What is Radical History Now?

by Onni Gust

To accept one’s past – one’s history – is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought.

James Baldwin, 1963

James Baldwin, the African-American novelist, critic and civil-rights activist, wrote his epistolary essay, *The Fire Next Time*, in order to explain to his nephew what it meant to be a black man growing up in white-dominated America. Except in so far as Baldwin narrated his own relationship with blackness and his experiences of racism across his lifetime, *The Fire Next Time* was not a history; it was a political critique of white supremacy in the United States. Yet he was emphatic in his claim that history was a key tool in the struggle against racism and for Black liberation. Against the myths that white Americans, alongside Europeans, had created to assure themselves of their superiority, Baldwin posited the ‘spectacle of human history and American Negro history in particular’. It was in this undefined ‘spectacle of human history’ that he placed his hope for the future, as a testament to ‘nothing less than the perpetual achievement of the impossible’. Baldwin’s understanding of history as a tool for building a better society was shared by his fellow Pan-Africanists, including the Algerian freedom fighter, Frantz Fanon, and by the Black feminist and prison abolitionist, Angela Davis. History as a means of self-empowerment and realization was also central to the Women’s Liberation Movement and formed the *raison d’être* of the History Workshop movement in the 1960s and seventies. Yet how far does this belief in history as a tool with which to identify and struggle against oppression still persist today? What is ‘radical history’ and where is it to be found? What kind of ‘radical history’ is possible in the context of universities that are increasingly driven by neo-liberal agendas and marketization?

The Raphael Samuel History Centre’s three-day conference, ‘Radical Histories/Histories of Radicalism’, held at Queen Mary University of London in July 2016, undertook to address these and many other questions.

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The conference marked twenty years since the death of Raphael Samuel, who founded the History Workshop movement, and forty years since the establishment of History Workshop Journal. Organized by the directors of the Raphael Samuel History Centre, Matt Cook (Birkbeck), Kate Hodgkin (University of East London) and Barbara Taylor (Queen Mary University of London), with the support of Katy Pettit and a team of twenty-four historians, the conference was roughly divided into five strands that ran simultaneously: radical movements; diversity and difference; local and global histories; culture, art and environment; and, history, policy and the idea of politics. The call for papers yielded about 230 submissions, ranging from papers to performances, roundtable discussions to installation pieces, a response which attests to the enthusiasm for the idea of ‘radical’ history and the diversity of its conceptualization. From these submissions, the organizing team selected those that fitted best in relationship to each other and the overarching themes. Overall, the conference had fifty-five panel sessions and twelve exhibitions and performances. This report cannot possibly cover them all. Instead, I gather some of the key themes, questions and concerns that appeared and reappeared across the different panels and plenaries that I attended. What was ‘radical history’ and what does it mean today? Who gets to define the parameters of ‘radical history’ and whose voices get heard? My focus, however, will be primarily on the relationship between radical history and the production of history from within the academy. What does it mean to research and teach ‘radical history’ at universities in Britain when student fees and increasingly precarious employment conditions are steadily eroding any semblance of democratic access to higher education? What possibilities and problems does the Research Excellence Framework’s ‘impact agenda’ (which ranks universities according to their ability to disseminate ideas and inform practice beyond the academy) pose for the relationship between academics and communities?

‘RADICAL’ HISTORY: THEN AND NOW

In Theatres of Memory, Raphael Samuel argued that the production of history is a collective social endeavour, a practice not a profession, that takes place everywhere, not only within the walls of the academy. ‘History’, Samuel wrote, ‘is not the prerogative of the historian, nor even, as postmodernism contends, a historian’s “invention”. It is, rather, a social form of knowledge; the work, in any given instance, of a thousand different hands.’3 History Workshop, as Anna Davin recalled in her plenary reflections, was animated by a thirst for historical knowledge but also by a desire to participate in the construction of that knowledge. Through its meetings and the History Workshop Journal, the movement fostered a sense of belonging and community among people with an enthusiasm for history and a desire to interrogate the past on their own terms. Many had left formal education at fifteen or sixteen, and people came to History Workshop from adult education as well as schools and colleges, from involvement in
socialist movements, and from the Women’s Liberation Movement. In this context, the production of ‘radical history’ lay outside the academy, while its form and content reflected and resonated with the lives of people marginalized in the official record.

Barbara Taylor’s 1983 book *Eve and the New Jerusalem* (new edn 2016) was the subject of the opening plenary. *Eve and the New Jerusalem* was born out of the Women’s Liberation Movement and her PhD research, and developed in a series of adult education classes. As a young socialist feminist at the height of the Women’s Liberation Movement, Taylor recalled, ‘I dedicated myself to exploring the historical roots of my political commitments’; she located those roots in the Owenites’ early nineteenth-century utopian project. For Taylor, the process of exploring the desires of socialist women in Britain in the early nineteenth century, and of writing their voices into history, was inseparable from the project of configuring a feminist vision for the future. This relationship between past, present and future, broadly understood through a Marxist lens, was fundamental to the History Workshop movement in the 1970s and to the project of ‘radical history’. Would such an endeavour or context be conceivable today? To what extent, amid globalization and the advances of neo-liberal market ideals throughout western economies, have we lost all vision and any hope for alternatives?

In her reflections on Taylor’s book, Lynne Segal noted the desire and need today for the kind of radical, utopian thinking that the Owenites sought to put into action at the turn of the nineteenth century. The revival of feminism in Britain and America that has resulted in the new edition of *Eve and the New Jerusalem* is testimony to the existence of that desire for action. As Urvashi Butalia pointed out in this first plenary, that desire never went away, feminism has always circulated across space, taking on different meanings, forms and urgencies in different contexts. Both Lynne Segal and Shahida Bari argued for the powerful role that historians, as ‘hot advocates’ for a better society, can play in reconstructing an ‘education of desire’. By studying the moments, often fleeting, at which the desire for a better future conglomerates into a movement, historians can provide inspiration and a vision for the present and future.

**RADICAL HISTORY AND RADICAL VISIONS**

Questions of vision and the uses of history continued beyond the initial plenary, informing numerous papers, albeit in very different ways, throughout the conference. Jack Saunders, for instance, in the panel ‘History as a Tool for Struggle?’, told how his research into labour militancy and union organizing in the 1970s motor industry in Britain had informed his practice as an organizer during the 2013 strikes over pay and conditions in UK universities. The history of union organizing and protest offered examples of good (and bad) practice, a resource on which to draw for today. In a different context, Eugene Michall’s discussion of visions of liberation in Greece during World War Two echoed the plenary discussion of *Eve and
the New Jerusalem. As with the Owenite socialists, the act of envisioning an alternative was itself a form of political resistance. Imagining a world after occupation provided the inspiration to struggle for that world and contributed to the destabilization of the occupying regime. Although they ultimately failed to be realized, those visions have been integral to the way that Greek history is remembered and provided the context for Syriza’s election victory in 2015 and the hopes pinned upon that left coalition. In a different register, Andrew Whitehead discussed the erasure of the history of struggle in Kashmir from the national and international history of post-war Communism. The radical manifesto ‘Naya Kashmir’ (1944), which proposed a constitutional monarchy and gender equality, was preceded by mass political agitation against the autocratic rule of Maharaja Hari Singh. Whitehead’s interviews with Kashmiri women who were alive at that time reveal that in memory the uprising lives on as a moment of genuine political empowerment. Yet amid escalating violence and brutal state repression in Kashmir, those memories are not historicized as part of a wider narrative of Indian, or Pakistani, history. The political threat that Kashmir poses to the coherence of the nation-state translates into the silencing of those mid-century memories of hope and empowerment; to turn them into a ‘useable past’ offers a radical challenge to the already rocky foundations of Indian rule.

From its beginnings oral history – and therefore memory – was fundamental to the practice of the History Workshop movement. As Alessandro Portelli wrote in 1981, oral history reveals how people experienced and remembered events, but even that experience is mediated by the choices of the historian, who selects the interviewees, asks the questions and turns that source into historical narrative. In what contexts can moments of resistance and struggle be turned into ‘radical history’ and what memories are lost in the process of forging fragments into coherent narratives? What acts and events do historians recognize as ‘radical’ and what conditions enable the production and recognition of certain events as history? Urvashi Butalia noted in her contribution to the discussion of Eve and the New Jerusalem, as well as in her later plenary remarks, that the ability to narrate radical visions and struggles at all is contingent upon wider structural relationships of power. The history of feminist struggle in India, for example, has been overshadowed both by a male-dominated national narrative of anti-imperialism and by a white-dominated and Western-centric narrative of feminism. The utopian visions of Pandita Ramabai (1858–1922), Savitribai Phule (1831–97) and Tarabai Shinde (1850–1910) re-imagined the possibilities for women living under direct and indirect British colonial rule in India. Whether by opening up wells and classrooms to dalit women or by writing and campaigning against male dominance, they articulated concerns and employed strategies of resistance using the languages and tools of their immediate contexts. The oppressions that they addressed, from caste-based subjugation to the treatment of widows, were embedded
in their localities and yet they speak to, and are part of, the wider history of transnational feminism.

How translatable and relatable are those contexts when what is understood by ‘History’ has grown out of Western imperial, national and patriarchal frameworks? As Frantz Fanon so powerfully stated in *Wretched of the Earth* (1961) ‘the settler makes history and is conscious of making it’. Yet whereas Fanon, alongside other anti-colonialists as well as feminists and civil-rights activists, understood the reclaiming of history as part of the process of liberation, recent scholars have cast doubt on that project, focusing instead on the archival and narrative structures in which history is so deeply embedded. In the context of South Asia subaltern histories, Gayatri Spivak and Anjali Arondekhar have argued that archives as the site of reclamation of the past are fundamentally shaped by the state and thereby complicit in its structures of oppression. Narrating the silences, the disharmonies and the contradictions of radical movements and visions in the past is vital to countering a false and narrow teleology that is often based on the preconceived limits of the nation state. Visions may take form in relationship to political borders, but they are rarely contained by them: we might question what limits this imposes and what exclusions it allows. Like the interconnected nature of nineteenth-century feminism, narrating the last forty years of feminist activism requires a transnational lens and a constant to-ing and fro-ing between the local and global, as well as an appreciation of their interconnections. Feminism, Butalia argued, is a ‘mosaic of movements’, and can never be told as one, linear story. How one tells the narrative of feminism, as part of the ‘education of desire’, is therefore a question of orientation, which in turn configures the vision of feminism that we hold for the future.

**HISTORY AND THE ACADEMY**

Many panels and performances grappled with the question of who owns history. Or, in the words of Geoff Eley, ‘which narratives get to organize commonly understood ideas of the present?’ Despite the public’s unquenchable thirst for history, evident in the proliferation of genealogy and of local archive and oral-history projects and in historical drama and documentary on television, some wondered whether the production of historical knowledge is becoming narrower. Questions about whose labour and whose voices produce history, and from what geographical and institutional locations, were central to many of the panels. Yasmin Khan’s question, ‘whose voices do we want to listen to?’ gestures to the problem of who controls access to the production of historical knowledge. Who are the ‘we’ who do the listening and often also the interpreting, and from what location? These are not new issues or discussions. In many ways, these questions of location and power carry the legacy of the socialist and feminist thought that underpinned the History Workshop movement, and radical and socialist histories before them. Anna Davin reminded us of the ways in which the History
Workshop movement tried to navigate questions about access, inclusion, status and belonging. Yet today there is a sense of renewed urgency, which reveals current fears that critical historical thinking is becoming re-enacted in universities at a moment when higher education is becoming less accessible to students from poorer backgrounds while further education is wilfully destroyed by underfunding.

In this context, what counts as historical knowledge, who counts as a historian and whose voices get to configure historical narrative constitute each other. Nathan Richards’s film, ‘Absent from the Academy’ (2013), shown on the Saturday, demonstrates the absence of black scholars from the academy. Only 0.4% of UK professors are non-white, which must inform how and by whom history is written. The film and the following discussion illustrated the vicious cycle that effects and maintains the exclusion of black scholars. When black students do not see themselves represented either in the topics that they study or in the demographic that teaches them, it may seem that education is not meant for them. Even if black academics overcome the wider messages of society against them, they face the overwhelming whiteness of the academy, where their bodies are labelled as out of place and their scholarship perceived as threatening. As Caroline Bressey noted, to decolonize the academy requires structural change; and yet that change is slow and gradual, the result of sustained pressure on institutions from the outside. The Women’s Liberation Movement, for example, pushed the academy to recognize the legitimacy of women’s (and later gender) history. Its ability to do so, Geoff Eley argued, was partly due to the connections that were forged between supportive institutions, such as the British Film Institute, and left-wing and feminist movements. Today, with the decline of civic spaces such as libraries, the increasing neo-liberalization of higher education and the rise in casualization in the UK, such alliances become harder and harder to build. As Stefan Collini has warned, any semblance of the university as a space of deep, critical enquiry looks to be increasingly overridden by a conception of the university as an ‘engine of growth’ and of research as valuable only in terms of its potential economic contribution.

Intersecting with concerns about the lack of representation of black people in the UK academy is the problem of the casualization of employment in higher education. This was the subject of the panel led by FACE (Fighting Against Casualization in Education). According to a UCU (University and College Union) report, in 2013 more than 20,000 university staff were on zero-hour contracts, growing numbers of academic staff included. As FACE noted, the increasing number of years spent in precarious academic work disproportionately affects ethnic minorities, women and people with disabilities. With only seventeen Black female professors in UK universities, and female academics paid £5,000 per year less on average than their male colleagues, the already-embedded structural inequality in UK universities looks set to get worse. Ten-month contracts also radically undermine any chances
of social mobility, for unless an academic on such a contract can afford to weather the summer months without pay in order to focus on research, the gap grows wider each year. As the members of FACE reiterated, cultural and material capital intersect with confidence, acceptance and a sense of entitlement to render historians from minority or traditionally excluded backgrounds more vulnerable to exploitation. They are the first and the worst hit by the neo-liberalization of the university, with its growing emphasis on ‘quality metrics’ from teaching evaluations to research outputs, which exacerbates the already-embedded competitive individualism inherent to academia. Despite these depressing statistics and prospects, the panel ended with a heartening recent example of collective action that had succeeded in preventing further casualization at the University of Warwick. Laura Schwartz explained how the combined efforts of UCU and FACE prevented the outsourcing of graduate teaching assistants on hourly-paid contracts. Warwick was forced to scrap their plan to manage teaching assistants by outsourcing recruitment, contracts and pay to a university-owned temping agency called ‘Teach Higher’. The campaign against Teach Higher succeeded through the coming together of different networks, including permanent and temporary staff, while FACE took responsibility for the press coverage. Their success has led to year-long teaching fellowships rather than hourly-paid ones, an example of what collective action can achieve.

WHERE IS ‘RADICAL’ HISTORY?: ACTIVISM AND ACADEMIA

Of all the additional forms of academic labour that have crept into academia, ‘impact’ is perhaps the most ideologically difficult to navigate. In some ways, the ‘impact’ agenda, which demands some form of collaboration between academic and non-academic communities, can be understood as a belated acknowledgement of Raphael Samuel’s call for history to be ‘thought of as an activity rather than a profession’.9 As Yasmin Khan noted in her plenary remarks on ‘History Workshop and its Legacies’, the new momentum towards public engagement can benefit from the kind of work that History Workshop has always done. For institutional funds and energies to be directed towards work with communities beyond academia sounds like exactly the kind of potential restructuring of the university that many historians on the Left would or should embrace. Yet when it comes alongside the increase of undergraduate fees to £9,000 a year, the scrapping of the Education Maintenance Allowance, the underfunding of further education, and the rise of casualized labour, it is difficult to see how ‘impact’ is not merely a token gesture, cancelled out by yet more barriers to access to higher or further education. What are the potentials and problems of the ‘impact’ agenda, to what extent is ‘grassroots’ or ‘community’ history necessarily ‘radical’, and what are the tensions between academia and activism?

In their 2015 article, ‘Engaging People in the Making of History’, Gary Rivett and Laura King criticized the criteria for successful ‘impact’ as outlined in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) for promoting a
top-down approach and focusing too narrowly on quantifiable end results. They advocated a focus, instead, on process, likely to encourage more genuine co-production. Building on these critiques and her own experience of working with two local community groups – the Sheffield Hindu Samaj and Sheffield Voices – Esme Cleall noted that there was a danger of ‘impact’ activities exploiting, rather than enriching, local communities in order to meet the demands of the REF. Collaborative retellings of the histories of previously ignored or marginalized groups is extremely important in order to raise their profile and promote recognition that they belong to wider society. Yet working with ‘grassroots’ communities can be difficult in that the marginalized are often – understandably – most eager to find and reproduce stories from the past that reveal the ‘positive’ contribution made to society by their predecessors. Their politics are not necessarily ‘radical’ and so thinking about their history in terms of strategies of resistance and structures of oppression is neither their aim or their desire. This clash of aims and frameworks was evident in Carrie Hamilton’s discussion of contemporary animal-rights activism in Spain, where an otherwise very ‘radical’ group uses a language of ‘civilization’ and ‘Europeanness’ to argue against bullfighting. Their use of terms that connote the cultural superiority of Europe (especially Northern Europe) and construct other countries and cultures as ‘lesser’ and more ‘barbaric’ is uncritically accepting of an imperialist and racist discourse.

E. J. Scott’s ‘Museum of Transology’ offered a very different approach to how we might conceptualize ‘radical’ history and its relationship to activism. In an old museum display cabinet, Scott exhibited artifacts donated to the project by trans people to archive transgender lives in material form. Each artifact, from silicone breast forms to testosterone vials, was labelled by the person who donated it, so that the exhibition-archive included the very human histories of its nominal objects as part of its production. In her presentation on the history of the London-Irish support for women forced to travel from Ireland for abortion Ann Rossiter argued that telling stories, whether through oral testimony or personal objects, can provide a way of confronting topics that are often stigmatized and taboo or painful to recall. Beginning with her own story of abortion, Rossiter’s narration of the development and work of the ‘abortion underground’ records an aspect of Irish women’s labour and solidarity that would otherwise be completely lost to history. In a similar way, Josie McClellan’s Bristol based ‘Outstories’, and Justin Bengry, Alison Oram and Claire Hayward’s ‘Pride of Place’ (across England), document LGBT history and heritage. Locating LGBT histories, whether from archives or personal testimony, conserves and acts as a reminder of the long presence of queer people, as well as the struggles for recognition and rights. All four of these projects have in common the desire to mark, to celebrate and to preserve the history of people whose gender and sexuality has rendered them and their stories undesirable and therefore hidden.
In these different projects, as in the History Workshop movement itself, the line between history and activism is blurry. The telling of radical histories can, itself, be a radical act, yet how we tell those stories and what we want, and are able, to do with them matters too. Justin Bengry in his plenary remarks asked ‘how radical is lesbian and gay history?’, a question which speaks to broader questions about what happens when the histories of previously marginalized groups become mainstream. Who, within those groups, gets relegated to the margins of the story or becomes displaced by them? Both Sumita Mukherjee and Laura Schwartz discussed the film Suffragette (dir. Sarah Gavron, 2015), which was criticized for the absence of women of colour from the narrative and its use of the slogan ‘I’d rather be a rebel than a slave’. These different, but interconnected issues, it was argued, suggest the author and director’s lack of critical awareness of the history of racism, of empire and their ignorance of the history of non-white women in Britain and their involvement in the suffragette movement. The social-media campaign that critiqued the film’s unreflective whiteness held up the image of Princess Sophia Alexandra Duleep Singh (1876–1948) as an example of suffragette women of colour. Yet as Mukherjee argued, this holds its own problems of historical accuracy, as well as of the kind of historical role models we need. As a very wealthy and elite woman, the daughter of Maharaja Duleep Singh and Bamba Muller and the god-daughter of Queen Victoria, Sophia can hardly be considered representative of the working-class aspect of the Suffragette movement that Gavron sought to portray. The difficulties of finding role models or resonances in the past goes back to the problem of the historical record. In my own paper, I reflected on the challenges of historicizing and locating transgender identities, especially prior to the late nineteenth century. Does the deeply felt need of a marginalized community for a history, in order to effect legitimacy in the present, override the concerns of the historian about accuracy? How do we encourage resonances rather than reclamation? Becky Taylor’s paper on the history of Roma-Gypsy traveller communities asked similar questions. How do we create a nuanced and sophisticated history that takes account of the noise of the archive but also its silences? These were not questions that had answers, yet as Laura Schwartz argued, actively supporting the struggles of marginalized people while sticking firmly to historical methods and accuracy is perhaps the only way to avoid what Baldwin called ‘an invented past’ that ‘cracks and crumples under the pressures of life’.11

CONCLUSION
The Radical Histories/Histories of Radicalism conference revisited and raised far more questions that could possibly be answered. Taking place the weekend after the referendum vote for Britain to leave the EU, it was also overshadowed by the anxiety generated by ‘Brexit’ and the sense of disillusionment and despair over the rise of racism and right-wing nationalism that the campaign had enabled. Where, as historians and activists,
whether inside, outside or on the edges of academia, do we go from here? Urvashi Butalia spoke of having been ‘shaken into history’ upon the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the subsequent revenge killings of Sikhs in India in 1984. In a different place and context, this is perhaps a moment when being ‘shaken into history’ is desperately needed, not least as a corrective to the imperial nostalgia displayed by the Right. In the impromptu panel on Brexit, Bill Schwarz spoke of the need to return to the archive of letters written to Enoch Powell in the 1970s if we are to understand the nature of the current conjunctural crisis. To do so would force us to acknowledge and to historicize failure; the failure of the state to support genuine alternatives to industry and coal; the failure of the Left to effect solidarity amongst working people; and the failure of critical socialist, feminist and anti-racist historians to gain a platform and to explain the history and legacy of Empire and the rise of neoliberalism. If the role of ‘radical’ historians is to undermine, critique and find alternatives to established frameworks, then our attention needs to be directed as much to understanding these failures and the silences of the past, as to its more positive visions and movements. This is not at odds with the importance of vision discussed above in relationship to Eve and the New Jerusalem. Rather, like Butalia’s discussion of Indian feminists and their place on the historical landscape of feminism, thinking about failure acknowledges the fragmentary and disjointed nature of historical struggles. Like the ‘failure’ of so many early career historians to secure permanent and stable employment as lecturers, or the absence of black scholars, ‘failure’ often reveals the play of wider structures of power that work to silence and oppress. To explore and historicize the mood of depression and despair that dominates the contemporary moment alongside the desire for a better world, may be to heed Baldwin’s contradictory, but hopeful message, that history is ‘nothing less than the perpetual achievement of the impossible’.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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