

## Reflections on Radical History

*Staughton Lynd*

I am one of the New Left historians who in the 1960s espoused “history from the bottom up.” The honor of first advocating that particular set of words belongs to Jesse Lemisch. I believe he first used the phrase in a pamphlet by that title he wrote for Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). I recall that about 1969 there was an occupation of the University of Chicago administration building to protest denial of tenure to a sociologist named Marlene Dixon. Jesse and I conducted a teach-in at the sit-in. He described the project of retrieving the history of the so-called inarticulate: those who do not leave behind correspondence, public papers, and the like, whose thoughts must be teased from court records, from eyewitness accounts of street demonstrations, from the minute books of obscure popular entities like the Muggletonians or the International Order of Odd Fellows. I talked about a methodology that seems to me inevitable for historians who are serious about retrieving the insights of those who talk more than they write—namely, oral history.

There are two historians whose example has especially influenced me.

The first is Howard Zinn. The sit-ins had begun, and I had informed my teachers at Columbia University that I wanted to teach in a “negro college” in the South. Howard recruited me at the Columbia history department’s smoker in December 1960. I can still see in my mind’s eye his lanky form, then topped by black hair rather than white, making its way across the floor to me.

The Zinns and Lynds spent some time together in New Hampshire during the summer of 1961. As he has described in his autobiography, *You Can’t Be Neutral on a Moving Train*, “we decided to climb a mountain together and get acquainted”:

That mountain-climbing conversation was illuminating. Staughton came from a background completely different from mine[,] . . . had been raised in comfortable circumstances, had gone to Harvard and Columbia. And yet, as we went back and forth on every political issue under the sun—race, class, war, violence, nationalism, justice, fascism, capitalism, socialism, and more—it was clear that our social philosophies, our values, were extraordinarily similar.

(History requires me to add that it was not Mt. Monadnock, as Howard writes, but Mt. Chocorua.)

It was when I arrived at Spelman College and began to teach with Howard that I learned most from him. Fresh out of graduate school, I asked him what scholarly papers he was writing and what academic conferences he planned to attend in the near future. He looked at me as if I were speaking a foreign language. I came to understand that although Howard Zinn was *making a living* as a college teacher, he seemed entirely indifferent to academia. That which absorbed his intellectual attention was to clarify what strategy the civil rights movement should pursue in overcoming institutional racism. We had long conversations about alternative strategies of social change: “all deliberate speed,” as in school desegregation, as compared to mandated change from above, as in desegregation of the armed forces. We struggled with the role that radical intellectuals could and should ask the national government to play.

One day I walked unannounced into the Zinn apartment. (The Zinns and Lynds lived next to one another on the Spelman campus.) Howard was tape recording an interview with two African American young men, field secretaries for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), who had just been released from jail in Albany, Georgia. A lightbulb went on behind my eyes. It was not Studs Terkel, nor was it my native genius, that led me to oral history: it was Howard Zinn.

More than anyone else I have known, Howard has a magical ability to make emotional contact with an audience. Self-evidently, this gift stays by him when he writes. I believe that those who consider themselves radical historians need to grapple with the fact that Howard Zinn’s *People’s History of the United States* has probably done more good, and influenced more people (especially young people), than

everything the rest of us have written put together. And I believe the key to why this is so is Howard's indifference to the usual rewards and punishments of academia. He was abruptly and scandalously fired by Spelman College. He got a job at Boston University as a *political scientist*. He made tenure there.<sup>1</sup> On his last day of teaching, he ended class early so as to join a picket line of campus workers. Throughout, he has steadily directed what he had to say to an audience off campus, and thereby taught us all.

The other historian who has most influenced me was Edward Thompson. I met him only once. In the course of a brief conversation he administered political shock therapy. Somehow he challenged me not to give up on the political possibilities of industrial workers in the advanced capitalist nations. He set me on a path in 1966 that I have been traveling ever since.

As I have come to know Thompson better through his writings and writings about him,<sup>2</sup> I feel I have encountered in his life the same paradigm that I experienced closer to hand with Howard Zinn. I suspect that most radical historians in the United States who knew Thompson personally made his acquaintance at the University of Warwick, or in the years after 1965 when Thompson began teaching there. To me by far the most interesting period in his life is the seventeen previous years (1948–65) when he was a staff tutor in English and history for the Department of Extra-Mural Studies at the University of Leeds.

It is recalled about Thompson (whose background was as upper middle class as my own) that people who got to know him “admired and trusted him.” Each tutor taught four or five classes and had to travel long distances. A common pattern was that an initial recruitment of fourteen or fifteen lost six or seven during the autumn but gained two or three latecomers. Colleagues did not live near each other. Obviously, as with Howard Zinn in his relation to SNCC, and I should like to think, as with myself in relation to working-class colleagues in Youngstown, during these years Thompson drew emotional sustenance less from fellow professionals than from his students, with whom he often joined in political demonstrations.

Accounts of Thompson in these years make clear that then, as in his posthumously published book on William Blake, he was preoccupied with two different notions of workers' education. One was the idea of workers laboriously bringing themselves up to middle-class standards so that they might participate effectively in a capitalist society. In this pedagogy, the emphasis was not on “what students bring to their classes, but of what the tutor had to do for them.”

Of course, Thompson's approach was entirely different. He stressed how much he learned from his students. “Within living memory, it seems, miners have worked lying down in eighteen inch seams, children have been in the mills at the age of nine.” One assignment—thirty of forty years before this assignment became commonplace in the United States—was to find an older person to talk about their

younger days. Of one literature class, Thompson wrote that it had learned to work “in the spirit so desirable in the Workers’ Education Association—not as tutor and passive audience, but as a group combining various talents and pooling differing knowledge and experience for a common end.” Sheila Rowbotham recalls a class on the history of mining when one student finally told the instructor: “Give me the chalk, Mr. Thompson.”

The bottom line was expressed by Dorothy Greenald. She came from a miner’s home where there was only one book. Edward Thompson, she later recalled, “brought it out that your background wasn’t anything to be ashamed of . . . that changed me really.”

The Himalayan fact is that *The Making of the English Working Class* was written in those years of teaching extramurally, “outside the walls.” Somehow, defying the idea that intellectual work and political engagement are at war with each other, Thompson did his greatest scholarly work during the period of his fullest immersion in working-class life. *The Making* was initially envisioned as a survey text for workers’ education classes. As he came upon original sources, Thompson shared them with his students and asked them to comment in class. The book is dedicated to Dorothy and Joseph Greenald.

In describing these exemplars I have run out of space to say more. What Zinn and Thompson model for me is the idea of a radical intellectual who is only incidentally an academic; who is an “organic intellectual” in the sense that, whatever his or her personal background, he or she lives out a professional life in the midst of social struggle; who “accompanies” the poor and oppressed, not only by thinking and writing about them, but by living near them and being available to them day-by-day.

## Notes

1. On pages 184–185 of *You Can’t Be Neutral*, Howard tells the story of how he got tenure. The BU trustees were to meet to consider, among other things, tenure for Howard Zinn. On the same day, outside the same place, students decided to hold a rally to protest the presence of Secretary of State Dean Rusk. They asked Howard to speak. He accepted with fear and trembling, believing he would be only one of many speakers. Arriving at the rally, he discovered he was the only speaker. He spoke and learned a few days later that the trustees had voted him tenure earlier in the day!
2. What follows is based on Peter Searby and the editors, “Edward Thompson as a Teacher,” in *Protest and Survive: Essays for E. P. Thompson* (London: Merlin Press, 1993), 1–17, and on Bryna D. Palmer, *E. P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (London: Verso, 1994), chapters 2–3.