

Editorial Note

Conceived of by recently departed editor Ian Hesketh, the symposium that forms the core of this issue of *Left History* concerns the question, “What is Left History?” Ian, inspired and prompted by a similar symposium mounted in *Critical Inquiry* on the state of critical theory, drafted a letter to our editorial board which was sent out a year ago. We must offer our thanks both to Ian for the concept (and his tireless work during his three-year tenure as editor) and our always-busy board members for their thoughtful and varied contributions. Clearly, this question was one in which they all had investment.

The results of the symposium provide an interesting snapshot of the state of left history at the outset of the 21st century. One can see continued presence of old debates between historical materialism and post-structural cultural histories, as expected, alongside relatively new debates on the validity of “left history” in today’s arguably inclusive scholarly climate. These debates manifest themselves both as preliminary answers to perceived problems for the contemporary practice of left history as well as reflections on the personal relationship of left historians to their past, to other disciplines, and to the societies in which they live, work, and debate.

The subjects of these debates could preoccupy the journal for another generation; they grant licence to numerous approaches for practitioners of left history. William Pelz puts it simply, writing, “Left history is more than being about the truth since there are always many truths.” This encompassing style is advocated by a number of our contributors. Craig Heron writes that “any field—including the study of the state and politics, which so many of us have abandoned over the past quarter century—is a legitimate area of study for left historians, and not simply the blue-collar wage-earner....” Molly Ladd-Taylor agrees, arguing that “Left history can and should be methodologically inclusive, encompassing culture as well as politics, the local and the global, the subaltern and the ruling class.” Franca Iacovetta also elaborates this notion of expanding the horizons of left subjects, even while reaffirming her own commitment to theorizing from the bottom up: “While it is not the only way to write left history, I remain particularly attuned to tracing the complex conflicts and negotiations between the powerful and those who occupied the margins.”

The definition of the margins in this symposium is a wide-ranging and occasionally contradictory one. While class remains a central subject for left history, many contributors suggest class has become a central category for history, and that the margins are defined predominantly through gender and race. Heron suggests that “the tried-and-true historical materialism that has always grounded my own studies of working-class life can be fruitfully

infused with newer theoretical currents about gender, race, and cultural formation” and that “left historians need to maintain an openness and flexibility in developing and applying our analytical frameworks and methodologies.”

In practical terms, Linda Kealey’s survey of the gendered bias of *Left History* indicates that gender has literally occupied our margins. Kealey’s discussion of the “slow pace of achieving gender equality in the academy” and the “slow death” of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, as well as Franca Iacovetta’s personal account of her own experiences as a feminist historian in the halls of labour history, indicate that the study of gender and the very practice of engaging in and with feminist histories places one outside the middle ground. Similarly, while race is mentioned consistently by various contributors, with the exception of Vijay Prishad’s work and current work by Karen Dubinsky, practical discussions of race as a category of analysis are sadly under-represented in the symposium. Prashad’s discussion of Marxism as practice and philosophy in India is a provocative look at what left history means in the non-western world. Here we can see how the meanings of “left” extend beyond the traditional interpretations set for them, and how left history, and indeed *Left History*, can only benefit from exposure and interaction with work being done on and in the non western world.

Other contributors, however, argue that gender, race, and class are too comfortably ensconced in current scholarship to be considered left history any more. Using the history of sex as an example, Bryan Palmer argues that “left history is threatened by its subtle incorporation into a homogenized mainstream, in which liberal (and undeniably good) values of multiculturalism, tolerance, and respect for the much-vaunted differences of our political age—skin colour, sexual orientation, biological and altered bodies—eviscerate the very possibility of an *oppositional* history.” Here Palmer points out what he sees as a fundamental difficulty: “any history conceived as dissent ... is being trapped in the conventions of thought so thoroughly familiar and insidiously pervasive in contemporary bourgeois culture that they overwhelm what is fundamentally contentious and challenging.” Palmer’s left history, then, can only be conceived as such if it possesses adequate distance from the middle, centrist ground. While Palmer’s approach is at odds with many of his fellow board members, his basic contention that left history must be oppositional is one that is echoed throughout the symposium.

Even if Geoff Eley mourns the fact that “there are no parties any more to join. Or, at least, there are no national movements of the Left any more with the kind of social and cultural reach ... that might be capable of drawing Left intellectuals into their *circumference*,” the personal accounts of political activities engaged in by our board indicate that gender, race, *and* class are still very vital categories of identity outside of academic scholarship. Women

still feel threatened even within the ivory tower, non-whites still have little representation both in that same tower and beyond it, and members of the working class are still being used, as Karen Dubinsky points out, as fodder for guns in Iraq. Thus while certain histories may be in vogue within academia, what is in vogue in the non-academic world should likely be more important for conceptions of left history. It is the challenge of left history to look outwards, rather than inwards, to recognize what it must oppose. Jeet Heer's recommendation to "know thy enemy" through a study of the religious right in America seems prescient. The age-old debate about the relationship between the scholarly community and the wider world is for many of our editorial board a site that needs to be reimagined.

In kind, Ladd-Taylor's submission offers the strength of the current right-wing political climate as a caution to historians to fascinated with debates over practice: "No single methodology or theoretical approach can capture the diversity and vitality of left history, and in the current political context, we cannot afford to be divided by battles over theory or sectarian political debates." In this climate, the multi-pronged approach of left history does not merely seem like a mirror to the scattered and disorganized left of the US, but rather speaks to the possibility of resistance on multiple levels. Liza Piper's discussion of the potential of environment history's sweeping approach to the impact of capitalism seems particularly relevant as it asks us to consider its impact on multiple spaces but also across multiple time periods.

In these approaches, as well as others, we can see that left history has a wide-ranging future, and one that in part involves "staying the course." The symposium, above all else, warns us that the emergence of left history as a fashionable subject does not mean there is room for comfort; it is clear that staying the course means continuing to embrace different approaches to left histories of left subjects, while continuing to pay homage to the foundations of left history and the intellectual and activist ferment of the 60s. Happily, the other contributions to this issue look in that direction. Carl Mirra's article on Staughton Lynd's turbulent career provides an interesting look at the difficulties faced by early left historians in the US. Mirra brings up many of the problems that scholars continue to face as they seek to pursue research and engage in activism on topics that fall outside the academy's chosen trajectory.

Jeet Heer's interview with Tariq Ali, although now almost a year old, presents the thoughts of one of the most renowned critics of our time on subjects that are central to the symposium. The American right, the war in Iraq, and the troubled state of the left since its collapse in the west in the 70s inform the malaise of both pieces while a command to stay true to Pelz and Eley's "good scholarship" is echoed by Ali when he demands a "hardheaded and realistic" approach in the face of significant challenges.

Heeding the issues raised throughout, we hope *Left History* will continue to play an important role in presenting a variety of left histories, theories, and activism. We hope to chart a line between publishing labour and radical history while opening the journal to new debates and controversies. As editors, we believe in the maintenance of the tradition of opposition.

The Editors
March 2006