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## Forum: Reflections on Radical History: Introduction

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## Forum: Reflections on Radical History

### Introduction

*Ian Christopher Fletcher*

In January 2000, *Radical History Review* held its second annual roundtable at the American Historical Association meeting in Chicago. Our topic was “Radical Historians and Political Engagement,” and two of the four presenters, Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Felix Masud-Piloto, were not affiliated with the journal’s editorial collective or associates group. The papers were subsequently published in *Radical Historians’ Newsletter* 82 (June 2000). In May, as part of what has become a continuing effort at outreach, *Radical History Review* asked a diverse group of forty-four scholars and activists from Canada, Mexico, and the United States to reflect on the practice, politics, and prospects of radical history. Sixteen were able to accept our invitation, and we are delighted to present their short but wide-ranging essays in this anniversary issue. Only one of our contributors, Ellen Carol DuBois, is connected to the journal.

We offered several open-ended questions as starting points for our contributors’ reflections:

- What can you tell us about your formation as an academic or activist interested in radical history? How do you understand the forces (social, political, discursive, institutional, etc.) that have shaped your identity and outlook? Do you have a sense of yourself as belonging to (or dissenting from) a tradition, generation, or community?
- What does “radical history” mean to you? Are there other terms that you prefer to use to describe your “take” on critical or oppositional history? What do you see as the

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leading ideas, central issues, key texts, and/or defining moments in the emergence of radical history as a field of inquiry and struggle?

- How do you think the political challenges, theoretical innovations, and other changes of recent decades have affected the project or practice of radical history? Have you rethought what radical history means as a consequence of the crisis or transition through which we are living?
- What do you think are the prospects of radical history? Are there new topics, tasks, perspectives, methods, or sources that excite you? How can (and why should) radical historians seek to speak to people in the general public as well as to academics and students? In what ways does our mass-mediated world offer opportunities as well as constraints for the elaboration and dissemination of radical history?
- How can radical history deepen or renew its connection to the left and the labor and social movements? What are the responsibilities of radical historians as activists, public intellectuals, citizens? Inside or outside academia, what has been your experience combining history and activism?

We encouraged contributors to write about what moved or mattered to them, and each of the resulting essays is a unique response to the questions. We hope readers will enjoy and learn from the variety of voices and views in this forum. They mix the personal, the political, the pedagogical, the programmatic, the philosophical, and even the humorous.

Obviously, short essays can't begin to exhaust the issues raised by this forum. We are interested in moving this dialogue forward. In that spirit, we invite readers to share their thoughts about the issues by contributing to *RHR*'s H-RADHIST discussion list and by joining us at our next annual roundtable at the American Historical Association meeting. For the Boston meeting in January 2001, the topic will be "Radical Historians and Transnational Activism." For more information, please visit our Web site at <http://chnm.gmu.edu/rhr/>.

*Radical History Review* is grateful to our contributors and to the other invited scholars and activists who could not participate but who nevertheless wished us success. I would also like to thank Yukiko Hanawa, a member of the *RHR* associates group, and Seth Fein for helping me contact colleagues, and Nell Irwin Painter for encouraging me to understand that "radical historians" must confront the exclusionary practices and conceptions of our own project if we are to reach out to other historians and a wider public and really open ourselves to the possibilities of dialogue, collaboration, and renewal.