

Applied History Network – Position Statement – by Tank Green

My proposal is for a network of politically-engaged historians to serve as a resource for our own, and others', research, writing, and campaigning activities. I/we¹ envisage the Applied History Network² as a collective of independent and affiliated researchers who would come together to enable mutual discussion, joint publishing activities, local events, and other activities which show the vitality and importance of history to the present. By calling it the Applied History Network, we are emphasising our commitment to a form of scholarship which engages with the real world and the problems that require real solutions today. There are therefore two core aspects to Applied History: firstly, we believe that a knowledge of history is vital to fully understanding the present; and, secondly, given the nature of the wildly inequitable, neoliberal twenty-first century, we assert that responsible scholarship must be politically-engaged. We also think that, despite being the most politicised subject on the curriculum, professional historians have been especially slow (reluctant?) to acknowledge and engage with the political relevance of history. However, following Howard Zinn, we assert that history need, and must, be a weapon for the generation of a fairer society.

The Problem

In general, the idea for a network is borne out of the tensions I feel as an inherently interdisciplinary scholar stuck in what feels like an old-fashioned discipline. I came to history organically as I aged, like I am sure many others do; however, this growing need to contextualise historically was suddenly, and quite particularly, amplified by 9/11. I was living in Philadelphia at the time and I watched a country I had loved become something I didn't love. So I made my way back to the UK in order to start a degree in the Study of Religions at SOAS³ so I could more adequately combat the growing Islamophobia I was witnessing. I mention this because it is key: I started this academic journey when I was 30 because of my politics, and I continued because I sought the authority of speech that a title (Dr) would confer and which I felt was denied to me because of my gender. So the space I occupy within the academy is dominated by my life and my politics outside of it and if I take that away, I take away my reason for being in that space in the first place.

Certainly (and unsurprisingly), when I was at SOAS both the interdisciplinary nature of my thinking and the presence of my politics proved me no problems. But since leaving, and especially now I am doing a *PhD* in History, which means that I am subject to different levels of scrutiny (internally and externally), I find myself

1 The idea for a formal network was my idea but grew out of a conference I did with two other people – Diarmaid Kelliher and Luca Lapolla – who are also a part of this network. Other members are: Hannah Ishmael and Rob Waters.

2 <http://appliedhistorynetwork.wordpress.com/>

3 <http://www.soas.ac.uk/>

thinking that history is both incredibly important *and* that the historical establishment⁴ forbids it from being so. By this I mean two main things: the straitjacket of emphasis on objectivity and neutrality, and the wider academic issues of non-engagement and of disinterested scholarship prevent the importance of history to contemporary society emerging. *In general* (and I admit this is broad-brush), I feel there is an overwhelming lack of political engagement by the historical establishment in Britain at present; or, to put it in other terms, an abundance of emphasis on objectivity, neutrality, and disinterested scholarship.

As may have been gathered, I am drawing heavily from the work of Howard Zinn⁵ and in particular, several essays in his *The Politics of History*.⁶ In these essays, Zinn noted the inconsequential nature of much academic historical scholarship and argued that since knowledge is a form of power, it should be used to counter the oppressive tendencies of governments (and other power structures) in order to liberate societies from racism, poverty, war, sexism, and other forms of injustices. Zinn contested the notion of 'disinterested scholarship', noting the systemic interests which were already at work within the academy. The question was not of *disinterested* scholarship, rather of *which interests* each academic would serve. Objectivity, he felt, was non-existent *per se*, and was actually the disguise for one of those interests: neutrality. Yet, given the unequal nature of the world, this neutrality was, and is, a retrogressive and fictive position. For Zinn, the position of a neutral bystander in a world riddled with injustice was untenable because,

[i]n a world where justice is maldistributed, historically and now, there is no such thing as a 'neutral' or 'representative' recapitulation of the facts, any more than one is dealing 'equally' with a starving beggar and a millionaire by giving each a piece of bread.⁷

Zinn also asserted that the preponderance of liberalism in the academy, in terms of the politics of academics in general, curtailed the activities of the historian. For, even when the historian did engage with current affairs, it was limited to the workings and objectives of the (neo)liberal, capitalist framework. However, given that, as Donald Soper noted in 1962, the framework of capitalism cannot provide answers to the problems provoked by capitalism, such limited engagements cannot amount to much. The world needs something more critical and radical than liberal urgings. But before cries of subjectivism are made, one should hold in mind Paulo Freire's comment that,

the radical is never a subjectivist. For this individual the subjective aspect exists only in relation to the objective aspect (the concrete reality, which is the object of analysis). Subjectivity and objectivity thus join in a dialectical unity producing knowledge with action, and vice versa.⁸

4 Here I'm talking in systemic terms: the prestigious academic journals, publishing houses, large conferences, and those individuals holding senior positions.

5 <http://howardzinn.org>

6 These are, 'Knowledge as a Form of Power', 'History as Private Enterprise', 'What is Radical History?', and 'The Historians' in particular. Howard Zinn, *The Politics of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1970, repr. 1971).

7 Howard Zinn, 'History as a Private Enterprise', pp. 15-34, (p. 24).

8 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (London: Continuum, 1970, repr. 2005), p. 38.

As such, we assert that education, and knowledge more generally, is too important and too powerful to leave to some inert and neutral existence, because the inertia only reinforces the status quo which is rapidly consuming all but those who exist within its (epi)centre. Like Freire, we think that education, historical and otherwise, should liberate us *and* those we seek to educate.

Some assert that 'presentism' will lead the scholar to twist or distort the 'truth' of the past. This assumes that the historian who opposes (neoliberal) capitalism or sexism or racism (etc.) needs to find oppositions to these things in the past. Coupled with that is the fear that, if the historian fails to find such oppositions, then they will be inclined to invent evidence for it or to exaggerate what evidence they do find. Aside from the unethical suggestions it makes, I think this is a limited understanding of how the past can relate to the present. Yes we can potentially use history to find past answers to present problems; and yes we can potentially find examples of action or community (etc.) that we wish to emulate. However, more than that, we can find in history similarities and differences with the present; different ways of being and different structures of society; different approaches to ecology and different relationships with the environment; different philosophies and practices of the human; and finally, but in no way exhaustively, we can find the ways in which we came to be here, in the present world, with the present order and structures. Fundamentally, it isn't that someone engaged with, or motivated by, present concerns needs to find those concerns in the past, it's that *we find the past in our present concerns*.

With this, I am also in some senses advocating an inversion of the historiographical operation. Like Zinn and like Nietzsche, I think that history should be 'life oriented';⁹ by which I mean that an important task of the historian is to begin with everyday life and then trace in the past in a connect-the-dots fashion, linking what is with what has been. This is because, as was noted in the opening paragraph, I believe that the past is highly relevant to everyday life. We can think of society as an institutionalised form of historical events,¹⁰ and witness in the social body the manifestations of 'the stigmata of past experience', or the imprints of history.¹¹ In this same way, Michel de Certeau reflected upon the notion of time and of the ways in which the dead haunt the living. He said that the past *bites* the present, secretly and repeatedly; history is therefore *cannibalistic* and memory is a site of conflict between an act of forgetting the past and the return of a past which is forced to disguise itself. No matter whether we recognise it or not, the past infiltrates the present, it resurfaces and disturbs with resistances and residues over and against the objections of the social body.¹²

9 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 1873, repr. 2005), pp. 1-11.

10 Kirsten Hastrup, 'Introduction', in Kirsten Hastrup (ed.), *Other Histories* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 7.

11 Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', in Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977), p. 148.

12 Michel de Certeau, 'Psychoanalysis and its History', in Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. 3-4.

It is important to clarify that I am not advocating a *singular* way of doing history, nor am I stating that particular (i.e. 'minority') histories are inherently radical. I would agree that the ways of doing history are multifarious and that the ways one engages with history depends upon one's place in society. However, many of us are not able to, cannot afford to, or do not want to, divorce our place in society and our present day political concerns from our scholarship. At the end of the day, *all* scholarship is related to the interests and concerns of the researcher; why shouldn't the researcher's politics also be a part of that? As such, whilst what I am advocating is one way of doing history, I do believe it is the most important way when one considers the vast and vicious disparities which exist globally. I am also arguing for an engaged form of historical scholarship because I think that it is a way of engaging with history that is marginalised, often frowned upon, and non-normative. Historians, as human beings, have a multiplicity of voices; Applied History is a method of reclamation, and of amplification, of voices currently outside the academic norm.

First Stage Solution

My frustrations, thoughts and convictions, as outlined above, led me to join the Raphael Samuel History Centre's¹³ 'new historian network', as their publicity email suggested that this was a group for politically-engaged historians. However, myself and two other members – Diarmaid Kelliher and Luca Lapolla – became frustrated by the reluctance among other members to make this political engagement explicit. Therefore, to cut a long story short, we three decided to put on the 'What is radical history?'¹⁴ PGR conference in March 2015. The conference was a resounding success with 6 panels of 3 speakers covering topics such as the psychological androgyny, a feminist intervention project, the politics of differing conceptualisations of time, the 1981 Brixton uprisings, the absence of rural women in the History of Art, and many others, as well as a round-table discussion with Mike Jackson of LGSM,¹⁵ the historian Becky Taylor, and the International Relations scholar Robbie Shilliam. We had over 75 attendees, not including the panellists, and as a result, History Workshop Online ran a special series of articles about the event.¹⁶

We were really encouraged and inspired by the response to the conference, and are keen that the conversations started that day are not ended there. Therefore, we have already started a small Applied History group (there are currently 5 of us) whereby we put on regular evening events in London which specifically apply historical scholarship to contemporary events. We aim to have one event every two months, and each event will tackle a different contemporary event / idea / discourse. The aim of these events is to show people the relevancy of history to the present, to use historical knowledge to make

13 <http://www.raphael-samuel.org.uk>

14 <https://radicalhistoryconference.wordpress.com>

15 Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners. The film *Pride* was recently made about this group.

16 <http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/radical-history-graduate-online-symposium-what-is-radical-history/>. The links to the other articles appear at the bottom of that introductory one.

interventions into contemporary debates, to view scholarship as a form of activism, and to take historical scholarship beyond the academy.

Each 1.5-2hr long event will be led by one member of the group and the suggested format is to have three or four participants giving 10-15min talks (or films, etc.) on the selected theme, followed by an extended discussion session involving the floor. The participants do not have to be academics or students, but the discussion must be based on the relationship of history to the topic being discussed, or, indeed, the failures of history in respect of it. We hope that the attendees will not just be academics, but other members of the public who are interested in current affairs and/or history. In this way we hope to be able to show people that there are different types of historians who practise the craft in various ways. Additionally, we hope that historians can learn from the public ways in which to enhance and direct their work, and also how to make it more accessible.

The purpose of holding these events, in reference to the overarching idea outlined in the first paragraph, is really to act as a practical first step. The initial idea, like most of those I have, was about 40 stages down the road – the question was how to get there. One of the people who attended the first meet-up about the network – Rob Waters – suggested putting on the events and, since it was something I anticipated the network facilitating long-term, we agreed it was the perfect first step. After the current year, in which events are put on by the current members of the group, we plan to put out a call for papers to open up event leadership to other people. The events will allow us to disseminate our view of historical scholarship beyond our limited circle and should also show us how interested people are in history of this kind.

So far, we have had a successful first event on 20 October 2015 with approximately 40 people in attendance. This event was led by myself and was entitled 'British history and anti-racist campaigning'.¹⁷ I organised it as a response to hearing many anti-racist campaigners say that their work was hampered by a general lack of historical knowledge in respect of Empire and colonialism amongst the white British public. Campaigners often assert that those they oppose lack basic knowledge about the histories, ties and bonds which bind people of Asian, African and Caribbean descent as tightly to this island as they do white people. In this way, we can see an abject failure in the historical narrative of this country: it does not tell the truth of our past in such a way as to facilitate justice for *all* of us on this island, as well as the greater world Britain pillaged. The truth of Sivanandan's aphorism 'we are here because you were there' is yet to be fully understood. Therefore, in order to explore this more fully, the event brought together four speakers to examine the relationship between the white general public's understanding of British history and anti-racist campaigning work. Write ups and podcasts of this, and all future events, are available on the 'past events'

¹⁷ <http://appliedhistorynetwork.wordpress.com/2015/09/13/british-history-and-anti-racist-campaigning/>

section of our website.¹⁸

Second Stage Solution

Eventually, I envisage the Applied History Network to be a much larger collective of independent and affiliated researchers. The Network will enable mutual discussion, joint publishing activities, local events, solidarity and advocacy work, and other activities. Long-term, the network would grow in size nationally and internationally¹⁹ in order to counteract white and/or Eurocentric biases in historical studies, and also to open up those living and working in white dominated countries to other readings of the past/present, other narratives, and other events. Our network is interdisciplinary, since much important historical work is done in other disciplines such as sociology, geography, literature, and politics. Applied History also seeks to emphasise diasporic thinking and being, social justice, and anti-neoliberalism. Crucially, since Britain produces way more History PhDs than will ever find work within academia, the network could also help to facilitate paid employment opportunities for politically-engaged historians to undertake targeted research for organisations, NGOs, think tanks, the media, and other bodies by serving as an advertising mechanism and facilitating referrals from colleagues.

Effectively, the network would exist as a database of critical or radical politically-engaged historians who want to interact with the world outside of academia as well as within. There would be a website hosting the biographical details of the members which would also serve as a contact point for those interested in commissioning something from a member, or in working with them in some other way, and perhaps a curated blog highlighting different researchers' expertise and events. Whilst the events and public engagement activities would involve non-academics, membership of the network would require a PhD or that the person be a practising professional historian. We would expect members to subscribe to an overall ethos but after that, we would hope that different groups of people connected via the network would come together to work towards specific events, papers, books, conferences, etc. of their own design. This means that groups of people in different places could come together in order to overcome the current London bias. We also hope that external organisations and people could approach members for assistance and/or expertise in relation to their own projects and campaigning activities. Essentially, the point and purpose of the network is to facilitate connections which would assist in the transmission of socially responsible and politically-engaged historical scholarship in varying ways.

The main problems in terms of creating the kind of network outlined above are funding, advertising, and attracting members, clients, and readers/listeners. In respect of funding, there are two main areas of

18 <http://appliedhistorynetwork.wordpress.com/past-events/>

19 We recently became aware of a group with similar aims operating from Barcelona. <http://radical.history-from-below.net>

concern: how to attract it and the ethics of acceptance. Would an offer of funding come with strings attached and if so, what type? Long-term, some independent funding could be generated by the commissioned member scholar donating a certain percentage of their fee to the administration of the network as a corporate entity. Alternatively, if conferences and other events charged an entrance fee (although the ones we are planning now do not), then income could be generated this way. How much funding would be required would be determined by the activities of the network. If, say, it were to provide an editorial function for members, then this would require substantially more income than, for instance, serving as a contact and advertising point through which people acted independently within the shared Applied History ethos.

To conclude, it should be clear that my ideal vision of academic scholarship is a type of scholarship that exists *in* and *for* the world. It is of a scholarship that listens to the concerns or problems of the marginalised and oppressed the world over, and uses its expertise in order to attempt to lift peoples' lives out of poverty and exploitation. In 1974, Sivanandan asked in a *Race* editorial:

What good is your knowledge to us? Do you in your analyses of our social realities tell us what we can do to transform them? Does your analysis contain some indications of strategies for change? Does your apprehension of our reality speak to our experience? Do you convey it in a language that we can understand? If you do none of these things, should we not only reject your 'knowledge' but, in the interests of our own liberation, consider you a friend to our enemies and a danger to our people?²⁰

Over forty years later, the questions laid out in this quote are still pertinent. I, and my colleagues in the Applied History Network, want to be able to answer those questions and to show that our scholarship is in the service of the oppressed and marginalised, that it is usable and readable, that it is of a certain ethic, and that it utilises the 'art of listening' to pay attention to the concerns of those it seeks to help in order to advocate in terms and ways that are beneficial to those groups. We want to disrupt temporality and show the ruptures and bubbles and cannibalism of the past upon our present social bodies. We want to wrestle and divert, to fight and to change, and to show the ways in which history is much more than a study of the past.

20 Ambalavaner Sivanandan, 'Editorial', *Race*, 4 (1974), 399-400, quote from p. 400.