

<http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/what-is-history-for/>

History Workshop was born in the 1960s, when 'the cultural revolution ... was seemingly carrying all before it', as its 'father' Raphael Samuel wrote on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1991. As exemplified by Ruskin College, the initiative was 'in the first place' an attempt, 'to replace the hierarchical relationship of tutor and pupil by one of comradeship in which each became, in some sort, co-learners'. The times of its 'homeland', adult education, were characterized by the establishment of the Open University (1966). Politically, History Workshop was 'shaped by a series of left-wing stirrings', among them the student revolt of 1968, and a new phase in the women's movement.<sup>1</sup>

The times of the middle-aged History Workshop are different. The present situation is characterized, on one hand, by a strong and hopeful tendency that has not been given the attention it deserves, and on the other, by a gloomy perspective that reached its starkest appearance, so far, in the riotous summer of 2011. The former is close to History Workshop's original homeland, the latter is about politics.

The hopeful tendency refers to a specific part of the 'history boom' of the last decades: the dramatic increase of research into the past done outside the academic world. Contrast to what the academics investigate is clear: knowledge created may be used to reconstruct engines or to explain old photographs, for instance. At the beginning of the twenty-first century these kinds of pursuits have become so commonplace, that they do not any longer attract public attention in the same way as they did a couple of decades ago.<sup>2</sup>

The practitioners of the non-professional research define themselves what is history and what it is for. This is not surprising if one takes note of a feature of humanness which scholars have virtually bypassed: people need knowledge of the past, and everybody uses this cognition in his or her own way. Accounting for the past, or creating histories as American historian David Thelen puts it, is "as natural a part of life as eating or breathing".<sup>3</sup> Giving up the prevailing tendency to think about all history in disciplinary terms is in other words a well-founded idea. From the angle of adult education a new feature of history-in-society at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is significant: thousands of people have

transformed the everyday casual habit referring of to the past into purposeful creation of histories in practically all industrial countries.

Equally significant is to observe Raphael Samuel's way of seeing the relevance of history. 'The past that inspires genealogists, local historians and collectors is not random' but connected to what for them is important.<sup>4</sup> It is the usefulness of the past that drives people to create histories, and it is paramount that scholarly historians keep this in mind. University training gives them a mandate to judge whether everyday accounts of the past are sound and fair, but this mandate does not give them a privileged position the relevance of past matters is assessed. Soundness and meaningfulness are, albeit inseparable but different sides of knowledge.

What justifies the existence of the historical profession is that meaningful knowledge is sustainable only if its foundation is sound. This is the idea embedded in the 19th century rationale of the founding fathers of the discipline: the specialists on the past are there to produce sound knowledge, not to convey moral stories or political lessons, for instance. In the mainstream historians' view this idea has meant keeping non-academic histories at arm's length, but the situation may alter after the paradigmatic change of the discipline at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> A positive interpretation of the founding fathers' rationale would be to uphold history-making as a basic social practice; in banal terms, to demonstrate how to use and how not to use the past.

This argument ends up in the idea of participatory historical culture<sup>6</sup> that is based on a democratized social division of labour in history-making. What will be studied, the relevance of past matters, results from collective deliberation and discussion while the main role of professionals is ensuring that the knowledge produced is sound. This kind of collaborative approach to the past offers the participants the possibility of tackling their own present concerns and thinking over how to make a better future for themselves. At the same time, by this way of using the past the participants not only empower themselves to come into grips with the conditions of their living but also learn that the implied strings attached to the social and political engagement advocated by the governing elite 'from above' are not inevitable.<sup>7</sup>

The political dimension of participatory historical culture should be thought of in relation a contemporary 'movement' also originating 'from below', the British riots of summer 2011. What took place on the streets of many English towns were 'Zero-Degree protests', as the

Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has it. It was violent action demanding nothing; since 'opposition to the system' cannot, in the present society, 'articulate itself in the form of a realistic alternative, or even as a utopian project'. Nor does participatory historical culture convey a political program, the question is rather of an approach or method. But it shows that 'meaningless outburst' is not the only alternative.<sup>8</sup>

The first, absolutely essential step towards 'collaborative, radical history' advocated by History Workshop Online is that university-trained historians give up their traditional stance on everyday history-making. The ways laypeople use the past must be taken seriously, there is no room for patronage, not to speak of arrogance. Showing respect is to take a large step towards second essential requirement: winning the other party's trust. Actually, scholars face the similar challenge as politicians who have not yet convinced the citizens that policies based on the idea of 'Whitehall knows best' belong to a foregone era.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Quotations from Samuel's Editorial Introduction to *History Workshop. A Collectanea 1967 – 1991* edited by him.

<sup>2</sup> A study of the nature and spread of these pursuit would be politically fruitful; there seems not exist a comprehensive study of this subject for any country.

<sup>3</sup> "A Participatory Historical Culture", in Roy Rosenzweig & David Thelen: *The Presence of the Past. Popular Uses of History in American Life*, Columbia University Press; New York, 1998, 190.

<sup>4</sup>More about Samuel's ideas here, see Hilda Kean "Public history" and Raphael Samuel. A forgotten radical pedagogy?. *Public History Review*, vol. 11 (2994).

<sup>5</sup> More about the paradigmatic change, see Jorma Kalela, *Making History. The Historian and Uses of the Past* (Palgrave Macmillan; Basingstoke 2011) Chapter 1, 'Introduction: Second Thoughts about History'.

<sup>6</sup> The terms has been coined by David Thelen, see his 'A Participatory Historical Culture' in Rosenzweig & Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*.

<sup>7</sup> More about this, see Kalela *Making History*, (the final) section 'The potentials of a participatory historical culture'; it is preceded by section 'Impact assessment by funders'. These sections deal with the inner contradiction of present-day 'impact'.

<sup>8</sup>Quotations from Žižek's 'Zero-Degree Protests', *London Review of Books*, 8 September 2011.

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<sup>9</sup> Quotation from Jackie Ashley's 'In Liverpool you can feel the change in Labour's chemistry', *The Guardian* 28 September 2011.