Answers to the questions related to the Left Historians discussion. 6/5/21

(1) **Cyrus Bina**

What does it mean to you to be a Left historian?

What are some of the ways you have expressed this?

What are some of the challenges you have faced/face?

What role has H-PAD played (or could play) in supporting radical activism among historians?

While thanking H-PAD’s leadership, here’s my response to these questions:

1. Being disciplinary and interdisciplinary both by training and by years of research, I was drawn to HAW, the forerunner of H-PAD years ago. I also think that our struggles here, as Left historians, are interdisciplinary and thus dialectically relate to the various aspects of history (past and present) across the geography of human existence. My own focus is on the source of class, power, conflict since the late nineteenth century and their reflection in policy, domestic (i.e., the US), and abroad (global arena). A “Left historian” is not a record-keeper the same as a “skinny CPA”: he/she is not like an analytical philosopher who wishes to interpret the world and sit back triumphantly; a Left historian (or for that matter, left economist, left geographer, left international relations specialist, left sociologist, etc.) – he/she is not a positivist. A good example is our own late colleague Howard Zinn.

2. I have expressed this through my long career (and my political activities since my student days) whenever I could. I am a former member of RRPE’s editorial board and a longtime member of Radical Political Economics, among others. For my scholarly writings see:

https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=ICT2jcoAAAAJ&hl=en

3. Those who are a bit familiar with my academic career, in the 1980s and 1990s, know that I never gave up and stood against the threats to my position, being tenured or not. On two separate occasions, I resigned rather than putting up with administrators of conventional mold. My key to success is that I stood my ground, and I produced a ton of research and scholarly work that supported often by my counterparts at the international level.

4. The role of H-PAD has been productive so far, given the numbers and the difficulties associated with so many of our daily lives, particularly with this pandemic. For our future activities, we need to distinguish between two different categories of activism: (1) contingent projects and (2) sustained projects. The first deals with events that not predictable but demand response and involvement. The second consists of the core of activities that reflect the identity of H-PAD in a longer term. Among the longer-term activities, in my view, the issues surrounding both foreign and domestic include migrants, Palestine (and Israel lobby), global vaccination, US unilateral sanctions (and war), “new cold war,” Black Lives Matter (and other minority groupings), voting rights, poverty, and cleaning up the high-school “history” curricula in the United States. For starters, there can be a focus on a few core tasks (relevant to both domestic and international) – thanks.

**(2) Ellen Schrecker**

**What does it mean to you to be a Left historian?**

I was always on the left, but not always an activist. Nor always a serious historian. I was fortunate to have had Arno Mayer as my mentor and role model in college and after. Arno, my undergraduate history tutor, made it very clear to me that writing history could be—and for him, certainly was – political work. I have tried to follow his example as best I could.

·      **What are some of the ways you have expressed this?**

Since the late 1970s, I have chosen to do research and write about subjects – like McCarthyism and academic freedom -- that can be useful for the broader movement for social justice. I have also tried to reach a general, rather than an academic, audience.

·      **What are some of the challenges you have faced/face?**

Several challenges. Some personal, but I have also felt marginalized because of my identification with the left and my teaching position at a non-elite institution – as well as being a woman of a pre-feminist generation in a man’s field. Affiliation with a small religious college that lacks name-brand advantages, professional colleagues, and the resources for scholarship of a research university is also something of a handicap – although living in New York alleviates much of the intellectual isolation I might otherwise experience. But I have never had graduate students. And I have no idea how many opportunities I have been denied because of my politics – though I know of a few.

     These are, of course, minor kvetches. I have managed to get my political/scholarly work out, get a full-time teaching job and tenure in New York City. Compared to how difficult it must be today for left-wing historians within the gig academy to pursue both their historical scholarship and their political work, I count myself fortunate.

     Actually, the main challenge I currently face is not political, but technological. I came of age professionally in a pre-computer era and still find myself seriously challenged by my antediluvian habits. As a result, I feel less effective politically than I probably could be. For example, I can’t even begin to figure out how to use the social media which are clearly where the political action is.

**·      What role has H-PAD played (or could play) in supporting radical activism among historians?**

I have just finished a book about higher education in the 1960s that pays considerable attention to the experience of left academics during that turbulent decade. These people were grappling in their way with the issues about the relationship between scholarship and political activism that I hope the coming H-PAD discussion will also raise. They never resolved them and the organizations that they formed never coalesced into an effective radical movement as the New Left to which they belonged splintered and fell apart.

We are now at a moment when a reconceptualized academic left – not just of historians – could come into being. The issues that we care about – racial justice, economic equality, peace, and democracy – are actually getting attention. We need to figure out what our mission as an organization of radical historians should be.

     I am currently thinking about reactivating my former ties with the AAUP as a way to best utilize my own personal political capital. What I would like to discuss within H-PAD is whether there is an opening for a coalition of progressive academics to contribute to the current movement for peace and social justice. There are other groups we might approach such the Scholars for Social Justice that operates as a kind of academic affiliate for the Black Lives Matter movement as well as the academic unions, and such other left groups within the disciplines as URPE. What such a coalition could do and how H-PAD fits into that kind of operation is something I’d like to discuss.

(3) **Paul Buhle**

Friends:

My apologies for not Zooming (for a variety of reasons).

In the process of rewriting an entry on US History for the next edition of the ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE AMERICAN LEFT, I am now thinking back on an era long past, and on what has followed.

Radical history was so central to new left politics in many places that history graduate students were likely to edit the underground newspapers, deliver the ringing mobilization addresses to activists, and lead the teaching assistants’ struggles. Ten years later, many of the same young historians, whether going into the academic world or not, were central to the public educational efforts of the 1970s-80s, ranging from labor history societies to teach-ins on Central America and so on, activities not excluding various kinds of public archival efforts such as oral histories.

The challenges came first from the academic establishment including the most prominent liberal historians. They could be kindly to graduate students but outraged that the narrative that they thought they had revised as much as necessary, still seeemed hopelessly oversimple and susceptible to interpretation of the US reaching ever forward toward its destiny leading the world to better things, etc and ad nauseum. The challenge came next, as I experienced it, with the deconstructive sense that history had become utterly irrelevant, meaningless and obstructive. This arrived alongside the creation of the army of the semi-employed and underpaid adjuncts, and somehow seems to me related.

The possibilites of meeting these challenges and transcending them arrives, I think, with the 21st century emergence of Occupy (in Wisconsin, the Uprising), Black Lives Matter and on the side, the first Obama campaigns, and the Bernie Sanders phenomenon, better seen as Bernie/AOC/[et.al](http://et.al/).

There is a possibility of a mass connection. My only role is producing Graphic Novels for this connection. But I am convinced that the opportunities are vast, if we can only locate them accurately and work on them. H-PAD is ideally suited to strategize and coordinate.

(4) **Stephen Gosch**

1. **What does it mean to me to be a left historian?** In my European and world history courses, to historicize and problematize capitalism. In civic life, to articulate a left point of view on key issues of the day, especially regarding U.S. foreign policy.
2. **What are some of the ways I have expressed this?** In teaching, offering a course on revolutions in world history, introducing world history in the early 1980s as an alternative to Western Civ., organizing a semester-long interdisciplinary faculty seminar in 1982 on “Humanity in the Shadow of the Bomb, teaching a course on the Vietnam War for thirty-plus years, and offering a one-semester course on U.S.-China Relations during the 1940s to a mixed group of Chinese and U.S. students at Jinan University in Guangzhou in 1990. In civic life, organizing a three-day series of workshops, lectures, and other activities that attracted about 1500 people in 1982 in support of the Nuclear Weapons Freeze; and, in 1988-89, in preparation for the visit of Noam Chomsky, organizing and leading a semester-long Chomsky Seminar, each meeting of which included a presentation by a professor, a student and a member of the community.
3. **What are some of the challenges I faced?** Loneliness. Fierce opposition to almost every idea I had from the Cold War liberals who controlled my department from the 1970s to 2000. Complaints from some students who dismissed everything I said as communist propaganda. Criticism from anonymous (to me) community members who saw me as, basically, a traitor to the U.S.
4. **What role could H-PAD play in supporting radical historians?** I was not really in touch with H-PAD until after I quit teaching in 2008. Jim O'Brien's helpful lists and announcements drew me in and have provided me with a feeling of membership in the community of left historians that I lacked while teaching. That has been important to me.