

Historicizing Thompson

An Interview with Bryan D. Palmer

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lh: Perhaps you could start with some background. What was your relationship with Thompson?

Bryan Palmer: Yes, this is an important beginning point. There are already those trying to establish their credentials through the creation of a mythology of proximity to Edward, and I would not want my own relationship to him to be misunderstood in this context. I know some people — a disproportionate number of the small group that comprised Edward's graduate students at Warwick were from the United States and Canada — whose time with him was quite intense and reaches back to the mid-to-late 1960s. I have met people, largely through my contact with Edward and Dorothy, who worked politically with the Thompsons in the 1950s. These are the kinds of enduring experiences of intellectual exchange and comradeship, rooted in ideas and struggles, that are, outside of ties of love and, perhaps, blood, primary. I was never of those kinds of circles. But I have known Edward since the mid-to-late 1970s and, especially from the mid-1980s on, my personal relationship with both Edward and Dorothy was affectionate and reasonably close.

My contact with Edward was of course first consolidated through reading him, primarily *The Making of the English Working Class*, but also some of the polemical writings of the mid-1960s and his *Past & Present* articles on time and discipline and the crowd. I am now an old man, an emeritus editor (which, since I have never been an editor, is quite an accomplished honour), but I was not old enough to know anything first-hand about the formative events in Edward's political and intellectual life: fighting fascism in the 1940s; breaking from the Communist Party in 1956; trying to build a new left in the late 1950s and early 1960s. When I first read *The Making* in the very early 1970s I was nineteen or twenty years old, had quit university to experience and live within what had survived of the left in New York City, and was attending the most stimulating classes in my academic life at a place (this is actually too strong a word since it was more of an atmosphere and a human creation, there being only loft space that was rented, and which we all contributed to maintain) called Alternate U. This was not a learning environment of competition for grades and grants, but it was a milieu of intense debate and argument, as well as fruitful exchange and mutual support, even, especially perhaps, at the point of hard disagreement. Reading Thompson blew me away. More than any other book it showed me that working-class history could be written in ways that broke through the boundaries of scholastic complacency, to recover experience that could impart meaning to the politics of our own time. When, a few years later, I moved in the direction of graduate school, I was uncertain about what to study: I had a longstanding and intense interest in race and seriously considered doing what then would have been called black

history. But it was relooking at *The Making* that convinced me to do labour history, first, and, second, that one could actually intervene in Canadian historiography, which in my youth I perhaps too harshly regarded as parochial and boring (well, I haven't lost all of my youth). It wasn't just the monumental achievement of Thompson's book that made me a believer. It was its constant going against the grain, its refusal to be complacent in the face of conventional wisdom. Whether it was in its evocation of Luddism's meaning to those who broke machines, or its satirically biting broadsides at the academic mountain of apology and rationalization thrown up in the face of the devastation of England's Industrial Revolution, the *tone* of Thompson captured me.

When I first met Edward in the mid-1970s it was as a graduate student attending a couple of his American lectures. He only confirmed me in my thoughts and appreciations. Like no other historian I have seen, he had the stage presence and style of a performing actor. He read in dialect, his hand was constantly brushing through and tugging at his hair and eyeglasses, he paced and fumed and *got angry* at the enemy, be it the Manchester yeomanry or a zealous improving nineteenth-century folklorist who understood the rough culture of the poor as only something to be evangelically exorcised. Our initial substantive contact came, I think, around 1978. Thompson had written a paper on English rough music and I was, in the aftermath of getting my thesis on Hamilton workers done, working on the same subject for North America. After a talk at York University I approached him gingerly with the lengthy manuscript on charivaris in hand. "You did it!" he yelled. "Fantastic — let me *have* it." A couple of months later I got an incredible letter, the kind Edward was famous for, full of support, generous in sharing materials and ideas, hard-hitting in its criticisms.

He was by this time finishing up the polemic on Althusser and was, I think, besieged by correspondence. I had been asked to give a paper on Thompson at an academic gathering in upstate New York. I wrote to ask for a few matters of clarification. By this time I was aware of Thompson's own history and I explained, although probably in the wrong kind of language, that I wanted to explore his historical writing as well as his work of political engagement (by which I meant the writing that came out of 1956 and its aftermath, specifically the *New Reasoner*, which Thompson edited with John Saville). I crossed some kind of line in Edward's mind when I referred to his well known history and his more obscure polemics. Now this was not, to my way of thinking, at all wrong: in a 1976 *Radical History Review* interview Edward himself noted that this political part of his work was not well known in the United States; it was less so in Canada — no one was at that time referring to the *New Reasoner*. Edward jumped to the conclusion that I knew nothing about the British and European communist traditions, that I was probably a pure-and-simple academic on the make, and that I was bothering him. He told me all I needed to know concerning the direct questions I had asked, but then he told me to take a hike. I believe the words he used — they still ring in my ears — were: "bugger your transatlantic academic snobbery."

This was not good. I was devastated. I wrote Edward a three line letter apologizing, saying there was a misunderstanding about what I had meant, and indicating I would not bother him again. What happened next was typical of Edward: blow-up, followed

by remorse, then a mending of the broken fences. He wrote back offering me apologies, saying it had all been “hyperbole” and I would know this if I knew him better. When, months later and with considerable trepidation, I sent Edward the paper I had written on him I received, quickly, in the mails: a) a gift copy of *The Poverty of Theory* and b) a nice postcard saying that my essay was the best account of the reciprocities of his politics and his history he had read. That paper later grew into my short book *The Making of E.P. Thompson* (1980) which, whatever its many shortcomings, covered ground in a political way that others have been reproducing in the service of their academic careers for the last ten years. I was gratified that Edward’s political comrades, such as John Saville, liked the book (Saville read it through the night at a conference he and I attended at Warwick), and that Edward asked for a few copies for his personal use. I was later told by a friend of the Thompson family that the book found its way into Christmas stockings. And when I went to a celebration for Thompson after his death I took a bundle of books, courtesy of my friend at New Hogtown Press, Russell Hann; they were graciously grabbed up by old CND campaigners, neighbours, and relatives, most of whom knew Edward only through specific encounters around single issues or family connections.

From the early 1980s on Thompson and I were friends, I think, but friends separated by geography, age, and sometimes politics. But we also shared much, including a perspective on historiographic developments and fashions, and a set of international political concerns. I visited Wick Episcopi two times during the 1980s, corresponded regularly with Edward, Dorothy, and END during the height of the peace movement and, when the pressures of commitment for Edward eased in the mid-to-late 1980s, I worked quite hard, and against the subversions of the odd colleague, to get Edward and Dorothy teaching posts at Queen’s. They came in the winter semester of 1988 and I spent a lot of time with them. I picked them up at the Toronto airport and was quite amused at how disappointed Edward was that he went through the customs and immigration interrogation without a hitch: “That wouldn’t have happened years ago,” he fumed. “We aren’t a threat to the state anymore,” he mused in obvious disappointment. Edward used his Queen’s teaching to get back into the scholarship on eighteenth-century England, which he had been out of for years. His lectures, on the subjects of *Customs in Common* (1991), were really quite amazing because they were an expression of him working through a theme, reworking it through a new contact with a developing literature, and placing it in a local context. His fifth lecture on charivaris, for instance, was introduced by research he had done in the Queen’s Archives, where he found the first Kingston bylaw outlawing processions of rough musickers. And he did this in extremely ill health. He really was quite sick, quite run down. He contracted shingles, I am quite sure, from my daughter Beth, who was then five years old. One Sunday she and Edward and Dorothy and I spent the day together: we went to the local harness racing track, which Edward and Dorothy found fascinating — they always appreciated getting *out* of academic contexts, something which I need no inducement to do myself — and had a meal together. There was much playing with Beth and much close proximity (I still have the image of Edward, looming around a corner, his awkward monster imitations somehow characteristic, bounding at Beth who retreated in laughter). Two days later

Beth had chickenpox and, shortly thereafter, Edward was inflicted with a bad dose of shingles.

Edward gave the Gutman Memorial Lecture at the New York Public Library that year and I drove Edward and Dorothy back to Kingston. We stopped along the route through upstate New York to visit communities of native people associated with a unique case of customary land usage that intrigued Edward and that had ended up being discussed in the courts of eighteenth-century Britain. This had been the subject of his lecture, which disturbed some American historians of radical impulses because it seemed to discredit their own revolutionary heritage: aboriginal peoples do make things messy.

There was more personal contact over the course of the next year because Edward and Dorothy took a 1989 job at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. I visited; we socialized; I spoke to the Centre where Edward and Dorothy were teaching; we argued; we agreed. But Edward was by now *very* ill. It was all he could do to carry the roast to the table. Still, he was characteristically more concerned about his friends' health and safety than his own. When I drove home a friend staying at my house informed me that Edward had called from New Jersey to see if I had made it home safely: he had discovered nails in his driveway and was worried one of them might have worked its way into a tire and caused an accident on the highway.

Returning to England, Edward was pretty much housebound for what was left for him of the 1990s. He wanted to get his writing out and he did: *Customs in Common* (1991) and his two 1993 books, the first on his father's relation with the Indian poet and nationalist Tagore, the second his much-awaited *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law*. There is also a forthcoming collection of historical writings that will appear with Merlin. Like many friends I deliberately limited my correspondence with Edward in these last years because I knew he always felt obliged to write a 'proper' letter and I did not want him expending energies on this when I knew and felt strongly that he had much more important things to do. Yet as I say this there are tears in my eyes. I should have done more than send him his yearly ration of maple syrup (which he loved and which, to Dorothy's disgust — "Oh, Edward!" she would proclaim with a grimace — he was known to eat with a spoon), a few letters, and get on the phone occasionally (although that too was difficult for Edward *hated* the telephone: "You're never alone when you have a phone," was a placard I remember seeing in the alcove at Wick).

So that was my relationship with Edward. It was a personal friendship, and a political one. Its basis, however, was the writing of history. At times the relationship was stormy, for this was the nature of all of Edward's relationships, with the possible exception of his marriage, where I saw no hint, *ever* (I find this hard to fathom), of anything approximating tumult. But Edward valued, as I do, loyalty. I knew he was loyal to me, even as he disagreed with me and could put his finger on my flaws as an historian and as a person of the left. He defended his friends and he bypassed, in public, their shortcomings and failures. This was always, as well, his practice with his own students. When two friends interacted in critical ways, he would tell the one he thought was in the wrong, as he did with me over portions of *Descent into Discourse* (1990) — a book about which he was nevertheless quite positive — but

he maintained support in general for both parties. This loyalty was always there. In his first lecture at Queen's, entitled "Custom[s] and Culture[s]," he singled out for rebuke an historian who had long taken ostensibly left-wing jabs at my historical writing. Later in the year he received a manuscript to read for *Past & Present*. Written by a Canadian, it was on rough music. He asked me to read it and give him my views. I declined, knowing that there would be something of a conflict of interest. Once he had assessed the manuscript he came to me and said, "Well, it's not bad really, but it lacks something, and I think its overly forced in its argument." "Could be," I replied. "*Past & Present* really should publish more by Canadians," he continued, "and we should publish something on this subject." Then he gave me a wry grin, his eyebrows went up, his eyes twinkled in a bit of mischievousness, and he added: "But it should be by *Bryan Palmer*." I told him this was silly, publish the piece if it was worthy, and his "harrumph" ended the matter.

I disagreed with Edward Thompson; I agreed with him. I knew him; I didn't know him. His *example* made me a part of what I am, for better *and* for worse. He was a great human being, a lifelong socialist, a truly inspirational writer. His passion made him different, special, whether it be in laughter, which he loved, in loyalties, which he stood by, or in political engagement, which was his life's work.

lh: That tells us a lot, but it leaves out, curiously, Marxism. You barely touched on this. Why?

Palmer: Well, this is an important question, and a difficult one. In the end, I mean at the end of his days, not in the overall picture, Edward was not a Marxist. He would not have called himself one by the 1980s, although I believe he remained true to historical materialism as a method and an approach to the past. But, like Gutman, Thompson believed strongly that what Marxism had left us was, "a series of very important questions." To say this, however, is to obscure important matters. For most of his life, Thompson was indeed a Marxist. And when he gave up his adherence to Marxism he did not renounce it, proclaim Marxism as a kind of enemy, and say that he wanted none of it any more. He had seen this with Arthur Koestler and others in the 1940s and it sickened him. And he saw it again, I think, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as a stampede of British historians made their loud exit from Marxism *and* historical materialism. He didn't like this much more.

So you see, it is not an easy question. It is not to be expected that anyone, let alone someone of E.P. Thompson's creative genius, should remain frozen in their beliefs and theoretical frameworks and political commitments. We expect change; we also expect some fundamental continuities. That happened with Edward, but it was a long process. And when it was most difficult — in terms of popular hostility and academic censure — to be a Marxist, Edward Thompson *was* a Marxist. Read the reviews of *William Morris* (1955) and *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), if you don't believe me, or Thompson's political journalism of the late 1950s and early 1960s, where the titles of his writings tell it all: "Socialist Humanism: or an Epistle to the Philistines," "Revolution," and my favourite, "Revolution Again! or Shut Your Ears and Run." Thompson was a Marxist when he worked on the Yugoslav

Railway Brigade in 1947, when he penned the pamphlet *The Fascist Threat to Britain* in the same year, when he proclaimed an end to complicity with Stalinism in 1956 but dedicated the next years of his life to building a new left. He was a Marxist when he taught in the Leeds Extra-Mural Department, struggling to be true to the principles of the old Workers' Educational Association, when he announced at a meeting of tutors that his purpose in doing adult education was "to create revolutionaries." He *said* that, in 1948 or 1950, in a room that contained dour liberals intent on maintaining 'University standards', people who could have fired him, I suspect, on the spot.

I mean only two things by insisting that Thompson was a Marxist in these years. First, he was a Marxist of the deed. He believed, and he did this, in putting his body between fascism and freedom. He acted. If he was wrong he was wrong on the side, not of interpreting the world, but of changing it. That is the right side to be wrong on: those errors can be corrected. Oh, sure, there were other influences than Marx at work on him, but those influences were, in this early period, *complementary* to Marx. What is unMarxist about Blake — "He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence" — or about Morris? Thompson took the powerful romantic critique of capitalism and harnessed it to the cause of revolutionary socialism. He *was* the William Morris of our time. Second, he was a Marxist of the word, of theory, although it was not the fashionable theory of contemporary 'critical' studies. His political writings of the period 1947-1962 are always characterized by attention to the primacy of the working class, to the necessity of revolution, to the vital importance of consciousness and oppositional forms of culture. They are always, moreover, *interventions* in the actual issues of the hour. Politically, these writings (like his actions) never gave one inch in the struggle against capitalist structures and values, just as they never (and this is always the greatest danger for the Marxist revolutionary) compromised around the question of social democratic reformism, which for Thompson was of course centred in the Labour Party, of which he was for some time a reluctant unenthusiastic member. He wrote on *this*; he abhorred the Labour Party leadership.

lh: But what about the determination of the economic? What about materialism?

Palmer: OK, yes, this is a point, but it is not so much of one as is perhaps assumed. Thompson did not spend his time attending to the structures of economic power, to the process of accumulation, which drives the engines of change within political economy, which is where exploitation happens. His concern was with how this was lived. He assumed an understanding of economic development and change. He worked with historians such as Saville and Hobsbawm whom he felt more able to address the economic. He was not so much silent on questions of hard economics as he was willing to let others address them because he felt that is where their talents lay and his were in other realms. But he never thought class was not formed within boundaries of economic determination, as he stated clearly time and time again. In his own engagement with the metaphor of base and superstructure it was not so much that he refused the meaning of the metaphor, as that he refused the mechanical implications of the metaphor, which could be destructive of an appreciation of humanity and what it did with 'the base'.

Ih: You say he did not die a Marxist. So when did this change happen?

Palmer: In 1962 C. Wright Mills was referring to Thompson as one of those “plain Marxists” who have lost in the struggle for power, a figure outside of the Communist Party, but one who, like many others, attended to the difficult historical questions of freedom and necessity. The 1960s were not good years, on the whole, for Edward, although they were years in which his academic reputation was being made. He found Marxist theory moving in ‘theological’ theoretical directions, he found the ‘second’ new left of youth revolt undisciplined and self-centred in its distance from the peace movement and the labour movement. He was, for the first time, isolated politically, although he broke out of this with writings in *The Socialist Register* and in the publication, with Raymond Williams and others, of the 1968 *May Day Manifesto*. Still, he was not embedded, as he had been in his days in the Communist Party and the first new left. This culminated in his assault on Althusser in *The Poverty of Theory*. I would argue that Edward was still a Marxist at this point of engagement with French structural Marxism. But he was now insisting that there was not one Marxist tradition (he had maintained, up to this point something of that position, arguing that Stalinism was a rupture from Marxism and a debasement of it that demanded the recovery of the Marxist tradition). There were many. With the tradition of historical materialism, evident in the rise of working-class history, with the tradition of the communist Partisan resistance to fascism, with the dissident Marxists of 1956, from Nagy in Hungary to his own comrades of the *New Reasoner*, with the anti-imperialism of the Marxist movement, he had no quarrel. But there were other Marxisms, theoretical and practical, with which he could not stand in common struggle. His engagement with Althusser was in fact the *Marxist* culmination of his longstanding appreciation of Marxism’s many faces.

I do not think he started to write “The Poverty of Theory; or, an Orrery of Errors” *knowing* that this was his swan song to Marxism. And it was not: this is, whatever its excesses and problems, a *Marxist* text. Throughout the argument, Thompson is fighting to rehabilitate a particular kind of Marxism. So I would suggest he was still a Marxist in the 1970s, and there are other indications of this, including his response to Tony Benn and, as late as 1979, his blunt, principled reply to the hectoring anti-Marxist red-baiting of Conor Cruise O’Brien, with whom Thompson had once been personally friendly.

The difficulty was that Thompson had been long engaged in his own dialogue with Marxism. He stayed with Marxism for so long. He stayed with it through the dog days of apathy and supposed ‘American Century’. He stayed with it through his dismissal from the *New Left Review*. He stayed with it through Althusser. There was a lot of history, a lot of commitment in this tenacity. What broke him from Marxism, I think, was the *response* to *The Poverty of Theory*. A bit of this went on within St. Paul’s Church, and this is much remembered; it is almost mythological in the memory of social historians of the left. Still, the key point was the immense barrage of attack that came down on Edward’s head, some of it from old comrades such as Stuart Hall, others from outside the discipline of history. And this response to his response was no kinder or more fraternal than he had been. He would have expected nothing less.

But in the end I sense that he simply had had enough. His Marxism of the word was over; he closed his book on Althusser and he put aside his book on Marxism (I won't say *closed* for he would return to Marx, Marxism, and what had been his own Marxist tradition from time to time).

And perhaps this Marxism was not broken by words alone, but by the need for deeds as well, at least as Edward saw it. For the furor around the Thompson/Althusser clash happened at precisely the time that a renewed arms race prompted Edward and millions of others to rehabilitate the late 1950s Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, extending it to the European Nuclear Disarmament movement. Thompson, now on the world stage of an immense immobilization, found Marxism less and less a guide. He now began to accentuate a side of his politics that had matured in his 1970s journalism, where themes of democracy and people's power increasingly displaced class. This was where he saw the political imperatives of the last decades of the twentieth century, and this was only reinforced in his global anti-nuclear campaigning and by the implosion of actually existing socialist Stalinist states, where he always sided with the insurgents, often, to my mind, too uncritically. A staunch anti-Stalinist, he thus ended his days outside of Marxism, but his distance was balanced with respect for much that he associated with one of a number of Marxist traditions. He never degenerated into a vile enemy of Marxism and he never, I think, abandoned historical materialism.

Ih: What explains his impact on the writing of left history? Why is there a Thompsonian presence in social history, but not, say, an easily identifiable Hobsbawmian or Hillian presence?

Palmer: This is a good question, and a complex one. It demands certain refusals. First, there is no school associated with any of the British Marxist historians, save, perhaps for the academic industry that some non-historians, such as Harvey Kaye, have built up. This industry informs us and is useful, but it is very far from 'Thompsonian'. Second, the very term Thompsonian, and its twinned surname, culturalism, can be refused as well, at least in the negative context in which they are often bandied about. They were and are constructions that came out of two rather disjointed moments of denigration, the one associated with a strained structuralist (largely British) attempt to question the Marxist credentials of certain texts of social history, the other an empiricist anti-Marxist, anti-theoretical reaction of pique (in Canada associated with historians such as McNaught and Bercuson) at the airplay the so-called 'new' working-class history was getting. In the one case, no structuralist histories have appeared that come anywhere close to rivalling Thompson's *Making*, as a text of history *or* an historical text of Marxism. *Pace* Richard Johnson, structuralism just did not deliver, and the British debate over structuralism and culturalism has died. In the other case, the empiricist assault on the social and cultural history of the working class was perhaps most acute in Canada, precisely because there was such a weak Marxist tradition of historical inquiry here. But those boys are gone now; some of us are still around.

lh: Yes, but we are not using Thompsonianism in this negative sense. Rather, we can embrace the term positively. Why was Thompson so influential?

Palmer: Right, this gets us back to what is good in your question. Thompson's influence exceeds that of other British Marxist historians I think for two reasons. First, in the case of someone like Hill, his work was always so focussed on a particular English development that had no real parallel elsewhere: the political revolution of the seventeenth century. Hill has had a most pronounced impact, of course, but his work turned so richly on a single historical moment that it has tended to register in more specialized studies, and cannot easily translate into the historical experience of, say, nineteenth-century Latin America. Second, figures like Hobsbawm and Victor Kiernan were so broad-ranging and eclectic, and their work encompassed different 'moments' and 'impulses' that it, too, while certainly influential, could not be easily digested into an interpretive meal. Or, to consider the youngest member of the Communist Party Historians' Group, Raphael Samuel, who has had a great impact at Ruskin and in the *History Workshop* movement: can you imagine crafting work along Samuelist lines? The question is absurdly rhetorical for Samuel's work, however creative, has been everywhere and anywhere; it lacks the *political* coherence of Thompson's work which, for all its much-commented-on lack of control, always revolved around a definable interpretive centre.

Thompson was different precisely because all of his work, from the eighteenth century essays through the account of the English working class in the Industrial Revolution to Morris and Maguire and Victorian socialism, addressed the more coherent problem of class formation. Moreover, it did this in ways that brought to the world the intellectual attention to *desire and agency* in the face of necessity and structure. This generalized problem of class formation from the vantage point of the class itself was more easily generalized into other national and regional experiences and, in its focus on the relationship of subjective experience and objective determination, could also be adapted to the history of other subordinate groups besides the working class: women; ethnic and racial minorities; even geo-spatial entities, such as colonized states.

But that said, Thompson's work and its influence, his genius and his accomplishment, need to be placed alongside that of other historians with whom he worked, who placed more emphasis on sides of 'making' that need consideration. I once talked to Edward about his piece on "Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism," suggesting to him that this was an interesting account of the cultural dimensions of Marx's understanding of primitive accumulation. He was a bit puzzled by this, but immediately suggested that I should talk with Pete Linebaugh. He might just as easily have turned me to his old comrade John Saville. The point is that Thompson's work was always co-operative work, always many-sided and reaching into sides that he himself might have underdeveloped, the better to accentuate a point that needed making and that he thought he could make with particular force, which he almost always did. But the point was never meant to stand alone, just as Thompson's own chronology cannot be sliced up, with a piece from, say, 1989, left standing as his epitaph. Historicizing Edward Thompson necessitates more than that, and it is by

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historicizing him that we will learn from his example, standing on his shoulders to see our left history better than he could. This, of course, is a big order; he was a tall man, an historian of the kind of stature that is rare and not likely to be reproduced.

lh: So we have to listen to many conversations, and to look at the entire picture, not just parts of it.

Palmer: Exactly. Up to a point, of course.