

Reflections on Jacoby and all that¹

Edward P. Thompson

I have been invited to say something about the relationship between writing, history and politics, as it comes to me through my own experience. In one sense, there is little to say that is not obvious. Or so it seems to me. One writes history as a historian and engages in political polemic as a citizen, and the one does not exclude the other. Yes, the two roles may sometimes overlap or become confused, but this need not be made into a big deal. It is less a theoretical problem than a practical one, which practical measures can sort out. I am very much against mixing teaching with political (or any other sort of) proselytising, since this is to take unfair advantage of the students. It is my decided impression that this offence is more flagrantly committed from the Right –who sometimes suppose, in all innocence, that its views are the only possible “objective” orthodoxy- than from the Left. But that is no excuse for the Left to imitate the offenders.

Perhaps I take this simple-minded view because my father was a writer -a historian and also a polemicist, on questions of Indian independence- so that the “normal” way of going to work (which I observed in my childhood) was that of stepping off in slippers to the study, with a steaming cup of coffee.² The sound of the typewriter was “work.” He also had some part-time association with Oxford University, as a Lecturer in Bengali and then as a Research Fellow in

¹ The original spelling has been maintained. Underlined words and titles have been changed to italics. All footnotes by Carlos Aguirre.

² On Edward John Thompson (1886-1946) see E.P. Thompson, *Alien Homage. Edward Thompson and Rabindranath Tagore* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993) and Mary Lago, *“India’s Prisoner.” A Biography of Edward John Thompson, 1886-1946* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001) and Scott Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory. E.P. Thompson, the new left and postwar British politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp. 11-21.

Indian History, but this work was not heavily demanding and I think that Russell Jacoby would allow him through his severe definitional grid, as an “intellectual.” But he thought of himself as a writer -a poet, novelist, historian, journalist, man-of-letters- and also (when he opened his mail with its endless requests to write this, speak at that, read this manuscript and advise on the other, nearly always unpaid) as “servus servorum.”

My years of prominence in the peace movement have enabled me to understand that title only too well. The world is full of nice and deserving people who for some reason assume that a writer is an unpaid public social servant. Sometimes one-half or more of my working life is spent in dealing with mail, and the pile of unanswered letters is always nagging one's mind. Some part of this correspondence is a good relationship with a public, but this public can also be thoughtless and demanding. The Catch-22 about this is that one never gets to know the thoughtful and tactful ones, since they are too kind to bother one with letters at all.

That is enough as prologue -except to add some terse biographical details. When young I supposed that I might be a Writer (capital W) not a historian. My first job was as an extra-mural tutor, for 17 years in West Yorkshire, working for Leeds University but in external adult education. I will return to this. During that time I became a historian, writing my *William Morris* and *The Making of the English Working Class*.³ Dorothy (my wife) and I were also much involved in political activism, climaxing in the fierce conflict inside (and then outside) the Communist Party (1956), and the formation and editorial work for *The New Reasoner* and *New Left Review*.⁴ My

³ *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1955); *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963).

⁴ Dorothy Thompson (1923-2011), Edward's wife, was a social historian and the author of, among other works, *The Chartists: Popular Politics in the Industrial Revolution* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984). On Thompson's (and other historians') relationship with the Communist Party, see Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians. An Introductory Analysis* (New York: Polity Press, 1984).

next job was *inside* a university, the newly-formed University of Warwick: it lasted only six years, but one of its rewards was the formation of an excellent graduate centre, especially strong in 18th-century English social history. After that (in 1971) I resigned in order to write: this opportunity was underwritten by Dorothy, who (with the children now growing up) had become a late entrant to university teaching, so that an academic salary was still coming in. My “freedom” to be an “intellectual” was dependant on this, and perhaps Jacoby pays too little attention to such down-to-earth matters. Serious freelance writing doesn't afford a livelihood. From time to time in the past two decades we have topped up our bank account and also our intellectual resources by accepting the kind hospitality of American, Canadian and other universities to teach for occasional terms or years. So that I am half “intellectual,” half academic. My agenda of historical writing has been jammed up and delayed repeatedly by the demands of polemical political writing: first, in defence of civil liberties, such as the integrity of the jury system, and in opposition to growing authoritarianism in Britain; and, second, on behalf of the peace movement. If we are to make a distinction between the writer of history and the writer of politics, then the historian in me regrets the spendthrift political years a good deal -and never more so than today, when I find myself surrounded by unfinished work and too much finished time. But myself as citizen will not apologize to the historian.

Let us return to Russell Jacoby, although I suppose that you have already picked him over enough in this seminar. On the whole I like his book. In lively prose, and with sufficient examples, it proposes the culture of the academy not as the answer but as a problem. Perhaps I like it because I have been arguing related points for years. In a discussion of the role of the university in adult education I wrote (in 1968):

The educated culture is not encapsulated from the culture of the people in the old class-bound ways: but it is encapsulated

nonetheless, within its own walls of intellectual self-esteem and spiritual pride.

There are, of course, more people coming within the capsule than ever before. But it is a most serious error –which can only be believed by those who look in upon the universities from outside– to suppose that all within the capsule are ardent protagonists ... of intellectual and cultural values. In the good adult class, the criticism of life is brought to bear upon the work or subject under study. In the nature of the case this is less common with students; and much of the work of the university teacher is that of a kind of intellectual grocer, weighing and measuring out syllabuses, reading-lists, essay-themes, in pursuance of a prescribed professional training.

The danger is that this kind of necessary professional technology will be mistaken for intellectual authority: and that the universities -presenting themselves as a syndicate of all the 'experts' in every branch of knowledge- will expropriate the people of their intellectual identity. And in this they are seconded by the great centralized media of communication - and notably the television- which do in fact often present the academic –or should I say certain photogenic academics?- not as a specialised professional man, but as an 'expert' on Life itself in exactly this sense. ("Education and Experience," pp. 21-22).⁵

This is not exactly the same as Jacoby's complaint, for he is concerned at the failure of academics to project themselves as public intellectuals, whereas I was concerned at the universities' expropriation of the nation's intellectual life. Both of us, however, are

⁵ E.P. Thompson, "Education and Experience: Fifth Mansbridge Memorial Lecture" (Leeds 1968), pp. 21-22. This paper was included in his posthumous book *The Romantics: England in a Revolutionary Age* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 4-32.

radically concerned with the exchange, or dialogue, between the academy and the public.

Yet Jacoby makes the problem seem too easy. Despite disclaimers his book appears to expose a wilful self-isolation in which compromised intellectuals have opted for professional advancement within the mystified vocabularies of academic careers. No doubt this goes on, as it has gone on in the past. In unheroic and materialist times this has happened before. Yet this may be only one half of the process. Jacoby doesn't look for any ulterior "structural" reasons for the self-isolation of an intelligentsia -he doesn't ask whether this isolation, and these self imprisoning-cum-self-advancing vocabularies may not be consequence as well as cause. Might it not be *because* political and intellectual relations between "intellectuals" and a wider public have been interrupted by changes in the technologies of communication, or perhaps in consequence of ulterior political and ideological changes, that the intellectuals have been left talking to themselves -or have nothing much of general interest to talk about?

At this point I would invite you to look at two articles of mine which come at this problem from different angles. The first, "The Segregation of Dissent," was written for and rejected by the BBC, in 1961; it eventually found a home in a small journal published from Oxford, *The New University*, edited by students.⁶ Thus its publication appeared to illustrate its argument. The second, "The Heavy Dancers," is in a sense a restatement of the argument of the first, but in a more authoritarian context some twenty years on.⁷ It was commissioned by a somewhat daring commercial TV production unit for the occasionally "intellectual" television Channel Four. But it was not all that daring, for the sensitive matter in my talk -which concerned the Falklands or Malvinas War- had already been long

⁶ *New University*, 6, 1961, 13-16, reproduced in *Writing by Candlelight* (London: The Merlin Press, 1980), 1-10.

⁷ "The Heavy Dancers of the Air," *New Society*, 11, November 1982, 243-7, reproduced in *The Heavy Dancers* (London: The Merlin Press, 1985), 1-11.

desensitised by Mrs. Thatcher's victory. During that war -although every poll showed from 20 to 25% of the British public opposed to it- the presentation of that part of my argument on television or radio would have been impossible.

I am simply stressing the obvious point that there are structural and political reasons for the isolation of "intellectuals" (if they are dissenters). This may be especially obvious in Britain in the past decades, with its steadily-extending authoritarianism, its absurd governmental obsession with pseudo-security, its complicit judiciary, its decadent popular press. There is, I am glad to say, a resistance movement of a sort within the media professions themselves -notably within television- but Mrs Thatcher is attending to that.

It seems to me that something similar has been taking place in the United States since the end of World War II. I have sketched, in the *Tri-Quarterly* no. 70, something of the intellectual biography of your distinguished fellow citizen in Minneapolis, the poet Thomas McGrath, and have compared it to a resistance movement conducted through the "samizdat" of little reviews.⁸ To this day this distinguished "intellectual" is marginalised in American academic life -you will not find his work on course assignments nor discussed in the *New York Review of Books*. But is it possible that Jacoby's arguments are circular and self-confirming? He does not mention McGrath, presumably because he has not heard of him. But how many other "intellectuals" may there not be who are invisible for the same reasons? I sent a draft of my study of McGrath to that fine literary historian and critic, the late Warren Susman, and was encouraged by his response. But on one question he voiced vigorous disagreement. The resistance culture of the ("samizdat") little journals in every part of the United States had just as much claim to be "typical" of recent decades as had the "official" culture of the academy and the NYRB. "For the cultural historian," Susman argued,

⁸ E.P. Thompson, "Homage to Thomas McGrath," *TriQuarterly*, 70 (Fall 1987), 116-17.

it was McGrath's "typicality as well as his uniqueness [which] are important cultural facts."

I do not know how this problem is to be dealt with. I strongly support the work of minority reviews, and indeed I scarcely like to account for the hours, days, weeks, months and years of my life spent editing or contributing to or raising funds for such journals, from *Our Time* to the *New Reasoner* and *New Left Review* to *END Journal* today. But important as such journals are, they do not in themselves solve the problem of communicating with a wider public. There needs to be some transmission belt or other mediations. Wright Mills, when I knew him in the early "New Left" days, was much preoccupied with this problem. He thought that a solution might be found in the short paperback, and he formed a particular friendship with Ian Ballantine of Ballantine Books, who boasted that, through slot-machines in drugstores across the USA, he could sell a minimum of 20,000 copies of any book, even if it was only a cover with blank pages. (I suspect that if he had tried that too often his slot-machines would have been smashed). *Listen Yankee* was written for this (Ballantine) audience/outlet, and in the (earlier) *The Sociological Imagination* and *The Causes of World War III* he was looking towards a similar audience.⁹ I remember clearly discussing this with Mills and Ballantine in a Welsh mountain farmhouse, and they definitely saw the paperback as a "mass" medium and as the answer to TV and popular press. The trouble is not only that intellectual or political products compete poorly when they share outlets with sensationalism, soft porn, romance or even computer guides, but that in the attempt to make them into effective competitors their intellectual qualities may be diluted. I much admired (and admire) Wright Mills and his example. But I thought that *Listen, Yankee* might have been more effective if not shouted in telegraphese; that *The Sociological Imagination* made the argument sound too easy; and that

⁹ C. Wright Mills, *Listen Yankee: The Revolution in Cuba* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1960); *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959); *The Causes of World War Three* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1958).

The Causes of World War Three (which I recently re-read) ruined the effect of some remarkable insights (which have stood the test of time) by packaging these in poorly-argued, assertive or exclamatory prose. Popularisation is a specialised kind of writing for which few are gifted, and if a thinker popularises his/her own ideas s/he may end up only devaluing them.

What may provide the medium for the transmission of “dissenting” ideas may not be any technical solution (a popular journal or slot-machine paperback) but a movement, political, religious, nationalist or whatever. Yes, this is chicken-or-egg, but often chicken and egg appear together: ideas are popularised and rapidly disseminated, because (a) the public mind is already prepared for them, and (b) some public excitement is bringing people into association -clubs, parties, armies, religious enthusiasms- in which ideas are readily debated. Radical ideas can lie dormant for decades, defeated by the deafening propaganda of the *status quo*; but if circumstances change in such a way as to signal a new opportunity, if there is some reason for *hope* -they may suddenly flourish on every side. (Even though the first 18 months of Mr. Gorbachov’s reforms were met with public suspicion and caution, I think that hope -which is a very powerful historical force- is now active in the Soviet Union).

[*This line is missing in the mimeographed copy we are using*]
 common concern and discourse was around in the United States during the New Deal; in Britain some part of the public was even organised in Left Book Clubs. In the late 1950s there were similar developments leading up to the foundation of the *New Left Review*. For a short time (perhaps 1961-3) we had some twenty or more NLR clubs in major centres, which served both as outlet and as inlet for the journal and which took further political initiatives in the community. This was both a transmission belt and an audience with a known identity -the final section of Raymond Williams’s *The Long Revolution*¹⁰ was perhaps written to that audience, as was also

¹⁰ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chato and Windus, 1961).

(in some part) *The Making of the English Working Class*. But to service these clubs was a heavy strain on our unwieldy editorial board, which was half-advisory, half organiser of a new left movement. Some Board members felt that this intervention into movement politics was incompatible with the consistent intellectual conduct of a review: and several bright young colleagues eventually (as a result of other difficulties) took over the journal, and at once severed all connections with the (ailing) clubs, ceased even to list them in the journal's pages, and pruned from the editorial board all movement-oriented members (including the working miner who subsequently became General Secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers!).

I mention all this, not out of garrulity, but because it does bear upon the question of audiences and changes which can be demonstrated in the past decades. For if your library holds a full file of *New Left Review* you can examine the whole record. The style of the journal changed within two or three issues. Instead of addressing an activist audience, with the rhetoric and sometimes sloppiness which this might entail, NLR now affected a "rigorous" tone and format which was clearly addressed to the academy. Its circulation probably fell, but it became international as university librarians found it to be as obligatory as *Past & Present* or the *Economic History Review*. It was rescued from collapse; consolidated; and with remarkable consistency, for twenty-five years, has developed and defined a socialist theory of the academy. Its audience -and its sense of audience relations- is utterly different from your *New Masses* and our *Left Review* of the late 1930s. Its trajectory might seem, in some respects, to confirm and illustrate the Jacoby thesis. Yet we should also add that history is still going on. If NLR has been an academic laboratory, it is still possible that its inventions and its influence will become powerful in the next decade. I am not sure whether I will like

this or not. Like so much else that is around on all sides, NLR is the product of an over-cerebral and uncreative age.¹¹

The feminist movement and the peace movement have also provided their own transmission belts for books and ideas. The first appears to have established a substantial and continuing audience. The second has been more fickle and subject to swings of fashion. This has been most notably the case in the USA, with the swift rise and then the swift decline of the Freeze audience -illustrated also by the sensational success of Schell's *Fate of the Earth*.¹² (Why does Jacoby overlook Jonathan Schell among his "intellectuals"?) I have noted similar swings in Britain. The build-up of our movement was a remarkable example of using pre-modern means and pre-modern media to break into a hostile or indifferent manipulated "consensus." We used the pamphlet, the weekly news-sheet, the meeting in a church hall or schoolroom, the outside demonstration, the picket, with such effect that by 1981 our manifestations were so numerous and colourful that the majority media could no longer pretend that we did not exist. The efforts and hours of voluntary labour were prodigious and scarcely to be maintained for more than two or three years at that intensity. Eventually we did break through into the television and (with foul misrepresentations) into our ugly popular press. But, of course, this was at the cost of losing direct control over the way in which our arguments were produced -at the moment that we seemed to be succeeding, our voices were given over to others (political commentators, announcers) who proposed their questions and not our own. Characteristically in Britain all our complex proposals were reduced to two questions only: for or against

¹¹ The history of New Left Review has been studied in Duncan Thompson, *Pessimism of the Intellect?: A History of the New Left Review* (London: Merlin Press, 2006).

¹² Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth* (New York: Knopf, 1982). EPT refers here to the "Freeze" movement against nuclear weapons. On this, see Alexander Cockburn and James Ridgeway, "The Freeze Movement versus Reagan," *New Left Review*, 137, January-February 1983.

“unilateralism” -and “unilateralism” as they, and not we, defined it; and (by direct suppression of our non-aligned policy and our many contacts with “dissidents” on the other side) for or against Soviet policies. Given the capacity of the majority media for falsification and manipulation, one wonders whether we might have done better if we had gone on being ignored.

In all this I have said rather little about my own practices in writing politics or history. As I said at the outset, I can think of little to say that is not self-evident; and if I have overlooked significant questions, then you must prompt me. There is one point which has been important to me and to some of my colleagues. My first employment -for 17 years- was in adult education. This was at a time -just after the war- when the movement was vigorous and with wide popular support. Classes were organised by the Workers Educational Association, but the longer and more formal courses were conducted by tutors from the university extra-mural or extension departments. These classes normally ran for three winters of 24 meetings each, supplemented by summer schools; the students undertook this considerable commitment (which most of them honoured) with the sole object of self-education: there was no degree or diploma at the end and rarely any direct vocational incentive. The majority of courses were in the humanities or social sciences -economics, international affairs, history, literature, music. In a good adult education tutorial class there was a real dialogue between tutor and students, and a young tutor like myself had to approach his class with humility before their experience. (At my first class in a mining village in South Yorkshire it was made very plain to me in the first few weeks that I could not command the respect of the class until I had been taken down and introduced to the local pit).

This was very different from internal university teaching. On one hand, the students had little time to do sufficient reading, and what they read was normally books rather than learned articles. (The age of cheap xerox had not arrived, and we had no bound volumes of journals in our book-boxes). Few of them wrote serious essays. But

on the other hand the tutor strained to interpret to the class the state of knowledge as lucidly and fairly as possible, and this was then followed by a discussion period of a further hour in which class members interrogated the tutor, introduced their own -often relevant- experience, and in this light proposed their own judgements. Sometimes, in a history class, these were insufficiently informed, but in a literature class (and I taught both in equal measure, another advantage of the adult education milieu) the experience of the students was in advance of that of the tutor and was rewarding.

This adult education experience has certainly influenced one tradition of social history in England. R.H. Tawney was a pioneer of university tutorial classes. I do not know if the Hammonds took part in it, but their books sound as if they did.¹³ In recent and current generations G.D.H. Cole, Asa Briggs, Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, J.F.C. Harrison, Dorothy and myself are among those partly formed by the adult education “moment.” (I believe that, while the form persists, and some excellent classes continue in local history, that “moment” is now overtaken by others).

Undoubtedly this influenced my sense of audience in writing history. My *William Morris* and *The Making of the English Working Class* were written with an adult class or political activist audience in mind, and with an internal university audience scarcely at all. Hence my inattention to academic proprieties (which in fact I knew rather little about). I have noticed the difference in my own writing since. The good reception of *The Making* made me also a target for academic criticism, and in writing in the past two decades that critical audience has also been in my mind. This has made my work slower and more self-conscious; more cautious in judgements; more punctilious about

¹³ Thompson refers to John Lawrence and Barbara Hammond, authors of numerous and very influential books of social history during the first three decades of the twentieth century. See Stewart Angas Weaver, *The Hammonds: A Marriage in History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

scholarly apparatus. Perhaps the work has gained in professional expertise, but it has also lost in other ways.

It has lost, most of all, in a sense of dialogue with a public. And this may be inevitable, because of the structural isolation and self-isolation of the academy. It has become more difficult to straddle the academic and the non-specialist general public. And in this all parties are losers -the writers, the public audience, and the academy. For adult education provided not only an outlet for the university but also an inlet for experience and criticism. In this dialogue new disciplines emerged and were given trial runs -for example, some economic, social and local history, some themes in sociology and in cultural studies- and university teachers were forced to avoid introversial professionalised vocabularies, and to give priority to the difficult work of communication. This dialogue, and this "inlet" for experience, is profoundly necessary for the intellectual health of the academy itself. In its absence, scholasticism multiply, and the intellectual life of the public is confiscated by those who have a professional disposition to theorise an intelligentsia (i.e. themselves) as the only free agents of history, while all others are seen as prisoners of structures or of determinations (conceptual or other) which reduce them to being either the enemies of intellectuality or complicit in their own victimhood. It is not only that this is wrong; it is also a self-fulfilling error. It endorses in the name of high theories our fractured intellectual life, and it reproduces alienations. But that is another story.