Radical History: Thinking, Writing and Engagement

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Abstract
In recent years, in various places and on our blog ‘Radical Sydney/Radical History’ we have written about radical history. As radical historians we seek out, explore, and celebrate the diversities of alternatives and oppositions, arguing there is a basic tension between radical history and ‘mainstream history’, a history that is constituted to prop up both capitalism and the state. We see our history as part of the struggle against capitalism and the state. In researching the past, we do not do it nostalgically, but with utilitarian, political intent, recognising that the past has the capacity to variously inspire and inform the present and the future. In a nutshell, while mainstream history would like people to read it, radical history wants its readers to act as history makers; while mainstream history props, radical history unprops.

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Radical History: Thinking, Writing and Engagement

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Kicking away the props

In recent years, in various places and on our blog ‘Radical Sydney/Radical History’ (http://radicalsydney.blogspot.com.au/), we have written about radical history. As radical historians we seek out, explore, and celebrate the diversities of alternatives and oppositions, arguing there is a basic tension between radical history and ‘mainstream history’, a history that is constituted to prop up both capitalism and the state. We see our history as part of the struggle against capitalism and the state. In researching the past, we do not do it nostalgically, but with utilitarian, political intent, recognising that the past has the capacity to variously inspire and inform the present and the future. In a nutshell, while mainstream history would like people to read it, radical history wants its readers to act as history makers; while mainstream history props, radical history unprops.

So, in more abstract terms we believe radical history has three distinguishing features: its subject matter, its political stance, and its relationship to its audience. Radical historians write about the struggles of disempowered people to stand up to their oppressors and exploiters, and to take control of their lives by attacking coercive authority and by socializing power. They tell stories of resistance and agency, not of ruling and maintaining order, which are the signs of ruling class history. Radical historians, secondly, are partisan. They write with a social purpose, and in doing so they draw on radical philosophies and methods. They write history as a political act. Thirdly, although writing about the past, they want to encourage people in the present to resist and rebel. Because the radical past was always being made anew their work is pregnant with possibilities, alerting their readers to the possibilities for action in their own situations. This has consequences for how they write. Readers must be given space to reflect on the present as well as the past. It is not enough to tell stories; the stories have to be shaped by theory, sharpened by the historian’s passion, and riddled with unresolved political questions. Moreover, whether writing for other radical intellectuals, engaging with scholarship and theory, or seeking a wider audience, radical historians place a high value on clarity of expression, avoiding like the plague the over-theoreticized language of academic in-groups, and their self-aggrandizing citation of trendy thinkers.
We write radical history from an urban perspective. The capitalist city is as distinctive a historical space as, say, the nation state, the free-trade empire or the eighteenth/nineteenth century slave ship. Like them it is organized by the processes of capital accumulation and class relations into zones of activity and meaning that change over time. Because radicalism in capitalist cities expresses resistance to the exploitation and oppression inherent in those processes, it is never free of spatial dynamics. It always exhibits a desire to appropriate space, to make places into resources for radical struggle and symbols of popular rights to the capitalist city. The task of the historian of the radical city is to find the patterns in these dynamics and to relate these to the changing nature of radical struggle.

Radical history as a tradition, as an approach to viewing and writing history, has depth in terms of time and variety. It includes magisterial works like those of A. L. Morton (A People’s History of England, 1938), G.D.H. Cole and Raymond Postgate (The Common People, 1938), Howard Zinn (A People’s History of the United States, 1980), and Edward Vallance (A Radical History of Britain, 2009). It is the tradition in which practitioners like maritime historian Marcus Rediker and commons historian Peter Linebaugh work. When Australian historians conceived ‘labour history’ in the early 1960s, they did so in the radical history tradition, determining to make working people part of Australian historical discourse and challenge the prevailing hegemony of imperial/colonial/ruling class histories, and seeking to use the study of labouring people and their institutions as a political tool to assist the shaping of the present and future. In 1983 Eric Fry, one of these pioneers, published Rebels & Radicals, asserting the role of conflict, struggle and rebellion as important parts of the Australian story, a notion that had become muted in the academic study of labourism.

Before the 1960s, and particularly within the orbit of the Communist Party of Australia, labour intellectuals (such as Bob Walshe, James Rawling, Bill Wood, and Rupert Lockwood) researched, wrote, and published in labour movement outlets, radical histories of Australian struggles for popular democracy and of the agency of working people. The work and output of these historians is, still, virtually unfurrowed by researchers, and undeservedly so. Their approach to popularizing radical history can be traced back to socialist pioneer, agitator, artist and poet, William Morris, whose writings Nicholas Salmon has collected in William Morris on History (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996). Dorothy Thompson, radical historian of Chartism, recalled that in 1991 she asked husband E P Thompson whether he was still the Marxist historian he once was, and he replied “that he preferred to call himself ‘a Morrisist’”. This reply is both poetic and political, capturing the step ‘beyond’ to which radical historians aspire.

It is the aspiration that publisher Ian Syson (Vulgar Press) and authors Jeff and Jill Sparrow brought to the radical history of the geographical-political space that is Melbourne in Radical Melbourne: A Secret History (Vulgar Press: Melbourne, 2001). Since then other ‘radical city’ books have followed: Radical Melbourne II (by the same authors and publisher, 2004), Radical Brisbane (edited by Raymond Evans and Carole Ferrier, Vulgar Press, 2004), and Radical Sydney (UNSW Press, 2010). Earlier at the University of Ballarat in 2009, Robert Hodder successfully
produced a two-part doctoral thesis (exegesis and documents) titled 'Radical Tasmania: Rebellion, reaction and resistance: A thesis in creative nonfiction.' Later, a Wollongong team, working from a script written by John Rainford, released their 60 minute-long film Radical Wollongong: A People’s History of Wollongong in 2014, which went on to tour Australia and parts of Asia and to win two Awards at the Canadian Labour International Film Festival (2014), including 'Best in Festival'. As the co-authors of Radical Sydney, we are keen to see this form of radical history continued.

Radical Newcastle: inventing the wheel?

The reader picking up Radical Newcastle (NewSouth Publishing, Sydney, 2015), edited by James Bennett, Nancy Cushing, and Erik Eldund, could be forgiven for thinking that the editors, all University of Newcastle historians, have invented the wheel, for there is no recognition in the book that Radical Newcastle is part of this vibrant and visible, if somewhat marginalised in Australian academic circles, area of historical work. The editors seem completely indifferent to the long tradition of writing about history from a radical perspective, the tradition of radical history of which the ‘radical city’ books are a part. Nor are they aware of the recent radical scholarship by Mike Davis, David Harvey, Adam Morton, Justin McGuirk, and others, that has transformed the study of cities.

The editors of Radical Newcastle describe their book as ‘the outcome of community-engaged research’ that aimed to connect ‘with the interests and concerns of our local community’. In other words its genre is public history with community involvement. Fair enough; that’s a recognised kind of history, although one frequently derailed by deceptive ideas of social unity. The problem is that the subject of their history book is radicalism, and radical history is a tradition the editors don’t engage with. Should they have? Well, imagine writing a book called ‘Indigenous Newcastle’ but neglecting to take into account the literature of Aboriginal history.

The editors’ neglect of the radical history tradition of writing is symptomatic of a deeper problem. Their approach to writing history is called, in the trade, academic empiricism. A classic case in fact: they begin with a definition of radicalism based on the Oxford English Dictionary and a British handbook on radicalism, then proceed to look for examples of it in the past. But is this how historians should work, using a timeless definition to corral the past into a predefined pen? Relying on ahistorical thinking? Surely what historians should do is historicize, that is, to work with an understanding of society as process, as a series of situations in which people act, institutions react, and structures change. Historians need to be able to think abstractly as well as concretely, otherwise they are trapped by empiricism, and make the mistake of starting with definitions instead of an historical understanding of their subject. Meaning, not definition; that’s what has to be grasped, as has their own position in relation to the subject.

Radicalism has a symbiotic relationship with capitalism, a word that the editors fail to mention in their Introduction, and capitalism also structured Newcastle as
a city. In Radical Newcastle, places seem to be incidental. About a dozen appear on the maps at the start of the book, but none of them has a main entry in the index. Of the thirty chapters just a few refer to a place in their titles. This neglect does a great disservice to Newcastle’s dense geography of struggle, which can be detected in Places, Protests and Memorabilia – The Labour Heritage Register of New South Wales (Industrial Relations Research Centre, University of New South Wales, 2002), where Terry Irving and Lucy Taksa have listed about 60 of Newcastle and the Hunter’s sites of radical activity: the speakers’ corners, meeting rooms, union offices, halls, factory gates, parks and so on. And these are just the sites associated with the labour movement. What about the places associated with the new social movements? Although one of the chapters (by Peta Belic and Erik Eldund) identifies Newcastle’s radicalism as a defining city characteristic, this is not enough. We have to ask how Newcastle as a city worked for and against its radicals. Were there labour or bohemian precincts in the city? Are there patterns in the distribution of radical sites? How did agitators move around their radical city? Again: what route or routes were taken by radical processions, and was the route chosen as a symbolic gesture against ruling institutions? Did the routes change over time? Did women and children march? Unless there is a systematic exploration of questions like these that arise out of an awareness of Newcastle’s geography, of the city’s spatial organization as an aspect of radical struggles, a whole dimension of the radical experience in Newcastle is lost.

There are thirty chapters in this book; less than half of them qualify as radical history. The others would have been at home in a book on Liberal Newcastle, their tone bland and even-handed, the product of an academic culture that values description over commitment. Readers, it seems, must not be allowed to assume that the authors are identifying with embarrassing ideas like class and domination or contentious action that ignores the ‘right’ channels for protest. Taking the book as a whole this is hodge-podge history, without any sense of radical Newcastle’s patterns in time or space. The deficiencies of the book - as spatial history and radical history - are down to the editors; luckily, some of the contributors show us what the book could have been.

The radical chapters: thinking, writing and engagement

What makes their chapters examples of radical history is that in them we can detect a radical point of view. It is not just that their chapters are about people in movement, challenging, resisting, and so on. Rather the authors are keen to tell us about it in a way that stirs the heart and the head to consider our own situation. Sometimes our attention is caught by the drama of the struggle, as in Rod Noble’s account of the mass civil disobedience of mining communities in the late nineteenth century, and in Ross Edmonds’ chapter on the Silksworth dispute in which militant unionists showed that ‘the radical spirit of anti-imperialism and internationalism’ could overcome ‘unthinking racism’. In Ann Curthoys’ chapter on Barbara Curthoys’ involvement in the Aboriginal rent strike at Purfleet Reserve, however, it is the attention to organisation that compels. We learn not just about the tasks and the planning, the meetings and publicity, but
also about the history of Aboriginal politics and Communist Party strategy. We also learn, of course, about a remarkable woman, an intellectual as well as an activist, who, as Ann writes, had a deep effect on her own involvement in Aboriginal issues. There is another mother-daughter connection in Jude Conway’s chapter on the Right to Choose Abortion Coalition that Josephine Conway helped to form. When Josephine turned 80 a friend said that she was a living reminder that radicalism was a way of life, a description that comes across also in the first-hand accounts of their environmental campaigning by Bernadette Smith, and Paula Morrow. The personal dimension of these chapters helps us understand radicalism as a living force rather than a dead definition.

It has always been a radical approach to history writing to insist on rescuing the common people and subversive ideas that mainstream history neglects. There are several chapters that meet that criterion. Tony Laffan’s chapter on the Hall of Science discovers a local free thought movement nurturing and nurtured by industrial militancy, while the chapter by Peta Belic and Erik Eldund on the One Big Union shows the persistence of syndicalist ideas. Among the courageous anti-conscriptionists of 1916, there was a range of forces and views, and Tod Moore and Harry Williams argue that the most radical were not reported in the press and have consequently disappeared from history. In his chapter, John Maynard successfully restores the significant activism of two white activists, John Maloney and his daughter Dorothy. They campaigned for Aboriginal rights, making contact with the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association, the first all-Aboriginal political organisation in Australia. And here’s another sign of radicalism as a living tradition: one of the founders of this association was Fred Maynard, the grandfather of the author, John Maynard.

In the best radical history, the actors are never ciphers but real flesh-and-blood people. Two chapters stand out in this regard: Troy Duncan’s on Father Alf Clint, and Shane Hopkinson’s and Tom Griffiths’ on Neville Cunningham. We cherish the image of the reverend inviting the militant Jim Comerford, a teetotaller and temperance advocate, to drink a pint with him in the local miners’ pub. And we are filled with uncomfortable admiration for the idiomatic flair of an ASIO informant who described Neville Cunningham – Communist, activist and working class intellectual – as ‘a fighter … a crude one, rough but direct … Nev has no time for nice trimmings, nor for calling a spade by any other name … He is a likeable chap, all proletarian, dead set against authority.’

Finally, we want to cheer for two chapters of forensic social analysis. Bernadette Smith situates the 1979 Star Hotel riot in the context of Newcastle’s history of class struggle, before placing the state in the frame and looking at local policing and power politics. She also explains the culture of the pub in a sociological way, challenging/undermining a whole lot of safe/traditional academic wisdom. Griff Foley, internationally respected in adult education and social learning circles, has brought together five cases of ‘community conservation’ – a neglected aspect of environmental history – in order to address the most important question in social movement as well as revolutionary politics: how do activists learn? The answer: informally and incidentally, and making this explicit helps their practice. It’s a lesson that radical historians should take on board: we should be thinking about our intellectual practice as we engage with our next project.
Overall, *Radical Newcastle* is a mixed bag of hits, almosts, and misses. Considered in the context of Australian radical historical writing, it provides opportunity to reflect upon the nature of radical history, how it is written, and how the historian can render struggles of the past in ways that instruct and inspire the present.

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