



Golden Years?

25 Years of History Workshop

Was there ever a golden age, in politics? Sooner or later, which ever may have seemed the golden years of our own personal involvement are likely to become tarnished as we are forced to see the faces then excluded, to hear the voices silenced then – even as we mourn with guilty longing that sense of belonging some of us once shared. Maybe so. But, nothing is more certain than that there was a better time than this; a time when politics was more colourful, more hopeful, more creative, more exciting – a time when things moved very, very fast. And nothing so illustrates this as the documents, memoirs, scribbled agendas, private letters and miscellanea assembled to commemorate 25 years of History Workshop: **Raphael Samuel (ed.) History Workshop: A Collectanea 1967-1991, Oxford, Ruskin College, 1992, £15 pb. 0 9518609 0 9.** I am glad that this material has been put together to remind us of some of the transformations which have occurred in the political and cultural life of the Left over the last quarter of a century.

It is a controversial enterprise, of course. Old libertarian that he remains, knowing he must end these 25 years as he began – at breakneck speed, no time for consultation, toes trodden on, egos neglected – Samuels commenced and completed the task within the month, with just a little help from his friends. There is thus a certain arbitrariness to whose memoirs appear: no comment, for example, from Anna Davin, who along with Samuels was always so central to the project. Not sufficient evidence, some may feel, of the bitter intensity of the struggles around expanding traditional socialist agendas to include the lives and perspectives of women, black people, other ethnic minorities, lesbians, gays and ... and the ever multiplying dissonances which occur as a politics of identity begins to replace the idea of class unity as a basis for collective action and emancipatory knowledge.

Yet the outcome of many of those struggles are clear enough. They are most visible, not so surprisingly, in relation to women: in the difference which sexual difference makes, once questions of gender hierarchy are made central to any scholarly or political project. How could it not be so? It was from *History Workshop* itself, in 1969, that the very first *Women's Liberation Conference* was planned in reaction to the dismissive laughter which greeted the 23 year-old Sheila Rowbotham defending women's interest in paid work. It was at Ruskin College in 1970 (the headquarters of History Workshop from 1967 to 1980) that the conference was held. Its organisers were all passionate believers in the idea that history matters: that we must look into women's consciousness and resistance in the past to plan a future which does not exclude women's interests or ignore women's specific

exploitation and oppression. History matters, and *History Workshop* did play a significant part in the making, not just the recording, of history.

In the beginning of *History Workshop*, in the time of the growing grass roots working class militancy and student protest of the late 1960s, was the appeal of the working man (and woman, we might hear hastily added on). Mock him (and overlook her) in line with the political fashions of today, but the idea of 'history from below', and the importance of recognising the autonomy, the cultural and political resistance of those excluded from power, got all its initial passion and inspiration from working class experience and struggle: *Railwaymen's Talk, Pit Life, Working Men's Clubs, Lancaster Mill Girls, Children's Strikes, Country Girlhoods, School and Community*, were just some of the early History Workshop pamphlet and discussion topics. Quite extraordinary levels of energy, ambition and activity were evident as *History Workshop* expanded nationally and regionally throughout the 1970s, cropping up in ever new localities within Britain (and very soon inspiring offshoots in Europe and North America).

During these years themes and theoretical perspectives diversified, especially after the publication of *History Workshop Journal* in 1976, which remains distinct from the Workshop organisation. Despite its initial interest in workplace experience and class themes, the journal quickly took on board psychoanalytic and poststructuralist perspectives. This meant exploring how these approaches call into question and fragment notions of the self, subjectivity, memory and experience, as well as embracing all the broader points of contention around empire, nation, race, religion, gender and sexuality, which challenge and reject notions of the working class and labour movement as essentially radical and progressive. Here as elsewhere, tensions which began to wreak havoc and undermine personal confidence throughout the whole of the British Left in the 1980s are memorably enacted and recorded in these pages. It was at the 17th annual Workshop Conference, in 1979, that E.P. Thompson furiously attacked Stuart Hall, and thundered against his and other theoreticians role in promoting Althusser's anti-humanist rejection of the significance of individual action and direct experience. Sharing the platform, Hall himself had earlier, more calmly and more carefully, welcomed Thompson's book *The Poverty of Theory* for its critique of Althusser's 'theoretical terrorism', but nevertheless insisted upon the problematic nature of 'experience' and 'the necessity of theory, to put beside the poverty of theoreticism'.



These documents, however, are proof enough that the Left has not simply torn itself apart. We can see that even as it faced the ineluctable rise and triumph of the Right from the early 1980s, and the accompanying – if more gradual – decline of confidence in the promise, and eventually (for many) even in the meaning, of socialism by the late 80s, new issues of the autonomy and the specificity of marginalised identities, and the source of people's sense of place and belonging, do continue to arise. The utopian rhetoric, however, is gone. And it is not so easy today to find any articulation of shared goals or culture which might unite us in struggling against the forces of a transnational capitalism which is, after all, ever more powerfully organised and successful in its exploitation of vulnerable peoples and shrinking ecological resources.

The overall importance of *History Workshop* for me is simply to see an institution of the Left continue to flourish, to put on conferences which pull in hundreds of people, to inspire the formation of new groups both in Britain and elsewhere, and to engage in many of the major theoretical and political issues of the day – most recently around nationalism, education and the school curriculum. The *Journal* as well, always with its equal numbers of women to men and other democratic practices and procedures aiming to put women and (with not quite the same success) race issues at the centre of their history, continues to thrive. For the moment at least, however, as *History Workshop* orchestrates debates between conservatives, liberals and erstwhile radicals, much of the passion and energy remains in abeyance. We may still hear the odd old stalwart, like Francis Mulhern, joke that it is time 'to fire the canon' rather than support its perpetuation, but such passion seems more of an individual stance than any collective call to action to which others might respond.

History is not dead, though, and times do change. In bad times such as these it is all the more important to keep recording, and attempting to participate in, its changing. After all, we may yet find what in most recent years we have been most lacking: the political confidence to weave a language which can create new hope and unity.

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