



Histories of Activism. Postgraduate Conference. London: Society for the Study of Labour History; Northumbria University, 26.11.2011.

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Histories of Activism. Postgraduate Conference

On November 25, 2011, widely acclaimed urban sociologist and communication scholar Manuel Castells addressed a large crowd sitting on the steps of St. Paul's Cathedral. Drawn from their nearby tents which together compose London's very own Occupy movement, the activists in the audience cheerfully listened to Castells's words of hope and inspiration. Some 24 hours later and two tube stops on the Central Line to the east, a diverse group of scholars explored the historical dimension of social and political activism in the 19th and 20th century. Brought together by the Society for the Study of Labour History and Northumbria University, the Postgraduate Conference "Histories of Activism" focused on past instances of collective protest and opposition. Unlike Castells's reading of the present, the interpretation given here was, however, a less confident one.

Rather than portraying historical activism as stories of success and inspiration, many of the contributions were bound together by a shared notion of ambiguity and scepticism. STEFAN MÄLLER (Duisburg-Essen) discussed the role of West German trade unions in the rapprochement policy of *Neue Ostpolitik*. MÄLLER argued that union activism in West Germany was deeply embedded in the political structure of the Federal Republic. Union discussions and meetings were heavily monitored by West German ministries which, similar to the Confederation of German Trade Unions (DGB) itself, feared socialist sympathies among the unions's membership. Especially the DGB seems to have understood its own agenda as equivalent to the agenda of the Federal Republic towards the German Democratic Republic. The

unions operated, MÄLLER summarized, as agents of the state rather than as independent non-governmental organisations. Interpreting independency as central to social participation, the steady institutionalisation of union activism clearly implies a notion of failure.

Though highlighting the internationalist nature of the prominent attempt to fight imperialism and colonialism during the interwar period, PAUL SIMPSON's (Newcastle) account of the League Against Imperialism evoked a similar notion of failure. After all, the League Against Imperialism did not succeed in mainstreaming anti-colonialism as a central issue within organised labour. LEE COLLINS (Newcastle), too, drew a more ambiguous picture of popular perceptions of the Soviet Union in wartime Britain than usually suggested by British labour historians. The latter established the dominant interpretation that the rather affirmative view of the Soviet Union which the British public held during World War II was an expression not only of general sympathies towards the Russian people but also towards a more egalitarian society in the UK itself. Collins, however, argued that the appreciation of Soviet military performance by the British public does not equal an appreciation of a Soviet political system in Great Britain. That the British public gave so much in financial aid to the USSR symbolized the former's admiration for the Russian struggle against the common German enemy rather than the endorsement of a more egalitarian social and political order. Here, the notion of pragmatism replaced previous narratives which interpreted British activism and public opinion during WW II as expression of struggles for so-

cial equality.

In what arguably was the most optimistic contribution of the day, IAN GWINN (Liverpool) analyzed the History Workshop in Great Britain as a symbol of the emerging counter-culture of the late 1960s and an attempt to re-evaluate the collective historical imagination. Bringing together students, teachers, and scholars of history with workers interested in the field, the History Workshops helped to bridge boundaries between hand and mind. Yet, somewhat ironically, there is also a certain element of tragedy in this narrative. Workers involved in the History Workshops were regarded as central to the movement thanks to their ability to connect working class experience with its academic representation. The more these workers became involved in academic practice and discourse by participating in the History Workshop movement, the more they seemed to forfeit the advantage of non-academic authenticity. The notion of tragedy also came to mind in SANDRA GUERREIRO DIAS (Coimbra) discussion of the role of Portuguese poets in the democratic transformation of Portugal. The poets portrayed by Guerreiro Dias articulated an artistic criticism for a civil society that increasingly became disinterested in genuine social and cultural change.

Was there, then, nothing that the scholarly analysis of past activism had to offer to present day activists? Speaking to the latter at St. Paul's Cathedral, Manuel Castells had highlighted two crucial issues. First, he argued for the establishment of alternative networks of communication. And second, he insisted in the necessity to institutionalize social protest democratically. At least with respect to communicative and organisational structures, the conference did draw a more affirmative conclusion. Exploring the impact of book selling activists in interwar Britain, ELEN COCAIGN (Paris) revealed how these activists, though burdened by financial woes and discriminatory legal practices, fostered the democratisation of the reading public independent from organised party activity. DAVIDE TABOR (Turin), finally, presented a model of political transmission with which the Italian Socialist Party in Turin established consent. The leadership of the party obviously constituted the party's centre. However, the centre depended heavily on the co-operation and critical engagement of the periphery. According to Tabor, the grassroots activists of this very periphery played a crucial role in the distribution and adoption of ideas and

practices. In these postmodern times of normative uncertainty, it is not surprising that a historical interpretation of social activism emphasizes the significance of organisational structures and communication rather than the meaning of particular collective action.

Conference overview:

Panel One: Structures of Activism (Chair: Nicole Robertson)

Stefan M  ller (University of Duisburg-Essen), German Trade Unions and the new Eastern policy

Lee Collins (University of Northumbria), 'One of the more imponderable influences in the erosion of conservative attitudes': the Soviet Union in the eyes of the British people during the Second World War.

Davide Tabor (University of Turin), A Model of Circular Political Transmission: The Case of the Italian Socialist Party Between the 1800s and 1900s

Panel Two: Activism and the Written Word (Chair: Vanessa Sherriffs)

Sandra Guerreiro Dias (University of Coimbra), Poetics and Activisms in Post-Revolutionary Portugal

Ian Gwinn (University of Liverpool), People's History as Cultural Praxis: The Case of History Workshop

Elen Cogaing (University of Paris), Politicising new audiences, popularising ideas: bookselling activists in interwar Britain

Panel Three: Transfers of Activism (Chair: Daniel Laqua)

Paul Simpson (University of Northumbria), The Internationalism(s) of the Independent Labour Party in the Interwar Years

Malcolm Petrie (University of St. Andrews), Unity form Below? The Impact of the Spanish Civil War on Labour and the Left in Aberdeen and Dundee, 1936 - 1939

James Perkins (Birkbeck College, University of London), The British Balkan Committee and the Radical Conscience: The Political Activism of Some Edwardian 'Trouble Makers'

Concluding Remarks

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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