Symposium

What Is Left History?

Dear Editorial Board Member,

We, the editors of *Left History*, would like to create a dialogue with our editorial board about what it means to produce "left" history, and also make this dialogue available to our readers in the form of a symposium in a forthcoming issue. This is partly an excuse to show off *Left History*'s diverse and multitalented board members whose contributions to the journal are for the most part – and unfortunately so – behind the scenes and therefore unseen by the journal's readers.

Indeed, there are countless reasons as to why we think our readers would appreciate the publication of such a discussion. Most importantly, perhaps, is that since the journal's first issue went to press in 1993, it has been produced—by a variety of editors—without a concrete statement of what exactly "left" history is. This is not to say that it has not been attempted. The first issue included editorial statements by Alison Forrest, Adam Givertz, and Marcus Klee respectively. Each spoke of the space *left history* (it was lowercased in those days) would provide for debates about historical analysis on the left, from gender and Marxist to poststuctural and postcolonial perspectives. For Klee, it was the lack of a definition of "left" history that provided the journal with much of its appeal because it necessarily countered the "fragmentation of history into antagonistic interpretive fields and research areas, not by striving for some unifying category or boundary into which all histories will collapse, but by opening a space where seemingly disparate topics and approaches can co-exist to strengthen our understanding of the past" (1.1 Spring 1993 p. 8). From the beginning, *Left History* was devised as a kind of boundary-less space for diverse and perhaps even contradictory "topics and approaches to co-exist".

However, certain debates and issues came to dominate the journal, which suggests that, though there was no explicit articulation of "left" history, both contributors and editors were guided by a tacit definition. When the journal moved from Queen's University to York University in 1997, Patrick Connor and Jeet Heer assured continued "focus on the debates and issues which have characterized the journal since its inception in 1993" (5.1 Spring 1997). Connor and Heer were willing to let the journal speak for itself and let their choice of articles define the space of *Left History*'s pages. At the time, the debate between historical materialism and poststructuralism had yet to reach its inevitable stalemate and the new editors were keen to ensure proponents of both sides felt welcome within the journal. The big question posed in that editors' note of 1997—

"Are the concerns of Marxist historians (oppression and class conflict) still relevant in a world of queer theory, discourse analysis, and identity politics?"—has surely been answered in the affirmative. Our most recent issue is a case in point: biographies of Alexander Trachtenberg and Ernest Mandel were published alongside an article on the legislating of homosexual activity and a forum on experimenting with literary techniques in historical writing (10.1 Fall/Winter 2004).

All one has to do is look at the different topics of the journal's theme issues to see the alternative approaches that have fallen under the rubric of a "left" history. The work of E. P. Thompson was the subject of the first theme issue (1.2) while Soviet culture was the focus of the second (6.2). More recently, we devoted an issue to the theme of LGBTQ scholarship (9.2) and are currently in the process of producing a theme issue on masculinity studies. Such varied themes and topics suggest that as a space, *Left History* has been true to the hopes of the founding editors and their successors. As well, this diversity reflects the evolution of leftist historiography over the past decade. While we agree with Klee that formulating a concrete definition of "left" history may necessarily limit and undermine the possibilities of "left" history in the future, with the transition of one editorial team to another currently underway, we felt that it would be useful to inquire into if not the meaning of "left" history then the meanings of "left" history, not in the past, but for the future. With this in mind, we would like to ask, what does it mean to write "left" history for you? As we would also like this symposium to be an introduction—to both the readers and the new editors—of our diverse editorial board, feel free to discuss the particulars of your own field and we would be grateful if you could reference, in particular, any work currently in progress. We hope that by inquiring into the meanings of the journal itself we will also engender an exploration into the various ways the making of historical knowledge is possible.

Four Focus Points (for suggestion only)

Is "left" history a genre of history writing? In other words, is there something that unites the various topics and approaches that you would consider "left" history? Is it even possible for there to be a "left" history?

Now that so many of the subjects that have been considered "left" history have become established genres on their own are there any new avenues of historical analysis that should become the terrain of "left" history? Related to this: should "left" history only be concerned with history that is on the margins of the discipline?

What is the task of the "left" historian? Do you agree with the editors who suggested (in issue 8.2) that "left" history needs to be written in the spirit of Chateaubriand's avenging angel of history, "charged with avenging the people", rather than Ranke's humdrum historian, "merely" showing "what actually hap-

pened"? This tends to suggest that any subject could be considered "left" history as long as it was written in a certain way, which would contradict many of the founding principles of the professional discipline of history. Is this the case? Would that not undermine the necessity for the historian to at least attempt objectivity?

Can "left" history be considered a politicized alternative to the now ascendant social and cultural history?

Ian Hesketh et al.
May 2005

My Left History

Molly Ladd-Taylor

When the first issue of this journal was published in 1993, US president Bill Clinton had just launched his long-anticipated campaign for health care reform, Nelson Mandela was on the road to becoming the first president of the New South Africa, and leftists in Ontario, the home province of *Left History,* were struggling with the failings of their social democratic premier. What a difference a decade makes! Despite a few encouraging signs—most notably, Canada's legalization of gay marriage—corporate power and US military might seem practically invincible. From the contested US election of 2000 to September 11th 2001 to the disastrous US-led war in Iraq, events in the US and the world have dramatically altered the context, meaning, and goals of left history. As left historians struggle to adapt to changing circumstances, any attempt to answer the question, "What is Left History?" seems daunting indeed.

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. 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. Ultimately, left history is not a methodology or approach, but a politics, a way of operating as a historian in the world. The basic premise of left history is commitment to social justice, but while our political and scholarly worlds overlap like a Venn diagram, they are definitely not the same. The binary we reject in our scholarship holds firm on the picket line, and although many of us began our careers with high hopes for politically-engaged scholarship, our audience has mostly been ourselves. Historians rarely make history; the momentous court decisions based on the work of George Chauncey and William Wicken are the exception, not the rule.[1] More common is the experience of US feminist historians in the 1990s. Despite outstanding historical scholarship and a vigorous political campaign to save—and expand—welfare and women's reproductive rights, their efforts were largely ignored. The lesson is not that historical scholarship is irrelevant—the engaged response of the doctors and disability activists who attend my talks on Minnesota's eugenicist past show otherwise—but that historians play a relatively small role in a much larger movement. Those of us writing on politically-charged topics, such as the history of eugenic sterilization, can provide valuable information and academic "legitimacy" to lawyers and grassroots activists, but the impact of our historical work depends on many factors beyond our control. For example, historian Johanna Schoen's principled decision to share her unpublished research on North Carolina's sterilization pro-

gram with a reporter led to a formal apology and a compensation plan for sterilization survivors, but Schoen's *interpretation* of her data—and its implications for health policy and reproductive rights—has generally been neglected. In Minnesota, where I do my research, the ten-year campaign of the disability rights group Remembering with Dignity to secure a formal apology for the treatment of people in state institutions, and to replace numbered gravestones with named markers in the cemeteries of state hospitals, has played a far greater role in publicizing and rectifying the historical treatment of people with disabilities than I have as a university-based scholar.[2] As historians we are not the stars of the social-justice movement, but the supporting cast.

My own admittedly eclectic scholarship has been shaped more by my sources and personal political interests than by specific theoretical debates. I got involved with the Marxist-feminist Wages for Housework Campaign as an undergraduate and pursued my concern with women's unpaid "mother-work" and welfare activism as I did my PhD. Researching my dissertation, I was deeply moved by the letters ordinary women wrote to the federal Children's Bureau in the 1910s and 1920s. Pregnant women and new mothers poured out their hearts to the bureau staff, confiding their fears that they or their babies would die and asking for birth control information, health care, and most of all money. I saw the letters as powerful testimony of mothers' need for, and efforts to get, public health and welfare services—just when those services were being cut back. Later, after I had my own children and struggled with the competing demands of career and family, I watched with dismay as the demonization of poor women on welfare continued, and worsened, and I took up a new research project on "bad" mothers and eugenics. From this perspective, three aspects of "left history" hold particular appeal. The first is its attention to relations of power. Leftists disagree on the sites and even the nature of power, but my own research on the local implementation of eugenic sterilization has reinforced my commitment to social history and a materialist worldview. The power of eugenic discourse notwithstanding, it is hard to read sterilization records without being awed by the physical and spiritual cruelty of class, intersecting with gender, sexuality, race, and ability. The low IQs, poor school and work records, and "incorrigible" behaviour that brought some working-class people into the clutches of the state may signify informal political resistance or be the weapons of the weak. Or they may show diminished capacity or the consequences of exploitation and abuse. Power is always relational, and everyday conflicts call for multiple readings.

An aspect of left history that I would like to see more often is what Charles Payne, in his study of the civil rights movement in Mississippi, calls the "organizing tradition" in the struggle for freedom.[3] Payne is less interested in informal resistance than in the deliberate efforts of dedicated rank and file organizers whose work—often church-based and certainly not limited to established

civil rights groups—laid the groundwork for breathtaking change. While *I've Got the Light of Freedom* focuses mainly on voter registration, it ends with the Algebra Project founded in the 1980s by civil rights leader Bob Moses. As Payne (and Moses) point out, the specific topic matters less than the organizing process. The same could be said for left history.

My final point about left history concerns a focus on change. As Wendy Goldman demonstrated in a recent talk on the women's movement in Russia, a faith in the possibility of transformation is essential, even in the bleakest of contexts.[4] Goldman began her paper with a "moment of joyful surprise," as thousands of women journeyed across Russia in 1918 to form their own organization and advance women's causes; she described the "tenacity of their struggle" as they fought the reversals of the Stalin era, and she described the "bitter cynicism of defeat" that runs through Russia today. Yet, Goldman reminds us, it was out of horrible conditions in the 1910s that Soviet feminists achieved their moment of joyful surprise. The left cannot achieve a different future if we cannot imagine it—and if we cannot see transformative changes that happened in the past. The nurture of our imagination may be the most important contribution we can make as practitioners of left history.

Notes

1. See George Chauncey, "'What Gay Studies Taught the Court: The Historians' Amicus Brief in Lawrence v. Texas," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10 (2004): 509-583; William C. Wicken, *Mi'kmaq Treaties on Trial: History, Land, and Donald Marshall Jr.* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).
2. Johanna Schoen, *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005). On disability history, see Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, eds. *The New Disability History: American Perspectives* (New York University Press, 2001) and Steven Noll and James W. Trent Jr., *Mental Retardation in America: A Historical Reader* (New York University Press, 2004).
3. Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (University of California Press, 1995).
4. Wendy Goldman, "Lessons from the Proletarian Women's Movement," Conference on Labouring Feminism and Working Class History, Toronto, ON. 2005.

What is Left History?

William A. Pelz

At first glance, a simple question. Even if one hesitates to define left history, certainly one knows it when one sees it, right? Upon reflection, however, the problem becomes more complex and nuanced since there must certainly be competing definitions. What follows, therefore, should be seen as indicative of one historian's thought rather than any definitive position.

It may help to point out, right away, what left history is NOT. It is not a mere recounting of the parade of the great and the good who mold history above the heads of humanity. History, particularly left history, is about more than either Adam Smith's theories or Comrade Stalin's decrees. Left history rejects a "party line" that basks in revealed historical truth crafted only to support immediate political or economic ends. It believes in neither the end of history, nor in respectful worship of *Trump, the Book*. It admires the theory of Eric Hobsbawm in *Bandits*, not the praxis of Lord Conrad Black on the same subject.

Not that a listing of so-called facts devoid of overt analysis is any improvement. Here history threatens to degenerate into an antiquarian jumble without meaning, or worse, a subtle propaganda effort that pushes a viewpoint by a crafty selection of evidence. Left history must also be more than the handmaiden of identity politics. The historical evidence, in all its strange and contradictory ways, must be allowed to speak without spin doctors massaging the evidence to support this year's fad.

Left history is more than being about the truth since there are always many truths. All historians take a stand, whether open and honest about their position or not. Left history bases itself on democracy. Not abstract, formal, and constitutional democracy alone but rather a notion of democracy informed by an awareness of class. A class analysis that views gender, race, and belief as complimentary, rather than only contradictory, features of the world. How can one speak of the working class without attempting to do justice to the role of women, ethnic groups, and communities holding differing beliefs? Economics may be the bottom line in human history, but as Engels once noted in a letter, it is far from the entire landscape.

So, left history is partisan. It stands in the best traditions of humanistic and democratic values. It refuses to ignore the serf to praise the king. It declines to forget the worker or to honor the boss. In fact, left history refuses to blindly worship the "winners." Along with Rosa Luxemburg, it realizes that a popular defeat may tell us more about the course of humanity than any number of victorious battles. Left history believes in more than just power; it takes a stand

for human dignity and for human equality. Like Brecht in his "A Worker Reads History," left history realizes that Alexander did not conquer the world without a cook in his army.

Yes, left history is partisan. A partisan of science, for example. Not science as secular religion but science as a method that always asks why and hunts down evidence to test theories. Left history may not always have the right answers but it mainly asks the right questions. It cares about the people as potential historical agents, and not mere historical subjects. Left history respects people's struggles while reserving the right to criticize their mistakes. Unlike mainstream history, it is not deferential to Capital. It does not think it is time to praise the rich or the war chieftains.

So, what is left history? Well, history is, according to E. H. Carr, reason applied to human affairs. Thus, might not left history be reason applied to human affairs ...with a special commitment to democracy and liberation?

Writing in Opposition

Geoff Eley

What can the purposes of a Left historian be today? My first answer is a very simple one: to write good history. Of course, the boundaries between being a historian and the other things we do are completely porous. But unless those of us on the Left try to write histories that can genuinely have an impact, whether inside the discipline or in some broader kind of public, we might as well be doing something else. We can be of most use for whatever broader political ideals we continue to hold by being as good as possible at what we do. Sometimes, to be sure, the urgencies of political life overwhelm everything else. We might regret Edward Thompson's long delays in bringing *Customs in Common* to completion, for example, but who would question his decision during the 1980s to devote himself entirely to the cause of the peace movement?[1] The place of politics in the overall balance of our lives, overtly and more subtly, will inevitably rise and fall. But one part of the voice we can have in that respect rests upon the quality of the histories we produce, the respect they acquire, the legitimacy they confer, the opportunities for influence they might provide and, of course, the enhancements in the quality of our own understanding they impart. Good history and good politics go together. "The primary Party duty" of Communist students in the 1930s, Eric Hobsbawm remembers, "was to get a good degree."[2] The primary duty of Left historians today—*as historians*—is to write the best histories we can.

To some that may seem like the back stairway to the ivory tower. Clearly it can become the short road to quietism, to an inner emigration, or to the armchair consolations which periods of political retreat or duress always invite us to seek. It's certainly not easy to avoid that logic taking over. These days there are precious few means of keeping us connected to any wider political sphere. To be a Left intellectual in the late capitalist world now describes a profoundly different predicament from the one faced by Left intellectuals in earlier periods of duress like the 1930s or the 1950s. For those of us who came of age politically 30 or 40 years ago, the organized landscape of politics has changed out of all recognition, although for those growing up since the 1980s, paradoxically, the terms of this contemporary predicament have a much longer familiarity. To put this in a nutshell: 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—the organized machineries of identification that can build collective and continuous contexts of action and thought—that might be capable of drawing Left intellectuals into their circumference, whether as fully paid-up members, critical supporters, or independent interlocutors. For roughly 100

years between the 1860s and the 1960s under conditions of constitutional democracy, in Europe and the Americas and some other parts of the world, socialist, Communist, and other radical parties very successfully enabled that kind of participation. Then, it was much easier to know how to answer this question of how to become involved. During the 1960s and 1970s the associated political cultures were already eroding, but large mass parties of the kind I'm describing—like the Italian Communist Party (PCI) or the Labour Party or the German Social Democrats (SPD)—still worked as umbrellas or points of orientation, as extraordinarily ramified bridgeheads into society and culture, as ready-made contexts for getting involved, which promised some concrete, articulated relationship to a national or state-centered politics of some plausible effect.

The availability of those parties subsisted on definite histories of capitalist industrialization and class formation, which in the course of hard political struggles had sustained a complex narrative of social improvement—one based in strong institutional structures of local government, expanding public services and employment, the growth of national planning and public investment, the creation of welfare states, collectivist ideals of the public good, and an expansive model of citizenship. Inside this story of unevenly expanding democratic capacities, the presence of a mass socialist party allowed the public involvement of intellectuals some obvious avenues. In practical ways it afforded access to a wider audience, to the means of circulation, and to the world of policy. Within the larger structures of public communication associated with democratic forms of the public sphere, it offered certain institutional outlets of Left intellectual work for those interested in exploring them. In terms of access to power, more ambitiously and usually elusively, it also harbored a promise of coherence, continuity, and meaningful effects.

Within this now-vanished institutional world of politics, even the less attractive and less democratic mass formations defined a space of opportunity. If the Stalinist proclivities of the French Communist Party (PCF) remained a constant source of frustration for even its most incorrigible fellow travelers, to take an obvious example, its place in the political landscape could never be disregarded. For all its hidebound and unappealing rigidities, the PCF provided an essential organized presence on the French political scene between the 1950s and 1980s, which brought with it vital forms of efficacy—whether positively, by building the coalitions and campaigns that others felt able to join, or negatively, by defining the spaces where different and more democratic politics could be imagined. Thus the remarkable influence as a public intellectual exercised by Jean-Paul Sartre during that time was inseparable from either the wider place the PCF had helped establish for Left ideas or its own inadequacies in sustaining them. Of course, such influence as Sartre's also presumed a particular type of public sphere, which specifically held a place for the kind of public

intellectuality he embodied, quite aside from the particular platforms he was able to use.

By now, though, the prevailing political environment under capitalism has been profoundly transformed. The former Communist and socialist parties have either disbanded, decayed, or moved drastically to the center or the right; their relationship to popular constituencies has atrophied; their old machineries of organized loyalty and identification have crumbled apart. The overall structure of public communication has likewise been decisively reconfigured: access is hopelessly impeded by new monopolies of ownership and control; older pluralist conventions are under attack; print media and public broadcasting are in decline; the democratic possibilities of the internet and other electronic media have only unevenly translated into concerted political effects. Ease of access to the internet has yet to compensate for the loss of the classically structured public sphere and the absence of the organized collective agency of a party or movement. The new electronic means of communication contain unprecedented opportunities for constructing our own organs of opinion and initiating grassroots political exchange. But the resulting circuits of activity remain highly individualized, locally bounded, episodic, fragmented, and largely hidden from conventional public visibility.

In seeking to have an effect amidst this dispiriting contemporary conjuncture, and in trying to find an audience larger than one's own classroom or specialized field, it's not easy to see where and how to intervene. In the present world of multi-media marketing, literary agents, and celebrity hype (and in the absence of book topics like wars, dead presidents, Nazism, or the Holocaust), unfortunately, it's hard for Left historians not to feel confined to a margin. To use myself as an example, I recently published a general history of the Left in Europe, conceived as a study in the development of democracy, which I hoped at the very least might engage the Left itself in debate about the character of contemporary transformations and might even help claw back some of the ground of democratic discourse from the Right.[3] Yet none of that happened. Predictably perhaps, the book went completely unnoticed by the quality press and political weeklies in the English-speaking world (in contrast, for example, to Spain, Greece, the Netherlands, and Brazil).[4] More depressingly, with the exceptions of *Tikkun*, *Dissent*, and *In These Times*, it was reviewed in none of the Left's own magazines or journals. It went unnoticed by *The Nation*, *The Progressive*, *Mother Jones*, *New Statesman*, *London Review of Books*, *Red Pepper*, *Soundings*, *openDemocracy*, *Renewal*, and *New Left Review* (or for that matter by periodicals like *Historical Materialism*, *Socialist History*, *Labour History Review*, *Socialism and Democracy*, *Rethinking Marxism*, *Radical History Review*, or indeed *Left History*). In terms of any aspiring political effect, the book sank like a stone.[5]

In other words, to write as a historian of the Left these days has become a

surprisingly academic and lonely exercise. I cite my own experience not solipsistically or out of sour grapes (I hope), but because it illustrates the difficulties not only of bringing one's work into any wider public circulation, but even of moving the Left itself into a discussion of its deeper and more recent pasts. This seems very different from an earlier time. During the 1970s it was still possible to find easier points of connection to larger institutional fields of politics and the associated sites of the public sphere. In my own case, in Britain, those ranged from the local branches of national campaigning organizations, trade union affairs, and the associated meeting culture of committees and public platforms to the national scene structured around the left of the Labour Party, the Communist Party, and other socialist organizations, including the conference calendar of History Workshops, Communist Universities, and so forth. Of course, it's notoriously hard to make this kind of argument without seeming to slide into generational nostalgia of a better-knowing and admonitory kind (we knew how to do it better, once upon a time), and that's certainly not my intention. But the contrast does help us to think about the ways in which the conditions of politically engaged intellectual work have changed. It helps bring into relief the specific and novel arduousness of trying to make a difference as a Left historian now.

While this contraction of access to the wider means of political communication remains profoundly disabling and dispiriting, it doesn't exhaust all we can say about the politics of knowledge Left historians might be able to pursue. What it means, I think, is the need for taking a realistic but sanguine view of the forms of efficacy available to us in our immediate working lives. In doing so, we might also bring what we know from other periods of conservative ascendancy and Left political retreat about the ways in which oppositional ideas can be kept alive. In that latter respect, we might well consider the complicated relationship of the counter-revolutionary 1850s to the pan-European political mobilizations and constitution making of the 1860s, for example, or the relationship of the 1870s and 1880s to the following two decades in much of western Europe, or the relationship of the 1950s to the 1960s, and so forth. In each of those cases, critical and oppositional thought was nurtured without much evident or practical articulation to the given pathways of political influence or institutional infrastructure of public power. In each case, indirectly and in hidden and subterranean ways, the production and circulation of ideas as such acquired efficacy.

There are many ways of conceptualizing the coalescence of those spaces of experimentation and dissidence where opposition might be nurtured—spaces, that is, which are capable of sustaining a relationship to an earlier experience of radicalism while enabling possible futures to be imagined. Some of those spaces might be situated inside the institutional worlds of politics themselves. Some might be found mainly in the networks of critical intellectuals and the

ideas and books they produce. Some might be found in the distinct public spheres of the arts, some in the oppositional and dissentient parts of popular culture, some in the new electronic commons of the cyberspace. Some can be found in the quite localized and apparently isolated efforts at oppositional world building. Some are certainly to be found in the social movement politics of the past quarter century. The role of cultural and aesthetic avant-gardes in holding a place for radical imagining, in sharpening the critical edge of oppositional culture, in inventing new languages and practices of dissidence during times of increasingly coercive normativity, and in making available the forms of radical sensibility so essential to broader-based political insurgencies when they eventually occur, is especially interesting in this respect. How exactly all of these continuities get reproduced is extremely complex. Gramsci's extremely utopian ideal of the party as the "Modern Prince" provided one highly articulated version of how a concerted intelligence or strategic political agency might help such continuities to converge or coalesce. But if the social histories that might have sustained that particular model of the mass party are now definitively a thing of the past, as I've argued above, then that doesn't mean that oppositional impulses are not being generated. To my mind the relationship of Situationism to the radical explosions of 1968 is always a salutary example here: the Situationist milieu consisted of extremely small networks of individuals, after all, but the political languages associated with the new mass radicalisms of the late 1960s were pervasively indebted to the forms of analysis, modalities of action, iterations of utopian desire, and general oppositional sensibility the Situationists had produced.

In these brief comments I've chosen to focus not on particular subject matters and genres of history-writing, but on the issue of the Left historian's possible connectedness to politics and the public sphere. I've been concerned with the question: how can the historian's knowledge become useful for politics? That seems to me a more decisive set of criteria than any particular range of subject matters or methodologies and approaches in defining what Left history might be, although the ethico-political principles moving the history we write will also clearly be at the core. A set of critical, oppositional, democratic principles have to be essential to how Left historians practice their history. In these respects there would be an enormous amount to say about interdisciplinarity, the relationship of theory to history, and the forms of the politics of knowledge embedded in the kind of historiographical differences and innovations we pursue. There would also be a lot to say about particular historiographical controversies and their pertinence for politics. The necessity of working toward types of democratic practice for the classroom, the seminar room, and everything that composes the public sphere of the discipline (the wider constellation of conferences, journals, newsletters, professional associations, and so forth) would also need a lot of attention. All of these comprise arenas in which Left historians

can be active and have an effect. So that brings me full circle to the comments in my opening paragraph: above all else, Left history has to be the best history. During a bad conjuncture, that is where we will have to begin.

Notes

1. See Edward Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (London: Merlin Press, 1991). For a succinct discussion of Thompson's turning to the peace movement: Bryan D. Palmer, *E. P. Thompson: Objections and Oppositions* (London: Verso, 1994), 126-42.
2. Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (New York: Pantheon, 2002), 119.
3. Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
4. The exceptions were *The Economist* and the *Washington Post.*
5. The book *was* reviewed at great length (55 pages) by Colin Barker in the Quarterly Journal of the Socialist Workers Party (Britain) under the title "In the Middle Way," *International Socialism*, 101 (2003), 65-121. My solicited reply, "Socialists and the Tasks of Democracy: A Response to Colin Barker," was not included in the print journal, but buried in the website, at http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=86#content.

The Personal, Political, and the Intellectual in Left Feminist History

Franca Iacovetta

I was delighted to join the editorial board of *Left History*. I will contribute to this symposium on "where is left history now?", and address our editors' questions, by noting a few of the personal, political, and intellectual threads that inform my left feminist historical approach.

As a historian of the immigrant working classes; radical and refugee women; moral regulation; and the social, sexual, and gender history of cold war Canada, my scholarship has reflected an interest in how marginal, minority, oppressed, and defiant subjects confronted, challenged, circumvented, or fell victim to the more powerful in society, and how they sought, often through a mix of resistance and accommodation to dominant bourgeois norms and institutions, to carve out meaningful lives. My subjects have included former peasants who became urban workers (*Such Hard-working People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* [1992]), radical women exiles (*Women, Gender and Transnational Lives: Italian Workers of the World* [2002]), and wartime internees (*Enemies Within: Italian and Other Internees in Canada and Beyond* [2000]), as well as Canadian "delinquent girls," European refugees, and immigrants labeled as social, sexual, or mental "deviants" (*On the Case: Explorations in Social History* [1998]; *Gatekeepers: Reshaping Refugee and Immigrant Lives in Cold War Canada* [2006]). A related concern to challenge Canada's self-styled liberal myths, both as a highly enlightened immigrant nation and of democracy, has prompted collective efforts to expose racism and state repression (*A Nation of Immigrants* [1998]); to re-write the national narrative by centring the lives of immigrant and racialized women (*Sisters or Strangers? Immigrant, Ethnic and Racialized Women in Canadian History* [2004]); and to use feminist gender, race-critical, and transnational approaches to problematize the category of nation (*Whose Canada Is It? Atlantis* [2000]).

Certainly, I have not shied away from debate, having been part of collective socialist feminist calls and efforts to write more fully gendered and raced Canadian feminist and labour histories (*Gender Conflicts* [1992]) and to shift the polarized debates between historical materialists and post-modernists towards more productive dialogue and demonstration (*On the Case* [1998]). Along with other left-wing scholars, I criticized the Italian-Canadians redress lobby and urged those keen on the state apology for the World War Two internment of about 600 Italians to acknowledge the presence of fascism in the immigrant communities of this era and the harm done to radical antifascists as well as to those unjustly scooped up in the RCMP net (*Enemies Within* [2000]). The

now fifteen year-old and thrice re-printed *Gender Conflicts* continues to provoke both valuable and misplaced commentary. In the place of excessively aggressive polemics and chest-thumping theatrics that certain, but by no means all, male left historians sometimes confuse for rigorous (manly?) debate, I, like other feminists, have tried to facilitate constructive exchange within a context of mutual respect (*Rigorous Feminist Standards! Festschrift for Ruth Roach Pierson, Atlantis,* [2004]; *Labouring Feminism Conference*, Toronto, [2005]). A feminist labour historian who does not tolerate sexist behaviour, I have been the target of certain vulgar rants—for example, I have been depicted as an uppity bitch who works with weak men who don't have the f'ing balls to put me in my place (or words to that effect). I have also had the privilege of working and debating with so many fine men on the left. I deeply appreciate the respect that they have shown me over the years. But while exposing offensive and unacceptable male behaviour, and alerting other women to it is important, I am also especially concerned to build bridges with younger progressive women and men and to encourage cross-generational conversations with them because, otherwise, left history will not have much of a future. My efforts to mentor graduate students (*Becoming a Historian* [2002]) are also linked to larger left feminist and anti-racist agendas to more effectively diversify and democratize the Canadian historical community and to encourage (not shape) the next generation into the field while giving them the space to work out their own political and intellectual priorities.

It is mainly in this spirit that I will comment on the issues at hand. As my political and intellectual awakening as a socialist and feminist occurred pretty much in tandem, I have long viewed left history in terms of a constant negotiation between the personal and the political, between socialism and feminism, and between producing empirically rich studies of people's history and testing, revising, and refining evolving, never static, theoretical frameworks in light of those grounded social histories. I prefer theorizing from the bottom up rather than the top down. I see a critical engagement with old and new theories, familiar and alternative paradigms, as the intellectual's main task, no matter her political stripe. We can remain committed to our theoretical paradigms but through constant interrogation, not simply as believers of the faith.

Is history "fact" or "fiction" (to use an over-stated shorthand)? I see it as neither wholly empirical nor entirely self-referential, and still strive to write analytically rigorous and politically engaged scholarship. Our politics and current concerns can shape our research topics but our ability to interrogate them is what makes us good or weak historians. Like most historians, I share a curiosity about the past and enjoy the challenge of reconstructing dramatic episodes from fragmented sources and of breathing life, as it were, into historical actors from the past. I also agree with those who argue that we can never produce truly impartial or entirely definitive histories, or actually get into the

real heads of our subjects. I can live with contradiction and ambiguity, in the present and the past. Recognizing that oral interviews do not provide us with the full or unmediated truth of our living subjects is no more problematic than knowing that the written record is biased and incomplete. Both require us to be attentive to the silences, gaps, and competing stories and evidence but also to exercise, from an informed position, our historical creative imagination. 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. This approach helps us to see that history is not inevitable, that choices were made, battles were fought, with winners and losers, and thus, also, to see that different choices and visions might yet win out. By studying the so often ridiculed and punished critics of the powerful—and so often they were women—we can uncover and articulate a politics of social change, we can produce emancipatory knowledge. But easier said than done, of course.

How did I become a left historian? The short answer is that when a working-class immigrant girl reads the young Marx within the strange wasp elite world that is Queen's University, you get an instant Marxist! I was not a clean slate, however, for I had gone there in 1976 to study (among other things) Drama, especially Brecht and Ibsen. (I loved acting class, and bread and puppet theatre, and both still serve me well in the classroom and at demonstrations.) While reading Marx, I experienced those eureka moments when words articulated what I had often felt as the child of exploited foreigners and what I dreamed might be possible in a more just world. I quickly left Queen's for York University (and stayed for all three degrees), where I better articulated my feminism, in part through the study of women in Latin American and African independence and revolutionary movements. Franz Fanon, the Sandinistas, especially the women, and Angela Davis, inspired me, among others. I began to draw connections between radicalized Latin American peasants and southern Italian peasants, even developing my own critique of Gramsci's "southern problem." Sociology courses with social change agendas led to anti-poverty work, including a long stint with an organization that assisted the female partners and children of men in prison. I studied women's and social history, read critical sociology, and joined feminist reading groups that debated feminist thinkers and feminisms of every type. I embraced my sexual emancipation and did lots of others things too. I read a lot of Marxist cultural histories, struggled with Althusser, loved social history, and became a Canadian feminist labour migration historian. I became active in union politics and in the women's movement. Many years later, I was part of the small but determined band of labour artists, unionists, and educators who founded the (Ontario) Workers Arts and Heritage Centre.

But this snapshot particularly ignores the more formative, and painful,

tales of my emerging feminist consciousness. I have described myself as a daughter and grand-daughter of virtually illiterate women whom I loved but whose suffocating gender codes I detested. More specifically, there was a point in my teenage years when I decided that the only way to win my battle for autonomy was to completely undermine—indeed defeat—my mother. I belittled her at every turn, poked fun of her fears and folk beliefs, slammed doors, turned up my record-player (with Jimi Hendrix, no less), returned insults with worse insults, and never let up—until I had won. When I first planned to leave home, my mother consulted a witch doctor who cast a spell meant to rid me of my defiant spirit. It didn't work. I left home. Terrified that her head-strong daughter was doomed to a life of shame and failure, she became very ill. It took her a long time to fully recover. I have never regretted my decision to reject the life my mother wanted for me, and many years later, we made our peace with each other. I tell this story here partly to illustrate how the personal, political, and intellectual are intertwined. Within the left-wing feminist circles that I occupied during the 1980s, where wasp, university-educated women dominated, I did not feel comfortable telling a story that, I thought, too easily invoked a dark and foreign under-world of loud, illiterate, uncouth, and superstitious peasant women. In retrospect, I think I could have done so, but at that time, my story, like my cultural ways of being, and even my body language, felt far removed from theirs. It also remained a source of pain and guilt, though I can now also say in retrospect that my personal liberation allowed me, eventually, to retrieve that which had been most valuable and meaningful about my past. In that regard, I think it significant—but not inevitable and certainly not ordained—that I chose to write a respectful but decidedly left and feminist history of Italian workers like my mother. Contrary to how many have categorized me, I trained not as a historian of Italians; rather, as a feminist labour historian of Canada, a major receiving country whose workers often wore a distinctly foreign face, I chose a case study that allowed me to bring together my interests in labour, gender, and migration. I also wrote that history on my own political terms and according to the craft in which I had trained.

My current projects indicate how I am practicing left history now. My new book, *Gatekeepers,* is a gendered study of reception and citizenship work among European refugees and immigrants in early cold war Canada. As Jewish survivors, East European refugees, and volunteer immigrants set about rebuilding disrupted or shattered lives in Canada, they encountered a variety of gatekeepers—among them liberal journalists, citizenship officials, food and family experts, social workers, mental health experts, and anti-Communist activists—whose activities were influenced by the dominant bourgeois gender and cold war ideologies of the day. I try to convey the highly charged context in which these varied encounters occurred—where social optimism mixed with fears of Communism and anxiety about fragile families and spreading sexual deviance

and mental illness—and to consider the consequences such encounters had for both groups. As a contribution to the growing body of left scholarship on the domestic side of Canada's cold war, I try to integrate the social, political, gender, sexual, and cultural dimensions of the era through thematic chapters that explore, for example, the media's depiction of certain newcomers as freedom lovers but others as sexual and mental deviants; the state's efforts to manipulate the ideological splits within the ethnic press; the woman-focussed, family boosting, and anti-delinquency programs of the settlement houses; and the complex relations between front-line caseworkers and newcomer clients seen as suffering from a range of problems, such as persecution complex, (female) immorality, and domestic violence.

The book is also part of a broader left challenge to the conventional view that Canada fought a far less paranoid and damaging cold war than its US neighbour. Like other leftists, I also faced the challenge of how to write this history in light of our greater knowledge of the Soviet Union's despicable human rights record and the fall of Communism. It had repercussions for how I assessed the anti-Communist East European refugees, whose testimonials regarding human rights violations and atrocities in the Soviet Union and other East Bloc states can no longer be characterized as entirely ideologically-motivated exaggerations born of right-wing fanaticism. We can, however, address how such groups helped to sustain a repressive culture within the Canadian cold war state. My study considers the ideological alliances forged between gatekeeper and newcomer Cold Warriors and shows that the East Europeans played a far greater role than previously understood in shaping Canada's cold war democratic culture.

As a follow-up project, I plan to carry out a more sustained examination of caseworker/clients encounters, because power relations between the more and less powerful so often occur at the local level and affect the character of daily life. Also, the records generated raise key questions about theory, method, and historical knowledge. My case study of Toronto's International Institute—the only Canadian member of the US-based International Institutes (an organization of social welfare agencies with YWCA and settlement house origins)—will also be cast within a more decidedly North American context.

I wrote *Gatekeepers* over the same two years that I was deeply immersed in organizing the recently held conference, "Labouring Feminism and Feminist Working Class History in North American and Beyond," at the University of Toronto with my colleagues Rick Halpern and Ruth Percy. Our international planning committee carried out a number of pro-active recruitment strategies meant to ensure a diverse and multi-generational gathering of feminist and progressive scholars. The conference attracted about 300 people, mostly women, and far more than we had initially anticipated. By way of a few insider comments, I note that the conference was worth all of the time, energy, and frustra-

tion involved. As a constructive feminist response to the recent absorbing laments about the decline of "real" labour history—laments in which certain male labour historians have assumed the role of gatekeepers patrolling the boundaries of a field being defined in increasingly narrow and male-privileging ways—the conference did not aim to produce a new feminist research manifesto but rather to initiate meaningful exchanges and conversations. From its earliest planning stages, it was clear that much important work is being done by junior and senior feminists that can enlarge the parameters of working-class history; these ought to be part of more inclusionary forms of labour history. The topics included the cultural history of racialized, sexualized, diseased, and disabled bodies; the history of sex tourism and transnational sex-trade workers; and the cross-border nature of labour feminist ideologies in the Americas. The theoretical breadth of many participants was impressive and illuminating. Far from simply advocating pluralism, the conference created left feminist spaces for talking through and across theoretical, disciplinary, national, and other boundaries, and for encouraging dialectical dialogues.

Moreover, the conference most directly emerged out of and reflected the enthusiasm and work of younger feminists like Ruth Percy, our graduate student co-chair, whose thesis is a transnational study of labour feminism in Chicago and London. It was wonderful to have so many of them involved. Several participants commented that the event was qualitatively different from many labour history conferences partly because the many women historians there were feminist scholars open to theoretical insights and inter-sectional modes of analysis developed outside of labour history. People spoke of exploding not policing boundaries. Many of the presentations reflected the recent shift in focus away from more unitary understandings of what constituted workers' culture or class consciousness and towards a more "multiple meanings" approach that views workers as possessing several shifting subjectivities. The race-critical scholars probed racialized constructions of self and brought new worker subjects, such as African American models, to labour history's table. Participants grappled with ways of redefining notions of "the political," trade union feminism, and transnational and multi-generational female work and radicalism. The "bodily turn" in history was much in evidence. So were discussions about the symbiotic, but not tension-free, relationship between women's and gender history; these generally focussed on a shared interest in scrutinizing the differences of race/ethnicity, class, religion, sexuality, age, and (dis)ability. By trying to be as inclusive as possible, we probably did have too many "bodies" on the program, which meant not enough time for dialogue and debate, at least on the formal program. But could we have been inclusive without such jam-packed sessions? They also showcased the enormous amount of activity going on. For me, it was a signal that rather than rush to pre-mature pronouncements about where left feminist labour history is now, and where it should be in the next five or so

years, we need to keep busy doing it, keep stretching the borders and boundaries, keep talking, and see where it takes us. I feel the same about left history, though of course, on-going critical reflection is also crucially important. Our efforts to get that "serious sprinkling" of "beyond North America," as in Asia, Africa, and Australia was really only successful in the latter case. The transnational papers were terrific but also too few in number. We did better with a Latin American presence. We brought together activists and academics to deal with organizing and radical cultures, but most were activist academics, though I would certainly defend their status as activists. Highly mindful that even a project meant in part to de-centre the US or challenge US-based paradigms is often dominated by US papers, we did successfully integrate many Canadians but, despite plenty of effort, too few of them were Francophone and Quebec scholars.

My conference organizing grew logically out of the transnational feminist labour project that produced *Women, Gender and Transnational Lives.* Determined to smash the still-strong US stereotypes of Italian women as reluctant wage-earners and docile workers, that project (among other things) traced the presence of a transnational militant and radical culture among Italian women in Italy, France, Argentina, the US, Belgium, Canada, and Australia. We were particularly pleased to have found so many rank-and-file militants. We argued that our discovery of an earthy female political culture in which women acted in strikes as in daily life—with an assertive and mouthy femininity rooted in the harsh realities and struggles of peasant and proletarian life—also challenged an older but still influential North American paradigm that stressed how working-class women were constrained in protesting and mounting militant campaigns by their aspirations to feminine propriety in either bourgeois (i.e. hegemonic) or proletarian notions of domesticity and motherhood. In a plenary talk with US historian Jennifer Guglielmo that drew partly on the Italian transnational women workers project, I specifically addressed the Canadian historiography on militant and radical women and suggested that it was time to re-interrogate the much-used concept of "honest womanhood" in this literature. This concept, though valuable, was developed by feminist and labour historians (Wayne Roberts, Alice Klein) in the 1970s on the basis of an empirical study of working women in Victorian Toronto—a most decidedly Anglo-Saxon city! I suggested that, perhaps, it was not sufficient to simply stretch the concept so as to accommodate the histories, lives, and cultural worlds of the mostly immigrant and ethnic women (Jews, Ukrainians, Finns and others) who comprised the Canadian female left. Another suggestion was that Quebec and immigration historians of militant women explore whether Francophone and non-English speaking immigrant women's cultural (including bodily) expressions of militancy and radicalism were at all similar. I also stressed that concepts like militant mothering and anarchist motherhood were international and transna-

tional ones and urged younger Canadian scholars to be similarly transnational in their study of the subject. I have been heartened by the recent efforts, especially of young feminist Canadian historians, to use race-critical approaches to more effectively de-centre the wasp woman worker and I hope that the conference encouraged them to consider the possibilities that an Americas, Atlantic World, or global approach might hold for enriching their Canadian projects. But I also admit that such concerns are near and dear to me these days. As part of my contribution to the women workers project, I co-authored a piece on an anarcho-syndicalist anti-fascist exile and poet, Virgilia D'Andrea, who led a peripatetic life in Berlin, Paris, Toronto (briefly), and New York. I would like to write a full length biography, or perhaps a collective gendered biography of D'Andrea and her male partner, and, together, my Italian-American sisters and I have been tracing the trajectories of the many other women forced to leave Fascist Italy with a view to one day producing a full-length study of these transnational radical female subjects. It is a long-term project. If we ever racially diversify the Canadian historical profession, a different kind of history will also emerge. I do not know what it will look like but I know that it will be different. This applies equally to left history.

In closing, I would like to make a final point about feminism and left history by noting that the inside cover of Left History notes only two founding editors of Left History, Adam Givertz and Marcus Klee, both of whom I know and respect. But there was a third one, a feminist, Alison Forrest who, alas, later left the academy. I do not know Alison personally but I know that she too brought certain feminist hopes and a feminist vision to the project. It is critically important to remember that she too was there, at the journal's founding, because, otherwise, we might fall into the gender trap to which I referred above; that is, of writing the history of left history in ways that assume that in the beginning there were "a few good men" who created a radical discipline (or the possibility of a radical historiography), and then came the woman, some of them fine and acceptable comrades, but others unruly women who supposedly derailed the radical project. I am not a feminist and then a left historian but a feminist left historian. I know that our editors understand the point and I thank them for inviting me to offer some comments on the subject.

The Case for Right History

Jeet Heer

Reviewing a recent biography of Phyllis Schlafly, the right-wing political activist best known for leading the campaign against making the Equal Rights Amendment part of the United States Constitution, the sociologist Alan Wolfe made an acute observation: "The left in America has not paid as much attention to the right as the right has paid to the left, and the result has been a huge hole in the number of serious books by historians and political scientists dealing with people such as Phyllis Schlafly."[1]

Wolfe's pithy generalization presents both a conundrum and a challenge. Is it true that leftwing American scholars have spent little time studying American political conservatism? If so, is this a problem? And if it is a problem, how can it be solved?

First, there can be little argument with Wolfe's basic contention: compared with the robust and growing scholarly literature devoted to working class and radical social movements, the academic shelf on American conservatism is remarkably bare. Aside from tomes written by conservatives themselves, which often tend to be apologetic in intent if not outright hagiographies, we're left with a scattering of decent monographs and articles: in his many diplomatic histories, William Appleman Williams always laboured hard to do justice to conservative politicians (more than anyone, he helped revive Herbert Hoover's reputation as a statesman); Nancy K MacLean has written an excellent study of the Klu Klux Klan as a populist social movement; John Judis crafted a solid biography of William F. Buckley which illuminated the role of the journal *National Review* in American intellectual life; Sara Diamond is the author of a number of important books on the social roots of the religious right. One could also add some fine articles that have appeared in *Left History*, particularly Christopher Phelps's finely textured study of Lionel Trilling, a godfather to the neoconservatives, and Daniel Rosenberg's muckraking account of academic corruption at Adelphi College. There are, of course, other books and articles, but not that many more. By point of comparison, you can build a small library just by collecting volumes devoted to the European right, especially in its more extreme forms.

Of course, the list of relevant books becomes somewhat larger if we include volumes written by conservatives on their intellectual and political forbearers. But these books are marred by a self-serving tendency to hide distasteful family secrets. One of the best books in the genre is George H. Nash's *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America, since 1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1976; updated edition, Wilmington, Delaware: Intercollegiate Studies

Institute, 1996), which has the merits of combining an encyclopedic thoroughness with a strong narrative. Yet the omissions in the books are telling: there are only three passing references to racism in a book of nearly 500 pages, despite the fact that more than a few of the writers and thinkers surveyed were white supremacists, openly defending segregation in the American South and white colonialism in the third world (this is certainly true of such central figures as William Buckley, Willmoore Kendall, James J. Kilpatrick).

The weakness of books written by right-wing scholars analyzing their own pedigree illustrates why radical historians have to fill in the gap: simply put, the history of conservatism is too important to be left to conservatives. As we endure the second half of the presidency of George W. Bush, we see that American conservatism not only dominates the domestic politics of the United States, but also has a worldwide impact. Aside from the role neo-conservative ideologues have played in pushing for the Iraq war, the American conservative movement is currently a beacon for right-wingers around the world. From Canada to Taiwan, from India to Israel, local conservative groups are taking their cue from their Washington counterparts. In the current world situation, the United States is the leading capitalist power and the pre-eminent base for counter-revolutionary thinking.

"Know thy enemy" is not only wise strategic advice, it also presents radical scholars with a useful scholarly program. Building on the works of writers like Williams, MacLean, and Diamond, we need to understand the social and intellectual origins of contemporary right wing movements. There is a great deal of work to be done in this field and in some ways left historians are ideally posed for the challenge: the skills we've acquired in studying popular social movements can help illuminate the history of conservatism, since the existing literature has too often focused on elite intellectuals and ignores the important role played by grass-roots organizers. Often, the political right has borrowed its tactics and language from the left, particularly the vernacular voice of populism. Many leading conservatives, from James Burnham to Irivng Kristol, began their life as leftists and kept a basic Marxist framework even as they moved to the right. Historian of the left have a role to play in tracing this political trajectory, showing how these thinkers shifted course but also how radicalism shaped their gestalt. Finally, radical historians can be much less squeamish than their conservative (or for that matter liberal) counterparts in examining the racist, sexist, or homophobic roots of some forms of conservative thought. These are all areas of study that would benefit from the insight of left historians.

As noted earlier, some scholars have already done useful research in the area. However, much more spadework needs to be done. Paradoxically, the future of left history might be in right history.

Notes

1, Alan Wolfe, "Mrs. America," *The New Republic* (3 October, 2005).

Living Otherwise

Craig Heron

The invitation to contribute to this symposium arrived at almost the same time as a copy of Ian McKay's new *Rebels, Reds, Radicals: Rethinking Canada's Left History* (2005), a little introductory volume to a magisterial three-volume history that will begin to appear in the near future. The book ripples with the intellectual imagination, creativity, and energy that we have come to expect from this prolific writer, and presents a perspective on "The Left" that ought to inform and inspire the work of "left" historians. For me, the book encapsulates most articulately a way of thinking about the past that I have been trying to use and teach about for some time. So I decided to use it as the springboard for my contribution to *Left History*'s discussion.

McKay's first dilemma was obviously to delineate the parameters of the left. Who are we? This cuts directly to the questions raised by this journal's editors about whether there is a distinct "left" history. McKay's answer is to cast the net as widely as possible to include not only the identifiable left-wing political formations and labour movements, but also a broad range of social activists—environmentalists, feminists, gays, religious activists, and so on—all of whom are making a contribution to the struggle for what Marx called "the realm of freedom," made possible by a secure "realm of necessity." What unites us is our perspective on past and current social realities within capitalism and on the possibilities for alternatives that could bring about democracy in all aspects of our lives. This is what McKay likes to call "thinking otherwise." To my mind, that is what should define a "left historian," rather than a particular genre of history (labour history, gender history, cultural history, whatever).

Then the hard part begins. What kind of history should we write? What should we write about? What theoretical guideposts should we follow? For whom should we write? Again, McKay's response is expansive. His main argument in the book is that the left in Canada has been diverse and sometimes fragmented and querulous, but, to his mind, always worthy of respectful but unsentimental, non-sectarian consideration at each stage of its evolution. His argument builds on the classics, starting inevitably with Marx—actually, with a subtle, complex, incisive process of analysis larger than the man himself and his commonly cited texts—and frequently invoking the creative contributions of Gramsci, but also welcoming the less traditional insights of feminist and environmentalist analyses, for example. He calls on us to engage with the actors of the past not as inadequate (or heroic) creatures of our theoretical imaginations—the class-conscious versus the deferential worker, the feminist versus the maternalist woman, and so on—but on their own terms in their own specific

context, in this case within that curious "liberal project" (as he calls it) known as Canada. He urges us to stay attuned to the Gramscian notion of hegemony.

For me, there are several important implications to be drawn from all this. First, 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 who filled the horizons of so many earnest young male left-wing academics like me. Second, we need to be sensitive to a variety of responses to oppression and exploitation within capitalist societies, not all of which fit the conventional moulds of much left thinking (Francophone Catholics, Tory working men, and Aboriginal peoples all provide important examples). Third, 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, finally, left historians need to maintain an openness and flexibility in developing and applying our analytical frameworks and methodologies. We need to promote dialogue among a broad range of writers in a comradely spirit, not shut it down dismissively.

That doesn't necessarily mean endless fragmentation of historical investigation and analysis. It must be accompanied by efforts to consolidate our insights, to build ever more powerful conceptual frameworks, to speak an increasingly common language derived from our diversity and our dialogues. We have already come such an impressively long way since hard-boiled leftists could only consider gender and race as minor add-ons to the bedrock concept of class. We should continue to be open to the kind of tentative "reconnaissance" that McKay recommends. *Left History* can play an important role in that process.

The other really important insight in his book is the contextualizing of particular leftist formations in their time. That includes us. We scholars inside the academy who are pondering these hard questions are operating in a time of profound crisis for progressive forces in the larger society. Nothing has weakened the left at the close of the twentieth century more than the pervasive cultural and intellectual power of neo-liberalism. Historians are better placed than many other academics to challenge that worldview. The cultural authority of history is still remarkably influential and can give us some space to suggest that the world has never operated the way the neo-liberals suggest, that the central premises of their attacks—especially that the unfettered market can produce widespread human happiness—are historically unfounded, that resistance to such thinking has a long history, and that humane and democratic alternatives have emerged repeatedly.

To whom do we convey these messages? To as many audiences as possible. There is nothing wrong with narrowly specialized, esoteric discussions among ourselves about the implications of new research, particular theoretical

innovations, or compelling critiques. This journal is one place for that to happen. But we have to be prepared to engage with other intellectuals who do not necessarily "think otherwise," arguing with them in conferences and meetings, engaging them with our articles, books, and journalistic pieces, challenging them to recognize the importance of our democratic perspective. Left history has to appear in the pages of the *Canadian Historical Review* and the *Globe and Mail* as well as in *Left History*. We have already made huge strides in changing how Canadian history is conceptualized, bringing into the mainstream the experience of workers, women, aboriginal peoples, ethnic and racial minorities, sexual dissenters, and so on, along with the sometimes hideous record of patriarchal, colonialist industrial capitalism in Canada. Like the Liberal Party's willingness to scoop leftist social policies, however, our apparent success can be diluted, and we have to keep pushing the deeper radicalism of our ideas.

We also need to speak to our students. We need to help develop their critical appreciation of the left's main intellectual currents (in all their diversity) and their usefulness in understanding the histories of capitalism, patriarchy, and racism, and so much more. We need to develop ways to break through the fatalism of the present era to convince them that throughout history people have "thought otherwise" and mobilized to turn their visions into reality. To do this may mean producing different kinds of written texts from what most of us are accustomed to doing, as well as spending more time examining our own pedagogies and attempting to infuse the learning experience in our classrooms with the democratic ethos that motivates us. The larger structures of the universities and colleges where we work also regularly demand our political energies to promote and (increasingly) defend democratic principles of governance and accessibility. Perhaps *Left History* should consider these sides of our work more directly.

At the same time, we need to address the larger left more directly. We need to be consciously part of the contemporary struggle, in McKay's phrase, to "live otherwise." Our writing and other forms of intellectual or cultural engagement must speak to contemporary movements for social justice and also listen to them. History can have a place in struggling for a better future. That is not always an easy process. Being public intellectuals can force awkward compromises. Subtle nuance can be lost in the pressure for over-simplification through "popularization." We can also easily be drawn into the role of cheerleaders for particular social or political movements, writing and speaking about their great accomplishments and heroic struggles. I spent fifteen years working intensively with a workers' heritage organization, and had to constantly balance my own critical instincts with the expectation that labour's story should be upbeat and heroic, even though I don't think that it had always been so glorious in Canada. In the end, however, I found that dilemma only a minor distraction from the rewarding possibilities of contributing some knowledge and insight to political

cultures outside academia. It has been heartening over the years, for example, to have so many labour activists tell me that they found my short history of the Canadian labour movement really useful (it has, of course, sold far more copies than anything else I ever published).

So, like Ian McKay, I am a "left historian" who still thinks that it is possible to be a sophisticated, credible, and critical scholar while keeping one's feet planted firmly on the left, and that there is still something important uniting us in a loose-knit, but potentially powerful community of like-minded people (which, of course, includes the readers and contributors to this remarkably successful journal). To again invoke McKay's words, we are all committed in our various ways to "shared conversations and collective acts that hasten the day of a more generous democracy."

Nature, History, and Marx

Liza Piper

> *[A]ll progress in capitalistic agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the labourer, but of robbing the soil.*
> Karl Marx - *Capital*

Left history considers who or what is left—because they resisted, rejected, or were excluded from the dominant capitalist order of the last several hundred years of world history. As evidenced from the scope of this journal, left history embraces the history of left social and political movements; foregrounds the importance of gender, race, and class analysis; and always builds upon the bulwarks of labour history. As a former co-editor of this journal I needed to have an answer to the question "what is left history?" As a student of environmental history I have had to answer the corresponding question, "what is environmental history?" both for my own sanity and to introduce the uninitiated. My ready answer to the latter is that it considers the historical relations between humans and the rest of nature. In looking for the intersections of left and environmental histories I was struck by the breadth of possibilities, as each is so inclusive in its scope to create considerable overlap. In the interests of clarity I opted to narrow my field of vision. I turned to what I consider a traditional interpretation of left history, one that emphasises politics, the place of Marxist theory and historical materialism, to assess its potential, realized, and rejected contributions to environmental history. To this end, the following discussion reviews first how Marxist theory and ecology have engaged one another in different arenas over the past thirty years. Significantly, eco-Marxism, as a form of social and political inquiry, and environmental history remain isolated from one another even as eco-Marxists evoke the importance of history and environmental historians set forth their own materialist analyses. I conclude by suggesting four important overlaps that demonstrate the significance of building a left environmental history even from these admittedly narrow foundations.

Left and environmental histories each examine the evolution of socialist and environmental organizations, political parties, and their impacts on broader society. This history of environmental activism forms an important core of environmental historical research and overlaps, without being limited to, left history. Although united in a common critique of capitalism, the histories of red and green politics in the West otherwise diverge; a fact which reflects the relative immaturity of green politics, the middle-class origins of much environmental activism, and the divisive character of left political discourse. Two examples will illustrate this point, specifically the case of the German Greens, one of the

strongest green political movements in the West, and the French Greens since 1970.[1] The German Greens up to the 1980s directed their interventions "against the dehumanization of work in capitalist industrial society."[2] They rejected bourgeois society and traditional social democracy because of their dependence upon capitalist rationality, which involved environmental degradation and waste as integral to the operation of competition and accumulation of profit. After 1980, ideological divergence split the German Greens along four lines with strong right (eco-libertarian) and left (eco-socialist) wings while the majority of supporters fell somewhere in between. In France, the majority of Green supporters were similarly moderate but the Greens in general affiliated politically and intellectually with the left, without the same strong right wing. Michael Bess emphasised two distinct styles of green ideology in post-war France: nature-centred environmentalism, with close ties to long-standing conservation and nature protection organisations, and social environmentalism which embodied a critique of industrial modernity and recognized the fundamentally global character of ecological problems and their ultimate solution. The mutual reinforcement of reds and greens depended upon the political dynamics of given communities rather than intrinsic ideological sympathy.

The evolving alliances between red and green politics in the West in the late twentieth century provoked rigorous debate amongst social and political theorists regarding the relationship between Marxism and ecology. Paul Burkett's self-described "holistic reconstruction" of Marx's ecological thought in *Marx and Nature: A Red and Green Perspective* (1999) and John Bellamy Foster's comprehensive intellectual history, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (2000) find in the work of Marx and Engels an integral and comprehensive exposition of ecologically relevant ideas.[3] These works must be understood in a broader context of animosity between Marxism and green politics, however. Observers such as David Harvey and Ted Benton pointed to the "bad blood" between the two and the unconscionable delay amongst Marxists to properly grapple with environmental issues.[4] Some thinkers abandoned central elements of Marx's theory as incompatible with the new challenges posed by ecology. Benton's attempt to press the issue came in the form of an influential essay, published in 1989 in the *New Left Review*.[5] Here, Benton detailed what historical materialism had to offer to an ecologically-based alternative to capitalist society. Yet he also maintained that Marx's and Engel's ecological thought was, in effect, limited by "a crucial hiatus" between historical materialism and their economic theory which limited potential ecological insights. Colin Duncan, among others, further argued that Marx's ecological rigour was constrained by the character of nineteenth century environmental thought. Marx held a narrow view of nature and worried principally about capitalists "robbing the soil," not how they destroyed the soil's ability to perform broader life-supporting functions.[6] The extent then that Marx's and Engel's writings can provide a founda-

tion for ecologically informed politics remains disputed although the significance of historical materialism to ecology has been well established. From the other camp, whether greens will embrace the class politics of socialism is never assured, although the growing prominence of advocates for environmental justice has shifted the class character of environmentalism. Nevertheless, the elaboration of eco-Marxism in these debates and elsewhere, including notably the journal *Capitalism Nature Socialism* (*CNS*), demonstrates "the need to free both labour and natural conditions from the rule of capital by socially reuniting them as joint conditions of human development."[7]

The intensity of the theoretical debate remains unmatched by historical analysis. This is in part a product of how Marxists and eco-Marxists frame the problem. Many adherents argue that the primary causes of ecological degradation are "the dynamics of specifically capitalist social and economic relations (not "industrialism," "greed," "modernity," "anthropocentrism," "science," or whatever)."[8] While capitalist social and economic relations have produced the most consequential human impacts on the natural world, this does not give the analysis of these relations exclusive purchase in enlightening us as to how we can most effectively deal with the problems produced by capitalism. In other words, it is necessary to look outside of capitalism to discern alternative relationships between humanity and nature and possible solutions to our current crisis. Such a long-historical perspective appears only fleetingly within socialist ecological writing as in for example, J. Donald Hughes' regular column, "Ripples in Clio's Pond" that appears in *CNS*.[9] Otherwise, *CNS* shares the presentist, late-twentieth-century perspective that dominates green and socialist publications.

The influence of left theory and history on the foundation of the field of environmental history are readily apparent. As Donald Worster pointed out over fifteen years ago, strong moral concerns had given birth to and persisted in environmental history, although the field had also matured into an intellectual enterprise that exceeded the scope of any particular political agenda.[10] Classics of environmental historiography set forth materialist foundations for the field that resonate with left historical analysis. Donald Worster's model of environmental history identified the basic triumvirate of ecology (nature), mode of production (labour), and consciousness (culture). In a 1987 article on "The Theoretical Structure of Ecological Revolutions," Carolyn Merchant insisted upon a fourth category of reproduction necessary to understand the gendered character of ecological transformations. Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha in *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India* (1992) organized their analysis along five "modes of resource use" that extended the classic Marxist modes of production to deepen understanding of the material conditions of historical resource exploitation in India and the social arrangements that arose out of these conditions. Richard White in *The Organic Machine*

(1995) emphasised the importance of knowing nature through labour, effectively setting forth the central precept of an ecologically informed historical materialism that sees bodies at work as allowing the material metabolism of societies with nature.[11]

The ties between left history and environmental history nevertheless remain under-theorized. This was indeed one of the key critiques that emerged from the 1994 symposium in *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography* that reviewed William Cronon's seminal 1991 publication, *Nature's Metropolis*. Individual reviewers took Cronon to task for failing to "work from within a coherent theory of capitalist development" and therefore missing an opportunity to use the study of Chicago and the Great West to elaborate upon the intersecting environmental and social relations of capitalism.[12] Environmental historians, including Cronon and Worster, have critiqued Marx's labour theory of value, arguing that it fails to recognize the wealth of nature but they also have shied away from proposing alternative models, or at least any models with much traction.[13] Environmental historians have thus largely failed to press the case for rethinking important tenets of left historical, and especially Marxist, analysis. Scholars interested in theorizing environmental history have instead turned to the insights offered by social theory more broadly and gender, consumption, and science and technology studies in particular.[14]

Why should we study left environmental history? First, within the confines of the discipline a dialectic understanding of the relationship between humanity and nature, building upon the concept of metabolism for example, is essential to getting past the dichotomies of nature/culture, wilderness/civilization, or ecocentric/anthropocentric that offer little insight into the role of environments in the human past. Second, we need to know and revisit past sustainable relationships to nature in order to create a viable alternative to our capitalist present. As Duncan has illustrated using the case of English agriculture up to the nineteenth century, it is not necessary "to revert to some premodern social arrangement" to have an advanced, modern society fed by environmentally-benign agriculture.[15] In general the idea is not to identify and recreate a past eco-socialist utopia. Instead, it is to understand what mechanisms—economic, social, cultural, spiritual, political, and so forth—successfully integrated rather than externalised the physical world with human economies. Third, knowing nature through labour produces historically accessible ecological knowledge. Science and capitalism each generate volumes of ecological knowledge preserved in the natural world and the documentary record as scientific reports, inventories, land surveys preparatory to development, annual reports, and in their most recent manifestation, environmental assessments. Although necessary tools to know past environments, in most instances these documents are clearly skewed by the end goals of their creators: exploitation, maximizing production, and claiming ownership without responsibility. Indigenous studies

have demonstrated the wealth of ecological knowledge retained in oral histories and indigenous communities. Similarly, studying the histories of workers and their families in specific environments offers another view of past ecosystems necessary to correct the myopia produced by science and capitalism. It signifies that in order to know and sustain natural spaces we must live and work in nature, not just visit past or present wilderness as tourists.

Finally, the environmentally unconstrained character of capitalism ensures its continued liability for unprecedented ecological degradation. Exploitation of environments in a non-sustainable fashion is equivalent to the appropriation of present and future privilege by those in power. To properly understand the full scale of this appropriation, however, it is necessary to know as much as possible about the character of past environments. By only considering the impacts of capitalist economies in the near-past we fail to see the scale of change over the past several centuries because we fail to understand how much the environments modified by industrial capitalism in the past two centuries were already human-made places. A meaningful critique of the environmental injustice created by capitalism is impossible without historical analysis that extends beyond the past hundred years. These then are the potential contributions of a left environmental history.

Notes

1. See Werner Hülsberg, *The German Greens: A Social and Political Profile*, trans. Gus Fagan (London; New York: Verso, 1988); Thomas Poguntke, *Alternative Politics: The German Green Party* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993); Michael Bess, *TheLlight-Green Society: Ecology and Technological Modernity in France, 1960-2000* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
2. Werner Hülsberg, "The Greens at the Crossroads," *New Left Review* 152 (July/August 1985): 18.
3. Paul Burkett, *Marx and Nature: A Red and Green Perspective* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000). See also James O'Connor, *Natural causes: Essays in Ecological Marxism* (New York: Guildford Press, 1998); Jonathan Hughes, *Ecology and Historical Materialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
4. See David Harvey, "Marxism, Metaphors, and Ecological Politics," *Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine* 49.11 (April 1998); Ted Benton, "Marxism and Natural Limits: An Ecological Critique and Reconstruction," 178 (November-December 1989).
5. Benton, "Marxism and Natural Limits."
6. Colin Duncan, *The Centrality of Agriculture: Between Humankind and the Rest of Nature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996).
7. Paul Burkett, "Marxism and Natural Limits: A Rejoinder," *Historical Materialism* 8.1 (2001): 353.

8. Ted Benton, "Marx, Malthus and the Greens: A Reply to Paul Burkett," *Historical Materialism* 8.1 (2001): 309. In his 1989 article Benton does acknowledge that, "it is a mistake to suppose that capitalism is the root of *all* ecological evil. I think it can be shown that capitalism is a mode peculiarly liable to ecological crisis, but it must not be forgotten that other modes, too, have their own distinctive ecological crisis-tendencies" (emphasis in original), "Marxism and Natural Limits," 82. Benton is more sensitive than most to the importance of a long-historical perspective.

9. Hughes is himself an ancient historian who has published on environmental problems in the Greek and Roman worlds. See *Pan's Travail: Environmental Problems of the Ancient Greeks and Romans* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

10. These environmentalist underpinnings were, as the previous discussion suggests, in no way intrinsically linked to socialist political goals in the 1960s and 1970s although they occupied shared terrain under particular historical circumstances. See Adam Rome, "'Give Earth a Chance': The Environmentalist Movement and the Sixties," *Journal of American History* 90.2 (September 2003).

11. There is an important body of work on urban metabolism. See Martin V. Melosi, *The Sanitary City: Urban Infrastructure in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); J. Galloway, D. Keene, and M. Murphy, "Fuelling the City: Production and Distribution of Firewood and Fuel in London's Region, 1290-1400," *Economic History Review* 49 (1996): 155-196; Joel A. Tarr, "The Metabolism of the Industrial City: The Case of Pittsburgh," *Journal of Urban History* 28.5 (2002): 511-545.

12. "William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis*: A Symposium," *Antipode* 26.2 (April 1994): 113-176. See in particular, Mary Beth Pudup "Trading Places," 116-121; Cole Harris, "From Turner and Von Thunen to Marx and Leopold," 122-125; and Brian Page and Richard Walker, "*Nature's Metropolis*: The Ghost Dance of Christaller and Von Thünen," 152-162.

13. See Donald Worster, et al., "A Roundtable: Environmental History," *Journal of American History* 74.4 (March 1990): 1087-1147.

14. See Virginia J. Scharff, ed. *Seeing Nature Through Gender* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003); *History and Theory, Theme Issue* 42.4 (December 2003): 1-135. From this issue on environmental history see in particular, Theodore R. Schatzki, "Nature and Technology in History," 82-93; Matthew W. Klingle, "Spaces of Consumption in Environmental History," 94-110. See also McNeill's comments on social theory and environmental history in "Observations on the Nature and Culture of Environmental History," 36-39.

15. Duncan, *The Centrality of Agriculture*, 12.

Left History on the Middle Ground

Bryan Palmer

"What does it mean to write 'left history?'" is the question that has been posed to editorial board members of this journal. As I pondered this seemingly innocuous query, my mind wandered back to another time. I was finishing up my first year of an undergraduate degree at a sleepy college affiliated with the University of Western Ontario. Leftists of an academic sort were few and far between, and certainly there was nothing much in the way of left history. But something was in the air, nonetheless, and what remained of the 1960s registered with a few of us.

In April of 1970 I found myself miffed at the grading grid of English 100 at Huron College. Sixty percent of the year's mark (and it was the entire two semesters' worth of academic work) was assigned to a final examination, the questions structured so as to provide a minimum of choice. I demanded options, and placed a strong accent on the value of an oral exam and the right of students to have alternatives.

The four-or-five person English Department of Huron College met to consider this cheeky petition. I marveled at the ingenuity of their disingenuousness. I am sure they decamped puffed up with the self-satisfaction that they were getting me out of what was left of their hair. A special exam could be arranged, but under quite particular conditions, which were, like the National Liberation Front's demand that the US withdraw its forces unilaterally from Vietnam, open to No Negotiations.

I was still required to write the final examination, which would remain as sixty percent of my year's mark. Rules were rules! An oral exam was scheduled to take place, before the *entire* English Department faculty, which would assemble, should I so wish, in the Chair's office, at 8 a.m., on a designated Sunday in May. I would then be questioned on the written exam. This unconventional exercise that I so arduously sought, made rather conventional by the powers that be, was to be factored into the forty percent already assigned to essays and previous tests. It would be conceded a weighty ten marks out of one hundred. Ten percent, cutting into marks for work completed, determined by an assembly of Inquisitors (they still wore academic robes at Huron at this time) drawn together at the break of Holy Day—who could pass on this?!

And so I went, wedged between the Chair's sporty, fire-engine-red MGM convertible bubble top (just off for the spring), against which leaned a Bull's-Eye putter, and the canonical-breathing circle of largely jaundiced scholastics, rubbing the sleep from their eyes, unable (understandably) to suppress their irritation on being summoned at such an ungodly hour, on the godliest (or golfin-

gest) of days, wasting their time with me and my "cause." They were there to put me in my place. It wasn't a tall order.

I tried valiantly to convince the august body of interrogation that *The Tempest* really was about Empire, racism, and conquest. Failing miserably, I gave up on the project as the waters bloodied and the sharks fed more and more voraciously. Undoubtedly I deserved the D- they gave me for my efforts, although the professorial team probably violated whatever oath teachers should be required to take (but never do) with respect to a commitment to pedagogy over pedantry. The only humanity in the room was exhibited by my sessional appointment instructor, a young woman of integrity who tried to rescue me from my Martin Luther-like immolation before the Bishops.

How does this prod to discuss left history relate to such memory? Most will see no link. But for me they *are* connected. Separated by so much, and even allowing for obvious differences, including some inversion, I seem back there again as I try to think through what left history as it is practiced in Canada is becoming. Academics have a way of sanctifying the middle ground, and that is where my professors at Huron College wanted to put me. I think many in the university who imagine themselves of the left like this middle quite a lot, and it is indeed a sociable space. But I have no more inclination to come in to it now than I did a long time ago. Sometimes it is lonely away from the pleasantries of the middle. I felt that way as I left London, Ontario in the late summer of 1970, hitch-hiking to New York to enter a world of the left that I knew very little about.

In New York, and later in my graduate school days at the State University of New York at Binghamton, I nevertheless retained a taste for challenging authorities and disagreeing with established conventions. Sometimes this happened *on the left*, as surprising as that may seem to some in our time. Those who dished it out had to be prepared, on occasion, to take it as well. I remember *Monthly Review's* Harry Magdoff handling me brusquely in a public forum for asking a question indicating to him that I had not read thoroughly enough his views on the economics of US imperialism. I didn't think he owed me any niceties. Neither did my PhD supervisor feel that he should be on the receiving end of sycophancy. He still relishes telling tales of how my first written assignment for him was an attack on his conceptual use of Oscar Lewis's "culture of poverty" paradigm in his study of the Industrial Workers of the World.

But those were the Bad Old Days, when argument, disagreement, and debate were pretty standard fare, especially among leftists, who thought it their job to be in constant disagreement. In university classes this meant taking to task all manner of writings that refused to recognize the contentiousness of the past. Interpretation *was* argument. Fudging political issues rather than confronting them was particularly frowned upon.

Now the tenor of the times is different. Being adept at dodging is all the

rage. If you get caught out in a particularly transparent silliness you can claim you were, of course, being *ironic*. If you state black is white, few are going to query you. Beauty isn't just in the eye of the beholder: everything is. Even outright lying does not seem to be held in much disregard. What, after all, *is* truth!?[1] Pluralism was, back in the Bad Old Days, an enemy. Today it is an enema cleansing us of irksome political roughage.

A Golden Age of Agreeableness is upon us. Nothing is more unfashionable among "progressive" historians than argument and, indeed, there is seldom anything worth arguing about. There is no center, no power that is not somehow countered by other power, and no questioning of anyone who is able to dredge up from the deck of oppression some identity card that trumps yours. As we all know, this is damned certain to happen. We used to think, as radicals in 1960s garb, that there was no standing judiciously in the middle. Now we know, as New (Age) Millennium postmodern, deconstructionist, critical theorists that the middle is very much the place to be.

When little can be explained by recourse to anything that actually reeks of the materiality of the vulgarly economic, like capitalism, and everything can always be explained by a more and more nuanced piling up of other causalities, the list of which is endless, and tends, in our time, to more and more ethereal and representational realms, then analysis is best undertaken from the vantage point of the middle. This is even more the case if we dispense with the notion of causality altogether.[2] We don't need analysis of causality when everything comes from everything, and nothing can be explained by crude interpretive schema dependent on simplification. Better to stand in the middle and swivel-head one's interpretive apparatus to take in what we want to see. And so we explain less and less, describing more and more, our analytic necks too often corkscrewing downward until they come to rest on our navels.

Or, straddling all possible fences, the surrounding territory is surveyed expeditiously, adding on this and that and so on and so forth, dropping what does not fit comfortably in the social construction of complacent "community." Such a reconnaissance seldom highlights difference, and often congeals much that might be separated, shearing the past of thorny particulars. The more elastic the container of explanation the better: it offers the least resistance to whatever can be stuffed down its aperture.

The expansive "middle" that results and is reproduced conceptually in the theoretical fashions that seep into historical practice as they are fading in the corridors of their original creation (always in disciplines other than History) is simultaneously a place of observation, a subject, and, even, a politics. Thus the clamour to address the "middle classes" (usually ill-defined); the need to bridge the material and the representational (even though, perhaps, no structure can traverse this analytic divide); the current attractions of textualism, microhistories, and narrations, all of which are a mixed bag that contain potential and

insight as well as providing, in certain hands, a license for historians to make a great deal out of a very little. The ground that is thus cultivated is nicely of the middle, firm in its supports for both the middle-minded and those who appear to want to get there fast.

"Old" left values are often as much regarded as the problem as they are the solution. Monocausal, crudely economistic, class-based metanarratives, for instance, are written off in perfunctory phrases of dismissal. That almost no one ever put forward interpretations of this kind is beside the point. Scapegoating Marxists is the non-contact sport of choice in our postmodern times. If Marxists did not exist, many postmodernists would have trouble figuring out what they were against and why their world view was, indeed, "radical."

But what, then, is the solution? Telling labour historians that they must study religion is good enough as far as it goes, for this is an area that has been understudied, especially in class terms and most particularly in Canada. But if you avoid the examination of class struggle in the process, presenting religion only as a means by which people coped with their oppressions and even mounted resistance to them, without also addressing how it incorporated many into an acceptance of the status quo, at times deepening the ways in which they were structured into subordination, this is hardly a project with much left content to it. It is rather like telling the exotic dancer to write a dissertation on her clientele without addressing uncouth and obnoxious behaviour. I am sure it is not all that she sees, but I don't think very many of these entertainers would deny that it exists. Extolling the value of studying consumption as one more realm of human agency—be it of booze or baubles—isn't really doing left history if you avoid a close look at commodification and the alienating capacity of the new, and routinely proliferating, opiates of the people to obfuscate oppression and exploitation. Demanding a serious examination of working-class Toryism sounds sensible enough. But how is this to be done without recourse to notions of false consciousness or class interest, terms that, if used today, would be regarded as the intellectual equivalent of passing gas loudly in church. It is not difficult to avoid critiquing the labour bureaucracy—all sections of the revolutionary left in the short twentieth century took aim at this stratum with a vengeance—if you are hobnobbing with them, insist that they (like you) are entirely reasonable people who are doing their best in a non-revolutionary situation, and are dependent on their approval for your next workshop. Damn if you should use "history" as a battered old Ford to drive into their parking lot and smash up the SUVs!

All of this is of "the middle." This middle, which has become the stomping ground of the "progressive," eschews stands that the left once took for granted. We have been warned of this colonizing middle. Edward Thompson once wrote of 1960s labour history that it had been liberated of its old conventions, and had become more dangerous to established mainstream historiography in

the process. He saw this as a "lively impulse" and argued that it would retain its health to the extent that it remained "disestablished." But he cautioned that it "may become successful: grow fat and adopt Norman habits in its turn."[3]

The middle is a place where such habits abound. One part of this registers in the extent to which answers to the question, "What is left history?" are an exercise in narrowing issues and avoiding judgments in ways that are quite foreign to what used to be considered left analysis. Positions taken, arguments raised, and conclusions arrived at, in the Bad Old Days, were prone to be judged by their coherence, logic, and integrity, all of which once were, among those claiming to be left historians, matters both *political* and *intellectual*. The deepening subjectivism and widening relativism of our theoretical period, influenced as it has been by particular accents on Foucalt's work and on postmodernism's skepticism concerning Enlightenment values, caricatures such notions into quaint dust balls, gathering in the corner of some unfashionably antiquated room vacated decades ago.

Of course the left has always imagined that its ways of analyzing past and present give it a leg up the interpretive ladder, and it is quite right to think this. A large part of this rests on the conviction that being left, which for much of the last century and a half meant premising argument on some kind of historical materialist interpretive foundation, is superior to outlining and explaining developments within human societies by relying on what could be found in a Hegelian Spirit or Weberian Ideal Types or a Mackenzie King Séance. By the 1990s, however, there were those "progressives" who, with the "end of history" crumbling before them as the Soviet Union imploded, thought anything dirtied by the remnants of the Berlin Wall dubious at best. Historical materialism animated fewer and fewer fashionable theorists; more and more histories, seemingly left, drew less and less on orthodox materialist understandings. Whereas the left had once wrestled with the injunction that "being determined consciousness," such productive combat has been displaced by an almost biblical injunction that directs the "new course": "language" determines all, and "in the beginning was the word." Since language is of course substantially more than words, and includes discourses of varying kinds—representation, imagery, symbolism—the subjects of left history proliferate. Surveying academics in 2005 about what left history means to them is, in this epoch of the Subject as Supreme Being, destined to elicit responses that largely dispense with discussion of what should be the content of left history. Anything, pretty much, goes.

And so, in some ways, it should. No leftist worth his or her salt will concede that there exists a subject, from jazz to ju-jubes, that cannot be imbued with meaning by historicizing it and analyzing it from the left. But the ladder of left history once had rungs that were recognizable, even allowing for specific tastes: peasant revolts, the transition from feudalism to capitalism, class struggle and the industrial revolution, imperialism and war, the "woman ques-

tion," race and colonialism, the state and its meanings. Now we have added a goodly number of *equally canonical* rungs, many of them undeniably welcome and imaginatively innovative, such as sexual orientation and increasingly sophisticated appreciations of the complexities of issues bounded by race and gender.

Still, there is no mistaking a dual trend. First, the old rungs are, in the eyes of many, worn thin, and splintered. Few feet touch them. Second, there are newer rungs, polished, gleaming with attractiveness. What is wrong with those who are not stepping *there?*! And these new rungs, sleek and slippery, grow daily, crowding out and displacing their counterparts.

The list of what sells in current left circles and what does not could be extended almost indefinitely. A scrupulously researched analysis of the wage differential separating black and white workers in the steel industry will result in eyelids drooping and heads nodding in a junkie-like obliviousness, but a combing of the personal ads in *The Tattler* will hold people in rapt attention. A terse book on literary modes of production in the nineteenth century is likely to lie unread, and draw no "meet the author" session at the Modern Language Association meetings or the Social Science History annual fete. But studies of the tattooed body or an uncovering of lesbian longings in the novels of Lucy Maude Montgomery won't lack for an audience or applause. Studies of factionalism in the communist movement of the 1920s bore most left historians, but speak to them of how gossip networks and gender performativity in ethnic neighborhoods constructed politics and they are all ears. The beat goes on.

So what is left history? I have not answered the question. Were I to do so, I'd offer a simple, blunt answer. It is history that actually undermines the contemporary status quo, destabilizing the reign of capital. Does much of the history that passes for left today really do this? Yes, many will answer with resolute conviction, their certainty sealed in subjective assertions standing firm on the middle ground. On the best of days, in the most charitable of circumstances, I wonder. Of course history that does not take aim at capitalism's hegemonic holds is not necessarily *bad* history, and in actuality it could be wonderfully researched, ably argued, and elegantly presented. But it might well have no left content at all.

Take the history of sex, for instance. Once upon a time there was no such thing as serious historical study of bodies coupled (or tripled) in sensual, steamy contact. In pushing the profession to include the erotic as a legitimate realm of inquiry, recent advocates expanded the arena of left study importantly, just as leftists of certain stripes, in specific periods of the past, were unambiguous in claiming sex and its liberation as a radical endeavour. Nevertheless, it is patently clear that the views of an Edward Carpenter at the turn of the century or a Floyd Dell in the 1920s were radical in their time, precisely because the very subject of sex, in various guises, was too often vetoed in polite political dis-

course, even within segments of the left. And such "sex radicals" were also radical on other matters: they wrote about socialism; they defended anarchists victimized by the state; they placed cultural and political matters in a wide, often revolutionary, context.

But 80 and more years later, the scene is decidedly different. As late as the mid-1960s, sex remained a private, often repressed, matter. Now sex is everywhere. Once silenced, it has become public, mainstream, and loud. And I for one am glad that it is. But there is no denying that the suppressed radical content of one epoch has become the exposed convention of another.

In my lifetime I have seen gay sexuality emerge from the underbrush of "dirty secrets" too outrageous to countenance in popular culture to the point that it is now a staple of such media as television. I once warned a gay student about to embark on a pioneering dissertation exploring the history of male homosexuality that he would face the prejudices of a profession not quite ready for his research. Barely two decades have passed, but journals are given over to theme issues on homosexuality in history, many departments hire gay and lesbian historians, and universities are promoting the field of same-sex issues as part of diversity studies.

Of course there remains sufficient homophobia and anti-sex prudery in mainstream culture that it is critical not to lapse into complacency. We must be vigilante in our defences. But I nevertheless now tend to reluctantly agree with Maurice Agulhon, who wrote perceptively in the 1980s that since "the taboo on the history of sexuality has been lifted, there is as much danger in attaching undue importance to it, as in the past there was an error in ignoring it altogether."[4]

The problem is that sex politics, which is surely what any left history values, has in our time been reduced to sex. This reductionism has been easy, because late capitalism, unlike earlier more ascetic variants, appreciates how much sex can be made to pay. Critical theory, which conceptualized sex as a dissenting subject, is now ironically overtaken by sex, too often with the politics not so much left as left out. As Terry Eagleton remarks, tongue appropriately in (his own) cheek: "On the wilder shores of academia, an interest in French philosophy has given way to a fascination with French kissing. In some cultural circles, the politics of masturbation exert far more fascination than the politics of the Middle East. Socialism has lost out to sado-masochism."[5] Eagleton could well have added (had he been given to hyperbole!) that the revolutionary left is threatened with becoming an endangered subject-identity species on an intellectual planet far more interested in transvestism than it is in Trotsky's transitional program.

Sex certainly has *both* left and right meanings, and as a subject can be studied to uncover these. But it is the explication of such meaning that needs doing, not just a celebration of *sexual acts,* however seemingly outlaw they may

appear. Contrary to contemporary assumptions, "there is nothing inherently subversive about pleasure."[6]

It is sometimes difficult to appreciate this when desire is presented as *always and only* paramount. Power *within* the history of sexual activity is now routinely treated as though it is a pile of poker chips, distributed evenly to all players, who then wager their resources on various hands, the level field of decision-making governed by negotiations of all kinds through which free wills articulate calculations of rational choice exchange, bodies becoming a new medium of sensual commerce. How gender, class, race, sexual orientation, disability, age, and a host of other factors figure in this erogenous mercantilism requires a deft analytic hand, and one cognizant, I would argue, of a politics of the left. For such leftism remains the only antidote to these historical erotic exchange relations being overwhelmed, both as interpretation and practice, by power inequalities. What is required is balance *and* connection; we need studies that reach out to include *both* the erotic and the politically dissident (without sacrificing the *meaning* of *political* on some altar of rampant relativism), their *mutual* analysis informed by the strong appreciation of *totality*, another word that will draw peals of laughter from the "post" *cognescenti*.[7]

What all of this suggests is *not* a narrowing of the subjects of historical analysis, but a doing of them in ways that are actually *left*. A left history of the ju-jube can indeed be written, but not if it is a project concerned primarily with extolling the sweet taste of the item, declaiming on its sublime texture, and waxing eloquent on the exquisite meaning of youthful purchase. This would leave out the sickeningly offensive labour process that brings the ju-jube into being, beginning with the brutal exploitation of sugar harvesters in the "Third World," and ending in the candy factories of the "First."

Left history is everything, to be sure, but in our times it may be in danger of being nothing. Such an opposition is, patently, absurd. Nevertheless, it marks out suggestive trajectories of difference, its heuristic value located in making clear contentious understandings of left history as it is written today.

Increasingly endangered, 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. The problem, for 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, leaving only the hackneyed comforts of convention, however much they appear to appease what is so obviously wrong.[8]

Big books may present the history of the left in ways that stifle its past in idiosyncratic smoothings of its rough and sharp edges of political program,

edges that we will need if we are not only to write history but *make* it. Smaller, increasingly insular studies, leaning more and more in the directions of populism and extolling particularity over combativity, will be background to this process, increasingly distant from the actual agendas, activisms, and articulations of what will be recognized, albeit with difficulty, dimly and more and more nostalgically, as the organized left. It will be enough to will oneself a leftist, subjectively, rather than build anything, objectively, that might serve as a socio-political fighting left, able to stand in the face of capital and the state and shake something approximating a threatening fist. As one critic has recently suggested, what is most damaging in our times is "the absence of memories of collective, and effective, political action.... For some postmodern thought, consensus is tyrannical and solidarity nothing but soulless uniformity."[9]

For it is perhaps necessary to understand that the non-academic left of the English-speaking world[10] in our times has faded to the point that it often seems impossible to envision it as anything but a shadowy, distant reference. And this is not without costs in what unfolds as left history.

Today's left history suffers seriously from its academic incarceration, which registers in a general isolation from not only a practice of left intervention but, equally significant, a striking disconnection from anything resembling an organized left and the discipline/commitment it demands. Like the western Marxism that sprang up in Europe after the catastrophic defeats of the 1919-1923 years, this left history inevitably carries within it degrees of compromise and accommodation, as well as a certain aestheticization. It might be said that segments of the academic left repudiate much of what any organized non-academic left would regard as fundamental to a left practice which, of course, should come as no great surprise.

"All that can be said," Perry Anderson once wrote, "is that when the masses themselves speak, theoreticians—of the sort the West has produced for fifty years—will necessarily be silent."[11] Unfortunately, the masses within western capitalism have not spoken with decisive revolutionary movement in the 30 years since Anderson wrote these words. And the theoreticians have proliferated, their critical texts productive of many gains. But these are unfortunately dwarfed by a wall of words piled high against any analysis that accents not just revolutionary possibility, but also a material engagement with the exploitative essence of capitalist society. This situation is not likely to change, and breakthroughs for left history be effected, until some political shift occurs outside of the graduate seminars where ideas have grown rather moldy with the overuse of conventional progressive conceptual wisdom.

Oddly enough, the danger today in academic life is not so much from the kind of conservatives that I faced in my undergraduate classes. They are still around, but they can, more and more, be avoided; arguably, they exercise less impact now than at any previous time in the history of Canadian universities.

Rather, the liberal "progressives" tend to be the ones who are reducing left history to a lowest common denominator, claiming to offer the virtues of the middle ground, seducing what could be left, and what is struggling to be so, into the comfortable centre.

There is a need to refuse such enticement. Some are, indeed, doing just this, but sadly it often appears to me that the *leftist* of histories are now being produced by young scholars in other disciplines: sociology, political studies, and international relations. In the sobering moments of our present defeat, we need to envision the victory that can be ours, if we deepen the legacy of the left, learn from its past, and, with others outside of our ranks, play our small part in creating the possibilities of the future. If this is to happen, someone has to stand ground way out there, distant from the middle, if only to charitably allow the middle an opportunity to exist. A "disestablished" element needs to assert itself, if left history is to exist in any meaningful sense.

Where we stand, after all, is what we are, although it is difficult to see difference if you are in the cluttered middle. Unlike other, always multiplying, identities, which are called upon to locate us in our finite present, this act of standing ground other than the middle has the potential to condition the course of the infinite future.

Notes

1. For varied Marxist responses to the contemporary erosion of truth see Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, eds., *Socialist Register, 2006: Telling the Truth* (London: Merlin Press, 2005).
2. See Mariana Valverde, "Some Remarks on the Rise and Fall of Discourse Analysis," *Histoire Sociale/Social History,* 33 (2000): 59-78.
3. E.P. Thompson, "History from Below," *Times Literary Supplement,* 7 April 1966, reprinted in Dorothy Thompson, ed., *The Essential E.P.Thompson* (New York: New Press, 2001), 489.
4. Maurice Agulhon, "On Political Allegory: A Reply to Eric Hobsbawm," *History Workshop*, 8 (Autumn 1979): 169.
5. Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 2.
6. Eagleton, *After Theory*, 6. Evidenced in its recent treatment by Edward Shorter, *Written in the Flesh: A History of Desire* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005). Note, as well, Stan Persky, *Buddy's: Meditations on Desire* (Vancouver: New Star, 1989).
7. As an introduction see Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukacs to Habermas* (Berkely and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984).
8. This should be apparent to anyone who has pondered the appointment of our recent Governor-General, Her Excellency Michaelle Jean.
9. Eagleton, *After Theory*, 7, 13.
10. I write this having just returned from Mexico, invited by the Instituto Nacional de

Antropologia E Historia to participate in a conference honouring Eric Hobsbawm and focusing on the Mexican Revolution and the struggle for independence. At that Institute, professors and students alike are animated by a commitment to revolutionary radicalism, often Marxist. Their active involvements in political struggle *and* the subjects they study stand in stark contrast to the situation in a country such as Canada.

11. Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: New Left Books, 1976), 106.

Gendering Left History—A Challenge

Linda Kealey

Judging from the most recent issues of this journal (Volumes 8-10), "left history" includes a wide variety of themes and approaches. Not surprisingly left politics (Renton on David Widgery; Stutje on Ernest Mandel; Palmer on Trotsky; Devinatz on the role of Trotskyists in the UAW), including cultural politics and left literature (Lincove on Tractenberg and International Publishers; Worcester on cultural politics; Paul on *Left Review*; Henderson on gendering Joni Mitchell; Haapamaki on writers and the Spanish Civil War; and Lander on graphic novels) seem to dominate. Readers can also find several articles on black history, slavery, and aboriginal history. Recent issues have also featured gay and lesbian history (for example four articles in Volume 9, number 2, Spring/Summer 2004). A few articles deal with the history of work (Hull on industrial measurement; Wall on native industrial education; Cole on Philadelphia's longshoremen and the IWW). Women's/gender history articles (with the exception of gay and lesbian history) are not numerous and the overwhelming majority of authors of articles (4 to 1 ratio) can be identified as male. The editorial board is more balanced in terms of gender though only two of the ten editors in the last three volumes have been female. While some authors employ gender as a category of analysis, this is more typical of those pieces specifically on women's experiences or representations and of those dealing with sexuality and sexual identity. I point this out not to condemn the journal but to try to answer the question, "what is left history?" Have we changed the way left history has been written? Although a quick glance at the last three volumes of this journal does not represent the whole story, it raises questions about the easy assumption that left history has incorporated gender as well as class, race, and ethnicity into historical analysis. It also challenges us to think about the relationship between oppositional and critical forms of history and political movements. These links were key in forging new historical approaches in the past.

Women's history, labour history, black history, and immigration history emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in North America as part of the move toward a social history that addressed marginalized groups and groups marginalized from history itself. Students, professors, and intellectuals working in the academy were also drawn to political movements directly associated with these subjects. The intellectual ferment of the times was reinforced by the development of movements that captured these issues. In my own case, student and anti-war activities in the late 60s led to feminism and a questioning of male dominance and gender relations; these in turn reinforced my burgeoning interest in

women's history in the form of women's work and later, of women's involvement in labour and left wing political history. While it would be inaccurate to claim that women's history is by nature "oppositional" much of the early work in the field was definitely guided and sharpened by ideological debate among feminists of various political allegiances. Socialist feminists like myself were quick to critique both liberal feminists and Marxist feminists for their slant on women's history and women's issues more generally.[1]

The history of left wing political movements was subjected to significant feminist historical scrutiny in the 1980s and 1990s, beginning with Joan Sangster's *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left, 1920-1950* (1984), followed by Janice Newton's *The Feminist Challenge to the Canadian Left, 1900-1918* (1995), my own *Enlisting Women for the Cause: Women, Labour and the Left in Canada, 1890-1920* (1998), Andrée Levesque's *Scenes de la vie en rouge: l'époque de Jeanne Corbin (1906-1944)* (1999), and others. By the '90s we were engaged in debates over gender history and post-structuralism and the slow pace of achieving gender equality in the academy. Meanwhile the Canadian federal state was engaged in the process of dismantling its support for feminist activities and programmes. Our much-praised coalition of women's groups across the country (NAC—the National Action Committee on the Status of Women) died a slow death in the new millennium. The loss, not only of this particular organization but also of grass-roots feminist groups generally, means that women's/gender history is in danger of becoming increasingly isolated within the academy, a phenomenon that applies to left history as well. Without connections to a political movement it is much more difficult to broaden the base and the appeal of feminist and left history.

What does this mean for the future of "left history?" There is some value in reassessing what we really mean by "left history" at this particular political juncture. We need to write not only histories of the left and labour, historically central topics, but we also have to study a broad array of subjects and approaches. We also need to connect more with those who might read our history if it addressed their interests and questions. Strategically, for historians of the modern age, this means relating our research and writing to contemporary issues and problems. Such projects must pay close attention to gender as well as class, race, ethnicity, and other variables relevant to both past and present. Left history should play a role in providing historically relevant research on contemporary issues.

Speaking autobiographically, I was attracted to the field partly because historical research helped me to think about contemporary problems. I shifted my research in recent years from the history of Canadian women on the left and in the labour movement to the history of health and health care. In many ways I have continued to pursue an understanding of contemporary issues through historical research. Through my current involvement in a Community-University

Research Alliance (CURA) grant, I have begun to investigate the history of nursing in the province of New Brunswick. Working with nursing organizations as partners, I am framing this project as an exploration of the history of women's caring work and as a history of labour activism in the post-World War II era. Oral history is key for this research and that of my colleagues working on different aspects of New Brunswick's labour history through the CURA grant. While I cannot speak for these colleagues, I think all of them would embrace the notion that the history we research and write speaks to current concerns—the nature of work in Atlantic Canada, challenges facing workers in health and resource sectors, the role of labour, the gendered nature of work and union activism, the role of French-speaking Acadian workers, the nature of historical commemoration, and many other current topics of debate. As I think about the potential in this research trajectory, however, I am brought back to my original observations and concerns. Despite all the work being carried on in a wide range of left history subjects, we cannot become complaisant about our commitment to the importance of gender as well as class, race, and ethnicity in historical analysis. As my brief survey of recent volumes of *Left History* suggests, we still have some distance to go.

Notes

1. Socialist feminists in the 1970s argued that gender and class were equally important in understanding women's oppression; Marxist feminists also grappled with gender divisions but tended to frame their analyses primarily around the paradigm of production.

Considerations on Eastern Marxism

Vijay Prashad

I came to Marxism against my self-interest. Born into affluence, I was raised in an evolutionary city (Calcutta, India) where the working-class and the impoverished had not the will to take their suffering lightly. The Left political parties had engineered an entry into governance from 1969-71 (with a short stint in 1967). During this period, the parliamentary Left (the Communist Party of India [Marxist], the Communist Party of India, the Revolutionary Socialist Party, Forward Bloc, and the Socialist Unity of Center of India) joined with a breakaway faction of the Congress Party to attempt governance. The Labor minister in the state cabinet, Subodh Banerjee, came from the SUCI, an anarcho-syndicalist organization. Under his watch, the cabinet agreed to a number of important principled matters such as that the police must not intervene in labor disputes. As Banerjee told a mass rally in Rourkela in 1967, "I have allowed a duel between employees and employers in West Bengal and the police have been taken out of the picture so that the strength of each other may be known." Buoyed by the government, the number of strikes doubled during the Left rule, and the workers' organizations devised a new theory for their industrial actions: the gherao. Workers would stream into the office of the managers, surround them, and hold them there without food, water, or toilet breaks till they acceded to their demands. Between March and August 1967, 583 industrial concerns in Bengal experienced 1018 gheraos. It was hard to be oblivious to this sort of cultural change.

Meanwhile, in the north of Bengal, a group from within the CPM decided to abandon the electoral road and take to the gun. In Naxalbari district, this group drew from the unrest at the failures of the Indian republic to mobilize some sections of the population into Maoism. The program of the Naxalites, as the Maoists began to be called, did not differ from that of the Left Front, for both sought to implement laws already on the books.

While the Left Front fought to utilize political (including electoral) power and the law to defend the right of the peasants to form unions, the Maoists believed that the party had to use armed force to maintain the peasant gains. A Red Civil War between the Naxalites and the CPM activists led to the death of over two hundred communists, and this violence opened the door to the state terror exercised by an increasingly enthusiastic police force.

Militants in the civil war set trams afire, and those relatives of mine who went underground into the fight remain a shadowy inspiration for me today. In its April 1968 Resolution, the CPM set out its own programmatic analysis:

> The United Front Governments that we have now are to be treated and understood as instruments of struggle in the hands of our people, more than as Governments that actually possess adequate power that can materially and substantially give relief to the people. In class terms, our Party's participation in such Governments is one specific form of struggle to win more and more people, and more and more allies for the proletariat and its allies in the struggle for the cause of People's Democracy and at a later stage Socialism.

To condense the distance between its maximum program and its minimum program, the CPM has sought out a variety of tactical forms of struggle, including the panchayat raj (local self-government), an unusual interpretation of the united front, among others.

In 1977, the CPM in alliance with its Left Front partners (but no longer the SUCI) won the election to the state house. The Left has won eight consecutive elections in Bengal, and, within the Constitutional limits of a state government in a federal system, and of the necessary disruptions and distortions of any human government, it has conducted itself admirably. Like any other political party that consistently follows a mass line and carries out its struggles inside bourgeois democratic institutions, the Left Front shudders in the space between the tendency toward reformism and the use of reforms as an "instrument of struggle." Could it be otherwise? The CPM's slogan from 1964, Govern and Mobilize, remains alive and well. In 1979, two years into the Left Front experiment in my Bengal, Perry Anderson published his important account Considerations on Western Marxism.

Shocked by the atrophied state of the Communist, Socialist, and Trotskyist movements within Europe, Anderson declared, "The hidden hallmark of Western Marxism as a whole is thus that it is a politics of defeat." The withered Left organizations led Marxist intellectuals into the situation where they no longer felt "at home among the masses." An interest in revolutionary politics, in political economy and in socio-cultural investigations lapsed, and Western Marxism slowly spiraled into philosophy.

Anderson's analytical pessimism stemmed from a simple Leninist proposition, that "correct revolutionary theory assumes final shape only in close connection with the practical activity of a truly mass and truly revolutionary movement." If the latter does not exist, the former is impoverished. So it turns inwards and tries to reconstruct itself as a philosophy. No such luck in India, where the movement blossomed and felt the heat of various social critiques to expand rather than to contract. Women's struggles and the emergence of the Dalit and anti-caste movement in the 1970s pushed the Communists to engage with those elements of Indian society that it had not considered as fundamental. Shifts in the nature of the State, accompanied by these socio-political pressures, created efflorescence in the Indian world of ideas. Marxism had to

engage with these new social realities or else it would not be capable of bearing the weight of the ongoing social movements.

The CPM's E. M. S. Namboodiripad (1909-1998) wrote feisty and elegant essays in journals of the Left (Social Scientist and Mainstream) as well as the principle Indian journal of ideas (Economic and Political Weekly). The breathe of EMS's engagement can be best gauged in the titles of some of his essays from the 1970s:

- Chile and the Parliamentary Road to Socialism.
- The Strategy of Indian Revolution.
- Marxism and Aesthetics.
- Humanism and Class Struggle in Literature.
- How Not to Study Marx.
- Perspective of the Women's Movement.
- Caste Conflicts vs. Growing Unity of Popular Democratic Forces.
- Caste, Classes and Parties in Modern Political Development.

While EMS wrote these essays, he worked as the General Secretary of the CPM (he read for some of them while he was the Chief Minister in the United Front Government in Kerala from 1967-69). In this period, CPM party members like EMS consistently engaged the texts of university intellectuals as much as they took on their political adversaries. This made for a very rich intellectual scene, even as it would have been daunting to many of those from my background whose bent is far more to Mandarin intellectualism than to the intersection between struggle and knowledge. Marxism, in this atmosphere, had a harder time locking its doors, because the people, via their political emissaries, knocked frequently.

In 1947, EMS published Jati-Janmi Naduyazhi Medhavityan, which warned that if the new republic did not engage the discriminations of caste, the system would lead "to the cultural backwardness of the overwhelming majority." In the 1930s, anti-caste liberation movements spread across the region that produced EMS (Kerala and southern India). EMS later acknowledged his great intellectual and political debt to these oppressed caste movements, although even then he recognized the need to both confront imperialism, on one front, and to battle caste hierarchies, on the other front. This "two front struggle" had to be waged or else the anti-colonial movement would simply inherit an unequal society from the colonial overlords. The work of EMS and the Marxism developed by and around him thoroughly influenced my thoughts as I wrote my first book, on the social history of the Balmiki community (an oppressed caste, Dalit, community in northern India). I wrote a political economy of caste, based on detailed historical ethnographic work—although it should be said, that like EMS, I ended up having to make my categories supple enough to reconstruct the social formation that I studied.

Not for EMS Marxism as dogma, but a set of analytical concepts and a narrative of social development to help un-mechanically understand the social contradictions of each social formation. Such an engagement is not unique to EMS, nor to India. José Carlos Mariátegui's work on Peruvian social reality, and Julius Nyerere's engagement with Tanzanian society and imperialism are of a piece with the kind of Marxist polycentrism that was commonplace around the globe. Mao's own writings on China are a testament to the importance of setting accounts with one's history and sociology with the use of the insights of historical materialism, in order to formulate strategy for political struggle. Marxism, as Engels had pointed out, is not a dogma, but a guide to action. What use is a guide if it is entirely imported, and therefore blind to the social realities before one?

Why Write History When There is So Much Present?

Karen Dubinsky

My mother reads a lot. I can picture her still as she was when I was a child, sitting with a book in her favorite chair in the living room as her four children burst in the door from school. I now understand exactly what she was doing because I do the same thing: I hear my (one) child coming in the front door and as happy as I am to see him I wait till he's up the stairs and half-way in my office before I turn away from my desk, trying to read or write one more line before the end of my work day. Note the difference a generation makes: for me, books constitute my work, and childrearing, my pleasure. My mother had things the other way around. At any rate, we had a lot of books and magazines around the house when I was growing up, and as I've been thinking about one of the questions posed by *Left History*'s editors—are historians Avenging Angels?—a childhood memory from those magazines came back. I grew up in the 60s, and my parents' *Life* and *Look* magazines—the titles I remember best—were filled with glossy photos of tragedy and devastation. But whenever I saw pictures of crying Vietnamese children or starving people in Africa or fire-bombings in Alabama I believed that whatever had happened, everything was now going to be OK because someone had found them. I'm not sure who I thought was going to put things right; the photographer, the journalist, magazine readers, my parents? But I recall strongly believing that adults couldn't *know* about these things without *fixing* them. It was a comforting idea.

I think many on the left approach the writing of history with something of the same sensibility. Left historians have always been disdainful of antiquarianism. We're made of sterner stuff; our history Means Something. While no one would articulate the relationship between the past and the present in the same terms as my naïve childhood understanding of 60s-era photojournalism, who would deny that it's that explicit past/present engagement which gives left critique its punch? Who hasn't felt the thrilling shock of recognition in the lives or writings of someone—especially someone marginal—centuries dead, or watched students light up when they realize "that's just like..." or ask "why haven't I heard of...?"

The distance between interpreting and changing the world is vast, and growing. Yet oddly, for me, these days, the worse the present is getting, more important the past gets. To explain why this is so I have little more than my childhood conviction that knowledge creates the conditions for ... something. Inspiration? Action? Community? Rage? Optimism? Something. Let me provide a few recent examples.

Among the books I have introduced graduate students to recently, two of

my favorites are Mary Renda's *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940* (2001) and Sherene H. Razack's *Dark Threats and White Knights: The Somalia Affair, Peacekeeping and the New Imperialism* (2004). Last year, (by coincidence, not design), they came up in the syllabus the week after the re-election of George W. Bush. "How does a man imagine himself when he is about to pull a trigger?" asks Renda. "If he is a white man, setting his sights on a black man, what image of himself does he conjure as the muscles in his hand tighten? If ... he is a private in the U.S. Marine Corps, who does he think he is?" These are powerful research questions; which turned the funk of November 2004 into something teachable, at least for a few hours. Similarly, as Razack interrogates why, in the face of so much evidence to the contrary, Canadians remain so invested in "the pleasures of the moral high ground," the depth of our beloved national narrative of anti-conquest came, for me, as for my students, more fully into view. Try this experiment with a large undergraduate class: ask them what's more familiar, Somalia and Shidane Arone or Abu Ghraib. And then ask them why.

I'm currently writing a book on the history of international and interracial adoption. I'm asking how children become symbolic of racial and national identities, and exploring the various (adult) anxieties that have accompanied children when they cross these boundaries. One of the stories I'm researching is about the ideological rescue of children in post-revolutionary Cuba, namely "Operation Peter Pan," a clandestine scheme organized by the Catholic Church and the CIA in Miami and Havana, which brought over (and then stranded) 14,000 unaccompanied Cuban children to Miami in 1960 and 1961. Parents were motivated to send their children out of Cuba for several reasons, primarily because of rumours (organized by Castro's opponents) that the new revolutionary government was planning on nationalizing children and sending them to the Soviet Union for indoctrination or worse. In planting rumours that Fidel Castro was about to revoke parental custody rights, essentially nationalizing children the way he was the nation's sugar mills and factories, the CIA and internal anti Castro forces were *invoking* not *inventing* the vulnerable child. This story of the attack of the communist baby-snatchers joined a long history of unsettled societies whose national traumas are expressed through their children.

I've been researching the ongoing cultural meaning of Operation Peter Pan on both sides of the US/Cuba divide, and how it lives on in popular memory and official commemorations (as well as animating the international convulsions over Elian Gonzalez 40 years later). To this end I spent some time recently in the voluminous archives of the Catholic Welfare Bureau in Miami, learning how Cuban refugee children became, in the 1960s, miniature icons of anti-communism. A vast army of foster parents were recruited to "fight the cold war by taking in its victims," and the children themselves made regular appearances at

American Legions and Catholic Church functions, for example, to narrate their story as anti-Castro parable. The most famous Peter Pan alumnus is Mel Martinez, who had just been elected to the US Senate a couple of months before I came to Miami. His Peter Pan credentials were crucial to his election, as what he referred to as "my incredible life story" became part of virtually every speech he made. Martinez, who has clearly learned the value of a good origin story, has helped to erase the handprints of the CIA, reframing Operation Peter Pan as a humanitarian tale of child rescue. By highlighting his own dramatic "escape from communism," he effectively used his childhood to bridge the cold war and the contemporary war on terror. Furthermore, Martinez has declared Operation Peter Pan to be exactly the kind of successful faith-based social welfare initiative currently being promoted by George W. Bush. Discovering all this gave me one of those rare, electrifying moments in the archives when the past and the present collapse in on each other.

To me these tales illustrate the profound importance of historical research but of course any one of them could also be cause for despair. Dissolving the boundaries between past and present often simply reveals the continued circulation of monstrous things, why should historians pat ourselves on the back for this? How does knowledge about the subjectivities of white male soldiers of empire in 1915 Haiti alter our understanding of white, black, and brown male and female soldiers of empire in 2005 Iraq?

It was what I heard recently about the subjectivity of a white male who declined the opportunity to become a soldier of empire that provides my answer to this question. One of the handful of US war resisters who have recently turned up in Canada spoke at Queen's this year, and told his story: a working class child of a military family in the US South, he wanted an education and, like hundreds of thousands of others, joined the army to get it. A few weeks into boot camp he learned he was on his way to Iraq. Something about Bush's declaration of war didn't sit right with him. He expressed this to no one on the base, nor to his parents. "We didn't question things," he explained. Instead he made his way to the public library, and did what kids do these days at the library: he found a computer and surfed the internet. He read the BBC websites and Al Jazeera's website and learned enough to realize his discomfort had some basis: plenty of people around the world were asking about the "weapons of mass destruction" and the links between the government of Iraq and the September 11th terrorists. And so, he hopped a bus in Florida, didn't get off until Toronto, and spent several months living homeless until coming forward to launch a refugee claim. He'll probably be sent back.

Of all the features of this moving story, the part I keep coming back to is this young man's decision to seek out alternative information. What makes one person on a military base take this step? He was asked this, repeatedly, by a room full of spellbound Queen's undergraduates, (many of them, perhaps for

the first time, confronting the actual meaning of "class privilege.") He couldn't really answer this, and neither can I; I don't think anyone can (if we could, I'm tempted to say, we wouldn't have military bases). What I know is that this confirms my obligation to continue to tell alternative stories. This won't drown out the relentless blare of CNN, but our stories will be there when people come looking for them. If we can't stop horrors, at least, as anthropologist Ruth Behar says, we can document them.[1] It's still a comforting idea.

Notes

1. Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 2.