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Editor's Introduction: Making Radical History

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Radical History Review, Issue 79, Winter 2001, pp. 1-5 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



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Editor's Introduction: Making Radical History

This is a benchmark issue for the *RHR*, in many more ways than one.

For several years we have talked about some way of examining our institutional and social history (even celebrating it) as we came up on the cusp of what was either the journal's twenty-fifth or thirtieth anniversary; the uncertainty regarding exactly when we were "founded" was a source of bemusement.

The decision to move to a new publisher, Duke University Press, after a productive decade with Cambridge, provided an opportunity to act on this idea at last, to take stock as we conclude one stage and plan another.

The urge to write history of any sort, including the history of "radical history," is about situating events in larger screens of causality and contingency, to unpack and explore all the possible layers of determination and influence. Thus our desire to look back upon this journal's role in the generation of a counter-hegemonic discourse around (and ultimately within, as this issue traces) the profession of history in the United States.

Since 1994, the *RHR*'s editorial collective has engaged in a long, systematic process of thinking through how we operate, who we are and who we want to be, what we publish, and above all, our role as a consciously left group of historians. We have established and fine-tuned internal structures to strengthen participation and accountability, and recruited new members in areas such as Latin American, African, Asian, and imperial history. We have begun to address the historically overwhelmingly white composition of the Mid-Atlantic Radical Historians' Organization (MARHO) and the *RHR*, and the concomitant association of "radical history" (at least in the U.S.) with white leftist and feminist academics and white subjects (be they workers, or women, or political or sexual dissidents), when in fact all kinds of historians have been doing all kinds of radical history in this country as well as

Radical History Review

Issue 79 (winter 2001): 1–5

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abroad. We have engaged in a series of debates: Should we continue to publish monographic articles? Who is—more to the point, who should or could be—our audience? And how do we relate to the emerging movements that began to glimmer around 1995, and surged in 1999 and 2000 under the heading of “Seattle,” “A16” (the April 2000 mobilization in Washington, D.C., against the IMF) and “R2D2” (the protests at the Democratic and Republican Party conventions last summer)?

What this has meant in practice is a much greater focus on forums and round-tables, a revival of the interviews with radical historians and intellectuals that were a highlight of the *RHR*'s early years, the emerging prominence of the new “Teaching Radical History” section, and a repeated clarification to our authors that articles published in the *Radical History Review* must have a political stance (not any particular politics—Marxist, socialist-feminist, radical democratic, anarcho-communist, or whatever—just some politics). That readers of, or potential writers for, the journal may conclude that we are interested only in the industrial and post-industrial eras (the nineteenth and twentieth centuries), when these kinds of left politics became conscious stances, is one more problem for us to overcome. We do believe that, as indicated by the bitter polemics over Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* thesis regarding who and what constituted “antiquity,” or the long-running “Brenner debate” over the transition to capitalism in early modern Europe, there is deep political significance to how we interpret history in the millenia of human social activity before 1850. That the journal needs to do a better job of incorporating this much larger field of history prior to the emergence of modernity is evident, and we invite ideas and proposals from readers to do just that.

Structural innovations to the journal continue. Over the course of this year, we will inaugurate two new regular departments: “Interventions,” political commentary by members of the collective and guests, and “Historians at Work,” a column looking at all of the different public venues within which historians operate. We are also reorganizing the book review section, “Past in Print,” into a department called “(Re)Views,” which will include review articles on all forms of historical media—film, television, Web, print, and museum and other exhibits. And our “Public History” department, long a hallmark of the *RHR*, has moved from reporting on and critiquing various forms of public historical production into a deeper examination of the struggles over memory and spectacle in a transnational context; in this issue Teresa Meade discusses the extraordinarily effective use of physical place to render concrete Pinochet's state terror, and Cynthia Paces shows how the presence—or more often absence—of a single famous statue in Prague exposes that city's dense, fluid political history over the past eight decades.

Finally, we are striving to be more than a thrice-yearly magazine, by integrating all of our different forms of media and outreach (the journal, the *Radical Historians' Newsletter* edited by Jim O'Brien and Bob Hannigan, the H-RADHIST list on H-NET, the comprehensive Web site built by Andor Skotnes [<http://chnm>].

gmu.edu/rhr], and more frequent public forums in New York and at major association meetings) into a coherent political project. This last goal remains the biggest and most elusive task, since diffusion rather than integration is a characteristic of this particular conjuncture: the 500 people on H-RADHIST, up to a third of them outside the U.S., are not necessarily aware of what's published in the *RHR* or *RHN*; the newsletter's and journal's readerships are surprisingly distinct.

All of these changes to engage with and expand a broader constituency for radical historical practice in and outside of the academy is summed up in an aphorism—that our work be consciously “public, political, and popular.” And this new direction in turn impelled the move to Duke University Press, with its commitment to focused marketing and creative promotion.

The move to a new publisher, as we readied major new elements in the journal, led the *RHR*'s steering committee to generate a series of special features to investigate how radical history came into being and how its political and institutional function and influence has—or has not—mutated over three or more decades, as well as the particular role of MARHO and the *RHR*.

Various members of the steering committee took responsibility for specific efforts. Andor Skotnes organized and edited a public “Conversation about the *Radical History Review*” in May 2000 between key present and former members of the collective from the early 1970s on, including Molly Nolan, Robert Padgug, Danny Walkowitz, Ellen Noonan, Jim O'Brien, and Roy Rosenzweig. Ellen Noonan interviewed Mike Wallace, who played a central role in MARHO and the *RHR* from the earliest days. Ian Fletcher solicited short “Reflections” from a multigenerational array of radical historians in all of the different subdisciplines of history. Managing editor Dave Kinkela and fellow New York University grad student Dan Bender discuss the long, contentious history of unionization struggles at New York University in the debut of the “Interventions” column.

Not surprisingly, there are some common themes stretching across all of these features. One is the impact of radical history's success. As Roy Rosenzweig noted during the May roundtable, regarding the associational structures of the discipline, “to some degree, in history, we're running those things. . . . We did transform the profession.” And in “Reflections,” numerous writers outside the *RHR*'s ambit stress that what the majority of historians research and write about and teach is radically and fundamentally different—more democratic in the broadest sense of the word—than what was constituted (or permitted) as the study of history at mid-century. In that sense the “long march through the institutions” posed by Eurocommunists and others in the 1970s, and alluded to in this issue's title, has proven strategically sound. What is much less clear—or perhaps it is the point at which we have arrived—is how to relate a degree of intellectual hegemony in an academic discipline towards a much larger and more sweeping social transformation.

Another note sounded repeatedly in this issue is the vast distance we have

traveled from the common culture of the “movement” in the early ’70s, when MARHO and the *RHR* were one part of a systematic effort among young untenured or often simply unemployed scholars across the humanities and social sciences to dig in and give the New Left some long-term “counterinstitutional” footing. The interview with Mike Wallace provides a close-up, almost tactile sense of how much sheer organizing and public education work MARHO did in the ’70s, with weekly forums in New York, far-flung collectives on the East and West Coasts and various places in between, conferences, exhibits, radio shows, and much more. *RHR* editors who joined in the past ten years find it very hard to imagine doing all the work we do now—soliciting, reviewing, and editing articles, forums, and reviews—while also physically laying out the journal, getting it printed and mailed, collecting subscription renewals, and raising money to make sure it gets published at all. This independence from volunteer production tasks is a concrete measure of how far the journal has come, to be able to take these things for granted, but raises basic questions about the difference between “movement” and “institution” building: Does one negate the other? What would it mean for radical history to again become part of a radical social movement?

More generally, as the reflections by historians as different as Nikki Keddie, Ellen DuBois, Enrique Ochoa, Anna Clark, Gary Okihiro, Martin Duberman, Rob Gregg, Staughton Lynd, Vijay Prashad, David Roediger, Harry Harootunian, Gabriela Cano, Winston James, Tani Barlow, Max Page, and Paul Buhle remind us, both the “moment” of radical history’s formation in the U.S., circa 1966–72, and its ongoing propagation are made up of myriad decisions intensely personal and fully political—what scholarship to further, whom to work with, where to publish, what struggles or organizations to join. What strikes one in reading this international group of historians is the degree of agency and self-consciousness involved in these choices, either as breaking away from the familiar (to investigate those topics and peoples “without history”) or as an extension of deeply felt solidarities. And one is reminded that those historians who refuse the radical stance must have their own personal politics equally at stake—though they are unlikely to write about themselves as openly and self-critically.

Perhaps the most important decision our steering committee made in conceptualizing this special commemorative issue of the *RHR* was to seek the largest and, in all senses, most diverse group of voices to engage with the questions of what was, is, and should be radical history. This emphasis on pluralism and dialogue was deliberate because we assumed from the beginning that there could be no unequivocal answers to those questions. After multiple discussions and attempts at closure in our own collective, we knew all too well that radical history is properly a continual questioning of the practice of history, as well as an approach to what should be studied. So readers will find any number of theses, both stated and implied, about how

to define it. A few samples from different parts of this issue indicate how genuinely varied are these definitions.

One take on what is “radical history” would see it as a historical phenomenon of a particular time and place. It would be reasonable to conclude, for instance, from the conversation among founders of the *RHR* and later editors, that the coalescence of radical history in the U.S. was a specific political response to a set of conditions, ranging from how the Vietnam War intruded into the life of the professions to the generalized downturn in New Left organizing from 1971 onward. Tani Barlow takes this insight further, suggesting that “‘radical history’ has largely remained a signifier for 1970s and ’80s neo-Marxist histories of the United States and Europe,” and urging that it break from this perspective and become truly internationalist.

Focusing much more on what the radical historian does, or should do, than on his or her location, Winston James argues that the “preoccupation” distinguishing radical historians from others should be the story of the weak, the little people, the sufferers, the oppressed, and the exploited; their dreams, struggles, victories and defeats, their strengths and weaknesses. In short, the lives they led and the part they played in the making of our world.

Other historians focus much more on the social role of the historian, his or her political commitments and alliances outside of the library or the traditional classroom, agreeing with Anna Clark that 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.

Whether one agrees or disagrees with any or all of these propositions, our intent should by now be self-evident: to historicize a full generation’s worth of experience, practice, experiment, success, and failure, at a moment when the very notion of an academic discipline based on solid, established norms and practices—our discipline—teeters on the brink, an extraordinarily resurgent and dynamic capitalism bestrides the globe, and whole new movements are rising up unlike any we have seen before, from the Zapatistas to the “Teamsters and turtles” of Seattle. We have good cause for self-examination, as the first step on a new road to action.

Van Gosse,
for the Steering Committee

A final note: Never let it be said—if we can help it—that professionalization has made us solemn. Readers who eagerly anticipate R. J. Lambrose’s “The Abusable Past” in every issue will be pleased that that mysterious individual has assembled two decades’ worth of malapropisms, a retrospective of historical tomfoolery.