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Interview with Mike Wallace

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Interview with Mike Wallace

Conducted by Ellen Noonan

With this issue on the past and future of radical history, we present an interview with Mike Wallace, a longtime member of MARHO, award-winning scholar, trenchant critic of the presentation of the past in nonacademic settings, and stalwart member of the *Radical History Review* editorial collective. Wallace is coauthor, with Edwin G. Burrows, of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (Oxford University Press, 1999); he also served as an adviser and on-camera commentator in *New York: A Documentary History* (Steeplechase Films, 1999). In addition, he is the author of *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Temple University Press, 1996), winner of the Historic Preservation Book Prize for 1997; *Terrorism* (Arno, 1977); and coeditor, with Richard Hofstadter, of *American Violence: A Documentary History* (Knopf, 1970). He has taught at John Jay College, part of the City University of New York (CUNY) system, since 1971, and he has worked extensively as a lecturer and consultant on a variety of historical subjects.

Ellen Noonan of the *Radical History Review* editorial collective conducted the interview on June 13, 2000, at Wallace's home in Brooklyn.

Ellen: *I'd like to start by talking about your career at the City University of New York [CUNY]. How long have you been at its John Jay College of Criminal Justice unit?*

Mike: I came to John Jay in 1971.

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Ellen: *Given the current crisis over CUNY's admissions and remedial education policies, I wonder if you could talk about your sense of what's the same and what's different, from when you started teaching at CUNY to what's going on now, both in terms of the students and in terms of the larger political struggles.*

Mike: John Jay and CUNY have gone through significant changes. When I came to Jay it was still in its old building on 20th Street. I think we moved to our 59th Street digs—a former Miles shoe factory—in 1973. In fact the MARHO forums were the first events held there: before anybody else was in the building, I had already grabbed the auditorium. In the beginning, the students were overwhelmingly cops. My first class had lots of students who had been on the other side of the police barricades from me, up at Columbia in 1968. We got on quite well. They didn't like liberals one little bit, but radicals were something else. The way I looked at the world made sense to them, fit in with their own street experience. We seriously disagreed on some things, but became fairly comfortable with each other. Also there was tremendous diversity—black cops, white cops, rookies, precinct commanders. So that was wonderful . . .

Soon, however, CUNY, like New York City, was hit by the so-called fiscal crisis. But in my opinion, what was happening in 1974–75 was not simply a fiscal crisis. It was not simply a matter of a money shortfall because the city was spending too much, although certainly we had a level of social services that was higher than elsewhere. It was part of a global crisis. There was a worldwide recession in 1974–75. Banks in New York had tremendous exposure to New York City paper. They were also exposed to third world debt and bankrupt corporations. They had to decide who to lean on first, and New York was easiest at hand. The bankers applied what I consider a proto-IMF strategy to New York—treating it as if it were a third world country—telling us we were wasting funds on social services. President Ford, when he refused to help out the city, promulgated a list of outrages New York was committing. At the top of the list was free tuition at the City University of New York. After all he said, if New York City could provide free higher education for its citizens, what was to stop Minneapolis from doing so? I always thought that a perfectly good question. Quite right, Minneapolis should too. Josh Freeman's new book [*Working-Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II* (New Press, 2000)] is quite good on the fiscal crisis—properly casting it as an across-the-board attack on social democratic institutions that had been constructed by the city's working people. Throttling the City University was one of its triumphs.

John Jay was nearly shut down altogether. They were talking about “ration- alizing” colleges, eliminating “unnecessary duplication.” We had wonderful mass demonstrations out on the street, with cops on *our* side of the barricades too, which was intriguing. We saved the place, but at the cost of many liberal arts programs. All

the history majors at the college were told that if they wanted to continue they had to leave, even though history was the second most popular major in the college, as the cops loved us. They probably would have axed the history department altogether except that in those days educational foundations were saying that if you're going to be credible, not just a vocational training school, then you have to have some smattering of liberal arts stuff.

Ending the 150-year-old tradition of free tuition was the major thing. That was the big change they were able to impose. Tens of thousands of students couldn't afford the new fees. And once that many students were dumped, administrators began washing away lots of faculty—including many of the more conservative faculty, who had actually been quite happy at the prospect of rolling back free tuition and with it open admissions, because these policies were spoiling their fantasy of CUNY as a Harvard on the Hudson. A lot of the animus against CUNY went beyond the fact that it was a "socialistic" enterprise. It embodied, I believe, a reaction to the fact that the people who had entered the system were blacks and Latinos and such—and there was accordingly not the political support for a latter-day CUNY there had been for its earlier incarnation.

Besides helping organize demonstrations, I also got involved in a more specifically historian's form of resistance. In 1974, together with activists from various campuses, I helped write and distribute 10,000 copies of the "Crisis at CUNY" pamphlet, a history and political economy of the University. We looked at the pressures impinging on the place. We also predicted the adjunctification of the institution—the substitution of miserably paid and insecure academic proles for more expensive and tenured faculty. And we suggested an impending use of technology to displace faculty. In those days, John Jay had already installed and bolted centrally directed TV sets in each room, but the system never really quite worked, kept breaking down. We were a little early in our predictions, but many were borne out in a not terribly short space of time.

In the end, Jay survived, but changed. A lot of the programs that had supported cops there—some of them Vietnam GI benefits, some of them federal grants—were phased out. That brought the number of cops down considerably and increased the percentage of students who were recent high school graduates, working-class kids from the boroughs. At one intermediary point that produced an even better mix, because in the same classroom you had cops, along with streetwise blacks, Latinos, Italians, etc.—it was a spectacular combination of peoples. So I loved it, I had a great time with them. Later there were far fewer cops, though many more new immigrants, a different but still intriguing mix. And even though there was no history major anymore, I was able to come up with courses that attracted enough students so that I could teach pretty much what I wanted, including New York City history, and Jay remained/remains an interesting place to work.

Now CUNY's under assault again, has been for some time. They've continually ratcheted up the cost of tuition—each jump squeezing out more students. Most recently, by cutting out remediation and defining “standards” in particular ways, they've ratcheted out still more people.

Ellen: *Do you think the level of faculty activism and resistance is similar now?*

Mike: Well, I don't think it has been for awhile, but I think the election of the New Caucus [of the CUNY faculty union] is a hopeful development. A lot of the people in it, Stanley Aronowitz et al., have been slogging in the trenches for many years . . . I think the answer isn't in yet, we'll see. In some sense, in the mid-'70s, the circumstances were a lot worse. Then there was a simultaneous attack on public transport, on the hospital system, on day-care centers—the public sector en masse. There's nothing analogous to that at the moment, in part because so much of it was dismantled.

Ellen: *There's less to attack.*

Mike: Yes. Also the ideological climate was far more evenly balanced then, there were many staunch defenders of the public sector. Now the superior virtue of privatization is more widely accepted as self-evidently axiomatic.

So what else?

Ellen: *Well, maybe I should backtrack a little. I jumped right into CUNY and spoke about teaching there. Could you talk about what your intellectual interests have been over the years and what they were when you first started teaching? What were you teaching then?*

Mike: I was hired to teach a course called “Violence in American History.” That in turn came out of the work I had done with Richard Hofstadter after the '68 strike at Columbia. I had been working with him for a number of years—he was my thesis advisor, I was his research assistant, and we had gotten to be fairly close friends. We were, however, on opposite sides of the fence in '68. But once it was over, Hofstadter—who I think worried I had irretrievably ruined my chances in the profession, and who wanted to rehabilitate me by association—suggested we write a book together on the history of violence in the U.S. I was quite stunned by his giving me, a graduate student, equal billing on the front cover. He was an extremely generous man.

So, we began to work on violence. I did the research. The results amazed me. I had not been prepared to find so many bloodbaths, of such variety. The record didn't comport with the mythic notions of the consensual nature of American history

that had gotten reified in the high '50s. I had known of a dozen significant incidents. But it turned out there were hundreds of them—not inconsequential affairs, but major flashpoints, indicative of deep economic, political, cultural, and social issues. This wasn't the vision of history I had had. Rather unwittingly I'd stumbled onto what was about to become a large historiographical battlefield. Hofstadter and I had some disagreements on how to play the material. We had been going to write the introduction jointly, but then we agreed he would take responsibility for the piece in the book, and I would write a separate piece embodying my take—which got published in the *American Scholar* in 1970. So there I was, dissertation (on political parties) still in progress, but now a published, credentialed, koshered professional.

Just in time, too. In 1970, I had just started driving a taxi cab for a living when Hofstadter rescued me again. Leon Botstein, in those days the youngest college president in the known universe, had just been appointed to run this little college up in New Hampshire. The first thing he did was call Hofstadter and ask if he knew any job candidates in history. Leon hired me on the spot. So I spent a year at Franconia College. I loved it up there, but I was single at the time and I guess I'm a city boy.

I remember Hofstadter saying, "This is not a democracy, it's a teaching relationship."

I was driving to Boston and New York on long weekends, an insane thing to do, and I was looking to come back. I had two serious possibilities, one was Harvard and the other was John Jay.

I ran into John Cammett at a convention. John—a member of the Italian Communist Party—was the dean of this cop college. I'd met him doing organizing around radical history in the late '60s. John was thrilled, as was I, that I had just been denounced by the *Wall Street Journal*. They had run an entire editorial attacking my *American Scholar* piece, though with great respect. "Surely Professor Wallace must know better than this . . .," and so forth. John took this as a great job credential and told me they were hiring at John Jay. It was a natural—the idea of coming back to New York and teaching cops, working with the "red dean" and other lefties he'd stocked the department with, people like Blanche Cook and Jerry Markowitz. As a violence person, I taught a course organized around our book. I also taught Western Civ., which I reformulated as a course on the history of imperialism. I started with Columbus and traced the development of the global capitalist system, so that was fun. I also got students thinking about the history of politics and the politics of history. Again, given the mix of students, that was a fun thing to be doing . . .

Ellen: Around this time in the early '70s, you're teaching at John Jay and you're working on violence and other topics, and MARHO's also getting started. What was your role in that?

Mike: Well, let's see. It's roughly something like this. You've got to start with the fact that politically I had come out of the heart of *Reader's Digest* land. When I was in grade school in the late '40s and early '50s (I was born in 1942), I read books on World War II, studied plane silhouettes so I could become a civil-defense spotter, listened to military music all the time, and yes, read the *Reader's Digest* regularly. I

The liberal conservatives, or conservative liberals, had fashioned an unreal Boorstinian vision of a tranquil and consensual American past. In the '60s and '70s this construct ran up against the buzz saw of civil rights and women and the war and all the rest of it. The mismatch between fragile fantasy and obdurate reality was overwhelming, and in the end it was the fantasy that cracked.

was a child of the high '50s. My father had had some flirtation with the left. He had graduated as a lawyer into the Depression and worked a bit with the Lawyers' Guild. His brother Gene was a real card-carrying communist and been attacked by Roy Cohn himself when working at the U.N. as a stenographer. But my father moved steadily rightward, in large part at the urging

of my mother, who was terrified by radicalism, or more precisely its potential consequences during McCarthyism. I actually think her father was at some point a socialist in Hungary, but it didn't make the transition to her. In the '50s we were one anxious family—my mother especially didn't like Uncle Gene—and I imbibed that atmosphere. I remained a good boy. When I went to Columbia as an undergrad in 1960, somebody pointed out to me a guy named Collins who was something of a campus recruiter for the party. So far as I knew, apart from my uncle, I had never seen a communist before, and I goggled, but from afar. I knew the FBI was watching my every move. I never signed anything because I was sure—and of course I was right—that any such subversive action would be recorded in some central office somewhere. So I stayed good a long time.

Ellen: *So this is when you were an undergraduate?*

Mike. Yes. In my freshman year we had to read Walt Rostow's "Non-Communist Manifesto" in three—count them—three separate courses. And I was pretty much in tune with that. On the other hand, for reasons I still can't figure out, I was also drawn to the fringes of radical happenings, albeit mainly as an anxious if intrigued observer. In the late '50s, I think, maybe I was a senior in high school, I went to a SANE march, for some inexplicable reason. Somehow I ran up to the front of it, just to see what was going on, and found myself marching alongside Norman Thomas. In 1963, a friend and I went down to Washington. I stayed far from the stand, timidly on the periphery (and so could barely hear the speeches, even King's). I had never been in the presence of so many black people in my entire life. That was if not a

turning point, a nudging point. In 1964, I announced I wanted to go down south. My mother went wild. My parents sprang for me to go on a trip to Europe. [Laughter.] So I did that instead. In 1965, I went down to Georgia with my Columbia professor Jim Shenton, worked in COFO for a little bit, heard King in action, met SNCC people. But I remained on the margins of things. In my graduate work, too—I'd stayed on at Columbia as I wanted to work with Hofstadter—I stuck to pretty conventional topics and approaches.

The 1968 strike was therefore an amazing event for me. I still don't know why I got involved in it, but I did. Late one night I and Laura Foner occupied Fayerweather Hall, a simple enough matter as I had the key to the front door, being Hofstadter's research assistant. We just waltzed in. Then other students began wandering in. Manny [Immanuel] Wallerstein came by to suggest we shouldn't be doing this. One thing led to another and off we went. I wound up working in the communication room. I took a call from Paris in which students sent revolutionary greetings to we communards of Fayerweather Hall. It was very heady stuff. Wildly over-inflated, of course, as fellow student Rusti Eisenberg well knew, "For chrissakes, this isn't the Winter Palace," she told one meeting, "it's cruddy little Fayerweather Hall."

I got arrested (and gave Richard Hofstadter as reference to some prison official, who gasped, having read him in college—who knows, maybe John Jay?). I became a delegate to the central Strike Committee, partly I guess as I'd been running the graduate history student organization. In the middle of all this, reprints arrived of my first-ever article, published in the *American Historical Review*. Although Hofstadter and I at that point were very strained in our relations, he being convinced I was on the side of the crazies, I sent him a nice little note to thank him for his help. I think I was the oldest person in the occupied buildings—on the outer edge of the generational cusp. Other students who would become *RHR* founders—Mark Naison, Mike Merrill, Molly Nolan—were all younger than I was. And I hadn't had any contact at all with the older cohort of radical historians—[Jimmy] Weinstein, [Eugene] Genovese, [Jesse] Lemisch—the people getting established, getting fired, whatever.

Opening that door turned out to be a transformative moment. I continued to be involved with students unhappy with the structure of education at the Columbia history department. There was a lot of discussion about how to democratize and transform the nature of history education and the larger university as well. Our graduate student group had called for having students on faculty committees. This was vigorously resisted. I remember Hofstadter saying, "This is not a democracy, it's a teaching relationship." Some concessions to student input were made, but nothing of great consequence came of it.

At the same time, however, the Columbia contingent got involved in the larger history wars. Nineteen sixty-nine, when I gave my violence paper as a talk—

my first ever at a convention—was the year of the famous confrontations involving Genovese and [Christopher] Lasch and [Staughton] Lynd and [Howard] Zinn, the latter two of whom had previously helped set up a radical history caucus in the NUC.

Ellen: *What's the NUC?*

Mike: The New University Conference was an attempt to set up a national organization of radical scholars to work in tandem with the movement. One issue for them, and later for us, was how much they would define themselves as professionals in a traditional sense, albeit working to change the profession's intellectual direction, versus transforming the social relations of the production of knowledge, including the context of the relations between faculty and students. Another division—though many were on both sides—was over how much effort to put into getting professional organizations to take political stances on current issues, versus how much to concentrate on producing left history.

Between 1969 and 1973 the radical caucus of NUC, which then became the Radical Historians' Caucus, was centered in Madison, then in Boston. At first it tended to stress struggle within the associations, but by 1971 and 1972 contention at the annual meetings began dropping off. Partly this was because the organizations changed the rules so that radicals couldn't pass resolutions at the business meetings. They would now have to be ratified by the entire profession, where there was still a conservative majority. Increasingly, radicals didn't care so much. Many worked in various movement campaigns. While I was in Franconia, Columbia's Graduate History Union began mobilizing around Cambodia. There was also a slowly crystallizing sense that we needed an organization of our own and not just the NUC caucus. It was too evanescent, only came together at these professional conferences, and so wound up being defined willy-nilly by the professional structure.

I think Boston held a regional conference of New England historians in 1972, something like that. There was another midwestern group that also organized a regional association at that time. New Yorkers were a bit late. Mike Merrill reminds me that there had been a conference at Lehman [College, part of CUNY] in 1972, which I don't remember at all, and that there had been talk about having a summer camp modeled on URPE's, but little had happened before 1973.

Ellen: *What's URPE?*

Mike: I'm sorry, the Union of Radical Political Economics. One of the most remarkable things that came out of the Columbia strike—and again, it was a national phenomenon too—was that almost all of the disciplines in which graduate students were working developed radical caucuses. Many started newsletters, which became magazines. URPE produced the *Review of Radical Political Economics*. Al Szymanski and the radical sociologists brought out the *Insurgent Sociologist* [retitled *Criti-*

cal Sociology in 1988]. Lefty political scientists had *Politics and Society*. There was *Dialectical Anthropology*, and so forth. And of course *Studies on the Left* and *Radical America* had been trailblazers. The *Alternative Press Index* was launched to keep up with all our output. There were also occasions when we got together to think about interdisciplinary issues, organizing around projects or praxis.

There were two basic types of these radical outfits. URPE was primarily intraprofessional. It aimed to change the discourse within the profession and to maintain a professional presence.

Then there was CCAS, the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, which had a much more public model. They had four thousand members and produced three or four books of documents on the Vietnam War. New York-based historians were somewhat torn between these two models when they came together at Fordham in 1973.

Ellen: *This was a conference of historians?*

Mike: Yeah, a couple hundred historians, mostly graduate students, a few young teaching folk—you know, assistant professor types. Also movement people—what was left of it at this time—who were working in publishing or working in media or not working at all. What there was was a shared sense of wanting at the very least to establish a space for mutual support, and to develop alternate historical perspectives. It was not one of the more auspicious moments. The New Left's time had largely passed. But, somehow, from then on, and all through the '70s and '80s, radical history took off.

Ellen: *In a way that other disciplines didn't?*

Mike: Well URPE did, even though URPE was up against tougher resistance, given that they were tampering with conventional economic wisdom, which was a powerful ideological prop to the existing order. Still, radical history took off like a rocket ship. Partly, I think, this was because the vital center didn't hold. The liberal conservatives, or conservative liberals, had fashioned an unreal Boorstinian vision of a tranquil and consensual American past. In the '60s and '70s this construct ran up against the buzz saw of civil rights and women and the war and all the rest of it. The mismatch between fragile fantasy and obdurate reality was overwhelming, and in the end it was the fantasy that cracked. For all the country's rightward drift in recent decades it still hasn't been put back together again. I don't think it can be put back together again (though you never know: historiography, like history, is a constant struggle).

Partly our success was due to having broadened the range of historical issues one could grapple with. We expanded the number of historical actors one had to reckon with. Edward Thompson and other left luminaries had enormous impact—

and not only on the left. Many liberals were themselves increasingly persuaded that there were now many more interesting questions to work on than there had been earlier.

The fact that entrenched opponents gave ground ideologically doesn't mean radicals captured power. Power was still in the hands of very traditional people. This kept the issue alive as to what our central emphasis should be. How much should we do battle within the profession? How much should we concentrate on collectively advancing our own scholarship? How different were these tacks anyway?

I myself concentrated on helping build alternative institutions. As the Mid-Atlantic Radical Historians' Organization wobbled into existence, some worked on the newsletter that would evolve into the *RHR*. At first, I worked with Mike Merrill and one or two other people on organizing the [MARHO] forums. That was my major project. I particularly enjoyed it because it helped facilitate new lines of inquiry and allowed me to draw on my political connections with nontraditional historians. I was, for instance, along with my then-wife Liz Fee, involved at the time in the Gay Academic Union.

Ellen: *Was the Gay Academic Union a national or New York thing?*

Mike: New York, with aspirations to be national. It was there I met Jonathan Katz and, naturally enough, when I learned he was doing the work that would become *Gay American History* invited him to speak at the forum. As far as I know it was one of the first talks on an overview of gay history in a public venue. Many talks were given by people from other disciplines, but whom I knew through radical politics. Alan Wolfe was in the political scientist crowd, Bill Tabb was one of the URPE leaders. Mainly of course we had historians who were doing pioneering work—some famous (Edward Thompson, Perry Anderson, Wallerstein, Herb Gutman, Bill Williams), others just starting out but soon to be major players. When the forum was cooking, it was a hot-ticket item in the intellectual and political life of the city, some of the sessions attracting as many as 400 people. They went on for about ten years—from 1973–1984—and Danny [Walkowitz] revived them for a little while in later years. I don't know, maybe this is a fantasy, but it's remarkable the number of people I now run across who say that the supportive, nurturing, combative, interesting environment we created together was a very important sustaining force in their lives.

Ellen: *Do you have a sense if they were all academics?*

Mike: No, by no means. There were people working in radical journalism, in media, in publishing, in politics, and just politically minded people. We dealt with contemporary issues in historical context. When the CUNY crisis broke out, we had panels on that. We analyzed French elections. And we had fun, too.

Ellen: *Did the early RHR also have a wide-ranging constituency or did it restrict its focus to a more scholarly group?*

Mike: Well, let's look. [Ruffles through an old issue.] Well, right away my eye turns to a piece, "History for Non-Historians," by Sue Levine in issue 18 [Fall 1978]. [Reads:] "Most readers of RHR probably learned history as I did from a complicated set of political motivations deriving from the experience of the 1960s. Most of us probably still suffered from the tension between the professionalism which we take increasingly seriously and those political commitments that continue to be underpinnings to our work. I'm not so sure that it can ever be reconciled or even whether that reconciliation would be desirable. I do think that as historians we have something to offer outside a narrow professional audience. That something is not simply relevance to great figures of the past, it is another way posing questions. By asking certain questions of the past, we can bring new awareness to academics and non-academics alike."

I really do think that the stuff that we—all of us—the academics and the public practitioners working in tandem—the stuff that we've created is a hell of a lot more interesting than the stuff that used to be there . . . Monticello ain't what it used to be.

Here Sue was talking about a public-education project—the *Women and Work* exhibit—on which several collective members worked. So we were already into public history, sans the label. This exhibit opened at Gallery 1199, of the health and hospital workers, in September of 1977. Then it moved to the Educational Alliance, the Lower East Side Settlement House, then the Equitable Life Insurance building. So from the get-go we were going to try to do all of the above. We were going to try to speak to a multiplicity of audiences . . . The radio show was another effort, "Radical History Radio."

Ellen: *This was on WBAI?*

Mike: Yeah.

Ellen: *Was it just on WBAI? Or other stations?*

Mike: Just on BAI. Again, it was an attempt to speak to larger audiences. Our first one was in October 1981. We did a dramatization. Judy Evans was Queen Isabella, I was Columbus. Harry Levine played the crew. We reenacted the mythic Columbus story, like an old-time radio drama, with sound effects and whatnot. Queen Isabella hocks her jewels because she likes my blue eyes. The scaredy-cat crew revolts. And then we set foot on land, plant the cross—and the tape runs down, symbolizing that in myth-land the story's over with after "discovery." Nobody knew or cared what hap-

pened next. After breaking the frame of this little dramatization, we turned to what had happened next and explained why the mythic story was bullshit. I wasn't at all sure how this hour-long show would play. Dave Metzger was the WBAI producer who was working with us on this show and he was terrific. And the switchboard lit up with call-ins. Bingo!—which was the house term for a total jamming of the boards. Given the tremendous response to this we kept it up for a while.

Ellen: *What other kinds of things did you do on the radio show?*

Mike: Well, we did things like holiday histories. Lincoln's birthday. We'd say, "Well, you want to know about Lincoln, well here's the real story . . ." Thanksgiving—where did this holiday come from? What are the politics of Thanksgiving? We did a show on Ronald Reagan in 1981, trying to figure out whether he really believed all the stuff he was saying about history or was just making it all up. There were shows on jazz, on sports history. Bob Edelman was working on Russian sports so he did one on the history and politics of sports.

Ellen: *So meanwhile, what was happening with the journal?*

Mike: By '77, the newsletter that had begun in '73 had evolved into a journal. We spiffed up its appearance—Bob Padgug and I chose Palatino as the typeface—and we had some graphics designed by a radical artist and our own Josh Brown. For a time, issue production rotated between the various MARHO collectives that had emerged in different cities (Boston, New Haven, Providence, Philadelphia, Baltimore, etc.). The Providence issue was done by Paul Buhle and the group up in Rhode Island. But increasingly production got centralized in New York, and by this time I was heavily involved with the journal as well as the forum.

We were really running a small business. We were handling the typesetting and proofreading and relations with printers and promotion and fulfillment and advertising and exchange advertising and all this was being done voluntarily, with different collective members taking on different business as well as editorial tasks. I was doing a lot of the coordination of this. Every now and then, I'd take a break—Vicki [de Grazia] was editorial secretary at one point—but not too often. I was deeply embroiled in MARHO work for many years.

By 1982, 1983, 1984, there were problems. Some of them were functions of success. Once you move up to a more professional level, then you've got to keep going at this level. There was some concern about the time and energy going into the magazine. I never had serious reservations, though; maybe I should have. At any rate I pushed for its looking good and pushed for it being professionally presented, and most people seemed to agree. And knick-of-time financial support from John Jay and from CUNY President (and old socialist) Joe Murphy allowed us to hire part-time

staff and get past our crisis, and later the business and production functions were handed over to Cambridge University Press.

Ellen: *In terms of content, though, as well as style and presentation—was there a move to make it more professional in the sense of a stricter peer review and more sort of traditional scholarly articles? One of the things that’s interesting about early issues of the journal is that there is a kind of cheekiness in the early RHR, those cartoons and satirical pieces. Was that an intentional way of separating yourselves from the profession? And did things become a little more standardized at this moment too?*

Mike: [Laughs.] No, that’s the way we were—it was fun. Even in the “Crisis at CUNY” pamphlet, you’ll see all kinds of whimsical things tossed in. No, it was a funny crowd, you know, and there was a great deal of laughing and chortling. And this continued to be reflected in the journal even as we “professionalized.” We were running “Ad Nauseam,” ads that deployed historical themes to commercial effect. That was one of my favorite projects. People didn’t quite appreciate it as much as I did. I was sorry to see it go. R. J. Lambrose began his humor column. We were doing history and the media, we were doing reviews, we were doing teaching stuff. [Riffles through another old issue.] Here’s Liz Philips’s “Women’s Lives, Women’s Work, Materials for the High School Classroom” [*RHR*, issue 20, Spring/Summer 1979].

What I did push for in the late ’70s and early ’80s, and what we did indeed do, was to have a lot more thematic issues. I wanted us to first of all canvass what was out there, find people struggling to develop a new field, and then facilitate their efforts. The sex issue I coedited with Bob Padgug was arguably one of the first of these efforts. We did issues on the spatial dimension of history, on film and history, on gender, on imperialism, and it was now that our public-history approach began get more organized. Issue 25 [Fall 1981], I think, was the one in which it really came into its own.

Ellen: *Well, that’s a good segue, because I did want to talk to you about the intersections between your career as a public historian and theoretician of public history, and the journal’s role in promoting public history as a subdiscipline within the field of history.*

Mike: Well, we never had the slightest intention of promoting a subdiscipline in the profession. Indeed I was at first appalled when the academy, as is its wont, turned it into a “discipline,” with its own conferences and journals. There are of course good and legitimate reasons for doing that. People interested in a field want to get together to push and jointly develop it. But it was nevertheless startling to get to a point where there were umpteen huge conferences being held, when dissertations

are churned out on public memory, etc. I had no idea back then. [Laughs.] I just wandered into it, more as a political than an academic project.

I had always been interested in public presentations and mostly appalled by them. But I think that like most academics, I thought they were outside my sphere of concern as a professional. We didn't pay much attention to that pop stuff. It was another world. It must have been in the late '70s, on visits to Williamsburg and Disney World—I can't remember which came first—that a light bulb went off. Wow, these are the places where history is really being promulgated to huge numbers, and it ain't the kind we've been developing in our journal, to put it mildly. I just felt I had to respond to them. Also, critiquing popular presentations of the past suited my style. Simply doing scholarly work, fighting on an academic terrain, never seemed sufficient. Nor did I really want to be a full-time movement person, even though I'd flirted with it. What would get called "public history" seemed like a good combination of scholarly and popular-political work.

So I did this "Visiting the Past" piece on the history of history museums. (Originally it was joined at the hip to what was later separated out as a history of historic preservation, another field I now jumped into.) Once I started researching it, I discovered there was precious little that had been done on the question of presenting history in public venues. There was Hosmer's book, which was indispensable but very much a celebration—he'd been given access to all these papers—and so was his later two-volume continuation of the story. [Charles B. Hosmer Jr., *Presence of the Past: A History of the Preservation Movement in the United States before Williamsburg* (Putnam, 1965); *Preservation Comes of Age: From Williamsburg to the National Trust, 1926–1949* (University Press of Virginia, 1981).] In fact when I wrote a review of Hosmer for *Technology and Society*, one historian of science went berserk, accusing me of being a Stalinist and poisoning people's minds and so forth. I hadn't realized I was being quite so provocative. Then I gave a talk to Smithsonian curators, which generated a vigorous in-house debate. And I realized more forcefully that there were powerful vested interests operative in this as in other terrains, which I wanted to figure out. So I wrote a series of articles on this [collected in *Mickey Mouse History and other Essays on American Memory* (Temple, 1996)]. I also began working a lot with museums and meeting the curatorial world. Who were the people who produced things, where was this production taking place? What was the politics of this world? There were clearly struggles underway to transform the popular historical world, as we had been transforming the scholarly one. And I wanted to be useful to the degree that I could . . .

Other academics were tilling this pasture, too, many of them in the *RHR* orbit. Roy [Rosenzweig] had been playing around with this kind of stuff and I think he did his piece about *American Heritage* at this time. Sean Wilentz did a review of *Upstairs/Downstairs*—I think around this time. Issue 25 comes out of this energy. Steve [Brier] edited it, along with Roy, and Sue Benson.

We also began participating in public-history conferences. There was one on “Popular Interpretations of History” up in Tarrytown in 1982. Then in 1984 Jo Blatti, Elliot Willensky (who was coauthor of the AIA guide), and I decided to put on an unusual type of conference, one that broke with academic conventions. It ran for three days and included academics, filmmakers, archivists, librarians, museum curators, tour guides, popular novelists, the whole schmeer. While we had some talks—I gave my take on Disney World—we mainly broke up into groups, went out into the city, and critiqued existing presentations. I led a group to the Battleship Intrepid. It was terrific. It was particularly terrific for me, because one of the people who was attracted to this conference was a woman who had been working on a popular history guide about the Irish in New York by the name of Hope Cooke. We met across a crowded conference room at the South Street Seaport and have been together ever since.

Ellen: *Let's talk about public history some more.*

Mike: MARHO folk also started a New York City public-history project. It was part of this desire to bust out of an academic setting and go public. We were going to do a new WPA guide to New York City, in part because I was already working on the New York City book. We got fairly far along in organizing it, but couldn't quite agree on the money [with Pantheon Press] and it never came off. We did create a multi-projector slide show—using some fairly fancy technology for those days—on the history of Wall Street. We all played characters in this little story about a youth (played by Joe Doyle) who was being taken around the area by his banker uncle (Bill Preston). In the process we rehearsed the history of Wall Street since the 18th century and talked about the contemporary crisis of capitalism. It aired publicly at Fraunces Tavern, no less. Not bad—it wasn't bad. And we produced two pamphlets. One was on the history of Wall Street, and the other was on the history of housing in New York City, intended to intervene in the housing crisis. We had other notions still. I discovered when looking through some old MARHO papers that in 1979 I called for putting on a history festival; and here I am, twenty years later, still working on it!

The trouble with the NYCPHP was that it didn't have a constituency. NYU had a public-history program up, and some of our group were students or graduates, and they had some connections. But we ourselves had no direct outlet for our products. Bill Tabb kept asking, “Who's your audience?” I said, “We'll worry about it later. We'll do the history and then we'll find the public.” It was an ass-backward way of doing things. We did find some public, but not enough of one. Given that this was an all-volunteer effort and taking lots of time, it collapsed. There were just too many things going on at the same time.

Ellen: *It's related, I think, to the whole question of the institutionalization of public history. You say that you were working on these projects and knew that they didn't kind of count as academic work, that they were this extra thing, when in fact, your work, and your work for the journal during that period, was setting in place a foundation that is recognized. You were expressing surprise earlier that that happened. Do you think that a certain kind of depoliticization happened with a kind of professional status?*

Mike: Yes and no. Once you say that history doesn't happen only in the academy, so let's look at where it's happening elsewhere, then you really need to be inclusive in your looking. Once you are, you notice that the State Department, after all, has got its own historian, and the corporations have their own internal archivists. So does the military, there's an official U.S. Air Force historian. You quickly realize there's a lot of public historical terrains and they're by no means all friendly to left approaches to things.

Now the *RHR* had the advantage that we had helped launch what was emerging as a field, so we got to define much of its agenda at the beginning. Thus issue 25 became a book, and the "Past Meets Present" conference became a book, and Roy [Rosenzweig] put together a history-museum book. These became canonical works. Even if you didn't like them, you had to deal with them. So in a sense professionalization was useful to our political project.

Also, as the nonacademic places hired professional historians, they might well have been getting people who were practitioners of a more critical history than they had bargained for, or even people who had come up in the new public-history movement, maybe even MARHO people. One former *RHR* editor wound up at the New York Stock Exchange archives, which may have had a little to do with their own popular productions, precisely in order to hew more closely to current professional standards, telling a far more complex story than they had in the 1950s—including references to financial crises, corruption, and the integration of women in the financial professions. They were still triumphal narratives, as was Disney's, but with a difference.

Still, I suspect it's true that few professional public-history training programs place an interest in social transformation at the top of their list, no matter that the field has been tarred by our initial brush. I'm afraid I haven't been much involved with it in recent years, so I don't know, maybe it's gotten ossified by now, what with conferences and subspecialties and arcane panels. To some extent, too, the political complexion of the field is tied in with the state of the job market.

Ellen: *Right, but I guess my concern is with the way the professionalization of it has marginalized it. That there's a built-in marginalization, and it's very connected to the*

job-market issue. I think when public history gets seen as a solution to a bad academic job market, that's a way of marginalizing it, because it's seen as, well, if you can't get an academic job, then you do public history—

Mike: Well, that's been the case for a long time, after all. Most academic historians were always snooty about people working in museums, historical societies, and historic houses (though there were always the Dixon Ryan Foxes of the profession). If anything, there's been an erosion of formerly superrigid lines of status separation since the late '70s, early '80s, when social historians began wandering into places like Williamsburg. Some indeed came because there was a job crunch in the universities, though also often out of a commitment to bringing the new scholarship out into the civic arena.

Arguably there's more danger of depoliticization coming from commercialization than from academicization.

Ellen: *What do you mean by that?*

Mike: When history gets seen as, becomes, a commodity, a profit center, when what you're into is selling the past, then you don't care so much what the politics are. Or if you do care it's because you're concerned about losing market share. Going for inoffensive, "apolitical" blandness can be one solution to such fears.

Yet even in the marketplace, you can't escape politics. One of the things that fascinated me when I was studying Disney's 1980s updating of its 1950s historical material was that when I asked a Disney executive why they were changing their exhibits he said (more or less): "You know, I read Jesse Lemisch when I was in college. Everybody's read this new bottom-up social history by now. We can't do what we did in the '50s because our audience is more sophisticated. Since the civil rights movement and the transformation in college curricula, you can't any longer pretend there were no blacks in the history of the United States." To a degree, therefore, your commercial presentations depend on your assessment of what it is that real people want. In the '80s, new historical understandings and a new ecological consciousness drove Disney to the left, lest they lose their market, be perceived as "Mickey Mouse." Of course there are other cases where such pressures work in a different direction. There's no easy answer to that. It depends on the historical moment.

This also speaks to your concern that working on public history gets considered as marginal by the academy. Certainly there are academics who think that, but I think, what with all the contemporary focus on popular culture, media, popular memory, and the like, that's hardly a sustainable position. After all, Disney World is the single most popular tourist attraction on the planet. Not to pay attention to what's coming out of it is just ludicrous.

Ellen: *There's an important distinction between the part of public history that's about critiquing Disney World and the part of public history that's about the practice, and that's another topic I wanted to talk to you about, the kind of terrain where academic historians meet public-history practitioners.*

Mike: To start with, given that public historians are working in some of the most central symbolic institutions this culture has—and some of the most widely attended to by the general public—then I would say that those working on actually trying to change them are doing crucially significant cultural-political work, far more so than those simply churning out inconsequential monographs. Those who contest this would have to flip Shaw's dictum and have it read: "Those who can, teach; those who can't, do."

In fact, I think the relation between academic and "public history"—the term really is redundant, don't you think?—has changed a lot. Years ago I used to complain that while vast amounts of energy went into creating museum exhibits, there was no place that engaged in ongoing critical commentary on such productions. No reviews. The academic profession, on the other hand, would offer multiple reviews of some narrow-gauge monograph that maybe a few hundred people would ever read, yet give no attention whatever to a history exhibit that huge numbers of people would visit. Or a TV documentary seen by millions. The *RHR* began paying attention, along with a few other journals, and now everyone and their grandmother are reviewing movies and exhibitions. That's a qualitative transformation. There's also the fact that the National Park Service under Dwight Pitcaithley has established strong connections with academic historians and the professional associations. So I think that while this snobbishness lingers on, it's itself increasingly relegated to the margins.

Ellen: *What's the relationship on the ground between primarily academic or scholarly historians and the people who are doing museum exhibits? Has there been a change in what it means to be an advisor on a museum exhibit or a documentary film? I know you've been an advisor or a talking head on a lot of projects—prominently, on the recent Ric Burns documentary on the history of New York. How much influence do you have as an academic historian when you're forced to work with people who have the kind of craft and the technical skills to do these kinds of presentations?*

Mike: Well, I guess I don't think there's a single answer to that one either. It very much depends: (a) on the historical moment; and (b) who the players are. You can have an incredible range of possibilities. In general, though, I think there's a great deal more mutual respect for one another's crafts, that public practitioners seek to draw on what scholars produce, and that scholars who want to reach beyond

text-based audiences realize the necessity of partnering with people expert in doing so.

The methods the two crafts use are different. Filmmaking and exhibition mounting require skills academics—even when relatively flexible—are often not very good at. They are skills you have to develop expertise in, hone by constant practice. Museum educators know what fifth graders coming to their institution will absorb, and what they won't, where I haven't a clue.

Partnerships aren't always smooth, of course. Ric [Burns] and I had a very good working relationship once it got going, though it took a long time. He knows what he wants to do, and how he wants to do it in his medium. On the other hand, he knows he isn't in a position to produce a film history of New York without intense collaboration with historians of the city, whom he respects greatly. That doesn't mean he's always going to listen to them. As one of the senior historical consultants, I argued vigorously not only for particular lines of interpretation but for particular filmic approaches as well. A lot of what I had to say, off- as well as on-camera, wound up on the cutting-room floor. That didn't really bother me, in the sense that I've been around long enough not to expect anything different from a collaborative venture. I could, of course, get pretty exercised about any particular point I was fighting for. Indeed we had some knock-down-drag-outs. And I think I had a pretty substantial impact on the contours of the overall thing. Is it still nevertheless too triumphalist in tone? Is it still not too heavily focused on one great man after another? Does it not give short shrift to particular subjects, notably women? Sure.

On the other hand, the film did a lot of things really well. It certainly captured race and its centrality to the history of the city in a way that had never been done before in a comparable piece of public programming. And whatever my and other academic reservations, Ric's filmmaking skills have certainly grabbed lots of people. A lot of working-class folks in this neighborhood come up and tell me, "There's a lot of crap on TV, so it was really good to see something like that; I really learned a lot; I got that set of videos for my kids, all five of them" (for \$125!). There are people who've seen the show three times. To some extent, perhaps, its popularity is related to the kind of boosterism I find wildly overdone, in that it makes people feel good about the city. But it's also because the filmmakers were skilled practitioners, good at their craft. I think it helps when working collaboratively to keep remembering that your partners are skilled professionals as well, and different crafts have their own imperatives.

To some extent, of course, such partnerships have been midwived by money. Even if Burns had been inclined to make a history film without consulting historians, his initial reliance on NEH for funding precluded the possibility. They required panels of academic advisors. Same's true for museum exhibits. You know you have to

have humanities people in on the process. But that's something that's changed over time, too.

Ellen: *You raise an interesting point about NEH. I would go further and add PBS and the federal government in the case of a place like the Smithsonian in providing these kinds of institutional restraints or guides that push public-history projects in certain ways. I wondered if you wanted to talk a little about how that's changed. There were certainly some major turning points such as the Enola Gay controversy and "The West in America," around the idea of public funding of these kinds of projects, and how is that affecting what gets on PBS, what the NEH funds? Was that really a turning point? Or did it just seem to be because there was so much public debate and discussion?*

Mike: Well, I don't think we know yet. But I was expecting considerably more slippage than seems to have been the case.

Ellen: *Slippage in what sense?*

Mike: In a greater constriction of the range of political opinions that could make their presence felt through publicly funded presentations in the aftermath of Enola et al. I'm not sure that's proved to be the case. The most dramatic instance of self-censorship was perhaps the Smithsonian's own celebration of its centennial (or something or other), when they put together an object-studded show that was utterly bland. The script, such as it was, must have been screened by computers—some political spell-checker. Nothing in it could have offended anyone. It was also a colossal snoozer, and did not do very well. I don't think bland sells well, and to the degree that market calculations have intruded ever more into decisions about sponsorship, then that's a problem.

In general—this may be fantasy—I believe, as I said in my Enola Gay piece, that the stuff that we—all of us—the academics and the public practitioners working in tandem—the presentations we've created are a hell of a lot more interesting than the stuff that used to be put out there. Again, the reasons are complicated, and are no doubt also a function of changing publics. If we reenter a hyperpatriotic period, maybe people will line up to see eighty-three busts of George Washington. Still, Monticello ain't what it used to be. Neither for that matter is Mount Vernon.

Again, the overall progression seems to me towards an opening up of the range of questions that are addressed in public and the range of answers that can be given to those questions. We had the notion in the '60s that transformations would sweep through society and culture. Well, the historians, we did our bit. [Laughs.] We transformed this profession, I really do believe. But lots of other sectors of society didn't keep up. So in a way, this is a liberated zone here.

Ellen: *Well, I think that's probably true of the profession writ small; in higher education writ large, there's certainly different—*

Mike: Oh, that's a war zone—that's a war zone. All kinds of things are up for grabs there. That's what the battle over CUNY is smack in the front line of. The outcome of the struggles over the future of universities may well yet affect the historical world negatively. And historians, too. So far, I've been very lucky. I've managed to sail through all kinds of things. Still, my/our comeuppance could be just around the corner. We'll see.

Ellen: *Do you want to talk a little about the Gotham Center and your Gotham book?*⁹

Mike: Let's start with the book, or more precisely my sense, that grew out of my work on *RHR*, of the need for a new synthesis in U.S. history. As editorial secretary, I spent a lot of time canvassing recent work. Each month, religiously, I'd read the latest issue of *Dissertation Abstracts*. Not most people's idea of fun, but I had a whale of a time, because I could see terrific new work popping up in field after field. I organized a program of writing letters to promising newly minted Ph.D.s. Not only in history, but in sociology, political science, philosophy—to whomever had done interesting historical work, whatever disciplinary name they gave it. We'd invite them to join us (back when we had an organization), and invite them to send in material for possible publication in *RHR*.

Fairly early on I remember thinking two things: one, that the left, broadly defined, had collectively taken great strides toward reconstructing the history of the United States; and two, the general public couldn't grasp this because there was no new narrative, just a million fragments. People began to talk about how we needed a new synthesis, something to pull all this work together. By then, I'd already taken this as my project, and teamed up with Ted [Burrows]. Ted was in MARHO until about 1980 or 1981, and he and I had collaborated on a longish piece on the American Revolution as a war of national liberation.

I wrote up an outline for a left history of the United States. It was going to include the history of everything, rather as *Gotham* does in its smaller compass. I went to the Rabinowitz foundation—an old lefty foundation that no longer exists. Maybe I was its last grant? Ann Lane, my colleague at John Jay, was on the board. I got letters from everybody—Thompson, Gutman, Genovese, etc. In 1976 they gave me \$7,000, a serious piece of change at that moment, and thus some time off to work on this thing. We began with the transition from feudalism to capitalism and the construction of a world-system. Wallerstein, Anderson, Frank, etc., were doing pioneering studies, and we tried to integrate these global approaches into laying out the context within which the U.S. would emerge. Ted kept writing away, and I kept writing

away. This went on for some years and we hadn't gotten past the seventeenth century yet—we had barely gotten the future U.S. itself on the boards—most of the focus was on what was happening in Europe, and out on the planet, and I still think it's the correct way to approach it . . .

By the early '80s, we'd chugged into the early eighteenth century, and gotten an NEH grant for what we were then calling the "Origins of American Capitalism." But it just wasn't happening. Or too much was happening. We were doing a U.S. history at the same level we would do our New York history, only with a full footnote apparatus, defending and commenting on almost every scholarly argument we encountered. We had written many, many hundreds of pages. But it was now clear that at this rate it was going to take eleven lifetimes and we only had two to spare.

Plus, I was also doing my public-history pieces. Plus lots of *RHR* work. I also went to Nicaragua and did an interview with Nicaraguan historians. I think it was around that time that we did some collaborative work with radical theologians.

Ellen: *People working on Latin American support issues?*

Mike: Yeah. I remember a bunch of us went up to Tarrytown to the Dominican Reflection Center, me and Betsy Blackmar and Mike Merrill and Jeanie Attie. I ran my history of the United States book as a talk. I started in the sixteenth century and I think I made it down to the early twentieth century before I ran out of time and collapsed. Seemed all too congruent with the way the book was going. Then the MARHO people took over and did workshops with the nuns, who were dynamite—still are dynamite.

I also went to China, gave papers on public history in the U.S., an overview of the history of the U.S. history profession, and my survey of U.S. history in Beijing and Wuhan universities. I tried out the U.S. book on a group of radical historians in Tokyo.

But by that point I was getting discouraged. Partly the book was dragging on, partly the journal was in financial trouble, partly I was just overloaded.

After being depressed for a bit, I convinced Ted we should decant the larger opus into what seemed, in my naïveté, a far more manageable proposition, a history of New York, with the city's story set in a national and international context so our work to date wouldn't just go down the drain. The highest level of analysis in *Gotham* would be the development of the city against the backdrop of the development of U.S. capitalism, and its changing position in a global capitalist world. We would track New York as it moved from being a little backwater of the Dutch empire to being the center of the planet. Like the U.S. book was to have been, *Gotham* would be organized around stages of capitalist development, around the ups and downs of the accumulation process, around the experience of living in a capitalist society, around class

struggle, accommodation, negotiation, and around issues of gender and race and ethnicity and nationality. It would be not only a New York City history, but a synthesis of U.S. history, as viewed through the prism of its preeminent city. It would also be a good read, popularly accessible, a work of “public” history as well as a scholarly one.

So we shifted gears, and it took another fifteen years, but we did it. So what else is there to say about that? [Laughs.] Short of reciting 1,400 pages . . .

It did go on. Ted and I took turns feeling depressed, and we propped one another up. Hope was indispensable not only as a life partner but a superb critic—she went over each of our innumerable drafts—and her own *Seeing New York*, toward which she’d been working since we’d met in 1984, was itself an inspiration and source of ideas. Still, I was feeling pretty crazy in the mid-’gos when I realized we’d be surpassing even the eighteen-year timetable Hofstadter had set when he’d embarked on his never-to-be completed general history of the U.S. Indeed, I had in part decided to launch directly into this preposterous project after he died in 1970 at such a horribly young age. I thought, Jesus, what a disappointment, to wait until your mature and established years to undertake such a project, and then you suddenly drop dead. I figured if I was going to take a crack at something like this I’d better skip the conventional career track of doing monograph after monograph and get started right away. It was something of a gamble. I had no credibility in the profession, apart from some articles and talks and the public-history work. If I’d been fired from Jay, I’m not sure I could have gotten another job. Luckily for me, the college was staunchly supportive both of my own work, and that of the *RHR*, for many, many years.

We had the notion in the ’60s that transformations would sweep through society and culture. Well, the historians, we did our bit. [Laughs.] We transformed this profession, I really do believe. But lots of other sectors of society didn’t keep up. So in a way, this is a liberated zone here.

Ellen: *It is a different moment because now people on tenure track don’t have the luxury of saying, no, I won’t write a monograph, I’ll do articles and I’ll do this and I’ll do that, and eventually I’ll write a big book. Those avenues are closed, it’s a much more narrow path now. Do you want to talk about the Gotham Center?*

Mike: Let’s see. In a sense, all these years I’ve been moving back and forth between public history and academic history—treating them as different moments of a single process. Once *Gotham* came out and was pleasantly received by a general as well as an academic readership, I found myself wanting to do some more activist public-history work, which I had really dropped out of in the ’90s. So even though I’m now beaver away on *Gotham II*—into the postwar decades just now—I’ve started up

a Gotham Center for New York History at the CUNY Graduate Center. It's something of a reincarnation of the New York City Public History Project. It's got several aims.

One, I want to pull together all of the history makers in the city, not just the big museums, but the scores of little museums, the historical societies, the historic house trust, the preservationists, and the vast and varied world of history buffs. The latter are an underrecognized constituency, and they are rabid. My kind of rabid. The people who are running African American walking tours in Bed-Stuy. Who are reenacting revolutionary infantry operations in Brooklyn. Who are restoring buildings in Bayside. There's a tremendous popular interest in city history. The definitions of what it is, the kinds of questions people are concerned with, the degree to which their vision is open and broad or narrow and parochial can range enormously.

History is hot just now in the city, thanks in part to the buzz about *Gotham* and Burns's film (or maybe it's the other way around). There's a lot of excitement around it. But this being New York, it could dissipate in six months. I want to institutionalize that energy. People in scores of history-making institutions—academic departments, museums, libraries, archivists—have agreed that we need a consortium to collectively increase the visibility and staying power of history and come together to work on various projects. We've got institutional backing from CUNY's Graduate Center thanks to two old MARHO people—David Nasaw at the history department and Steve Brier, now associate provost.

Two, we set up a Web site, www.gothamcenter.org, to post information about every history offering in town. Eventually it will have a database in it so that you can search on shoemakers and it will tell you that there's an exhibit on shoemakers at Cooper Hewitt this week, and there are papers on cordwainers at such and such a library. It will crosslist everything—every Web site about a neighborhood's history, the doings of buff organizations, the offerings of tour guides, etc. It'll provide discussion boards for on-line conversations about New York City history, organized around format—i.e., when you go to a new exhibition you needn't limit your response to scribbling some comments in a guest book, which at the end of the exhibition gets deep-sixed. You can go home and post your comments on a thread about that exhibition, which will be available to curators at that and other institutions, allowing exhibit designers to get real popular feedback. We'll do the same for new books, new movies, new Web sites, whatever. It will be a virtual New York history forum.

Three, we want to help improve K–12 teaching of New York City history. The state's official syllabus requires the subject in fourth, seventh, eighth, and other grades, and lays out, on paper, some very exciting things to do in a classroom. Virtually nobody pays any attention to this syllabus, either because they don't have the background or sources to teach such material, or now, particularly, because they're

under the gun to teach to the test. But there are lots of people who, on their own, in good guerrilla fashion, have come up with interesting exciting projects. I met with teachers in Community Board 4 in East Harlem who had come up with all kinds of great middle school history projects. But they had no idea they had counterparts doing the same thing in Brooklyn, and Brooklyn doesn't know what's happening in the Bronx. So we're going to collect all these projects and put them up on the Web, and we'll show how to tie them into the board's requirements. The next step will be to take the best of these approaches and develop a new set of curriculum packages, again tied to the syllabus, and put them up on the site, and then hopefully have teacher training, maybe a certificate program at the Graduate Center in the history department. We've set up a crackerjack volunteer group of teachers and educators, including representatives from the parochial and private school sectors.

Four, I've revived the old MARHO forums, only now they'll all focus on New York history, setting issues of current concern in historical context. We had forums this past semester, our first, on Josh Freeman's new book, *Working-Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II*, and Christine Stansell's *American Moderns*. We had a panel on the Lindsay administration with participants from the Lindsay administration. We had [Ric] Burns come and talk on making his film. I very much want history makers involved in this as well as historians. Next semester we're going to have one on "From the Third Degree to Amadou Diallo: The History of Police Violence since the Nineteenth Century." We're going to have a discussion on why there hasn't been more great architecture in New York in the last fifty years with a lot of great architects and architectural historians. We're going to have a miniconference on the history of Puerto Ricans in New York City since the Second World War. We'll have an analysis of the forthcoming Museum of Sex, with its director and designer talking about its opening exhibit on the history of sex in New York City, with comments by Richard Rabinowitz from the museum world, and Carol Groneman, whose book *Nymphomania* has just come out. It's a place for public discussion, and though academics are included, so far they've been in the minority. I hope to tap into broader constituencies.

Five, we're going to do a series of video histories, organized as neighborhood walking tours, with me doing introductions, and Hope leading the perambulations.

Finally, we're talking about doing a History Festival, if we can raise the money. It would start with a three-day jamboree at the Graduate Center—with panels and discussions, but also musical presentations, teacher workshops, narrative performances, and a mini-film festival—a combination, again, or better yet a merger, of public and academic history. Then we'd go out into the city and, depending on resources, have events at sites ranging from big museums to local neighborhood organizations, all of them organized around the theme of "Past into Present." Potential presenters will be asked to pick an issue of either current concern, say a prom-

ising new development like Silicon Alley, or an ongoing public problem like the school system, and set that issue in historical context.

Setting this up has been a welcome change from cloistered library work. This past semester I've been doing virtually nothing else but raising the money. We've gotten underway with grants from the City Council, and private funders, hired Suzanne Wasserman (an NYU Ph.D. public-history grad: another straddler of worlds). Soon, hopefully, I can shift the bulk my attention back to the computer again. After all, I've got a book to write.

Ellen: I think that's an ambitious project and I'm particularly glad that you're reaching out to the buffs, the amateur historians, because I do think that's an area and a source of energy and public history that academic historians don't know quite what to do with, precisely because the questions they ask are so different, or they're often just not interested in the questions we're interested in. But there is this tremendous energy and curiosity that's just waiting out there to be drawn into those bigger questions.

Mike: Absolutely, if you've got any ideas . . . let me know and get involved. We'll sign you up for the festival committee and maybe the teaching committee too.

