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Anna Clark

Radical History Review, Issue 79, Winter 2001, pp. 87-88 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



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The Holy Grail of Radical History

Anna Clark

Writing popular history with a political impact is the elusive Holy Grail of the radical historian. The History Workshop Movement in Britain inspired me to aim toward this goal through its commitment to historical practice unshackled by academic pretensions and accessible to “the people.” When I attended graduate school at the University of Essex around 1980, the labor movement in Britain was still strong and connected to history, and debates raged between socialist and radical feminists. I returned to the United States torn between my desire to be a historian and a commitment to political action. A brief stint working for a PIRG organization disenchanted me with professional activism, so I decided to go to Rutgers to try to be a historian in the History Workshop tradition. I never envisioned actually getting a job, but I thought at least I could do radical history for a few years. I wrote my first book on sexual assault in the hopes that this historical perspective could reach a popular audience as a slim paperback.

Subsequent years proved disillusioning. The feminist approach of my book turned off traditional historians, and it did not reach a popular audience. It took two grueling years to find a tenure-track job. Teaching at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte forced me to revise my understanding of the politics of history. In the South, history is very popular, but a conservative, masculine, Confederate version of history. I began to understand that my direct political contribution came more in teaching than in writing: encouraging students reluctant to question authority to think critically for themselves and, eventually, teaching the history of sexuality as an open lesbian.

But I also acquired a more humble view of the historian’s political contribution: we delude ourselves if we think that the correct critical approach to the nineteenth century British labor movement or women’s experiences will have much of an impact beyond a few readers. Instead, if we really want to have an impact politically, we should engage in direct political action in today’s world. Living in the South for ten years also made this task more urgent, so I intermittently volunteered to protect abortion clinics, and help battered women, and became active in the lesbian and gay movement. This political activity also enriched my historical practice. I began to see that political commitment is only one reason why people join movements: they also seek a focus for their lives and a social life; outrage compels people into movements, and endless meetings drive them out. Of course, that is an autobiographical statement; my current involvement in politics is very marginal, but it is refreshing now to live in a city (Minneapolis) where local politicians vie to be the most progressive.

American academic history has, with some notable exceptions, moved away from any potential connection with a wider public, in part due to the fascination with

the linguistic turn. Intellectually, the postmodern/poststructuralist approach has led to necessary critiques of overarching theoretical frameworks that had ossified and failed to explain social change. It can keep us intellectually honest, aware of our assumptions and more skilled in our analysis of language. It has given us the tools to deconstruct the stories people invent about their experiences and their actions—and to deconstruct our own histories. As academics advance in our careers, we no longer struggle as desperately to survive economically, and we spend our days reading and writing; it is not surprising that we now regard language as the most important element of politics. I myself have followed this trajectory, moving away from working-class history toward deconstructing high politics through a gender analysis of political scandal.

Beyond our studies, however, the world is transforming, as global capitalism endlessly shape-shifts like a rapacious trickster. The linguistic turn has exposed the flaws in past theories, but it has its limitations in helping us understand vast social, economic, and political upheavals. It is time to take the insights we have gained in deconstructing discourses and to combine them with a revived materialism to again view society with a wider lens. Even as we deconstruct the stories people invent about their own social and economic experiences as fictions and fantasies, we still need to understand the impact these stories have. When do political rhetorics “work” and when do they conceal or fail to overcome pragmatic, material economic and political interests?

We understand, of course, that when historians write narratives they are constructing delusive stories. In Britain, women’s history books attract a wide audience, but only those which tell alluring tales of glamorous aristocrats or contented housewives, misleadingly arguing that feminism was irrelevant since conservatism allowed women a moral influence. However, popular audiences crave stories and personal narratives rather than austere critiques. We have come to understand, for instance, that the Chartist movement drew in huge numbers of working-class people, not because they had the correct socialist analysis of working-class identity, but because they constructed powerful metaphors and rhetorics which evoked working-class misery and promised a better day. Can we write stories which engage audiences from a radical, rather than conservative, perspective without delusions? If anyone has found the secret, please let me know.