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Radicals, Marxists, and Gentlemen: A Memoir of Twenty Years Ago

First, some background to the events surrounding the Radical Caucus at the American Historical Association Meeting in Washington D.C., December 27-30, 1969. (I speak from memory and with little reference to my papers, many of which are not currently accessible to me.) To begin: three episodes in 1968.

1. In April, the New University Conference had its founding meeting at the University of Chicago. NUC consisted mainly of faculty and graduate students with SDS connections. Staughton Lynd gave a keynote which endorsed the idea of left intellectuals leaving the university. Although Staughton argued well, this idea fit with the wave of guilt then passing through other movement people in academe ("We're irrelevant to The Struggle," "We're being paid \$8,000," "We're not where it's at," etc.), and it also fit the agenda of the universities, which were ardently escorting New Left academics, like Staughton and myself, out beyond the ivy, even making little box lunches for us. As an activist, protestor, and sometime arrestee, I identified with and

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admired Staughton's activism, but I differed with him on the place of scholarship in the left. My aim was to build a radical organization that would be clearly New Left in its devotion to activism and opposition to academic hierarchy, and, at the same time, would value independent scholarship as critical thought and as an important part of building left culture.

I responded to Staughton with a leaflet entitled (with deliberate irony) "Who Will Write a Left History of Art While We Are All Putting Our Balls on the Line?" (both pieces reprinted in the *Journal of American History*, Sept. 1989). I criticized the idea of "relevance." NUC failed at the unpromising task of organizing left academics around their shame of being academics, and disappeared in the early '70s.

2. Marxists Christopher Lasch and Eugene D. Genovese escalated their denunciations of the activist left, at a time when the universities were firing us and discharging our activist students, and cooperating with the war in Vietnam. Lasch and Genovese published articles in the *New York Review of Books* in 1968 and 1969 presenting the idea that the proper role of the left intellectual was to produce Marxist scholarship, with activism within the university seen in a hostile light. Genovese denounced Staughton harshly ("stupid...drivel...demagogue"), helping to legitimize this talented scholar's banishment from academia.

3. There were two radical caucuses at the 1968 AHA. Downstairs (was it in the hotel's Hegemony Suite?), Lasch expressed his doubts about the idea of a Radical Caucus; Genovese said that he would get power and use it to get "our best young people" published and advanced to positions of power themselves. I said that since we opposed the Gentlemen's protection-society, old-boy notion of building academic careers through connections with people with similar politics, we should oppose continuing systems of patronage and hierarchy and calling it socialism.

Upstairs, possibly in the Penthouse of the Honest Worker, a meeting took place organized primarily by radical graduate students from Columbia and the University of Wisconsin. Wonderful people: scholar-activists; I can see them in my head. This was the direct predecessor of the 1969 Radical Caucus. I spoke in support of this group's ideas.

1969. From these diverse roots (as well as others), many of us in the activist left began to think of organizing RADical Caucus activities at the December 1969 AHA meeting. (Some of this was done in informal coalition with a nascent women's caucus, which prospered and endured in the Coordinating Committee on Women in the Historical Profession and in committees within the professional organizations.) In those days, the profession was ruled, by and large, by Gentlemen, with sexism universal, racism and anti-semitism widespread, and more than a hint of anti-Catholicism. Those at the top of the hierarchy thought they were there because they were "excellent." Since those with power inevitably deem themselves "excellent," and no one really knows what "excellence" is (except that it is practiced at "excellent" institutions), I wanted to divorce power from alleged "excellence." Hierarchy wars with flourishing scholarship.

In September, I sent Art Waskow a five page single-spaced letter presenting a detailed outline of what we might

do in December, stating that we should face some hard questions, *document* our critique of the profession, and produce a new constitution rather than simply responding to the AHA's proposals. In passing, I stated what was by then totally obvious: there was no point in trying to involve Socialist Scholar types--by which I meant Lasch and Genovese, who were active in the then existing (and valuable) Socialist Scholars Conferences--who I correctly (and also prophetically) described as more interested in attacking the left than in confronting the establishment. (I did not know at the time that they had already refused our invitation to participate in a session on radical history). Art put a xerox machine to work, and dropped four to five million copies of my letter on cities and hamlets alike. Subsequently I learned that this letter was sent on to AHA Headquarters in Washington, where the alarm signifying the imminent arrival of a mob was sounded, creating a mobilization of the Gentlemen. (see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream...NY* 1988); another fine narrative and analysis appears in Jonathan M. Wiener, "Radical Historians and the Crisis in American History," *Journal of American History*, Sept. 1989, 399-434.) By October 20, my letter had gotten to Genovese, and he wrote me that "an enormous number of people...have taken full measure of the situation, your intention, and the spirit of your enterprise. It will be to the knife."

At the AHA we ran sessions about radical history and criticizing the pretense of political neutrality in mainstream scholarship. And we confronted the establishment at the business meeting, which drew an unprecedented two thousand people. We chose Staughton to run for president against Robert R. Palmer, and we called for reorganization of the AHA Council and committees. We introduced a resolution to put the organization on record as opposing the Vietnam War. (We were much influenced by the collusion of many German academics and universities with Hitler.) Genovese's people tried to sit on him, but he fought free and delivered a peculiar address. Speaking of the Radical Caucus, he shrieked, "we must put them down, we must put them down hard [stormy applause from the Gentlemen], we must put them down once and for all!"

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Our resolution did not pass, nor did we elect Staughton. What happened afterward?

Propelled in part from below, a kind of bourgeois revolution took place in the AHA, with some perestroika. Gentlemen began to feel alienated and stay away: George Wilson Pierson, former chair of the Yale History Department, put away the blue tuxedo in which he had greeted people at the Yale smokers. An AHA committee was appointed to look into discrimination in hiring, and Al Young played a heroic role in getting a good statement of professional standards that censured discrimination on the basis of politics or lifestyle.

The Radical Caucus lived on in other activities in the AHA and the OAH until the mid and late '70s. This newsletter and, indirectly, the *Radical History Review*, are among its fruits. Many people preferred to build left institutions and to put less energy into confrontation. In addition, with the death of the movement which had provided our impetus, the radical presence began to fade, and conser-

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vatives have been able to bring the AHA partly back to where it had been before. Meantime, the OAH changed in significant ways: at least a kind of "greening." Especially under Joan Hoff-Wilson, the OAH has made great gains.

What of the participants in the Radical Caucus and of left academics in general? The death of the movement affected us all. Many activists were run out of the academy, and some others just left. Those who stayed in tended to become Marxified—that is, with many honorable exceptions, legitimate—and to replicate in their academic lives some, but not all, of the culture of the Gentlemen. The Marxification of the left has been part of a larger social problem. Reaganism narrows everyone's sense of the possible, even on the left. During times of no movement, agency, reality, and causality are doubted, and essentially conservative systems of thought come to the fore. Today it is that complex of deconstructionism-Marxism-feminist theory-film criticism.

It is tragic to see so many leftists fall into conservative modes. Many left historians have lost touch with the essential New Left notion of agency. One feminist friend tells me of a conference of younger academic feminists where she had to explain that feminism was a movement before it became an academic discipline. At the height of last spring's CUNY tuition protests, with students occupying college buildings, I urged on our little faculty group that we call for a faculty picket line at the CUNY graduate center. Old friends from the '60s told me that we shouldn't do it since it might fail, and that it would be better for us to lay the theoretical groundwork by circulation of articles, etc.

Someday there will be another movement. We must do what we can to bring it about. The last one fueled our energies for a diversity of activisms, and enriched our scholarship. It also changed the world. When there is another movement, we will relearn agency, reality, and causality, and see the world clearly once again. How can we get there?

Staughton was wrong in 1968 to urge a guilt-ridden left professoriat to leave the universities. But today, during a time of reaction, with widespread passivity among academics ("How can we ask for more, when the Governor says..."), we must take some of his advice and re-learn the

habit of activism. Without this experience, our understanding of all history, including the present, becomes polluted and our judgment fails: we tend to think that what is is what must be, and that what was is what had to be. And beyond our lives as historians (which we should cherish and continue), we must be concerned lest our ideas of making a new future become buried under our magnified perception of the obstacles. In history and in society, agency is crucial. We must remember that we can break through and make a new reality, and the best way to remember it is to do it.

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