making of the English Working Class*,” in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York 1988), 72.

3. Catherine Hall, “The Tale of Samuel and Jemima: Gender and Working-Class Culture in Nineteenth-Century England,” in Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland, eds., *E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (Philadelphia 1990), 82.

of ordinary people, transformed definitions of the political. If only men, for much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, fully engaged in formal legislative politics and judicial decision-making, women could and did participate in a rough and ready politics of pamphleteering, public protest, and ritual expression. These community-originated forms of behavior, which became the subjects of the new labour history, have provided empirical depth to notions of class and complicated ideas of consciousness. Not accidentally, they have required a gender-encompassing agenda – one that utilizes information from every aspect of social and family life. The reward for historians of the working class has been immense: few would dispute that incorporating women and gender into their mix of evidence has enriched historical explanation. We have Edward Thompson to thank for this.

### **June Hannam:**

I FIRST MET E.P. THOMPSON when I was a student at Warwick University in the turbulent times of 1966–70. His lectures to the first-year history undergraduates were a tour de force, a theatrical performance. He strode through the lecture hall carrying an armful of books from which he quoted at length, while sweeping back his unruly mop of hair. He then proceeded to transform our view of the world of early industrialisation with his descriptions of the moral economy of the crowd, time and work discipline and, most exciting of all, wife selling as a popular form of divorce. He encouraged us to read the novels of Thomas Hardy with a new set of eyes and to value the works of older scholars such as the Hammonds – advice which has stayed with me throughout the years.

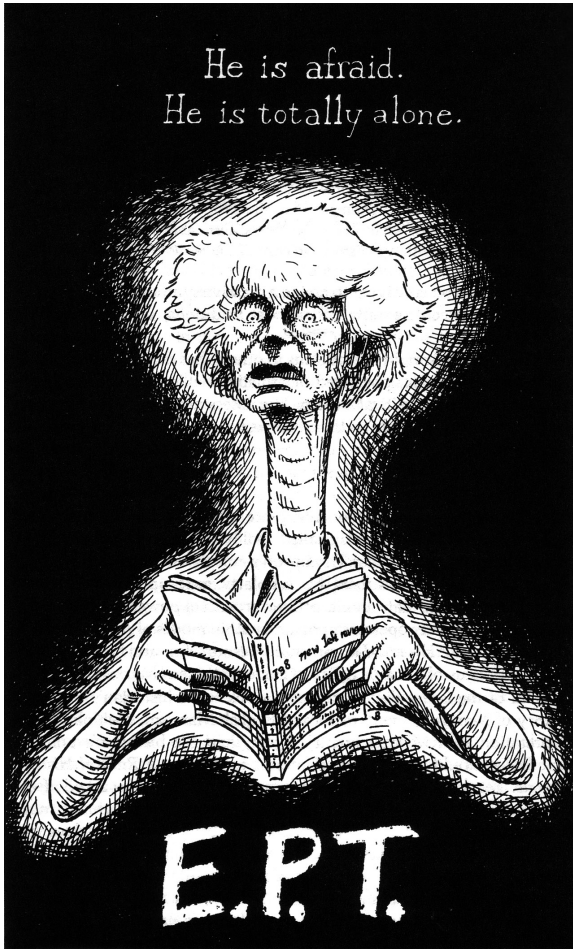
I was not taught by Edward after the first year of my undergraduate degree but he was a vital presence on the campus. In this period of student unrest against the Vietnam War and critique of the education system he gave frequent talks about his vision of current left politics – sometimes he was disconcertingly critical of the naivety of students who thought they could resist the power of the state. He also gave fascinating reminiscences of his involvement in communist and left politics and adult education in Yorkshire, which provided the context for Thompson's study of working-class self activity. What stayed with me most was the inextricable intertwining of family, politics, work and social life at this time and the importance of his friendship with the labour and left activists, Dorothy and Joseph Greenald, to whom Edward dedicated *The Making of the English Working Class*.

When *The Making* was published in paperback I can remember reading the whole book from cover to cover. Who could ever forget first reading the lines "I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete; handloom weaver...from the enormous condescension of posterity."

The approach to class as a relationship, bringing together experience and consciousness, the notion that ordinary people were significant historical actors and had complex emotions and ideas, and the importance of looking at history from below struck an immediate chord with me. I was already predisposed to be influenced by such an approach. From a working-class background, and the first person in my family to go to university, I was brought up to be a committed trade unionist and to be critical of inherited wealth and privilege. At Warwick there were numerous socialist societies exploring new ways of thinking about left politics as well as the protest movements encouraging direct action. In this atmosphere it is not surprising that I chose to study further with Thompson and stayed on at Warwick to do the MA in Comparative Labour History.

In that year contemporary politics and labour history were again intertwined. The course attracted students from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds but we all took part in the sit-ins in the registry in protest against the university's links with business which formed the basis of Thompson's book, *Warwick University Ltd.* In this heady atmosphere our debates about labour history had never seemed so relevant to our daily lives. Influenced by the new Women's Liberation Movement the small number of female students began to question why we only seemed to look at miners and engineers – where were the women? Having read Edward's article on the Leeds socialist, Tom Maguire, I decided to research the Leeds Tailoresses' Strike 1889 and, as my supervisor, he gave me his full support and encouragement. Thompson could be fierce when debating points of theory with his contemporaries, but I remember him as a sympathetic, if critical, supervisor who could be sensitive when dealing with a nervous and unconfident postgraduate.

*The Making*, the biography of William Morris, and Edward Thompson's work on Leeds socialists – all of which I encountered at a very formative period of my life – inspired me to carry on with history research and affected how I approached my teaching in my first full-time post as a lecturer at Bristol Polytechnic. I introduced social history courses which had *The Making* as their starting point, putting up with sarcastic remarks from some external examiners because of my approach. The Tailoresses' Strike was the starting point for my long term interest in socialist women. Questions and approaches may have changed over time, but the importance of recovering lost voices and the interconnections between history and politics still remain, for me as well as for the project of working-class history.



Josh Brown