Onni Gust, What is radical history now? A report on the Raphael Samuel History Centre's 'Radical Histories/Histories of Radicalism' conference, July 2016

> '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.'[i]

In 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 USA. 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, following 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.'[ii] 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'etre* of the History Workshop movement. Yet to what extent does the belief in history as a tool with which to identify and struggle against oppression persist today? What is 'radical history' and where is to be found? How is the relationship between academia and 'radical history' to be configured in the context of the neo-liberal university?

The Raphael Samuel History Centre's 'Radical Histories/Histories of Radicalism' conference, held at Queen Mary University of London between 1st and 3rd July 2016 undertook to address these, and many other questions. 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. 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 approximately 230 submissions, ranging from papers to performances, roundtables discussions to installation pieces, attest to the

enthusiasm for the idea of 'radical' history and the diversity of its conceptualization. This report cannot possibly cover all the myriad papers, exhibitions, discussions and performances that took place across the three days. Instead, it focuses on some of the key themes, questions and concerns that appeared and reappeared across the different panels that I attended and the three roundtable plenaries. What was 'radical history' and what does it mean today? Who gets to define the parameters of 'radical history' and whose voices get heard? Can history really be radical from within the academy and what possibilities and problems does the Research Excellence Framework's 'impact agenda' pose for the relationship between academics and communities? Overall, does the 'radical' lie in historical methodology and its modes of production; in the types of sources we use and the topics we approach; or, in the position that we, as differently located and embodied subjects, inhabit in relationship to the academy, to society, to the nation state and to global flows of capital?

'Radical' history: then and now

In *Theatres of Memory,* Raphael Samuel argued that the production of history should be a collective effort, developed out of the research and conversations between people from different walks of life and not dictated by 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.'[iii] As Anna Davin recalled in her plenary reflections, History Workshop 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 amongst people with an enthusiasm for history and a desire to interrogate the past on their own terms. Many had left formal education at fourteen and often came to History Workshop from the Workers' Education Association, Ruskin College, from involvement in socialist movements, and from the Women's Liberation Movement. In this context, 'radical history' meant going beyond the boundaries of the academy to write histories that resonated with, and reflected, the lives of people traditionally marginalized in the official record.

The conference began with a plenary roundtable to celebrate the re-edition of Barbara Taylor's *Eve and the New Jerusalem* and to reflect on its history and relevance for feminism today. As Barbara Taylor noted in her opening remarks, researching the history of women and workers, and to relating that research to the terms set out by Marx and Engels for the development of a socialist society was fundamental to the History workshop movement in the 1970s and to the project of 'radical history.' First published in 1983, *Eve and the New Jerusalem,* looked to the Owenites' early nineteenth-century utopian project in order to learn from, and develop, a utopian vision of society for late twentieth-century Britain. Taylor first taught *Eve and the New Jerusalem* to the London Feminist History Group. 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. Would such an endeavour or context be conceivable today? To what extent have we, in the midst of global economic slump and the rapid advancement of neo-liberalism, lost all vision and any hope for alternatives to capitalism? In her reflections on *Eve and the New Jerusalem,* Lynn Segal noted the contrast between the Owenite's radical, utopian thinking, and the lack of any vision of a better and radically different future today. There is an urgent need, she argued, for an 'education of desire' to counter the cynicism that pervades us today and to enable the construction of radical alternatives to high capitalism. As 'hot advocates' for a better society, to use the words of Shahida Bari, historians have a part to play in the construction of that vision. 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

Discussions of vision and questions about the uses of history went far beyond the initial plenary, informing numerous papers, albeit in very different ways, throughout the conference. Jack Saunders' paper, as part of the 'History as a Tool for Struggle?' panel, discussed how his research into labour militancy and union organizing in the 1970s in Britain had informed his practice of organizing as part of the strikes of 2013 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*. Like 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 destabilizing the occupying regime. Although they ultimately failed to be realized, those visions have been integral to the way that Greek history is remembered and provide the context for Syrizia's election victory in 2015 and the hopes pinned upon him. From the opposite perspective, 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' of 1944, which proposed a constitutional monarchy and gender equality was preceded by mass political agitation against the autocratic rule of Maharaja Hari Singh. As Whitehead's interviews with Kashmiri women who were alive at the time reveal, the memory of the uprising lives on as a moment of genuine political empowerment. Yet in the midst of escalating violence and brutal state repression in Kashmir, those memories evade historicisation. Given Kashmir's contested position vis-à-vis the Indian nation state, to what extent is it possible for those mid-century memories of radical promise be turned into a 'useable' past?

The loss of a memory, or at least its lack of cohesion into historical narrative, calls into question the contexts in which moments of resistance and struggle can be turned into 'radical' history. This is both a question of what acts and events historians recognize as 'radical' and what conditions enable the production and recognition of certain events as history. Or, in the words of Geoff Eley, 'which narratives get to organize commonly understood ideas of the present?' As Urvashi Butalia noted in her contribution to the discussion of *Eve and the New Jerusalem,* as well as in her plenary remarks, the very ability to narrate radical visions and struggles 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 a white-dominated and Western-centric narrative of feminism. The utopian visions of Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922), Savitriribai Phule (1831-1897) 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 their concerns and employed strategies of resistance using the languages and tools of their immediate contexts. The oppressions that they addressed, from

caste-based oppression to the treatment of widows, were embedded in their localities and yet they speak to, and as 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? Over the last thirty years, the hope that anti-colonialists, feminists and civil rights activists placed in the power of history to liberate people from structures of oppression has radically diminished. As Gayatri Spivak and Anjali Arondekhar have illustrated in the context of South Asian subaltern histories, archives as the site of reclamation of the past are fundamentally shaped by the state and thereby complicit in its structures of oppression.[iv] 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 be formed in relationship to, but are rarely contained by, political borders and where they are 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 and 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

Although few panels or performances engaged explicitly with the question of the limitations of historical practice, many grappled with the question of who owns history. Despite the public's unquenchable thirst for history, evident in the proliferation genealogy, local archive and oral history projects and in historical drama and documentary on television, is the production of historical knowledge 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 problems of who controls access to the production of historical knowledge. Who is the 'we' who does the listening and, often

also the interpreting, and from what location? These are not new problems or discussions. In many ways, these questions of location and power represent the legacy of the socialist and feminist thought that underpinned the History Workshop movement. Even at its height, Anna Davin reminded us, the History Workshop movement navigated questions about access, inclusion, status and belonging. Yet at the same time, there is a sense of renewed urgency, which reveals current fears that critical historical thinking is becoming re-ensconced in universities at a moment when higher education is becoming increasing inaccessible and expensive and further education willfully 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. As the film, 'Absent from the Academy' (dir. Nathan Richards, 2013) shows, the absence of black scholars from the academy, who represent 0.4% of UK professors, informs how history is written. The film and discussion illustrates 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 confirms the idea that education is not meant for them. Even then, if black academics overcome the wider messages of society against them, they face the overwhelming whiteness of the academy, where their bodies are labeled as out of place and their scholarship perceived as threatening. As Caroline Bressey noted, to decolonize the academy requires structural change; and yet, as Geoff Eley noted, that change has largely been forced upon 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 was partly due to the connections that were forged between supportive institutions, such as the British Film Institute, and Left-wing, feminist movements. With the decline of civic spaces such as libraries, the increasing neo-liberalisation of higher education and the rise in casualization in the UK, such alliances become harder and harder to build.

Intersecting with concerns about the lack of representation of black people in the academy, is the problem of the casualization of employment in higher education in the UK. This was the subject of the panel led by FACE (Fighting Against Casualization in Education). According to a UCU report, in 2013 more than 20 000 university staff were on zero hour contracts, which increasingly includes

academic staff. As FACE noted, the increasing number of years spent in precarious academic work tends to disproportionately impact ethnic minorities, women and people with disabilities. With only seventeen Black female professors in UK universities and female academics paid £5000 per year less on average than their male colleagues, the already-embedded structural inequality in UK universities looks set to get worse. Temporary, ten-month contracts also radically undermine any chances of social mobility, for unless an academic on a temporary contract can afford to weather the summer months without pay in order to focus on research, the gap grows ever-wider each year. Drawing on her own experiences as an early-career academic on a temporary contract, [who – ask Laura] noted that the issue of casualization was connected to one a wider structural problem. The classes that she was being employed to teach were often to cover for permanent academics who were struggling with mental health problems borne of the increasing stress of teaching, administrative and research demands. These are undoubtedly exacerbated by the idea that being in academia, even on a low-paid, per hour teaching contract is a privilege and a choice.

As the members of FACE reiterated, part-time contracts and hourly paid teaching, in which 40% of hours put into preparation was effectively unpaid, impact more heavily on under-represented groups. 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. The neo-liberal university's growing emphasis on quality metrics, including teaching evaluations and research outputs, exacerbates the already-embedded competitive individualism inherent to academia. Student evaluations have been widely shown to be biased against women and other minorities and as women are generally expected to do the lion's share of unpaid care work of children and elders in their 'spare' time, they also have less time for the creative thinking that research demands. Despite these depressing statistics and prospects, the panel ended with an example of collective action that succeeded in preventing further casualization at the University of Warwick. Laura Schwarz explained how the combined efforts of the University and College Union (UCU) and FACE prevented the outsourcing of graduate teaching assistants on hourly-paid contracts. Warwick was forced to scrap their plan to manage their teaching assistants by outsourcing recruitment, contracts and pay to a university-owned temping agency called 'Teach Higher.' The campaign against Teach Higher succeeded due to the coming-together of different networks, including permanent and temporary staff, whilst

FACE took responsibility for the press coverage. The result, which has led to year-long teaching fellowships rather than hourly-paid ones, is an illustration of what collective action can achieve.

Collective action is vital to avoid individuals, especially those who are precarious workers, facing penalties for speaking out. Yet acting collectively has wider benefits beyond the immediate, political aims of a campaign; it helps to mitigate the competitive individualism of academia. The neo-liberal university relies upon the idea that research is an individual effort and demands an ever-increasing number of 'research outputs' of international quality, more and higher quality teaching and student support, as well as administrative duties. The constant demand to produce more and to produce better is itself a disabling process, the burden of which falls heaviest on those with physical and/or mental health conditions and those with caring responsibilities. For academics on temporary contracts, the pressure is even higher because of the additional physical and emotional labour of constant job applications. Furthermore, academics on temporary contracts are often not included in departmental meetings and the lack of collegial and institutional investment and support in their research and their future exacerbates the sense of isolation. In many ways, academia is utterly incompatible with the socialist vision of collective action and endeavor that originally animated History Workshop. It relies upon a competitive spirit and individual 'excellence,' encouraging the belief that everybody else is succeeding whilst constantly redefining the definition and parameters of 'success' and denying the structural inequalities that enable 'some to 'succeed' more easily than others. For early-career academics, especially those on insecure and temporary contracts, it is difficult to resist turning the blame inwards. The structures of recruitment and decision making can also be opaque, leaving early career academics with the sense of personal failure, which exacerbates the cycle of overwork and self-exploitation.

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 many 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.'[v] 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. Directing institutional funds and energies 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 £9000 per year, the scrapping of the Education Maintenance Allowance, the under-funding of further education, and the rise of casualized labour, it is difficult to see how 'impact' is not merely a tokenistic gesture surrounded by yet more barriers to access to higher or further education. What are the potentials and also the 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 article, 'Engaging People in the Making of History,' Gary Rivett and Laura King argued that one of the major problems with 'impact' as outlined in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) were that the measures of success promoted a top-down approach and focused too heavily on quantifiable end results.[vi] They advocated a focus, instead, on process, which would enable more genuine co-production. Building on these critiques and her own experience of working with two different 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 these groups' profile in, and belonging to, wider society. Yet there is also a danger that these projects, which are very selectively funded, can lend credence to gentrification and the commodification of the past in ways that tokenize, rather than empower the very groups they are seeking to engage. Another problem with working with 'grassroots' communities is that, understandably, many marginalized communities are interested in finding and reproducing stories from the past that reveal the 'positive' contribution that their ancestors made to society. 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. The use of terms that connote the cultural superiority of Europe, and 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 labeled 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. As Ann Rossiter stated in her presentation on the history of the London-Irish abortion underground, telling stories whether through oral testimony or personal objects, provides 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 'Outstories,' and Justin Bengry, Alison Oram and Claire Hayward's 'Pride of Place' document LGBT history and heritage, in Bristol and across England. 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's question in his plenary remarks, 'how radical is lesbian and gay history?' speaks to broader questions about what happens when the history of previously marginalized groups become mainstream. Who, within those groups, gets relegated to the margins of the story or become displaced by them? Both Sumita Mukherjee and Laura Schwartz discussed the film Suffragette (dir. Sarah Gavron, 2015), which was critiqued 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, revealed 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 women of colour suffragettes. 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 Victorian, 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 Schwarz argued, actively supporting the struggles of marginalized people whilst 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.'[vii]

Conclusion

The Radical Histories/Histories of Radicalism conference raised far more questions that could possibly be answered. Taking place the weekend after the vote to leave the UK, 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 historicise 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 really gain a platform 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 historicise 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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[i] James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time,* Harmondsworth, 1964, p.71.
[ii] *Ibid.,* p.88.
[iii] Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture,* London, 2012 (first published, 1994), p.8.
[iv] Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* Urbana and Chicago, 1988; Anjali Arondekar, 'Without a Trace: sexuality and the colonial archive,' *Journal of the History of Sexuality,* 14:1(2005), pp.10-27.
[v] Samuel, p.17
[vi] Laura King and Gary Rivett, 'Engaging People in Making History: impact, public engagement and the world beyond the campus,' *History Workshop Journal* (2015)
[vii] Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time,* p.71.