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## Missing in Action

Martin Duberman

When I got my doctorate in history in 1957, I was a liberal, not a radical. More liberal than most of my colleagues at Harvard, which isn't saying much in a department that included Arthur Schlesinger Sr. and Jr., Oscar Handlin, and Samuel Eliot Morison. On the race question I was probably already radical (“*force* compliance in the South, and face up to the deep inequities that also characterize the North”). But my level of awareness on issues relating to class was dim; two of my first four books, on the privileged New Englanders Charles Francis Adams and James Russell Lowell, barely scrutinized the class context of their attitudes and actions. The other two, both relating to race, took a much less traditional stance. One was a collection of essays (*The Antislavery Vanguard*) that offered a positive reassessment of the abolitionists. The other was a documentary play (*In White America*) depicting the history of African Americans in this country.

As for the subject that has increasingly come to dominate my scholarship over the past twenty-five years—the history of queer people—that wasn't even a glimmer in the eye back in the late 1950s. Mine or anyone else's. There was already a gay movement—minuscule, mostly anonymous, and secretive—but there was no overlap at all between that brave handful of activists and closeted young gay scholars like myself who were busy making respectable careers and, in many cases, dutifully presenting ourselves for therapeutic “cure” of what the psychiatric profession all but uniformly agreed was “disabling pathology.” Everyone I knew—meaning privileged white men who could afford it—was busily seeking confirmatory grounds for self-hatred in a therapist's office and concealing the truth of their lives from as many people as possible.

Today that all seems as foreign as glyphs in an ancient cave. Just a few weeks ago two news items appeared within a few days of each other: there is now an openly gay caucus within the CIA[!]; and the trustees of Exeter and Andover Academies have voted to allow gay couples to live in student dorms as faculty “role models.” It's enough to make one feel prehistoric—and to give the lie to those temperamental doomsayers who are forever unable to acknowledge that progress of any kind, anywhere, has taken place. To maintain that posture, the it's-as-bad-as-ever-and-probably-worse types would also have to ignore the remarkable proliferation over the past few decades of once nonexistent queer scholarship—the mounting deluge of articles, monographs, books, and journals that make it impossible for even specialists to keep pace. That scholarship alone, with its proliferating set of challenges to receive wisdom, is testimony to a profound shift in the cultural climate.

And yet . . . many lesbian and gay graduate students are still being forced to hedge their bets. A few advanced “certificates” or “minors” in gay/lesbian/bisexual/

transgender studies exist, but there is no solid Ph.D. program anywhere in the country. Nor is campus demand—except among gay students themselves—for courses with queer content strong enough to have led to any proliferation in faculty hiring. And so most gay graduate students with training in the field are presenting themselves to job committees as specialists in “gender studies,” or “the history of sexual behavior,” or “the history of gender and sexual nonconformity.” And if any of the rest of us are tempted to call this “cowardice,” let *them* spend the rest of their lives driving cabs.

Equally grave is the ongoing patronization among nonqueer scholars of the entire enterprise of GLBT studies. Most heterosexual (the quaint het/homo binary, though yielding on the edges, persists—though it no longer describes how increasing numbers of people lead their lives) scholars pride themselves on their tolerance, but it is a tolerance usually so limited and opaque as to be useless, when not enraging. Radical academics love to condescend to the military, but in fact “don’t ask, don’t tell” is an all-American birthmark when it comes to the subject of homosexuality, and across the *entire* spectrum of political opinion, too. The prevailing attitude in straight academia (accompanied by a smug pat on the back) is, “What **THEY** do in private should be of no concern to anybody else.” Oh, but it *is*, or must be, since what we do in private, along with how we theorize our lives in public, is—if straight people would only expand their reading lists, or at least open their eyes and ears—of immense consequence to everyone, regardless of sexual orientation. Adopting the “privacy principle” is finally a form of self-protection, a shield for preventing too much subversive information from getting through. Yet with the exception of some feminist scholars, this is about as far as straight academia has gotten in taking seriously the lives and researchers of their lesbian and gay colleagues. And the loss is theirs, for reasons I will return to.

Thus the self-defined radical sociologist Todd Gitlin—his example could be multiplied many times over—has characterized identity politics as “groups overly concerned with protecting and purifying what they imagine to be their identities.” In other words, we may think we’re different, and have something valuably different to say, but apparently only Gitlin and other straight white men are qualified to judge that, and to know what is or isn’t a “real” identity.

Why do so many straight white male radicals like Gitlin so resolutely close off their minds and hearts to the actual complexity of gay lives and scholarship? Because they’re selective radicals: they’re willing to explore some (primarily class-based) challenges to the status quo, but refuse to join in questioning other “regimes of the normal,” those that protect their own sacred prerogatives.

They prefer to refer dismissively to our “supposedly oppositional cultures” and our “superficially transgressive ideas.” (Those particular put-downs are from Michael Tomasky’s *Left for Dead*). Supposedly? Superficially? The choice of words

is a dead giveaway that they've never read a word of queer theorists like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michael Warner, or Judith Butler, who, though subject to a variety of rejoinders, are rather difficult to send packing for their "superficiality."

What do Gitlin and a host of other "radical" scholars, like Eric Hobsbawm and Bogdan Denith, who have expressed comparable attitudes, gain from such blind denigration? It's simple. They don't have to take seriously queer notions about the performative nature of gender, the fluidity of erotic desire, the anarchic multiplicity of attractions, fantasies, and impulses that lie within us all—insights which, if taken seriously, would have a transformative impact on the current arrangement of power.

. . . . .

In its covering letter to those of us asked to contribute to this symposium, *RHR* included a set of "Questions for Consideration." One of them asked "How can we radical historians speak to people in the general public?" (or words to that effect). I'd like to suggest a variant: "How can we stop denouncing and start listening to *each other*?"