

## Writing History after EP Thompson

All events take place in 1014 Tisch Hall (unless otherwise noted)

### Rationale:

E.P. Thompson was a hugely important figure in the global development of social history from the 1960s. In South Africa his influence was marked, reflected in historical scholarship with recognisably Thompsonian characteristics defined by richly detailed explication of the experiences of the black working class. Revisionist scholars challenged liberal convictions about the pre-industrial origins of racial segregation in South Africa and claims about the colour-blind character of the market, but structuralist revisionists in the 1970s were centrally preoccupied with understanding the nature of South Africa's capitalist transition in the light of literature on capitalist transformations globally. Early revisionist social histories explicated the preservation, resilience and importance of 'pre-capitalist' social forms (chieftaincy, oscillating migrant labour between urban and rural areas). This more comparativist moment did not last across the field.

Thompson's attack on Althusserian Marxism, *The Poverty of Theory*, helped fuel a reaction against structuralist accounts of racial capitalism in South Africa which took the form of social history emphasising the agency of the black working class in inauspicious circumstances. With retrospect this was both a productive and unproductive development. As elsewhere, the Thompsonian legacy in South African historiography and historical practice now appears inherently paradoxical: encouraging sensitivity towards culture and the analysis of class as process, while nurturing a common sense which was – and in many ways remains – of generally hostile disposition towards theory. From the mid 1980s social historians were much less likely to engage with larger theoretical and comparative debates about the relationships between capitalism, the state, coercive labour regimes, race and class formation than scholars a decade before. Curiously, the precocious sensitivity to culture which South African social historians developed was not facilitated by the kinds of anthropological influences that were important to the 'cultural turn' in Anglo-American scholarship.

Like Thompson, the leftist historians who he inspired in South Africa were challenged for insufficiently addressing gender and race, and were subsequently assailed by post-structuralists for alleged commitment to teleological Marxist meta-narratives and naïve empiricism. This workshop aims to explore the genealogies and legacies of Thompsonian social history across Anglo-American, Africanist and South Africanist scholarly domains. Historians at Wits and Michigan share training and ongoing intellectual interests in the theoretical challenges of writing social history in a world where many of the tenets of class analysis have been undermined by the effects of de-industrialisation. There remains a nagging sense – underlined by the interest generated by Thomas Picketty's *Capital in the Twentieth Century* – that the contemporary global predicament necessitates the writing of theoretically ambitious comparativist histories employing culturally nuanced class analysis in the mode of the Thompsonian tradition. The workshop promises to interrogate the legacies, limits and possibilities of Thompsonian scholarship (and the relationship between theory and empiricism between the North and South).

Monday, November 16

## Session 1 - What has been lost? What has been gained?

**10: 00am – 12 : 00pm**

- Jim Oakes (CUNY) "No Such Thing as a Disloyal Slave': Rethinking E. P. Thompson's Legacy for the American Civil War"
- Lynn Thomas (University of Washington) "Agency"
- Kathleen Canning (UM) "The Social in the Cultural: Critical Reflections on Experience, Consciousness, and Subjectivity"
- Luise White (Florida) "*Whigs and Hunters* : the path not taken."
- Discussants : Keith Breckenridge and Geoff Eley

*Lunch*

## Session 2 - Thompson and African History

**1: 00 – 3: 00pm**

- Peter Delius (Wits) "Thompson's child or a remote relative from the colonies? A footnote from a foot-soldier in South Africa's history wars, 1970-1990."
- Hlonipha Mokoena (Wits) "'The hardness of the times and the dearness of all the necessities of life': Class and Consumption in Bilingual Nineteenth-Century Newspapers."
- Derek Peterson (UM) "Nonconformity in Africa's Cultural History"
- Clive Glaser (Wits) "Thompson on the Highveld? Social History and Humanist Socialism"
- Discussants: Jack Taylor (UM) and Stephen Sparks (UJ)

## Session 3 - Thompson and Empire

**3: 00 - 4.30 pm**

- Bridget Kenny (Wits) "The 'Lift Girls' Lament': Sex and Race in Johannesburg Department Stores, 1950s & 1960s"
- Juan Cole (UM) "Crowds, Workers & Millenarians: Thompsonian historiographies of the Middle East"
- Christopher Lee (Wits) "Histories without Groups: Thompson's 'Average' Working Man and Colonial Life"
- Discussants: Lynn Thomas (University of Washington) and Prinisha Badassy (Wits)

## Seminar by Dilip Menon (1636 School of Social Work Building)

**5: 00 – 6:30 pm**

"Writing history in colonial times: the space and time of religious polemic in late 19th and early 20th century southern India"

Tuesday, November 17

## Session 4 - Capitalist transformation and the Commons

**10: 00 – 11.30 am**

- Gregory Dowd (UM) "Jacksonian Democrats and Hunters, 1836-1837: Customary Rights, Property in Land, and Law"
- Federico Helfgott ( Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos and Universidad Antonio Ruiz de Montoya) "Mining labor, communal land, rent and moral economy in the Central Highlands of Peru"
- Khumisho Moguerane (Oxford University) "Class, culture and segregation: the pattern of landholding in colonial Bechuanaland"
- Discussants: Peter Delius (Wits) and Alex Lichtenstein (Indiana)

*Lunch*

## Session 5 - The influence of anthropology: E.P. Thompson as Geertzian proxy?

**1: 00pm – 2 : 30 pm**

- Adam Ashforth (UM) "Revisiting the Xhosa Cattle Killing"
- Robert Blunt (Lafayette College) "Old Age and Money: The General Numismatics of Independent Kenya"
- Bernard Dubbeld (Stellenbosch University) "Scales of studying historical transformations: divergent roads out of Thompson in African Studies"
- Discussants: David William Cohen (UM) and Nancy Rose Hunt (UM)

*Coffee Break*

## Session 6 - Religion & Moral Economies

**3: 00pm – 4: 30pm**

- Dilip Menon (Wits) "Religion, Identity and Community in EP Thompson's oeuvre"
- Leslie Hempson (UM) "The Moral and Political Economy of Measurement in Twentieth-Century India"
- Dunbar Moodie (Hobart and William Smith/Wits) "Using E.P. Thompson to think about South African history: Notes on a personal journey"
- Discussants: Keith Breckenridge (Wits) and Pamila Gupta (Wits)

**5: 00pm – 6:30 pm**

## Seminar by Hlonipha Mokoena (4701 Haven Hall)

"Zuluness on Trial: Re-reading John W. Colenso's 1874 Langalibalele and the Amahlubi Tribe Being Remarks Upon the Official Record"

Wednesday, November 18

## Session 7 - Space, property and the environment

**9: 00am - 11: 00am**

- Rosalie Kingwill (University of the Western Cape) "Kinship, custom and class: property relations among African freeholders in the Eastern Cape"
- Anne Berg (UM) "Green Capital, the Aesthetics of Poverty, and the Feel-Good Politics of Recycling"
- Robyn D'Avignon (UM) "Ancient Indexes: Colonial Geology and West African Gold Prospecting"
- Keith Breckenridge (Wits) "Plaatje's *Native Life*, the Commons and the racial limits of colonial progressivism"
- Discussants: Dario Gaggio (UM) and Sarah Emily Duff (Wits)

*Coffee Break*

## Session 8 – Class and Capitalism Now

**11.15 am – 12.45 pm**

- Joshua Coene (UM) "What Can Capitalism and Class Reveal in the Recent History of Imprisonment?: Thoughts from New South Wales and Pennsylvania."
- Andrea Wright (UM) "Managing Unruly Workers: Worker Strikes, Oil Companies, and the Development of Labor Policies in the Arabian Sea."
- Faeenza Ballim (Wits) "Capital beyond the Minerals-Energy Complex: The un-making of the working class in twentieth century South African agriculture."
- Discussants: George Steinmetz (UM) and Bernard Dubbeld (Stellenbosch University)

*Lunch*

**1.30-2.30**

Closing remarks