



PROJECT MUSE®

Reflections of an Old New Leftist

Paul Buhle

Radical History Review, Issue 79, Winter 2001, pp. 81-84 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/30198>

Reflections of an Old New Leftist

Paul Buhle

1

Readers of the *RHR* have perhaps heard as much about my New Left venture, *Radical America*, as they will ever wish to, and assorted essays in *History and the New Left: Madison, Wisconsin, 1950–1970* helpfully fill in other blanks. But I have been lately concluding that elements of popular culture reached me much earlier with compelling historical messages. Fanciful films like *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman* (1953) treating issues of memory and melancholy helped me establish a sense of more than personal loss; so did photos and drawings of the urban or rural scenes of the 1940s, as the last moment of a more exciting and hopeful time fast receding under the weight of the arms race, suburbanization, and sameness.

The idea of *recovering* something lost in history leaped out at me as I watched *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (written pseudonymously, it turned out, by blacklistees whom I would meet decades later) on the first television set in the house. And an African American history teacher in eighth grade made a big impact. Then again, as a young radical or Marxist of the early 1960s, I soon discovered that apart from political work, “history” was the only thing that I *could* do. Instinctively, I began trying to recover lost radicalism. That I should have chosen that path rather than muckraking capitalism and its apologists may explain why, between civil rights and the peace movement, I joined a group of mostly elderly, Wobbly-like socialists; my arrival and departure from the Socialist Labor Party certainly deepened my interest in the history of the American left.

2

I’m comfortable with the term “radical history” despite media efforts to portray atavistic forces like “radical Islamic fundamentalists” as proof of the danger that “radicalism” poses to a rational business-led global society. Speaking only for myself here, I look to a number of old favorites, after Marx, for the origins of our work: W. E. B. DuBois and my political mentor C. L. R. James, twin giants; E. P. Thompson; William Appleman Williams, and the *RHR*’s own Herbert Gutman. Each of them provided—in scholarly texts but just as much through teaching, political writing, and personal conversation—the rationale of radical history as political practice. My good fortune in knowing them well (except, of course, for DuBois) no doubt adds to my sense of their personal example, but thousands touched by one or more of them can say the same.

3

The first challenge of radical history in my own past was confronting the cold war (or imperial) scholars' consensus without falling back upon the simplistic monopolists-against-the-people model of the Popular Front, or the reductionist working-class-as-a-solid-mass of previous Marxist movements. The New Left historians moved in that direction, but their own overuse of "manipulation" theories (David Horowitz and Ronald Radosh were the most vulgar; we had to apologize for them to undergraduates even when we taught their writings) and dismissal of working-class life, with all its complexities, showed a lack of seriousness toward historical understanding. That said, working out better, more thorough perspectives has required good social history and great faith in the collective scholarly process.

The collapse of social movements from the middle 1970s had a delayed effect on advancing scholarship in black history, women's history and still "newer" areas of gay history, Chicano history, and so on; but eventually the effect was inevitably felt, alongside (or joined with) the deconstructionist assault on *all* historical usefulness. By the Reagan era, history seemingly offered less to the radical or avant-garde student than English, or still better, media studies. Theorizing, once considered the heavy-duty cerebral project of Marxists like devotees of the Frankfurt School (a good portion of them nevertheless deeply involved in activism), became a substitute for scholarship and for politics.

By the middle 1990s if not before, these modes had practically exhausted themselves or at least exhausted the intense interest generated outward from Paris. "Antihistory" quickly became the real relic because history did not end with the collapse of the Soviet Union and recovery of self-confidence by global capitalism, but also because history as "story" never lost its popular interest outside academic life. From the historical novel and film or television version to the amateur societies, historical interests flourished, although definitely changed from the Fourth of July version to subjects less predictable.

In the long run, postmodernism has had the effect of validating or at least opening for view all sorts of hitherto ignored areas, from comic strips to the role of Communists in American film. This is largely to the good, despite widespread complaints about popular cultural presentation of historical issues. (Does Oliver Stone tell his own and sometimes wildly distorted version of history? Sure, but it is no less distorted than, say, Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s version—in some ways far less distorted, because Stone identifies "conspiracy" as the effective inside story of the security-state operations to which Schlesinger and Isaiah Berlin, as chief CIA assets in the Congress for Cultural Freedom, devoted their talents. Besides, Stone makes no claim to "objectivity.")

4

Our prospects today revolve around the popular presentation of history and the application of our knowledge to the worsening global economic, political, and ecological crisis. The need for transnational history, the identification of our national saga with the experiences of the new immigrant populations, is greater than it has been for a century. Last time around, mainstream historians flagrantly misused the opportunity to eradicate the discrete pasts and their possible meanings in favor of the Anglo-Saxon, William McKinley/Theodore Roosevelt/Woodrow Wilson version of the “American” mission.

To battle against that drive so clear among the elderly Schlesingers and youngish Ken Burnses of “Americanizing” the globe by making all other histories subordinate to a narrow (and falsified) version of U.S. history is no easy matter. The executives of the media monopolies clearly want their version to win. But undercurrents can be seen on all sides as well, from the stubborn recuperation of apparently dying folk musics (and languages) of indigenous peoples and others, to the “rebellion against boredom” so present even in the generations hard-pressed from early childhood to excel in marketable talents (or in high culture: the access route to the well-heeled gentility). The dawning awareness that the history of popular music from folk to jazz or rhythm and blues, for instance, is interesting because it brings together minority lives with rebelliousness, offers fresh possibilities for historians to speak to (and with) the public on subjects a thousand times more interesting, more meaningful, than dead generals, presidents, and bankers.

5

Radical historians need, for political purposes, most of all to exercise their inventive energies while they continue to do serious work in the archives and on the Web. The labor muralist Mike Alewitz, to take a useful example, works with historians and local folks in raising a ruckus with his always controversial wall paintings. He inventively found a path to progressives of the labor movement and through it links to workers in Mexico and elsewhere, part of the “invisible international” of common interests and potential solidarities that now must be rebuilt.

Other opportunities abound and will increase with the global turmoil. So simple and unobserved a matter as the deep sadness of older people at the destruction of their cities and their countryside offers potential for intervention: history can go to work protecting buildings, forests, and green space against developers (accurately identified in many children’s films as the face of a ruthless system) and the state. Historians have endless opportunities, tragically enough, to remind newspaper readers and radio listeners about the Nuremburg Trials, and to insist upon the responsibility of American leaders for war crimes in Asia and Central America, also urging American soldiers to refuse orders for recent and certain future crimes such

as the dropping of the poisonous depleted uranium (DU) shells upon targets such as Iraq and the former Yugoslavia. Historians can speak out for native peoples and others desperately trying to hold onto their lands from exploitation and chemical victimization—the very heart of global economic expansion. “History” offers no past utopia, but the observation of disappearing biodiversity guarantees an issue for which neither Republicans nor Clinton-Gore Democrats can possibly present an acceptable answer.

Within academia, thuggish senior cold war ideologues still amazingly hold the positions of power in many history departments and think tanks, supported (or sucked up to) by mostly younger colleagues urgently craving the same power and perks for themselves—and not excluding, of course, some former radicals who found the road to respectability and obviously relish its benefits. (The more famous of them regularly appear, alongside their mentors, with their shamelessly vulgar flag-waving messages in the pages of the *New Republic*.) The struggle for dignity and respect by women and minority scholars often continues to have a positive role at the department level by breaking down the old-boy networks. Radicals who fight the good democratic fight in this way often feel trapped, but they also often make real democratic progress and set a personal example as well for new colleagues, for graduate and undergraduate students who instinctively despise the toadying model of the student/professor relationship at the heart of the old system.

But classroom, campus, and public-expression politics also have a large role. A democratic presentation is not a leveling-down presentation, but an effort to make history matter, especially to those students who do or may be brought to see the need for sweeping social changes. Professorial support and sponsorship of radical activities on campus is elementary, even if time-consuming. On another level, the message that the labor movement has in certain key ways changed for the better and deserves campus support needs to be explained as often as possible—and linked with reminders of how vicious and reactionary the old top labor leadership really was, how and why organized labor lost the social leadership it exercised before 1950. The same lessons apply to a wide range of issues now and in the easily foreseeable future. Our task is to use all means available to combat the global race to the bottom (and toward ecological hell); to help students, colleagues, and the public understand that capitalism’s much-vaunted “progress” endangers everything we hold dear; and to point toward efforts at cooperative solutions as part of an interrupted history to prevent the enveloping barbarism from destroying a beautiful world and all the human potential within it.