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## Coming in Late

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Radical History Review, Issue 79, Winter 2001, pp. 119-121 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



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## **Coming in Late**

*David Roediger*

The process of radicalization, or as Robin Kelley calls it, “catching the Holy Ghost,” remains deeply mysterious. Historians can rarely describe its workings convincingly at the level of individual transformations. Radicals, despite a century and more of “How I Became a Socialist” stories, have hardly been more convincing. Attuned to broad social forces, their accounts are often extremely reticent about the personal. To

ask radical historians to describe their own leftward movement therefore invites trouble. Because I've tried to discuss the impact of growing up in a union household and around both bitter racism and freedom movements in the introduction to *The Wages of Whiteness*, I'll sidestep those troubles here, with one limited exception.

The exception grows out of hearing it argued—I've tried hard to recall where—that those activists who came to the New Left in 1970 and after constitute a “microgeneration” with a quite different experience from the “rise-and-fall” narratives which describe the experiences of earlier activists. Coming to Northern Illinois University in 1970, and heading SDS there as it collapsed everywhere, I never thought revolution was right around the corner and never suffered profound disillusion when it did not appear. Although close to the sectarian left, especially International Socialists, I did not join it and therefore also missed the rise and dashing of revolutionary hopes writ small. For me, women's liberation and Black Power were exciting new realities and not wrenching departures from older movement norms. I hoped that we could help end the war (we did) and build institutions which could sustain a long struggle (mostly, we didn't). Doing small things over the years—rebuilding the Charles H. Kerr Company as a radical labor publisher, strike support, cooperation with the Chicago Surrealist Group, bookstore collective building, solidarity with South African liberation struggles—was what I expected and hoped to do. My closest mentors and role models as radical scholars, Margaret George, George Rawick, Marvin Rosen, and Sterling Stuckey, all spoke with great calm born of knowing that freedom struggles are long but that advances are made even when we do not see them, and they contributed to this long-run orientation.

Coming so late to the New Left also meant that I entered graduate school at a time (1975) when the new “radical history” was becoming an established fact rather than an insurgent project. The maturing presence of “new labor” and “new social” histories was important not just because these approaches formed my work methodologically but also because they seemed substantial and thriving enough to criticize. Unlike a slightly earlier microgeneration, I did not feel enjoined to pledge allegiance to beleaguered new histories. I could emphasize very strong connections of my work to Old Left thinkers, including the Communist historians Philip S. Foner and Herbert Aptheker as well as C. L. R. James and W. E. B. DuBois, in ways which young scholars choosing and establishing the new histories just a decade earlier could likely not have so easily done. Thus for me the key texts defining radical history were Susan Porter Benson's studies of department store workers and Marx's *Capital*; David Montgomery's *Beyond Equality* and DuBois's *Black Reconstruction*; Herbert Gutman's *Work, Culture, and Society* and Foner's *History of the Labor Movement*. Undoubtedly I have carried the luxury of being able to be critical of the new labor history farther than most and have at times missed the good reasons why some historians (especially those only *slightly* senior to me) reacted defensively to such crit-

icisms. Being neither chastened by dashed hopes nor defensive in the face of a seemingly hostile profession also likely contributed to my maintaining that the bar for what counts as radical history ought to be set high. Indeed it seems to me that both political and theoretical changes over the last thirty years argue for a *more* radical history.

Given this micro-generational experience and a host of personal ones with mentors and movements, I apprehend radical history as being a project which shows that alternatives to socially produced misery have continually been created. It often begins “from the bottom up” but with a keen sense that the exercise of power also shapes events and dreams. Such history must be critical—of itself, of systems of oppression, and even of the working people with whom it identifies. It need not be at every turn popularly accessible—a difficult book like Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* makes critically important radical contributions—but radical history at its best does show a sustained awareness of audience and often of the historical moment in which it is produced.

Just before settling into writing these lines, I read a literally incredible feature article in which a *New York Times* reporter set out to show that postcolonial studies *causes* protests against the World Trade Organization and sweatshop labor. In this never-never land, academics radicalize social movements. In real life, social movements and political economic ruptures create effective and creative radical intellectuals. It is therefore presumptuous to predict whether radical history, in and of itself, has a future. Its future lies precisely in its engagement with social movements, and it cannot call those movements into being, although the university is one important site of intellectual ferment and, increasingly, of labor protest.

Nonetheless it seems to me that grounds for very high optimism exist. My generation of historians, for example, very seldom sustained analyses which wove together race, gender, sexuality, and class, although we called for such analyses often enough. Academic and political experience tended to make us think in terms of which category deserved primacy. We did not know, from a technical point of view, how to write such multivalent history. Often enough we told each other privately that such writing perhaps was impossible. Now we have George Chauncey’s *Gay New York*, Tera Hunter’s *To ‘Joy My Freedom*, Lisa Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts* and a growing number of other studies which makes such pessimism seem ridiculous. Academic debate produced such advances but so too did social movements which demand complex analyses. Labor historians now write, for example, in dialogue with a union movement whose unprecedented diverse rank-and-file has changed far more dramatically than its leadership and with an unorganized working class with identities and dreams which far transcend a desire to be “labor.” To see such realities in the present has helped us to see their predecessors. Radical history must take its poetry from the past, from the present, and from the future.