

Introduction: The Global E.P. Thompson

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ABSTRACT: This article introduces the present Special Theme on the global reception and appropriation of E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). It aims to interrogate Thompson's legacy and potential vitality at a moment of renewed social and intellectual upheavals. It emphasizes the need for an interdisciplinary and global reflection on Thompson's work and impact for understanding how class, nation, and "the people" as subjects of historical inquiry have been repeatedly recast since the 1960s. Examining the course of Thompson's ideas in Japan and West Germany, South Africa and Argentina, as well as Czechoslovakia and Poland, each of the following five articles in the Special Theme is situated in specific and different locations in the global historiographical matrix. Read as a whole, they show how national historiographies have been products of local processes of state and class formation on the one hand, and transnational transfers of intellectual and historiographical ideas, on the other. They highlight the remarkable ability of Thompsonian social history to inspire new lives in varying national contexts shaped by different formations of race, class, and state.

The global crisis of 1914–1945 occurred at the intersection of class and nation. The competition between these two forms of collectivity drove the state system into its devastating thirty years' crisis.¹ And while World War II seemed to settle these questions, they reemerged immediately in the postwar world, organized along new, broader geographical dimensions.² The double division between East and West and North and

1. This analysis is derived from Arno J. Mayer's classic work, *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War*, 2nd ed. (London, 2010).

2. On this process writ large, see Eric Hobsbawm's magnum opus, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York, 1996), pp. 199–400. See also Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge, 2007).

South – socialist against capitalist and metropole against colony – set in motion new contests between competing forms of collective social organization. Who were “the people”? The national citizenry? The peasantry? The proletariat? How did race and gender shape or alter these categories?³

Within this matrix of competing collectivities, a global postwar historiography took shape; an uneven and intertwined field, decisively shaped by particular histories and divergent societies with distinct positions within the global economy. Like the world system itself, this historiography was divided over the question of which agglomerations of human experience added up to a proper subject of history. In some parts of the world, triumphant national narratives were in ruins with the demise of nationalist regimes of Germany and Japan, while they reached a zenith in others, such as with the rise of the “consensus school” in the United States, marking the opening of the American century.⁴ Historians in the defeated fascist countries sought a break with the idea of national heritage, while those in the triumphant capitalist and socialist powers tried to carve theirs in stone.⁵ In the colonial world, the question instead regarded the invention of the nation: where did its roots lie? To whom did the postcolonial nation belong?⁶ Social struggles in the Global South contested this question along lines of race and class, inventing national histories in the process. These struggles gave shape to the question of collective life in the Global North as well. Historians have demonstrated, for example, that it was only within the context of the double struggles of Cold War and decolonization that the postwar African-American insurgency took wing; this insurgency, a decolonization movement within the metropole, in turn opened the first

3. For assessment of these debates in anglophone and francophone historiography, see Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1999); Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, *The Future of Class in History: What's Left of the Social?* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2007).

4. In Germany, the *Sonderweg* debate gave shape to a question about the meaning of German nationhood. This is an enormous literature, but see the summary in Jürgen Kocka, “German History before Hitler: The Debate about the German *Sonderweg*”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 23 (1998), pp. 3–16. For a similar summary of Japanese historiography, see Takashi Yoshida, *The Making of the “Rape of Nanking”: History and Memory in Japan, China, and the United States* (New York, 2006). An assessment of the anti-nationalist reaction overall is found in Sebastian Conrad, *The Quest for the Lost Nation: Writing History in Germany and Japan in the American Century*, trans. Alan Nothnagle (Berkeley, CA, 2010).

5. The classic statement of American consensus school history is David Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago, 1954). For a later assessment of the consensus as invented tradition, see Wendy L. Wall, *Inventing the “American Way”: Consensus from the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 2008). For the Soviet equivalent of consensus historiography, see Dmitrii Pavlovich Kallistov et al., *History of the USSR in Three Parts*, trans. George H. Hanna et al. (Moscow, 1977).

6. The classic text here is, of course, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983).

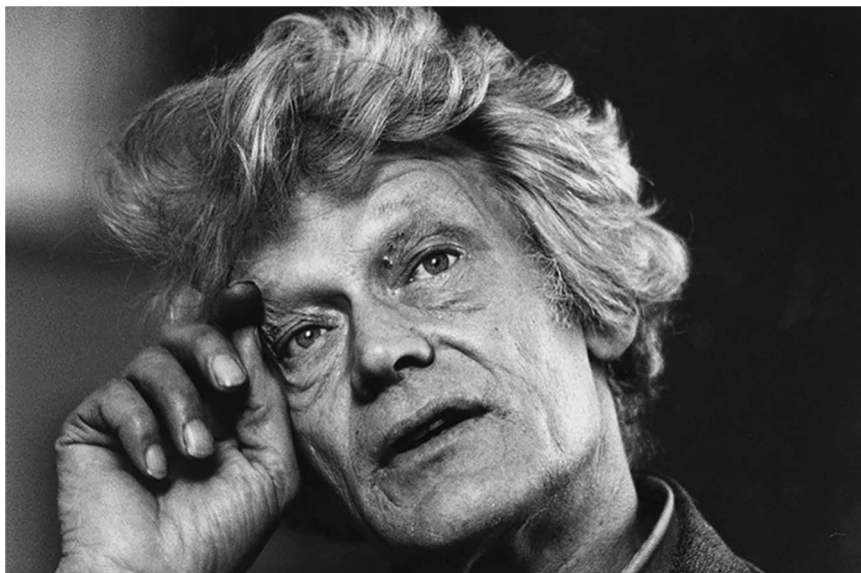


Figure 1. E.P. Thompson.

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cracks in the scholarly edifice of the American consensus historiography.⁷ Almost everywhere, the traditional focus of historical investigations on elites weakened.

The articles in this Special Theme contribute to understanding the development of global historical scholarship engaged with these issues by following the impact of the single most influential historian of social class in the twentieth century, Edward Palmer Thompson (1924–1993). They were initially drafted as contributions to a conference marking the fiftieth anniversary of Thompson’s landmark 1963 book *The Making of the English Working Class*. We organized the “Global E.P. Thompson Conference” at Harvard in October, 2013 to interrogate Thompson’s legacy and potential vitality at a moment of renewed social and intellectual upheavals. We hoped an interdisciplinary and global reflection on Thompson’s work and impact might help us focus on key questions in the contemporary moment, recasting class, nation, and “the people” as subjects of historical inquiry.⁸

7. Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, 2006).

8. Drawn from the conference, a set of articles that aimed to extend, re-apply, and develop key Thompsonian concepts has already appeared in the *Journal of Social History*. Lisa Furchtgott, “Tents Amid the Fragments: The Law at Greenham Common”, *Journal of Social History*, 48 (2015), pp. 789–802; Gabrielle Clark, “‘Humbug’ or ‘Human Good?’: E.P. Thompson, the Rule of



Figure 2. Participants in “The Global E.P. Thompson” conference hosted by the Weatherhead Initiative on Global History and the Program on the Study of Capitalism, Harvard University, October, 2013.

Scholars from most corners of the world responded to our call for papers, interested in assessing the way Thompson’s work was understood, appropriated, given meaning, or in some cases ignored or critiqued in particular national contexts.

The conference papers, in particular those presented in revised form here, taught us important things about the way Thompson, a dissident communist in a declining imperial power, opened wide the question of class not only in his own national historiography. His work also, and not necessarily by his intention or direct subsequent actions, came to provoke the possibility of such rethinking in countries on both sides of the Iron Curtain and on both sides of the equator. Thompson’s work was favorably situated to affect historical discussion in diverse cells of the global historiographical matrix: as the product of an English-speaking historian of the first Industrial Revolution, he had access to the scholarly communities of Britain and the United States; as the *cri de cœur* of an (ex-)communist, to dissenting communities around the world; and through Britain’s imperial connections, to several regions of the Global South. The similarly impressive – and it seems from the articles in this Special Theme, the

Law and Coercive Labor Relations Under Neoliberal American Capitalism”, *Journal of Social History*, 48 (2015), pp. 759–788; Nikos Potamianos, “Moral Economy? Popular Demands and State Intervention in the Struggle over Anti-Profitereing Laws in Greece 1914–1925”, *Journal of Social History*, 48 (2015), pp. 803–815; D. Parthasarathy, “The Poverty of (Marxist) Theory: Peasant Classes, Provincial Capital, and the Critique of Globalization in India”, *Journal of Social History*, 48 (2015), pp. 816–841.

somewhat earlier – appropriation of the work of Eric Hobsbawm is a clear illustration of the global high ground held by historians who previously had been associated with the British Communist Party Historians Group (1946–1956), especially in the English-speaking world.⁹

But, the metaphor of high ground is imperfect. Thompson’s work did not simply flow downhill to the rest of the world. The five articles to follow make clear that local historians appropriated it as needed, and adapted its ideas and concepts to the context of national controversies and debates.¹⁰ Much of the form of local historiographies was determined by the local state of play around the question of “the people”, as shaped by the national position within the global state system and the shifting trajectories of social struggles.

American historians, in many ways the closest to the British, were the first importers of Thompson, seeking to reopen questions of historical agency in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, which had been shut down by the consensus historiography.¹¹ A fundamentally different process led to the development of a Thompsonian New Left historiography in the countries newly allied to the United States. As Thomas Lindenberger and Hideo Ichihashi show in their articles about Thompson’s reception in West Germany and Japan, the crushing of working-class radicalism and the experience of postwar incorporation into the American sphere of influence at once limited the range of ideological expression and encouraged historians to seek local roots for radical traditions. At the same time, and somewhat contradictorily, it resulted in a wariness of a belief in the “people” – a “people” who had been associated with the rise of fascist politics. Like American historians, historians of Japan and West Germany embraced Thompson as a way to defy liberal pieties; unlike American historians (but like Thompson himself), Japanese historians did so under

9. In a recent study of global historiography, Thompson and Hobsbawm, as well as Maurice Dobb, Christopher Hill, George Rudé, and Dorothy Thompson, as participants in the Communist Party Historians Group are credited with “the most innovative reconstitution of Marxism” and Thompson’s *Making* is deemed the “most important turning point in the new Marxist approach”. Georg G. Iggers, Q. Edward Wang, and Supriya Mukherjee, *A Global History of Modern Historiography* (New York, 2013), pp. 268–269.

10. A recent exploration of the nascent field of global intellectual history underscores these partial, highly politicized appropriations in a variety of contexts. Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, *Global Intellectual History* (New York, 2013).

11. The very immediate reception of Thompson can be seen in Herbert G. Gutman, “Protestantism and the American Labor Movement: The Christian Spirit in the Gilded Age”, *The American Historical Review*, 72 (1966), pp. 74–101. This set the agenda for much work over the next two decades, with Gutman remaining a central figure. Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York, 1977). The work of one of the authors of this introduction came out of an early encounter with Thompson’s *The Making* while in graduate school: Andrew Gordon, *The Evolution of Labor Relations in Japan: Heavy Industry, 1853–1955* (Cambridge, MA, 1985).

the shadow of a Stalinist orthodoxy, while in West Germany the predominance of a more structuralist social history (the Bielefeld School) had hampered the development of alternative radical historiographies. In West Germany, the discovery of Thompson opened onto *Alltagsgeschichte* – the history of everyday life; Japanese historians particularly drew on Thompson’s later work on moral economy and rural agitation. In both cases, it was less the New Left-inflected concerns of the 1960s and early 1970s, but rather the 1970s and early 1980s and the political and intellectual issues after the New Left’s demise that drove historians, through Thompson, down into the hidden world that James C. Scott later called the “infrapolitical”.¹²

Historians in the Global South deployed Thompson strategically as well. In his article on Argentinian labor history, Lucas Poy situates the importation of Thompson’s work in the political context of the end of the military junta and the return to democracy in Argentina in 1983. In this setting, with a generation of killed and exiled leftists already behind them, historians sought to demonstrate less the country’s traditions in radical contentiousness, but its “nests of democracy”. In doing this, they sought out more generic social categories to replace social class, settling on “popular sectors”, and remaking the Marxist Thompson as a populist democrat. Yet, since the popular mobilization of the 2001 crisis, a repoliticized appropriation of Thompson has been at the center of a flourishing labor history in Argentina.

Similarly, the process of the creation of social history in South Africa was caught up with the question of democratization. South African society straddled the lines dividing the world: the white ruling elite had close ties to the West and aspired to membership in the capitalist First World; the subjugated black majority gave the country features in common with the colonized Global South. And the political leadership of the anti-apartheid movement hewed to a highly orthodox leftist line. As a result, South Africa’s social history tradition displayed some characteristics similar to those of all the countries discussed in these articles. In his contribution, Jonathan Hyslop shows how the Johannesburg History Workshop became a site of direct influence by Thompsonian social history. These historians, with links to British universities, were inspired by large-scale black uprisings in the 1970s, and wary of the orthodoxies of the African National Congress and the Communist Party. Navigating between a repressive regime, a domestic grassroots insurgency, and a theoretically rigid resistance leadership, South African social history became one of the richest of the Thompsonian traditions anywhere in the world.

12. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT, 1990).

While Thompson resonated most loudly within the First World and its most proximate clients, the Second World was no stranger to labor history; indeed, the orthodox Marxist history of the working class that Thompson opposed was central to the historiographies of the socialist states. In his article, Rudolf Kučera shows how Thompson's work remained largely ignored by the historians of the Polish and Czechoslovak working classes. While Czechoslovakia's historians retained more connection to British scholars than their counterparts in other Eastern Bloc countries, they developed these relationships before Thompson's prominence, and so drew on the somewhat older historians, Eric Hobsbawm and Maurice Dobb in particular. As Kučera explains, when they were displaced by a younger, reform-oriented generation in the years of the Prague Spring, their connections were lost – ironically leaving these younger Czech historians in search of intellectual reconceptualization bereft of the most significant British New Left historian. The subsequent repression of the 1968 uprising forced historians to a renewed orthodoxy with connections to debates in the West only surviving in niches. In Poland, in contrast, such connections remained more open, but Thompson did not resonate in the same way in a society whose industrialization was associated with Prussian dominance: the narratives of nation-state formation thus focused more on rural areas and the role of the peasantry than on the making of a working class.

Each of the five articles is situated in specific and different locations in the global historiographical matrix. Read as a whole, they show how national historiographies have themselves been products of state and class formation. They show the remarkable ability of Thompsonian social history to find new lives in new national contexts shaped by different formations of race, class, and state. At the same time, a rupture between this tradition and the newer historiography of gender is visible throughout these articles.¹³ Feminist thought has drawn on a different set of traditions for reimagining “the people”. A global comparison of the emergence of women's and gender history would be an instructive companion to these articles.

The end of the Cold War has opened space for the appearance of new social movements, as well as a global flourishing of loosely intersecting protests against inequality and political corruption. They are forcing historians once again to reconsider the relevant forms of collective social organization – in both past and present. These articles illustrate the inextricable links between writing history, our own particular histories, and the

13. To be sure, one important contribution to our symposium addressed this issue head on; cf. the aforementioned article: Furchtgott, “Tents Amid the Fragments”. Of course, earlier work has also pointed to this rupture; see for instance: Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*; Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal, and Hilary Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism*, 3rd ed. (London, 2013).

balance of social power within which research, scholarship, and cultural production unfold. They remind us, too, that the making of history and the writing of history are entangled, and these entanglements inevitably reflect relations of power on a global scale.

TRANSLATED ABSTRACTS
FRENCH – GERMAN – SPANISH

Gabriel Winant, Andrew Gordon, Sven Beckert, et Rudi Batzell. *Introduction: Le E.P. Thompson mondial.*

Cet article introduit le Thème spécial actuel sur la réception et l'appropriation mondiales de *The Making of the English Working Class* d'E.P. Thompson (1963; titre français: *La Formation de la classe ouvrière anglaise*). Il vise à interroger l'héritage et la vitalité potentielle de Thompson à un moment de bouleversements sociaux et intellectuels répétés. Il souligne le besoin d'une réflexion interdisciplinaire et mondiale sur l'œuvre et l'impact de Thompson, afin de comprendre comment la classe, la nation et "les gens" en tant que sujets de recherche historique ont incessamment été revisités depuis les années 1960. Examinant le destin des idées de Thompson au Japon, en Allemagne de l'Ouest, en Afrique du Sud et en Argentine ainsi qu'en Tchécoslovaquie et en Pologne, chacun des cinq articles suivants dans le Thème spécial est placé dans un cadre spécifique différent à l'intérieur de la matrice historiographique mondiale. Lus comme un ensemble, ils montrent comment les historiographies nationales ont été des produits d'une part, de processus locaux de formation d'État et de classe et d'autre part, de transferts transnationaux d'idées intellectuelles et historiographiques. Ils mettent en valeur la remarquable capacité de l'histoire sociale de Thompson d'insuffler de nouvelles vies dans de nouveaux contextes nationaux qui ont été façonnés par diverses formations de race, de classe et d'État.

Traduction: *Christine Plard*

Gabriel Winant, Andrew Gordon, Sven Beckert und Rudi Batzell, *Einführung: Der globale E.P. Thompson.*

Der Beitrag leitet den Heftschwerpunkt ein: die globale Rezeption und Aneignung von E.P. Thompsons *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963; deutscher Titel: *Die Entstehung der englischen Arbeiterklasse*). Der Beitrag zielt dabei darauf ab, Thompsons Hinterlassenschaft und potenzielle Vitalität in einer Zeit erneuter sozialer und intellektueller Umwälzungen auszuloten. Es bedarf einer interdisziplinären und globalen Reflexion des Werkes und Einflusses von Thompson, um zu verstehen, wie Klasse, Nation und „Volk“ als Gegenstände historischer Untersuchung seit den 1960er Jahren wiederholt neu bestimmt worden sind. Indem sie die Karriere von Thompsons Ideen in Japan, Westdeutschland, Südafrika und Argentinien sowie in der Tschechoslowakei und Polen untersuchen, positionieren sich die fünf Beiträge des Themenschwerpunkts an spezifischen, unterschiedlichen Orten

innerhalb der globalen historiografischen Matrix. In der Zusammenschau zeigen sie, wie nationale Historiografien das Produkt lokaler Prozesse der Staaten- und Klassenbildung einerseits sowie des transnationalen Transfers intellektueller und historiografischer Ideen andererseits waren und sind. Sie verweisen auf die außergewöhnliche Fähigkeit von Thompson in verschiedenen, durch unterschiedliche Formierungen von „Rasse“, Klasse und Staatlichkeit geprägten nationalen Kontexten die Sozialgeschichte neu zu beleben.

Übersetzung: *Max Henninger*

Gabriel Winant, Andrew Gordon, Sven Beckert, y Rudi Batzell. *Introducción: E.P. Thompson global.*

En este artículo se introduce el actual tema especial sobre la recepción y apropiación global de la obra de E.P. Thompson *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963; título en español: *La formación de la clase obrera en Inglaterra*). En él se trata de indagar en el legado de Thompson y en su vitalidad potencial en un momento de agitación social e intelectual renovada. Se pone énfasis en la necesidad de una reflexión interdisciplinar y global sobre la obra de Thompson y su repercusión, en aras de comprender cómo la clase, la nación y el “pueblo”, como sujetos de indagación histórica, han sido replanteados de forma constante desde la década de 1960. Examinando el recorrido de las ideas de Thompson en Japón y en Alemania Occidental, en Sudáfrica y en Argentina, así como en Checoslovaquia y en Polonia, cada uno de los cinco textos que forman parte de este tema especial se sitúa en lugares específicos y diferentes en la matriz historiográfica global. Leído como un todo, los artículos muestran cómo las historiografías nacionales han sido, por un lado, resultado de procesos locales de formación de estado y clase y, por otro lado, fruto de las transferencias transnacionales de ideas intelectuales e historiográficas. En los textos se destaca la extraordinaria habilidad de la historia social thompsoniana para inspirar nuevas vidas en diferentes contextos nacionales delineados por diferentes formaciones de raza, clase y estado.

Traducción: *Vicent Sanz Rozalén*