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# ‘History should become common property’

Raphael Samuel, History Workshop, and the Practice of Socialist History, 1966-1980

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## **Abstract**

The History Workshop movement, a grassroots coalition of radical-academic, feminist, and labour historians founded at Ruskin College in the late 1960s under the guidance of Raphael Samuel, represents a powerful example of the fusion of political commitment with historical practice. However, outside of a handful of general commentaries, the history of the Workshop remains mostly unexplored. This article focuses on two central pillars of the Workshop’s programme, the annual workshop gatherings held at Ruskin and the *History Workshop Journal*, in order to examine how its socialist (and feminist) political aspirations were translated into democratic and radical historical forms. It argues that this connection between politics and history should not be simply understood in theoretical or ideological terms, but should also encompass the symbolic, aesthetic and emotional dimensions of historical practice. While critical attention is paid to the tensions and limits of the Workshop’s project, the article suggests that it was precisely in the effort to negotiate the contradictions inherent in its own ideals that the relevance and productive use of the case of History Workshop endures.

**Key words:** communism, History Workshop, Raphael Samuel, Marxism

What is socialist history? How does it differ from other ways of doing history? Should it be defined primarily by its content? How should the modes of its production, presentation and dissemination be organised? What about the value of historical knowledge for socialist politics? And what is the role of the socialist historian today?

It seems obvious to the point of unnecessary to suggest that these

questions are of considerable interest to readers of this journal, one whose parent organisation re-constituted itself as the successor to the Communist Party Historians' Group (CPHG). Yet the task of defining what a politically-engaged, radical approach to history ought to be today comes with a great deal more uncertainty and bafflement than thirty or forty years ago. Then, of course, it was a good moment to be a socialist historian, to adapt a remark made by Eric Hobsbawm. Whether of social democratic or Marxist faiths, the idea of socialism was self-evident and the connection between historical work and politics was secure. There was indeed a unity of purpose between the two pursuits, crystallised powerfully in the British context by E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). In Thompson's classic text, an argument about the dynamics of working-class self-making, detailed in historically-grounded reconstructions of popular traditions of dissent, expressed through culture, served as a bridge to contemporary struggles 'from below'. That, at least, was how it appeared in the context of the late 1960s. '[W]e engaged with a past which spoke to a mood in the present' recalled Sheila Rowbotham '[h]istory from below made sense in the context of a ground-floor, grass-roots, rank-and-file socialism'.<sup>1</sup>

From the late 1970s, the threads that bound history and politics together began to unravel. Here major political and socio-economic changes combined with new and radically destabilising intellectual trends, above all, in the shape of feminism's challenge to Marxism, to drastically reduce confidence in the viability of social histories of class and the determinations of material reality upon which they were based. In the midst of socialist retreat in the 1980s, some historians followed the linguistic and cultural turns as a way of reworking historical analysis to take account of these changes. But the process of historiographical change has been contradictory: on the one hand, the registers of oppression and inequality in historical writing have been greatly enlarged to encompass gender, ethnicity, race, and sexuality; on the other, there has been a significant narrowing of the political scope, the withering of the cultural and institutional machinery that enabled radical thought to cohere, find expression, and gain purchase on the broader arenas of politics and public life. Today, as the dynamics of late capitalism have permeated all spheres of society, we need a critical understanding of the political and economic conditions of historical production in order to attain a deeper awareness of the kinds of alternatives and possibilities open to us to push back against those very conditions. To that end, this article considers an earlier example of socialist historical practice, which also owed a debt to the original CPHG.

Established in the late 1960s at Ruskin College in Oxford, the History Workshop movement was a major galvanising force in promoting the development of a radical and oppositional programme of historical activity until the 1990s. The chief architect and moving spirit behind the Workshop was Raphael Samuel (1934-1996), a tutor at Ruskin since 1962, who began his own apprenticeship as a historian by attending sessions of the CPHG as a schoolboy. Along with Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, Edward Thompson and others, he was also a key figure in the emergence of the 'first' New Left in Britain in the late-1950s, a short-lived political formation which significantly prefigured later radicalisms and popular mobilisations on the left. In several respects, History Workshop represented a continuation of the politics of that earlier moment.

The annual workshop meetings (held at Ruskin until 1980) brought together huge gatherings of academic, amateur, and labour historians, socialist, feminist and trade-union activists, school teachers, college lecturers, and students, who were carried along by its egalitarian ethos and rebellious esprit. But History Workshop also assumed different forms, from an expanding list of locally-based workshop meetings, to the founding of the *History Workshop Journal* (*HWJ*), and forays into popular media like the Television History Workshop, to more overtly political interventions, such as in debates over the national curriculum. A distinctive aspect of the Workshop's agenda was its commitment to history as a democratic undertaking; democratic in terms of subject-matter, forms of address, and authors. Samuel underscored this point:

People's history also has the merit of raising a crucial question for both theoretical and political work – that of the production of knowledge, both the sources on which it draws and its ultimate point of address. It questions the existing division of labour and implicitly challenges the professionalised monopolies of knowledge. It makes democratic practice one of the yardsticks by which socialist thought is judged, and thus might encourage us not only to interpret the world, but to see how our work could change it.<sup>2</sup>

In sum, History Workshop mobilised history as a form of cultural politics; though it claimed an audience among academic historians, it sought to reshape consciousness of the past far beyond the walls of the university, in particular in the subcultures of the left, and the socialist, feminist and labour movements. The article focuses on two main components in the period up until 1980, the journal and the workshop meetings, and analyses

the Workshop's historical practices, its relationship to left-wing movements and publics, and its anti-academic and democratic ethos.

### **Ruskinmania**

In many ways, History Workshop could only really have been established at Ruskin College, which recruited its students from the trade unions and yet was located at the centre of British elite education. Though not formally linked, the relationship to the University was close, lending Ruskin a distinctive character as well as being a frequent source of tension, which exerted a powerful influence over the genesis of History Workshop. In fact, the Workshop first took shape in response to the dominant model of education then on offer at Ruskin, which was based on the Oxford University Diploma. Samuel, a tutor at the College, claimed that working-class students were ill-served by pedagogical methods that reinforced assumptions about their inferior status. Instead, an alternative educational practice better adapted to their own life experience was required.

Under his watchful eye, students were encouraged to carry out primary research almost as soon as they arrived. The rationale behind this approach was to "demystify" the learning process and put students on a par with the authorities'.<sup>3</sup> Rather than the passive apprehension of an alien academic culture, the students' own life and work experience served as an alternative starting point for their researches, which were often conducted outside their courses and, in Samuel's words, in 'clandestine fashion'.<sup>4</sup> Thus, they implicitly challenged the professional authority of historians as the official producers and arbiters of knowledge. Reflecting on this anti-academic imperative, Samuel wrote that they had 'attempted, from the start, to enlarge the constituency of historical writers and researchers, to demonstrate in practice that the career historian had no monopoly of writing and research'.<sup>5</sup> This point was proved with the publication of several of these research projects as the History Workshop pamphlets between 1970 and 1974.

As examples of people's history, however, the pamphlets were much more than simply pedagogical exercises; conducting extensive research, the students made important contributions to neglected aspects of the history of working-class occupational, cultural and family life. Responding to the impulses released by the likes of Hobsbawm and Thompson, they produced small-scale, local and empirical studies of history from below that became synonymous with History Workshop practice. Equally, the role of experience assumed greater significance because it established a lived and felt connection to past oppressions and resistance. Epistemic privilege

thereby transferred to the marginalised themselves. In the words of one Ruskin student, 'if some of us worked in a particular job they are best qualified to write the social history of the job'.<sup>6</sup> So Bob Gilding, a former president of the London branch of coopers, wrote about *The Journeymen Coopers of East London* (1971). But they were not all occupational histories: John Taylor, a clubman of long-standing, authored the pamphlet *From Self-Help to Glamour: the Working Man's Club 1869-1972* (1972) and Jennie Kitteringham, who came from a farm workers' family, wrote *Country Girls in Nineteenth Century* (1973).

History Workshop began life in 1966, but what would become the first annual History Workshop took place the following year under the title 'A Day with the Chartists', which drew a small crowd to hear talks on the Chartist movement. The Workshop soon underwent a rapid swelling of numbers and a corresponding expansion in size and scale. The next workshop meeting, held in November 1967, involved twelve speakers, two of whom were Ruskin students. By the time of the fourth meeting (November 1969), which was spread across the whole weekend, the audience had doubled from the previous year to 600, who heard fifteen speakers on a range of themes from Victorian London to Proletarian Oxfordshire.

The burgeoning congregations at these early History Workshop meetings reflected the radical upsurge of the late-1960s and early-1970s, represented by both student agitation and industrial militancy. Situated at Ruskin, History Workshop was unusually receptive to impulses arising from the labour movement, the New Left, and the counterculture. 'History Workshop', Dennis Dworkin remarks, 'was a rare example of working-class militants and new left radicals finding common ground'.<sup>7</sup> Indeed the attempt to subvert or circumvent the College curriculum ran parallel to the general anti-authoritarian revolt within the student movement. But the status of the Workshop inside Ruskin was far from assured. According to Samuel, it faced the hostility of what he called the 'College authorities'. It was banned in 1970 following the furore caused by the first national Women's Liberation Conference held at Ruskin, the impetus for which came out of the previous year's workshop meeting. A source of friction and tension, feminist involvement imparted a powerful and critical energy to proceedings. But History Workshop conferences were not altogether popular with Ruskin students, who voted not to hold one at the College in 1973 (the 1974 Workshop took place at LSE), a decision later overturned by another cohort of students. Nonetheless, they became some of the largest gatherings of their kind in Britain.

Recollections of the annual workshop meetings at Ruskin are couched in vivid and evocative terms. Stuart Hall remembers them as 'great, crowded,

celebratory festivals of learning' that occurred in 'an atmosphere of absolute egalitarianism which Raphael, the Great Leveller, rigorously imposed'.<sup>8</sup> For John Gorman, they had 'energy' and were conducted in a 'chaotic spirit of improvisation', while for David Douglass they 'bore more in common with rock festivals without the mud'.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, Brian Harrison referred to the 'remarkable combination of study and recreation [...] the intense absorption of the audience, most of them young, in historical problems' and 'the genuine collaboration of teacher and taught, without stiffness or formality'.<sup>10</sup> The sense of exuberance, equality, and common purpose at these occasions catches the spirit of the time as well as the broadly leftist values and attitudes shared by the audience, what Samuel described as 'a free-floating utopianism, some of it feminist, some of it socialist, some of it anarchist, in which the past became a licence for impossible imaginings about the future'.<sup>11</sup>

In concrete terms, the Workshop was able to generate camaraderie and an egalitarian fervour through its mixture of spontaneous and structured activity, given shape by social, spatial and relational practices. Crucially, it was the prominence of working-class voices on the platform, alongside the general juxtaposition of speakers and listeners that cut across class, gender, and generational lines, which gave History Workshop meetings their distinctive character. In a literal sense, the Workshop put worker-historians on an equal footing with academic historians, undermining the structured inequalities that determine the dynamics of learning and teaching encounters. But their voice was different to that of the historian, carrying authenticity, excitement and political validation. This act of levelling was the most potent sign of the Workshop's democratic appeal.

The process of democratising history was supported by other features of workshop meetings. For example, many presentations took place in Ruskin's Buxton Hall, which was not large enough to accommodate the ever-increasing numbers that turned up. The tightly packed, smoke-filled hall created a physical setting that added to feelings of informality and expectancy. A sense of collective endeavour and mutuality was also present in ad-hoc social and living arrangements, which meant people slept on floors in empty halls or in dorms begged and borrowed from Oxford colleges. In addition, following the day's intellectual exertions, the meeting was transformed into a social and communal space. Folk music was played, union songs were sung, theatre was performed, trade union banners were exhibited, all of which helped to imbue the proceedings with political ardour and emotional intensity. Long-time workshopper Anna Davin recalled 'the general intoxication of the occasion, how people listened, and carried on discussions long afterwards [...] it was a heady mix,

this fusion of music, politics, history and like-minded company. In some ways it symbolised our common project'.<sup>12</sup>

In this light, History Workshop can be seen as a polymorphous space – intellectual, social and communal – which created favourable conditions for the interchange of different experiences and ways of knowing, and the coalescence of interests across various divides. It transgressed the boundaries that normally structured such events, opening up the world of thought to 'the thinking of those not "destined" to think'.<sup>13</sup> In the process, and within a limited orbit, it forged relations of solidarity and forms of mutual support that sustained History Workshop as a common project. After the radical upswing of 1966–74, however, the momentum ebbed, as some of the underlying tissue of assumptions and beliefs upon which it was based were brought gradually into question.

### **The indirect road to political influence and action**

The general sweep of historical work encouraged by the History Workshop is indicated by the organising themes of the annual workshop meetings. In its initial phase, the history of working-class experience and community, and of labour and popular movements was a common thread, featuring prominently in the cases of HW 5 (1971) on 'Workers' Control in the 19th Century England', in HW 10 (1976) on 'Workers' Education and Class Consciousness', and HW 11 (1977) on 'Rank and File Movements'. In spite of some suspicion, the entry of feminism onto the workshop stage was signalled by HW 7 (1973) on 'Women in History' and remained in the turn to the reproductive sphere at HW 6 (1972) on 'Childhood in History' and HW 8 (1974) on 'Family, Work, Home'.<sup>14</sup>

The Workshop's early historical practice, particularly as exhibited in the pamphlets and the first volumes of the History Workshop book series, though heavily shaped by its pedagogical origins, was not separated from the broader contours of historiography. In keeping with the grassroots and participatory sensibilities of the late-60s and early-70s, a major impetus behind this work was provided by discontent with the narrowly institutional and bureaucratic focus of labour history. Nor did the fascination with the minutiae of people's daily lives have nothing meaningful to say about the conceptual underpinnings of Marxist historiography. 'I think that what we were attempting to do, like others', Samuel recalled 'was to re-establish contact between Marxist thought and the reality it purported to address'.<sup>15</sup> This was particularly the case with studies on the workplace and the labour process, or what he described as 'class struggle at the point of production'.

In a wider context, the historical study of work ran parallel to revived interest among Marxists in the study of the labour process under capitalism.

As critics later argued, however, evocative and vivid accounts of working-class community and culture, which had such powerful resonances on the Workshop stage, rested on the assumption that they were intrinsically radical acts, in which class experiences were a font of oppositional political meanings.<sup>16</sup> Thompson's preface to *The Making* had laid out the rationale for 'rescuing' the benighted masses 'from the enormous condescension of posterity' no matter how eccentric or archaic they seemed. His argument about the dynamics of class formation was a powerful and eloquent statement of the political relevance of history. That it had such appeal at this time is hardly surprising given the apparent stability of working-class organisations and institutions, the social and economic gains wrought by the post-war settlement, and rising shop-floor industrial militancy, which gave a strong impression of the labour movement still on the march.

The link to politics did not necessarily have to be direct, but sometimes the strategic timing was impeccable. For example, the fifth History Workshop meeting in February 1971 on workers' control in the nineteenth century occurred at the same time as the Industrial Relations Bill was going through parliament. In a classic piece of workshop theatre, the proceedings began with the singing of the 'Blackleg Miner' by a Newcastle collier followed by a reading of clause 124 of the Bill. An introductory statement alighted on the political significance of historical work, cautioning the assembled gathering that 'the historian, immersed in his [sic] sources, must forgo the temptation to chase on the heels of those in power – or his history will suffer'. In place of soon forgotten ideological pronouncements, 'lasting relevance', it declared 'grows only from the authority which detailed research will lend to general propositions about the development of our society. It is an indirect road to political influence and action'.<sup>17</sup> The insistence on the patient accumulation of authority through historical research as the key to political utility did not easily square with the privileging of experiential access to the past, nor did it dampen the immediacy and celebratory atmosphere of workshop gatherings. This was certainly the case in the first few years of the History Workshop existence, but beginning in 1975, the Workshop took on new forms and enlarged its scope of activity beyond Oxford and Ruskin.

The publication of the first volume of the book series, *Village Life and Labour* (1975), and the foundation of the journal was followed by the extension of the Workshop's influence into wider public consciousness with the appearance of a network of local and community-based offshoots.



The form of these workshops and the structure of the organising groups varied greatly, as did the purpose for which they were convened. On a broader level, they occupied a position within an expanding sphere of people's history activity, encompassing WEA groups, worker-writers' groups, museum and heritage sites, libraries and archives, community arts centres, and regional labour history societies. In placing workshop activity into new fields of production, which operated according to their own specific dynamics and relations of force, these developments redefined the project.

In the case of the journal, the editorial collective committed itself to the principles of the Workshop. 'Like the Workshop, like the pamphlets, like the books in the workshop series', announced the inaugural editorial 'the journal is dedicated to making history a more democratic activity and more urgent concern'.<sup>18</sup> Whilst areas like working-class experience and culture would remain at the centre of their attention, the editors proposed to enlarge the historiographical canvass towards neglected subjects like literature, music, film, theatre and art. More ambitiously, and in distinction to the Workshop practice of local and micro-historical reconstruction, the journal intended to situate its work 'within an overall view of capitalism as a historical phenomenon, both as a mode of production and as system of social relations'. This Marxian emphasis co-existed with a series of planned sections around people's history that would be more accessible in form and practical in character. With titles like 'Archives and Sources', 'Critique', 'Enthusiasms', 'Essays' and 'Historian's Notebook', they would be published in the back half of each issue.

There was no little desire on the part of the editors to make their political commitment explicit, adopting the subtitle 'a journal of socialist historians'. The subtitle had both symbolic and substantive meanings. In the first place, it was designed to attract and repel. The decision to identify as socialist affirmed a commitment to the political complexion of Workshop's constituencies, whether they were based in the university, the labour movement, or elsewhere. For Alun Howkins, a member of the editorial collective, it offered 'a common ground between the 'people's history' of the Ruskin workshops and a more theoretical set of preoccupations coming from the newly-radicalised university seminars'.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the aim of *HWJ* was precisely to 'break through the current rigid division between academic and non-academic journals'.<sup>20</sup> Contrariwise, the symbolic value of the subtitle was also found in its capacity to guard against the co-opting interests of the academy. As Samuel put it, '[w]e didn't want to become another outlet for academic publication, and hoped that by

having 'socialist' in our masthead we would be protected from the kind of incorporation into the research machine which Past and Present had been exposed to'.<sup>21</sup> From this viewpoint, the term captured what Samuel later claimed to be a 'diffuse identity rather than a specific platform or line', one characterised by a pluralistic, egalitarian and non-sectarian sensitivities.<sup>22</sup> However, beyond the democratic appeal of the Workshop and a general commitment to being on the side of the oppressed, there was little to suggest what a journal of socialist historians actually stood for in terms of concrete historical practice.

In an early review of *HWJ*, Asa Briggs intensified this problem by noting that 'much of this activity is not socialist', and, in reference to one early article, suggested that it 'might well have been published in any historical journal'.<sup>23</sup> This claim caused no little amount of consternation. Whereas some editors wholly rejected Briggs' accusations, others conceded that the journal had yet to live up to its subtitle. It inspired discussion of the different ways of understanding the relationship of history to the politics of socialism. The journal's efficacy, suggested Gareth Stedman Jones, could be measured in terms of 'how many readers have been offended'. Samuel agreed, finding the potential for offence in 'exposing capitalism' and in trying to 'raise the temperature of people's feelings about capitalism'.<sup>24</sup> If they laid the emphasis on feelings, Mason showed an interest in the rationalism of historical argument. 'I believe that a part of *HWJ*'s socialist pluralism', he wrote 'involves being political, without seeming to be, consists in leading people to conclusions which are uncomfortable to them, pulling them through the evidence and then saying: "Look, where are you now?" He went on: 'this is a rationalistic approach to the problem of socialism and historiography, it rests upon argument and evidence, rather than imagination and distinctive voice'.<sup>25</sup> That the political force and effect of historical understanding operates through distinct modes of persuasion is something that ran through the Workshop. Samuel underlined this fact, stating the 'particular strength of the workshop, in its meeting, especially, but also in the journal, is that it speaks to people's feelings as well as to their thought'.<sup>26</sup>

The character of socialist history was practical, democratic and pluralist, functioning largely without an ideological core and, so far, a distinctive theoretical perspective. For Jane Caplan, the politics of the journal could not be judged by 'individual articles, but the combination of articles we publish that no one else would'.<sup>27</sup> Its socialist appeal was, then, commensurate with the strategic design of each issue, dictated by the delicacies of selecting and balancing material; as much a matter of aesthetics as ideology.

### Incompatible demands

The launch of the journal's maiden issue in 1976 coincided with the first appearance of local and regional History Workshop meetings and the editorial collective had anticipated drawing its readers from the constituency that made up the workshop meetings. 'We expect to be read by students, teachers, and by scholars', stated an early planning document, but 'the journal will have failed if it does not win a following among trade unionists and active political workers in the labour and the new left; among socialists in the women's movement; among writers, artists and musicians'.<sup>28</sup> With not one but several readerships to serve, all with their own interests and preoccupations, the editors would have to find ways of accommodating them in the content and design of each issue. It was this imperative that dictated their strategic approach to the overall complexion of the issue, which centred on striking a balance between different pieces. The same document claimed that 'carefully select[ing] the contents of each to give a maximum of coverage, contrast and balance, we can serve our different readerships in each issue'.<sup>29</sup>

That *HWJ* faced in many different directions all at once was reflected in a certain ambivalence about which of the its constituent parts ought to be given primacy and in expression of anxieties over alienating different sections of the readership. At an early stage, it was announced that 'the journal will stand and fall by the quality of its articles'. But if the scholarly credentials of the enterprise depended on the articles published, then the back half of the journal also had a crucial role to play. According to Samuel, 'they will actually be more important in establishing the identity of the journal, or at least in setting up a dialogue between the journal and the readers, and winning – or failing to win – their loyalty, participation and support'.<sup>30</sup> Features like 'Enthusiasms' and 'Historian's Notebook' offered novel forms of expression, being more evocative in style and in conveying the immediacy of historical work. It was paramount, therefore, to include both modes of writing, since 'our subscribers are an exceptionally heterogeneous group of people, and to swing too strongly in either direction would be certain to alienate one or another group among them'.<sup>31</sup> Dividing up the readership into distinct categories of reader, corresponding to different parts of the journal, revealed the real tensions imposed upon journal production by competing imperatives present in *HWJ*'s original programme. In simplified terms, the journal had to satisfy two basic commitments: 'a) [f]rom the point of view of our readership and standing in higher education we need normally to at least two research-based pieces per issue. b) from the point of view of readership following and support it is the almanac character of the

Journal which is the greatest strength'.<sup>32</sup> This admission appears to reproduce the very separation of academic and non-academic that the journal had sought to break down, but it actually confirmed the habit of many readers, who tended to read sections from the back half of the journal first.<sup>33</sup>

The question of how to translate political commitments into articles and editorial forms was intimately related to the political complexion of the readership. In the appeal to a wider reading public outside higher education was not only the prospect of placing the journal on a sounder financial footing, a frequent source of editorial unease, but also the belief that it would act (rather like the subtitle) as a buffer against mechanisms that assimilated opposition and defused dissent. 'We need this readership for security', wrote Samuel 'but also to maintain the character of the journal and prevent it succumbing to the invisible pressures of a mainly academic readership'.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, the editors' particular socialist commitments could not be assumed to be shared by the readership at large. Instead they ought to remain open for discussion, lest they 'degenerate into a mere complacency'.<sup>35</sup>

By mid-1977, with three issues of *HWJ* already published, editorial deliberations began to reflect dilemmas of how to sustain momentum, which were intensified by the lack of really exciting and pioneering submissions received. With different themes and subject-matter vying for space inside the journal, it was vital that each piece make a distinctive contribution. 'There can be no room in the journal for dead copy', as one internal memo cautioned.<sup>36</sup> The standards for articles were exacting. In a review of one submission, for instance, the stipulation for articles read: 'should either open up some new, or comparatively untraveled, historical subject matter [...] or offer some fairly radical and comprehensive reorientation of thought'.<sup>37</sup> Not only did this make the task of selection and coverage for each issue exceedingly contingent, but it threatened to upset the fragile balance of forces which the journal hoped to represent.

One area where this had become evident was in the limited presence of worker- or first-time historians in the pages of the journal. With the clamour for high quality submissions, it is unsurprising that their contributions were squeezed. Aside from the first issue, no other main article was authored by what could be described as a 'worker-historian'. Samuel himself worried about this imbalance, admitting that the trend would persist unless positive discrimination in favour of non-university writers was taken. '[W]e ought to have an overwhelming preference for worker-writers and first-time historians over established and academic ones but we can only give this if they also substantially enlarge or deepen historical knowledge'.<sup>38</sup> Therein lay the rub. The inequality of relations between worker-historians and academic

historians in their dealing with the journal could only be overcome with the kind of long-term support originally provided by Samuel (and Anna Davin) in the production of the workshop pamphlets.

Even the more evocative and accessible features of the journal, such as *Enthusiasms*, were not immune to this pressure. Hopes were high, however, that *Enthusiasms* would offer a fitting medium for conveying the kinds of experience and voice that would resonate with the wider readership, as well as fulfilling its democratic obligations. 'It should break down the sense of hierarchy in reading, by putting the unofficial and extra-mural sources on a par with the formally recognised ones', wrote Samuel to one critic.<sup>39</sup> But some early pieces were deemed unsuitable because they did not have 'exemplary force'. Samuel himself foresaw the problem of how editorial standards could limit their democratic potential and vitiate the link to the world of politics and movements. As he warned the rest of the editorial collective, 'we clearly need to be on guard lest the effect of our own critical standards is going to be to drive off that kind of contribution [...] which will in the end lose our precious but very fragile links with some large outside'.<sup>40</sup> If *HWJ* was to speak with different voices, to create an active relationship with the readership, and to widen the circle of writers, then it would surely require some lessening of the demand to print exemplary and distinctive material. Of course, sacrifices on quality would undermine the basis upon which the whole strategy was built, since it was also committed to intellectual growth and development.

In another memo to his fellow editors, Samuel urged them to recognise that they faced 'incompatible demands', but that should not lead to doubts about the political value of their project. That they wanted to extend their political and popular reach, but also make critical interventions into existing academic debates, or that they wanted to encourage inexperienced historical writers, but also publish scholarship by established historians, reflected such demands. Whether or not intellectual advance was compatible with connecting to that larger outside and expanding its democratic compass greatly depended on how far the priorities and concerns of the more academic and popular strands within the left could be held in tension without falling into outright conflict.

### **Anticipating the times**

If the editorial collective faced difficulties in democratising the published form, then the Ruskin workshop meeting too faced similar challenges. From the beginning, it had been run by a shifting combination of students

at the College and Samuel, but their relationship to Ruskin was different. Whereas the cycle of student participation rotated every two years with each new intake, Samuel was a permanent fixture. A structural inequality was thus built into the Workshop from the start. As Samuel later admitted, 'it is inherently an unequal relationship since in any given year I was the only person with Workshop experience, and also the only person who knew how a programme might be constructed'.<sup>41</sup> This did not create insuperable barriers, particularly when there was felt to be a strong sense of political synergy and shared solidarity between Ruskin students and those who came from outside. But later on there was growing resentment on the part of the students at the constituency of annual meetings.

The 1975 Workshop was another rumbustious event that had been so large that it moved to the Oxford Union and a number of students were drafted in to help; a situation that created friction between Samuel and the students. Consequently, the Workshop was placed under the control of a student committee, so that it would be done 'in a much more controlled way for the next time'. For the 1976 Workshop, a formal collective of students was established which ensured that 'the size of the attendance will be strictly limited' and 'priority in distributing tickets will be [sic] given to people applying from the Oxford area'.<sup>42</sup> The next workshop meeting in 1977 was a very different affair. Run almost entirely by the students themselves, the meeting returned to single sessions, which were delivered by far fewer academic historians and most of the speakers were drawn from the labour movement or Ruskin. In planning the event, the student collective decided that there was 'the need for greater participation by both Ruskin students and Rank and File people', and 'to structure the annual workshops so as to attract Rank and File people as opposed to "trendy" academics'.<sup>43</sup> Reflecting on the ebbs and flows of the annual workshop, Samuel identified a decisive shift in its direction:

The first workshops, from 1967 to 1973 were rather carefully shaped, a large component of the work being prepared, over a long period, by students and ex-students working with myself or (in the workshops of 1972-3) myself and Anna Davin [...] In the middle and later '70s, partly because of the formation of History Workshop Journal, which took up my energies, partly because of the weakening oppositional current among the students at Ruskin, the Workshop developed a much more open character [...] The proportion of long prepared Ruskin and ex-Ruskin papers in the Workshop declined.<sup>44</sup>

No doubt the declining participation of Ruskin students would have been acutely felt. But the impression of an absence of working-class people at the Workshop was not confined to Ruskin. For example, a report on a workshop meeting held in Bradford pointed out the irony of having no working-class involvement: '[f]or while we sat and intellectualised about Bradford's past, the very people whose participation would have made it all worthwhile were going about the routine Saturday-morning chore of shopping in the local supermarket, opposite the Workshop meeting'.<sup>45</sup> The inability to attract working people was attributed to the cultural distance that separated them from the lifestyle, language and concerns of a 'theory-building left'. Indeed, the journal itself increasingly became the target of criticisms that centred on its academic and elitist drift.

The distance between editorial and workshop collectives widened under the general worsening of the political climate and ways in which it was perceived. Since the appearance of *HWJ*'s first issue, 'it's been a depressing two years of defeat and setback to the British labour movement on almost every front', asserted an unpublished draft editorial for issue five, which had 'weakened the working class and democratic movement until the combativeness of 1967-74 seems a golden dream'.<sup>46</sup> Against this background, and in light of the strengths and weaknesses of the first few issues, specific areas of focus and attention were given new urgency, whilst the pressure to re-evaluate existing priorities mounted.

Despite the effort of the editors to cover a wide range of topics and themes, some readers expressed disappointment at their narrow and uncritical preoccupations. John Saville remarked that 'the whole tenor so far is really to de-politicise British history. Even the covers reinforce the impressions of antiquarianism'.<sup>47</sup> Another academic historian wrote bitterly about the fact that 'it seems to be determined to confine itself to a narrow group who work on a limited range of subjects from a workerist point of view'.<sup>48</sup> That a substantial proportion of the readership favoured a certain kind of historical encounter was duly noted in a report to the collective: 'the articles which have made the most impact so far have been McKenna and Martyrdom of the Mines'. Frank McKenna's article 'Victorian Railwayman' and a text by Edward Rymer on mine-workers offered vivid accounts of working-class experience and struggle. Conversely, the ambition to take up critical and theoretical questions had made little headway. As another reviewer observed, '[i]n the general enthusiasm for local history, oral history, the history of popular culture, and "history from below", one misses a consciously articulated theory of socialist historiography'.<sup>49</sup> The obligation to local and people's history

was a powerful one, but if it had inhibited the growth of other tendencies, then the journal would potentially lose contact with other constituencies.

From 1977 onwards, Samuel's internal memos and missives increasingly worried over the direction of the journal. He feared it was losing touch with the New Left, which was more critical in attitude and theoretical in orientation, originally imparting 'a restless, turbulent character' to workshop meetings. A parallel concern related to how the marginal status of the journal vis-à-vis the intellectual culture of the British left could be redressed. A theoretical contribution, Samuel surmised, could be orchestrated around a number of subjects, including 'the discussion of historiography', 'feminism', 'aesthetics', and 'class consciousness and the theory of labour movements'.<sup>50</sup> Another factor also weighed on Samuel's mind, which would powerfully shape the course of editorial strategy. In his view, 'at the moment and for some time to come it seems to me that the journal simply has to be visibly moving forward'.<sup>51</sup> The question was in which direction should it move.

### **Historiographical parricide**

'The great strength of workshop meetings', Samuel wrote 'is their supportive character – people don't on the whole come to snipe or to vent their personal competitiveness and aggression'.<sup>52</sup> It was one of the things that differentiated workshop gatherings from university seminars. When *HWJ* was formed, that supportive character was carried over into editorial practice, as was clear in the decision to replace book reviews with Enthusiasms. It also helps to explain the reluctance to enter into debates on the history of the left. Tim Mason conceded that 'the Journal wishes as a whole to avoid taking positions within historic controversies on the left'.<sup>53</sup> Despite such restraint, controversy did come to engulf the journal and the Workshop, though not over the history of the left.

The publication of an article written by Richard Johnson, a member of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), on 'Edward Thompson and Socialist-Humanist History' in 1978 caused major discord both inside and outside the editorial collective, and then culminated in a highly-charged and exceedingly hostile encounter at History Workshop 13 in November 1979.<sup>54</sup> Timing was everything, since Thompson himself had published the essay 'The Poverty of Theory' in 1978 in an eponymously titled volume – a vitriolic screed against structuralist Marxism identified with the French philosopher Louis Althusser.<sup>55</sup> Johnson stressed the benefits of 'Althusserian' theory for socialist historians, whilst taking aim at some of the more questionable assumptions basic



to Thompson's approach. His critique focused on Thompson's empiricist method, which concealed his own theoretical position and assumed a too simplistic a correspondence between concept and reality, as well as his problematic use of the category of experience. The latter charge related to the primacy accorded to experience in Thompson's account of working-class formation, a broad and amorphous notion, which, in Johnson's view, collapsed vital distinctions in Marx's original formulations between 'economic structure and political and cultural superstructure'.<sup>56</sup>

In retrospect, Thompson's clash with Johnson and Stuart Hall over 'People's History and Socialist Theory' appears to hold only antiquarian interest now. Althusser's Marxism soon fell out of fashion, whilst Thompson flung himself into campaigning for the peace movement, and his own version of social history came under more sustained criticism, as successive waves of theoretical currents (psychoanalytical, linguistic, feminist, cultural) broke across history's bow during the 1980s and 1990s. And yet in the context of History Workshop it had explosive consequences precisely because it was a contest over the legitimacy of the recuperative practice of people's history.

In publishing Johnson's article, the editorial collective knew they would cause a stir. Mason declared that they had 'released a genie', or, as he put it elsewhere, '*HWJ* attacks EPT. Read all about it!!! – this is big news, historiographical parricide'.<sup>57</sup> If there was an element of oedipal conflict about the episode, then the editorial collective was hardly enthusiasts for the piece. It was the prospect of generating a serious discussion about socialist historiography with a broad impact that proved persuasive. Despite the publication of several subsequent responses, this discussion never really took shape. Fear of the likely reaction to Johnson led to a conciliatory editorial designed to allay the fears of the readership, which sought to both recommend the importance of theory for history and yet distance the editorial collective from the specific case made. In the event, the editorial had little effect and privately there were admissions that the collective had taken a lot of 'flak' over the article. The efforts to make theory accessible and less impenetrable proved largely unrealised. Samuel bemoaned the fact that 'we have commenced a theory debate in ways in which a portion of our readership find alienating and do not understand [...] they fear we are going the way of the academic Marxist journals or (like my mother) simply do not follow what we – in the editorial – or Johnson, in his article, are on about'.<sup>58</sup>

Arguably, the main significance of the event was the way in which it crystallised the increasing bifurcation of academic and populist orientations, and revealed the limits of the Workshop's democratic capacities. This was most dramatically illustrated at the meeting itself. Following the

battle over theory between Thompson and Hall, the simmering discontent of the Ruskin students towards the division of labour in organisation of the weekend boiled over on the final day into the airing of resentments and grievances. In the words of one Ruskin student, 'last year, we students made the soup and all the editorial people waltzed in and out. This year we wanted to give papers, but we're still making the soup and they're still giving the papers'.<sup>59</sup> Ironically, the original plan to organise the Workshop around this topic had been to make the debate more democratic.

At the same time, the debate should not be isolated from the broader processes and dynamics of change affecting the journal, the Workshop and left intellectual work more generally. In the field of social history, practitioners had begun to see the conceptual insufficiencies of its explanatory schema, which was attributed to a faulty conception of class formation that rested on unspoken, essentialist assumptions about what the real consciousness and interests of the working-class ought to be.<sup>60</sup> This left a rather attenuated account of the role of political and ideological processes as secondary phenomena in comparison to the primacy accorded to class experience. To understand how class relations are politically and ideologically reproduced, and that experience is not some anterior reality, threatened to undermine the political rationale behind the recovery of working-class history. As Stuart Hall remarked, 'as if, simply to tell the story of past oppressions and struggles is to find the promise of socialism already there, fully constituted, only waiting to "speak out"'.<sup>61</sup> From another direction, and with more far-reaching consequences, feminism and women's history destabilised class-centred forms of explanation.

The 1979 History Workshop marked both the high point and the outer limit of its capacities to shape the wider cultural and intellectual terrain. By this time, Samuel's outlook had hardened. The journal had 'outlive[d] the original circumstances which led to its foundation' and now had 'to take account of, or to anticipate, changing circumstances'. In the changing climate, the editors had to find new areas that would be points of future growth. Meanwhile, the coverage devoted to local and people's history had become 'a bit disproportionate to its capacities for growth.' Thus, a reversal of sorts was underway. Where maintaining the interests of a wider and popular constituency had once been seen as protection against the de-politicising effects of incorporation into the academy, now they threatened to 'become fetters on real development'.<sup>62</sup> The local and regional workshops had also seemingly ran out of steam in Samuel's view, whereas advances came more from individual work. In this situation, with the left in a parlous state, *HWJ* was 'entering a new phase', which called for a

general realignment of its political perspective. 'We need to be, I think, both free of the ebbs and flows of political feeling', he argued 'otherwise we shall go under when things go badly'.<sup>63</sup>

Such sentiments may well have confirmed some of the fears of readers who felt that *HWJ* was moving further away from them. There was 'genuine anger and frustration' on the part of many readers, it was reported, and an impression that 'the Journal has betrayed the Workshop ideal'.<sup>64</sup> Part of the problem appears to have been an uncertainty about the relationship between the journal and the wider movement, as well as a general lack of coordination between different workshop organisations. Initiatives were launched to strengthen these connections via the organisation of readers' meetings to facilitate exchange between editors, writers and readers of the journal, and the creation of the short-lived 'Federation of History Workshops and Socialist historians'. Nevertheless, the antagonisms registered in the debate over theory reflected the contradictory impulses and purposes embedded in the original programme of *HWJ*. It is ironic that a project which had sought to de-academicise history and believed that professional historians had no monopoly over historical production came to reinforce tendencies that undercut those commitments.

### **The ends of socialist history**

In the volume *Village Life and Labour*, Samuel wrote that '[t]he socialist historian has the privilege of keeping the record of resistance to oppression, but also the duty of analysing the enemy's campaign, and showing how men and women become accomplices in their own subjection'.<sup>65</sup> If the former had characterised early Workshop practice, then the transition to the latter proved more troublesome and initiated a series of innovative departures, which left behind much of the earlier ground. The stress on agency had spoken to that early political moment of 1968, though it carried contradictory implications into later times. From the relative autonomy of the political, through various forms of non-Marxist theory identified with the linguistic and cultural turns, via Foucault, psychoanalysis and discourse theory, social history was fundamentally transformed in the 1980s and 1990s 'at the cost of making it unrecognisable to its erstwhile and intellectual supporters'.<sup>66</sup> At the same time, where History Workshop had once boasted of ties with the labour, socialist and feminist movements, however ultimately fragile they were, relations to popular forces and movements became much weaker, a fact confirmed by the editors' decision to drop the subtitle 'a journal of socialist and feminist historians'

in 1995. The contraction of both old and new left formations has drastically curtailed the political reach of socialist historical work.

Socialist or radical history will always shadow the broader fortunes of left-wing politics, but we have a little more scope to develop insights from past instances of left historiography in order to better engage with current politics. What an exploration of the history of History Workshop offers is a thickening of the imaginative possibilities of connecting history and politics. In its dismantling of inequalities by conferring authority on personal testimony and experience, its appeal to the emotional as well as the rational, its emphasis on the aesthetic and symbolic as much as the ideological, and its efforts to invent democratic forms of engagement, the Workshop multiplied the potential lines of transfer between the two. There were definite limits to this vision, but many of them were imposed by permanent contradictions that attend any project of democratising knowledge.

The editors of *HWJ* affirmed the belief 'that history is a source of inspiration and understanding', and added 'we believe that history should become common property'.<sup>67</sup> In this way, the Workshop's own history can do likewise for present struggles against capital and for the 'commons', functioning as a source of renewal for radically democratic forms of socialism.

## Notes

1. Sheila Rowbotham, 'Some Memories of Raphael', *New Left Review*, 221 (1997), p130
2. Raphael Samuel, 'People's History', in Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory*, London 1981, pxxxii
3. Raphael Samuel, *History Workshop: A Collectanea, 1967-1991*, Oxford 1991, p67.
4. Raphael Samuel, 'On the Methods of History Workshop: A reply', *History Workshop Journal*, 8 (1980), p163.
5. Samuel, 'Afterword', in Samuel, *People's History and Socialist Theory*, p415.
6. Sid Wills, quoted in Brian Harrison, 'Historical Happening', *New Society*, 18.02.1971, p267.
7. Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies*, Durham NC 1997, p186.
8. Stuart Hall, 'Raphael Samuel: 1934-96', *New Left Review*, 221 (1997), p124.
9. David Douglass, 'In Tribute', *Labour History Review*, 62, 1 (1997), p120.
10. Harrison, 'Historical Happening'.
11. Samuel, *Collectanea*, p95.

12. Anna Davin, 'The Only Problem was Time', *History Workshop Journal* 50 (2000), p240.
13. Jacques Ranciere, *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, Philadelphia PA 1989, pxii.
14. Within the scope of this article, it has not been possible to give the contribution of feminism and feminist historians to History Workshop its full due; I hope to remedy this in future publications.
15. Samuel, 'Afterword', p414.
16. See Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain*, p191.
17. David Douglass, Industrial Relations Bill, Undated, RS7/016, Bishopsgate Institute, London.
18. Editorial, *History Workshop Journal*, 1 (1976), p1.
19. Alun Howkins, 'A Past for the People', *New Statesman and Society*, 27.01.1995.
20. Unauthored, Letter to Ralph Blond, Undated, RS9/019.
21. Samuel, Invisible Pressures, 4.10.1977, RS9/003.
22. Samuel, *Collectanea*, pv.
23. Asa Briggs, 'The Secrets of Society', reprinted in *Collectanea*, p117.
24. Minutes of *HWJ* Editorial Meeting, 18.07.1976 RS9/003.
25. Tim Mason, Letter to Sue [Bullock], 4.05.1977, RS9/001.
26. RS, Letter [to collective], 22.03.1977, RS9/003.
27. Minutes of *HWJ* Editorial Meeting, 20.03.1977, RS9/003.
28. Unauthored, 'Character of the journal', 1.04.1975, RS9/013.
29. Ibid.
30. Samuel, 'Notes to fellow editors', 24.06.1975, RS9/002.
31. Tim Mason, 'Draft note on typescripts', Undated, RS9/003.
32. Samuel, 'Letter [to collective]', 21.01.1978, RS9/045.
33. In an impromptu survey of what people read first, Samuel noted how the results 'suggests that everyone (in a sample of five!) reads the Readers' Letters first or second'. Samuel, Notes on issue 5, 4.07.1978 RS9/051.
34. Samuel, Letter to Gwyn and Maria [Williams], 7.03.1976, RS9/022.
35. Samuel, Letter, 15.03.1977 RS9/003.
36. Samuel, GSJ, Memo on editorial practice', 28.07.1977 RS9/003.
37. Samuel, Comments on McGruffie 'Poor Man's Guardian', 30.04.1978 RS9/074.
38. Samuel, Letter [to editors], 1.06.1977 RS9/003.
39. Samuel, Letter to Philip Corrigan, 8.05.1975, RS9/015.
40. Samuel, Letter to Tim [Mason], 9.08.1976, RS9/026.
41. RS, Letter to editorial collective, 6.12.1979 RS9/063.
42. 'History Workshop Guidelines', Undated, RS7/002.

43. Minutes, RCHWC, 20.10.1976 RS7/002.
44. Samuel, 'Thoughts about the future organisation of national history workshop', 28.07.1980, RS7/004.
45. Bob West, 'Bradford History Workshop, Textile Hall, 10 March 1979', *History Workshop Journal*, 8 (1979) p187.
46. Draft editorial 'Issue 5: Two years ago', Undated RS9/0.
47. John Saville, Letter to Raphael Samuel, 24.08.1977, RS9/039.
48. Unknown author, 'Letter to Gareth Stedman Jones', 8.03.1978 RS9/001.
49. Gail Malmgreen, 'History Workshop Journal', *Victorian Studies*, 22, 2 (1979), p234.
50. Samuel, Letter to comrades, 11.01.1978, RS9/045.
51. Ibid.
52. Samuel, 'Federation of History Workshops and Socialist Historians', 14.02.1980, RS7/004.
53. Tim Mason, Letter to Alan Pratt, 2.12.1976, RS9/001.
54. Richard Johnson, 'Edward Thompson, Eugene Genovese, and Socialist-Humanist History', *History Workshop Journal*, 6 (1978), p79-100.
55. *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, London 1978.
56. Johnson, 'Socialist-Humanist History', p92. For a detailed examination of Thompson's theoretical premises, see William H. Sewell, 'How Classes Are Made: Critical Reflections on E.P. Thompson's Theory of Working-Class Formation', in Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland (eds.), *E.P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives*, Oxford 1990.
57. Tim Mason, Letter to Jerry [White], 27.01.1979, RS9/003.
58. Samuel, Letter to Tim [Mason], 2.02.1979 RS9/056.
59. Tom Mole quoted in Martin Kettle, 'The experience of history', reprinted in Samuel (ed.), *Collectanea*, p107.
60. See Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, 'Why does social history ignore politics', *Social History*, 5, 2 (1980), pp249-71.
61. Stuart Hall, 'In defence of theory', in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, p384.
62. Samuel, A third memo on the future of *HWJ*, 9.07.1979, RS9/005.
63. RS, Letter to Sue, 27.02.1980 RS9/068.
64. Jerry White, *HWJ* and Political Pamphlets, 13.02.1980, RS9/005.
65. Samuel, *Village Life and Labour*, London 1975, pxix.
66. Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Anglo-Marxism, Neo-Marxism and the Discursive Approach to History', in Alf Lüdtke (ed.), *Was bleibt von marxistischen Perspektiven in der Geschichtsforschung?*, Göttingen 1997, p165.
67. Editorial, *History Workshop Journal*, 1 (1965), p2.