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.