RADICAL HISTORY AND LABOUR HISTORY

by Terry Irving & Rowan Cahill

(First published on the Radical Sydney/Radical History blog, 19 February 2015

@ http://radicalsydney.blogspot.com.au/p/radical-ruminations.html)

In 1967 Gareth Stedman Jones advised socialist historians that they 'should not retreat into the safe pastures of labour history’ – advice taken to heart by Australian historian Humphrey McQueen in 1970 when he set out to write A New Britannia.

But the message largely went unheeded; labour history in Britain as well as Australia continued to attract radical historians. This was understandable. Labour history had begun in the institutions of the labour and socialist movement, drawing strength from its political vision, so at least in its early days it could bring academic and movement historians together.

By the late 1990s, labour historians were isolated, fenced off in antiquarian and/or academic paddocks, where they were susceptible to new bovine diseases – mutations of philosophical idealism - or befuddled into thinking work was labour. Meanwhile, the movement dynamic in labour's intellectual life was weakening.

Work is not labour. Labour is a term in political economy, an idea, and an economic relationship that exploits and oppresses working people. Using this idea to challenge these experiences a labour movement was formed almost two centuries ago. Later the idea of labour as an exploitative relationship was a catalyst for others, for example radical feminists and their movement.

Today there is a change in the air, and the political heritage of labour is part of the new energy among radical historians who are flexing their muscles in various parts of the world.

Indicative of this is the final timetable for the postgraduate-led Radical History Conference in London (at Birkbeck, on 24 March 2015), which has just been released [https://radicalhistoryconference.wordpress.com/]. Perusal of this indicates the energies and interests of a new generation of historians, their conceptions of radicalism/radical history, and where and how they find radicalism in the past, and how it relates to the present.

Some eighteen papers are scheduled, culminating in a roundtable discussion led by Becky Taylor, Robbie Shilliam and Mike Jackson to close the day. Labour historians are catered for in a session on ‘Urban and Rural Workers’. Other sessions show how radical history is breaking the mould that labour historians in the last decade or so have constructed for themselves. A session on ‘The State and Authority’ offers papers on ‘big management’ (Michael Weatherburn), the growth of surveillance in UK public order policing in the 1970s and 1980s (Ben
Taylor), and the argument that the modern ‘war on terror’ has its parallels in Victorian era colonial conflict (Jacob Ramsay Smith). In the session on ‘Social Movements and Protest’ a paper on ‘what time is radical history?’ promises something different (Garikoitz Gomez Alfaro). There is a whole session devoted to ‘Radical Education’, both in the past and as it is practised by feminists now.

And papers on the general question that inspired the organizers, ‘What is radical history?’ will be eagerly awaited by the growing networks of radical historians in other locations. These papers include a comparison of British and Irish historiography (David Convery), a study of ‘the histories of radical history’ (Amy Tobin and Hannah Proctor), and of ‘the crisis of purpose in history’ (George Stevenson).

On this blog we have taken as our mantra for radical history, ‘history that makes people want to act’. We have insisted that working at radical history is political. So we look forward especially to reading the papers on ‘criticism as resistance: a methodology for the activist-academic’ (Dominic Davies), and ‘History Acts’ (Ben Bethell, Barbara Warnock and Guy Beckett).

[Terry Irving and Rowan Cahill, 19 February 2015]