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## One Single Catastrophe

Tani E. Barlow

Motion under compulsion  
 Written successive growth and decay  
 Its sticky saltiness  
 Destroyed taken over the page  
 That history told  
 Blows and thirst.  
 —Myung Mi Kim, “Anna O Addendum”

You might say that I became what I am now in flight from Benjamin’s angel of history. I became a historian, rather than some other sort of scholar, only because teenage me met and eventually married the influential writer Donald M. Lowe, my risk-taking professor who taught Marxism at San Francisco State University for thirty years, and he called *himself* a historian. I was also drawn to the radical social history movement exploding Westward from Cambridge, New Haven, and New York to the Bay Area, and historiographically from British and U.S. works into the new, left-wing fields of modern China studies and the Chinese peasant and women’s history projects it was fostering. What made it possible for me to play out fortuity and determination in such a way that fifteen years after the fact I can, in good faith, accept the task of writing about *having been formed* radical and historian is a memory of reading a Golden Book about Pompeii when I was four or five. There for the first time I saw drawings of the famous plaster people fleeing Vesuvius. In my child mind, the white casts of empty space that another human body had made under showers of killing ash and the freeze-frame of flowing lava had achieved visible solidity only because someone that I might grow up to be like had poured plaster of paris into a hole in the rock. (This preoccupation with sudden disaster and mummification persisted even after the end of the Cold War. When I finally got myself all the way to Pompeii I could not get in the gate to actually see the plaster casts because the park workers had gone on strike. It figures.)

Benjamin’s angel of history sees the one single catastrophe. The historians I studied with saw the chain of events. I seemed to have figured out that my job was to fill the empty cavity of the material past with my own plaster of paris. The line of influences runs from E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Barrington Moore, and social histories of the Chinese revolution (e.g., Philip Huang, Mark Selden, Marilyn Young, K. C. Hsiao, Yungfa Chen, Fred Wakeman, and so on), to Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roz Coward and *m/f*, Ding Ling, Joan Scott, Ranajit Guha, and Gayatri Spivak. Each has helped me to consider if not a chain of events, then something less eschatological than one great catastrophe. Perhaps for these reasons I

retain in my own psychogeography a sense that “radical history” has largely remained a signifier for 1970s and ’80s neo-Marxist histories of the United States and Europe.<sup>1</sup> Even now Geoff Eley must struggle on in the precincts of radical history to draw attention to the overdetermined and necessary fiction of “the worker” in radical social history of labor.<sup>2</sup>

My wariness about radical history may also rest in part on its residual presumptions about centers (capital, development, colonizer, destination, imperialist, our ethnic diversity, etc.) and their purported peripheries (postsocialist, underdeveloped, semicolonial, migration from, anticolonial nationalism, etc.). If I ever had any doubts about the longevity of that political obstacle, they would be dispelled in the spectacle of recent debates on globalization and empire neatly recentering the attention of radical historians back on the putative West again, bypassing (again) what Fred Y. Chiu and Marshall Johnson call “agencies whose contingent patterns always admit the possibility of otherwise” in what they term loosely to be “Asia” and think about in relation to processes they call subimperialism and suborientalism.<sup>3</sup>

Under the weight of this and other burdens I turned to a kind of historical writing that considered again the question of how ideological languages in the past had conveyed social categories and relations of inequality. Looking back it seems to me that there were several basic reasons why historians like me made this turn when we did. Radical historians of China had a lot to rethink when the Chinese state and a vocal element of the people repudiated Maoism and collectivism. I first went to China and lived there in the early 1980s and consequently had to rethink my graduate school experience in relation to living people just before I wrote my dissertation. I rethought the women’s movement and sectarian politics on the left in the aftermath of the dismemberment of the People’s Republic of China and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. In light of the tragedies that have followed, my cohort and I turned toward other ways of thinking about social existence. We began paying more attention to interest movements and articulate minorities within the shifting boundaries of post-’89 recast state formations. The politicization of representational methods in scholarship that highlights ethnic, national, and gendered difference and takes seriously the relation of power and responsibility that writing about people outside one’s immediate community entails.

“Radical history” is too valuable to give up, of course. It is a necessary resource for those who would make historically informed criticism patiently self-critical, particularly in specialist or area studies where judgments made across national historical conventions are inescapable and where the region in question is not the West, though it may be the place where one is presently residing (see *Inter Asia Cultural Studies*, issue 1). I think to be true to the spirit of radicalism radical history should get completely out of the game of strict partition (e.g., center and periphery, global/local) and concern itself with the analytic or theoretical problem of

exactly where the presumption of heterogeneity leaves history writers.<sup>4</sup> For instance, a position I take (indebted to the historians of the Subaltern Studies project) in East Asia studies debates is that China historiography might profitably consider the colonial origins of modernity when investigating the relation of Chinese semicolonialism broadly construed and the Chinese Revolution.<sup>5</sup>

A *détourned* radical history may in fact be another of those possible instruments—like cultural studies has proven to be in Taiwan, China, Japan, Singapore, India, etc.—for imagining political affinities across the many dimensions of our differences. Where radical history abandons habits keeping it confined to a U.S.-European self-referential grid, then other strict lines of difference begin to look less stable. And that has got to be a good thing for a historian whose craft obligation is to assume that the past was lived in the very messy tense of the future anterior. Periodization may have to be redrawn, as Claudia Pozzana and Sandro Russo have argued, in relation to the history of Chinese Marxism and the singularity of the Chinese Revolution.<sup>6</sup> The problems of political subjects and historical representation, to say nothing of archiving and narrating practices, become, Yukiko Hanawa has elegantly shown, quite problematic, indeed.<sup>7</sup> Yes, probably the relation of history and historiography will have to change. But no, a radical history *détourned* still loves the archives, still reads documents that are not all fictional, still tries to rethink the things that really matter in an internationalist, progressive politics which registers the crises of economic globalization.

Now that I work in a department of women's studies (which has refused to even consider renaming itself "women and critical gender studies," no matter how strenuously generations of students and many newly hired faculty remonstrate), the importance of teaching historical method is far more clear to me than it was when I taught in history departments. Happily, I send off a significant fraction of my students into Chicano/Chicana labor organizing, historical preservation and community work at Seattle's Wing Luke museum, racial justice and sexual minority rights work, law school, and just lately a new domain called policy studies. But even as I do, I agonize over how to write a history curricula that might forestall the slide of international difference into American multiethnicity, to borrow Nikhil Pal Singh's formulation. No, I argue to my students, the "People's Republic of China" is not an ethnicity or a racial identity or a problem for "feminism" that can be adjudicated using the logics of U.S. multicultural civility. I have to ask myself: what difference does a renewed connection with left labor and the new social movements make if the radical history my elite students learn from me just recycles their already unflinching national chauvinism and U.S.-centered neoliberalism? How can I convince them that "postcolonialism" is a polite way of saying The End to a radical history centered on them? And how long does it take to convince students that Marx does not belong to Europe, that feminism does not belong to them!<sup>8</sup> The many crises of our time are

now being contained under the signifier “globalization.” Our students are receptive to this term, for they are not fools. But can they see that anti-WTO demonstrations in Seattle are both a beacon of a new radical politics and a warning sign that until the matter of internationalism is sorted out, chauvinism (intellectual, student, labor, etc.)—nationalism in the guise of benevolent human rights and official U.S. feminism—will persist. Whose history? Whose catastrophe? Whose processes? Whose Vesuvius?

In 1974 Guy Debord was writing about the history of the disbanding of the Situationist International. “For anyone who has not forgotten the conflicted and passionate relations [of the group],” he wrote, “this [blueprint of a garden] must appear to be a sort of inverse Pompeii: *the relief of a city that was not built*.”<sup>9</sup> I found this epigraph instructive since it obliquely points to both the passionate dead who cannot be buried and the historical blueprint of cities never built. Between the material plaster cast of a man in flight and this inverse Pompeii lies the process of “blows and thirst” that is history rather than nothing; and the “history told” that Myung Mi Kim utters in “Anna O Addendum” is particularly hard to write in just one language.

## Notes

1. For the history of the theories of “drifting” and psychogeography as the Situationist International developed them see Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 69–104.
2. Geoff Eley, “Is All the World a Text? From Social History to the History of Society Two Decades Later,” in Terrence McDonald, ed., *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 226.
3. Johnson and Chiu, eds., “Introduction,” “Subimperialism,” *positions* 8:1 (Spring 2000): 2. See also “Questioning Asia,” *Inter Asia Cultural Studies* 1 (2000), which submits the regional focus of the journal itself to historical deconstruction.
4. Tani E. Barlow, ed., “History and Heterogeneity,” parts one and two, *positions* 6:1–2 (Fall 1998).
5. See Tani E. Barlow, ed., *Formations of Colonial Modernity in Eastern Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).
6. See Claudia Pozzana, “Spring, Temporality, and History in Li Dazhao,” *positions* 3:2 (Fall 1995): 283–305; and Alessandro Russo, “‘The Probable Defeat’: Preliminary Notes on the Chinese Cultural Revolution,” in *positions* 6:1 (Spring 1998).
7. Yukiko Hanawa, “inciting sites of political interventions: queer ‘n’ asia,” *positions* 4:3 (Winter 1996): 459–490.
8. For books to the contrary see Liu Kang, *Aesthetics and Marxism: Chinese Aesthetic Marxists and Their Western Contemporaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); and Jing Wang and Tani E. Barlow, eds., *Cinema and Desire: The Feminist Marxism and Cultural Politics of Dai Jinhua* (London: Verso, 2001).
9. Cited in Sadler, *The Situationist City*, 111.