



# CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL STUDIES

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## Stencilled Occasional Paper

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY POPULAR MEMORY?

by

CCCS Popular Memory Group.

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This stencilled paper is an edited version of a study which will appear in a CCCS volume on historiography in 1982 (CCCS History Group, Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics, Hutchinson, forthcoming). The whole article ('Popular Memory: Theory, Politics, Method') is three times or so the length of this extract which consists only of the early, most general sections. The essay is based upon the collective work of the Popular Memory Group in CCCS which met between October 1979 and June 1980. The group consisted of: Michael Barmes, Gary Clarke, Graham Dawson, Jacob Eichler, Thomas Fock, Richard Johnson, Jim Meyer, Rebecca O'Rourke, Rita Pakleppa, Hans-Erich Poser, Morten Skov-Carlson, Anne Turley and Patrick Wright. This piece was written by Richard Johnson with Graham Dawson. The piece is published in advance as a CCCS stencilled paper since the group is keen to have responses from people working on similar (or dissimilar) lines. The work of the group is now focussed on popular and dominant memories of the 1940s in the 1970s and 1980s.

## What do we mean by Popular Memory?

CCCS Popular Memory Group

'Must become historians of the present too' (Communist Party Historian's Group Minutes, 8.4.1956)

In this article we explore an approach to history-writing which involves becoming 'historians of the present too'. It is important to stress 'explore'. It is not yet clear to us whether the study of 'popular memory' (our shorthand for this approach) should be pursued as an additional way of writing about history, or should be urged as an alternative to conventional historiography, or is indeed a perspective that should inform all historical practice. It is certain, however, that the arguments we want to put derive in large part from considering the contradictions of academic history, especially where links are attempted with a popular socialist or feminist politics.

Our second reservation is that we have no completed project on 'popular memory' on which to report. This article is part of an initial clarification; it is not a comprehensive review. We can however point to existing projects which are travelling in the same direction as we would like to go, producing resources and also encountering difficulties on the way. This includes important experiments in oral history, popular autobiography and community-based history, but also certain theoretical debates that bear centrally on these practices. One aim of this article is to bring together these different resources which are often, for reasons we will discuss, held rather separate.

What, then, do we mean by 'popular memory'? In the first few sections of this article we will try and answer this question, viewing popular memory first as an object of study and, secondly, as a form of political practice.

### Popular Memory as an object of study

So far, in this volume, we have worked with a rather implicit view of historiography, though occasionally breaching it. We understand historiography to be a practice which critically comments on history-writing, including its theoretical premises and political implications. This practical definition has not proved to be particularly limiting, at least for the examples and periods chosen. We have not drawn too formal a distinction between 'academic history' and more popular or politicized kinds. Indeed such a distinction would have made little sense for Marx, for the Hammonds, for the early years of the Communist Party Historian's Group and for much feminist history. Even so, there are some more limiting implications in our choices and it is important to be aware of them. Aside from neglecting a conventional academic and conservative historiography, we have worked with some loose notions of 'the history-writer', the practitioner who works



under the sign of history as art or science, the historian, perhaps as 'intellectual'. Even so flexible a definition does set rather too narrow limits, we now think, to the object of study.

This is especially true for the present time. The looser and potentially amateur notion of 'the history-writer' has hardened into the historian as specialist academic. Left historiographies have not been immune from this process. Left and feminist history had developed within and in connection with the universities, the polytechnics and, especially in the case of feminism, with adult education. The expansion of a left academic constituency, a particular feature of the 1960s and 1970s, has created fundamental tensions which will be all too familiar to most readers of this article. Some of the contradictions and two very different ways of handling them are to be seen, for example, in the contrasted strategies of Social History and History Workshop Journal the one pursuing a cautious historical avant-gardism, the other avowedly socialist and committed to the idea of a genuinely 'popular' history.<sup>1</sup>

For the modern period, then, there is a real problem of the implicitly non-popular effects of focussing on formal history-writing, a practice largely colonised by academic and professional norms. (As we shall see this is also the case with new methodologies, especially 'oral history', which are sometimes seen as intrinsically 'popular' and democratising.) If we retain this focus, we risk reproducing some very conservative forms: a closed circle of content between left social historians and what Marx would have called 'critical critics'. Ken Worpole has pointed out the effects of this in justly sceptical terms:

It is obvious to anyone that the last two decades have produced an outstanding growth in the range of work done in the field of Labour studies and the more informal modes of working-class self-organisation and forms of cultural identity.... There has been a proliferation of research papers, published essays and full-length books emerging from this powerful intellectual current. Yet... I seriously wonder whether we could with any confidence suggest that we have a more historically conscious labour movement now than we have done at previous periods of crisis in the past. I would think not.<sup>2</sup>

He suggests 'two observable trends' that might account for this: the concentration of history in higher education (the move from 'draughty Co-op Halls and Trades Hall to Modern Polytechnic lecture rooms') and the expense of commercially-published books ('expensive hardbacks for the higher education libraries, rather than pocketbooks for the people'). What is so important about these comments is that they direct attention to the form of historical works and the social conditions within which they are produced, distributed and (sometimes) read. These questions are completely taken for granted in the ordinary run of critical reviewing, though the problem of the accessibility of language and of 'jargon'

sometimes stands in for the larger problems.

Worpole's comments show the need to expand the idea of historical production well beyond the limits of academic history-writing. We must include indeed all the ways in which a sense of the past is constructed in our society. These do not necessarily take a written or literary form. Still less do they necessarily conform to academic standards of scholarship or canons of truthfulness. Academic history has a particular place in a much larger process. We will call this 'the social production of memory'. In this collective production everyone participates, though unequally. Everyone, in this sense, is a historian. As Jean Chesneaux argues, professionalized history has attempted to appropriate a much more general set of relationships and needs: 'the collective and contradictory relationship of our society to its past' and the 'collective need' for guidance in the struggle to make the future.<sup>3</sup> We have already noted a similar stress in Christopher Hill's work: the recognition of a larger social process in which 'we ourselves are shaped by the past' but are also continually re-working the past which shapes us. The first problem, in the pursuit of 'popular memory' is to specify the 'we' in Hill's formulation or 'our society' in Chesneaux's. What are the means by which social memory is produced? And what practices are relevant especially outside those of professional history-writing?

It is useful to distinguish two main ways in which a sense of the past is produced: through public representations and through private memory (which, however, may also be collective and shared). The first way involves a public 'theatre' of history, a public stage and a public audience for the enacting of dramas concerning 'our' history, or heritage, the story, traditions and legacy of 'the British People'. This public stage is occupied by many actors who often speak from contradictory scripts, but collectively we shall term the agencies which construct this public historical sphere and control access to the means of publicisation 'the historical apparatus'. We shall call the products of these agencies, in their aggregate relations and combinations at any point of time, 'the field of public representations of history'. In thinking about the ways in which these representations effect individual or group conceptions of the past, we might speak of 'dominant memory'. This term points to the power and pervasiveness of historical representations, their connections with dominant institutions and the part they play in winning consent and building alliances in the processes of formal politics. But we do not mean to imply that conceptions of the past that acquire a dominance in the field of public representations are either monolithically installed or everywhere believed in. Not all the historical representations that win access to the public field are 'dominant'. The field is crossed by competing constructions of the past, often at war with each other. Dominant memory is produced in the course of these struggles and is always

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open to contestation. We do want to insist, however, that there are real processes of domination in the historical field. Certain representations achieve centrality and luxuriate grandly; others are marginalised or excluded or re-worked. Nor are the criteria of success here those of truth: dominant representations may also be those that are most ideological, most obviously conforming to the flattened stereotypes of myth.

Historical constructions are most obviously public when linked to central state institutions. The government and parliamentary systems, especially in their 'Englishness', are historical apparatuses in their own right. Aided (*sotto voce*) by BBC pomposity, they 'breathe' a sense of 'tradition', guaranteeing the inviolability of the broad ground-rules of formal politics, 'our democratic constitution'. Actually (and contradictorily) it is not parliamentary institutions that are the important foci for most pageantry, the main form of historical theatre. The monarchy and the military are much more closely involved here, providing the very stuff of tradition. Both loom large in the regular metro-politan spectacles and in the more occasional shows: jubilees, royal weddings, state visits, state funerals and commemorative events. Nor are the historical interventions of the monarchy and the military only metropolitan, appropriated by visiting tourists (though they certainly benefit the tourist industries). Loudly amplified through the media, they also intersect with everyday life in the localities. 'Our Royal Family' may be cosily consumed at the fireside. Children may learn about a militaristic past at the war museums, through hand-books of military strategy and technology and through the local sirehow or open day, commemorating, perhaps, the Battle of Britain. Historical recreations (popular now in the grounds of the better preserved local castles) may figure military moments (the Civil War) or pugnacious popular myth, robbed however, of political significance (Robin Hood versus the Sheriff of Nottingham perhaps). Such events produce too their own historiographies of brochures, guides, official (e.g. regimental) histories and, of course, a massive academic and popular literatures on royal and military personages and themes. Despite their official origins, then, such representations have a real life within the patterns of popular leisure and pleasure.

Other institutions, though linked to the national or local state, have a greater degree of autonomy, operating with high-cultural, educational, preservational or archival purposes. We include here the whole world of museums, art galleries, record offices, the D.O.E's official preservation orders, the 'National' Trust, the 'National' Theatre, and in general the sphere of history as 'cultural policy' - much of what is explored in the next article as 'national heritage'. Perhaps the educational system itself belongs here too: the academic producers and all those definitions of historical significance carried in the formal curricula,

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their own historical and archaeological societies, often with a long nineteenth-century pedigree. Like the Historical Association which links school-teachers and academics these societies draw on a fund of amateur historical enthusiasm, often bounded by a strong sense of locality. To these we must add newer growths: the preservation societies and community-based groups and WEA classes, including those with socialist and feminist purposes. The growth of 'oral history' and of the history workshop movement has added whole layers, sometimes of a radically new kind, to these local and participatory forms.

As this last set of examples suggest, the various sites and institutions do not act in concert. To make them sing, if not in harmony at least with only minor dissonances, involves hard labour and active intervention. Sometimes this has been achieved by direct control (for example censorship) and by a violent recasting or obliteration of whole fields of public history. More commonly today, in the capitalist West, the intersections of formal political debates and the public media are probably the crucial site. Certainly political ideologies always involve a view of past and present and future. Ranged against powers such as these, what price the lonely scholar, producing (also through commercial channels) the one or two thousand copies of the latest monograph!?

There is a second way of looking at the social production of memory which draws attention to quite other processes. A knowledge of past and present is also produced in the course of everyday life. There is a common sense about history which, though it may lack consistency and an explanatory force, may nonetheless contain elements of very good sense indeed. Such knowledge may circulate, usually without amplification, in everyday talk and in personal comparisons and narratives. It may even be recorded in certain intimate cultural forms: letters, diaries, photograph albums and collections of things with past associations. It may be encapsulated in anecdotes that acquire the force and generality of myth. If this is history, however, it is history under extreme pressures and privations. Usually this history is held to the level of private remembrance. It concedes a wider canvass to historian or publicist. It is not only unrecorded, but actually silenced. It is not offered the occasion to speak. In one domain, the modern women's movement understands the process of silencing very well indeed and is now raising the 'hidden' history of women's feelings, thoughts and actions more clearly to view. Feminist history challenges the very distinction 'public'/'private' that silences or marginalises women's lived sense of the past. But similar processes of domination operate too in relation to specifically working-class experiences, for most working-class people are also robbed of access to the means of publicity and are equally un-used to the male, middle-class habit of giving universal or 'historic' significance to an extremely partial experience. But we are only beginning to understand the class dimensions of cultural domination, partly by transferring the



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in 'O' and 'A' level syllabuses and examinations, and in the texts that are widely used in schools. In this 'cultural' field, the relations between scholarly and dominant historiographies are especially intimate; the historian's criteria of truthfulness are more likely to prevail here than in the more overtly politicized versions.

History, however, is also business. It is important, of course, for the whole range of publishing activity, especially since historical writing retains much more of an amateur or 'lay' public than do other social sciences. Best sellers lists commonly contain items that are marketed as 'historical' especially biographies and autobiographies, historical fictions and military histories. In Britain, much more than in Europe, World War II has provided an inexhaustible supply of historical fact and fiction, much of it in heavily militaristic guise and reinforced by the close convergence of war, fighting and a boy culture in men, young and old. (The historical paradigm here is definitely not academic history but the tradition of masculine romance that runs from Boys Own to the super-hero comics of today). To popular fiction and the modern form of the glossy illustrated documentary book, we have to add the historical movies, somewhat displaced in the block-buster market by the contemporary salience of science fiction. More interesting because less remarked on is the massive contemporary growth of 'historical tourism'. We mean the way in which historically significant places become a resource, physically or ideologically, for the leisure and tourist industries. The way is led here by the owners of palaces, mansions, castles and other 'country houses', and, in its own discreet way, by the Anglican Church, but the last decade or so has seen the commercial colonisation of many lesser sites with historical or mythical capital. The guide books, also commercially produced and with very large and expertly promoted circulations, point us to these places, encapsulating their historical meaning.

The public media too - especially radio, television and the press - are a principle source of historical constructions. We include here the intersections of history, journalism and documentary, but also the media arts, especially historical drama. The media certainly produce their own historical accounts - they produce a contemporary history daily, for instance, in the form of 'news'. But they also select, amplify and transform constructions of the past produced elsewhere. They increasingly draw, for example, from oral history and 'yesterday's witness'. They give a privileged space to conceptions of the past which accompany the party-political battles. Of all parts of the historical apparatus, indeed, the electronic media are perhaps the most compelling and ubiquitous. Access there may often be decisive in gaining currency for an historical account. Somewhat more removed from the patronage of state and of capital are what we may term the voluntary associations of the world of history. Most counties and many towns have

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feminist insights. Nor is this only a question of class or gender positions. Even the very articulate middle-class historian, facing the dominant memory of events through which he has actually lived, can also be silenced (almost) in this way. One telling example is the difficulty of writers of the New Left in speaking coherently about World War II.

One is not permitted to speak of one's wartime reminiscences today, nor is one under any impulse to do so. It is an area of general reticence: an unmentionable subject among younger friends, and perhaps of mild ridicule among those of radical opinions. All this is understood. And one understands also why it is so.

It is so, in part, because Chapman Pincher and his like have made an uncontested take-over of all the moral assets of that period; have coined the war into Hollywood blockbusters and spooky paperbacks and television media; have attributed all the value of that moment to the mythic virtues of an authoritarian Right which is now supposedly, the proper inheritor and guardian of the present nation's interests.

I walk in my garden, or stand cooking at the stove, and muse on how this came about. My memories of that war are very different....<sup>5</sup>

This is followed by a re-assuringly confident passage which is a classic text for studying the popular memory of the 1940s, but the struggle is intense, the victory narrow, and the near-silencing of so strong and masculine a voice in the shape of its domestication is very revealing.

It is, of course, this kind of recovery that has become the mission of the radical and democratic currents in oral history, popular autobiography and community-based publishing. We will look at these attempts to create a socialist or democratic popular memory later in the argument. But we wish to stress first that for us the study of popular memory cannot be limited to this level alone. It is a necessarily relational study. It has to take in the dominant historical representations in the public field as well as attempts to amplify or generalise subordinated or private experiences. Like all struggles it must needs have two sides. Private memories cannot, in concrete studies, be readily unscrambled from the effects of dominant historical discourses. It is often these that supply, indeed, the very terms by which a private history is thought through. Memories of the past are, like all common-sense forms, strangely composite constructions, resembling themselves a kind of geology, the selective sedimentation of past traces. As Gramsci put it, writing about the necessity of historical consciousness for a Communist politics, the problem is ' "knowing theyself" as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory'. Similarly the public discourses must needs live off the primary recording of events in the course of everyday transactions and take over the practical knowledges of historical agents. It is for these reasons that the study of 'popular memory' is concerned with two sets of relations. It is concerned

with the relation between dominant memory and oppositional forms across the whole public (including academic field). It is also concerned with the relation between these public discourses in their contemporary state of play and the more privatised sense of the past which <sup>is</sup> generated within a lived culture.

#### Popular Memory as a political practice

Socialist, feminist and radical historians have always understood that history matters politically. History-writing has sometimes been seen as a way of fighting within one branch of 'science', an attempt to dislodge 'bourgeois' history from its predominant place within the professional intellectual field. Certainly, left historians have shared a general, often quite vague, sense that a history informed by Marxist or socialist premises must needs serve the politics of the present and future. Only rarely, at least in contemporary debates, has this general association been challenged. The intrinsically 'historical' character of Marxism, as science or as critique, has usually seemed to guarantee the connection.

Actually, the political uses of history do seem to us more problematic even from a Marxist perspective. This is especially the case when history is defined as it is usually defined within conventional historiography, as 'the study of the past'. We have come to see this as one of the key features of professional history, and indeed, of historical ideologies. Certainly it is deeply problematic from the viewpoint of 'popular memory'. For memory is, by definition, a term which directs our attention not to the past but to the past-present relation. It is precisely because 'the past' has this living active existence in the present that it matters so much politically. As 'the past'-dead, gone or only subsumed in the present-it matters much less. This argument may be clarified if we compare a number of approaches to the political significance of history, returning to some of Bill Schwarz's formulations in his essay on the Communist Party Historians' Group.<sup>6</sup>

We may follow Schwarz in distinguishing three main approaches to the political relevance of history. The first approach, while retaining in a quite strong form the notion that the object of history is 'the past', seeks to link past and present in the form of salutary 'lessons'. These may have a negative force, warning, for instance, against returns to past disasters. The contemporary argument about 'the 1930s', which draws on a conventional left historiography of that decade, is a case in point. But this argument may also work more positively, typically by identifying 'traditions' which then become a resource for present struggles. Raymond Williams' 'Culture and Society' tradition, Edward Thompson's tradition of libertarian socialism or communism, formed in the junction of Marxist and Romanticism and the socialist-feminist succession uncovered in the historical work of Sheila Rowbotham are salient examples here. An even better case is that already discussed by Schwarz: the communist historian's construction of a long lineage of

popular democratic struggles from the Levellers and Diggers to the socialism and communism of the twentieth century. More generally still, and the move is typical of Edward Thompson's history, the recreation of popular struggles shows us that despite retreats and defeats, 'the people', 'the working class' or the female sex do 'make history' even under conditions of oppression or exploitation. In the same way, especially if we are conscious of this lineage, we can make history too. The link between past and present, between history-writing and the construction of historical futures today, is in essence, an exhortatory one.

A second way of conceiving the past-present relation is to employ historical perspectives and methods as an element in strategic analysis. We start from the need to understand contemporary political problems. We seek to examine the conditions on which contemporary dilemmas rest. In looking at the nature and origins of current oppressions, we trace their genesis as far back as it is necessary to go. Here the relation between past and present is necessarily more organic, more internal. The past is present today in particular social structures with determinate origins and particular histories. This cooler, 'scientific' evaluation of the past is best exemplified, as Schwarz suggests, in Perry Anderson's historical project, from 'Origins of the Present Crisis' to his sequence of major studies in the origins of the modern capitalist world. It is characteristic too, of course, of Marx's own historical projects, Capital itself but also, for example, the essays on French and English politics, though in Marx it is certainly allied with a 'hotter' more inspirational or agitational mode of history-writing, closer to the first of our own categories and with a similar risk of triumphalism.

A stress on popular memory adds, we think, something to both these conceptions, though it certainly does not displace them. The construction of traditions is certainly one way in which historical argument operates as a political force though it risks a certain conservatism; similarly any adequate analysis of the contemporary relations of political force has to be historical in form as well as reach back to more or less distant historical times. It has also to attempt to grasp the broader epochal limits and possibilities in terms of a longer history of capitalist and patriarchal structures. What we may insist on in addition, is that all political activity is also intrinsically a process of historical argument and definition, that all political programmes involve some construction of the past as well as the future, and that these processes go on everyday, often outrunning, especially in terms of period, the pre-occupations of historians. Political domination involves historical definition. History - in particular popular memory - is a stake in the constant struggle for hegemony. The relation between history and politics, like the relation between past and present, is, therefore, an internal one: it is about the politics of history and the historical dimensions of politics.



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Some examples may make the implications of this argument clearer. It can certainly be argued that conceptions of the past have played a particularly central role in political life in Britain especially in popular conceptions of nationhood. The intersections between a popular conservative historiography and the dominant definitions of British (but especially English) nationalism have been especially intimate.

One problem of all left historiographies in Britain that retain 'the nation' or 'the national-popular' as a major affirmative category is precisely the thoroughness of this conservative appropriation of nationhood and the more structural conditions, especially the long history of Empire and of cultural separation from Europe on which it rests. The dominant memory of World War II (in which the 'island race' was united under a great leader, Sir Winston Churchill) and its recurrent re-evocation (they/we really can pull together when it's absolutely necessary) is a case in point. Similarly, contemporary racism feeds upon a memory of a nation and a working class that was white, chauvinistic and dominant on a world wide scale. Indeed 'the British People' (to whom the legacy of Alfred, Drake, Wellington and Churchill is bequeathed) is, often half-consciously, a racist construction. The dominant nationalist themes, grown cosy and thoroughly naturalised by repetition, disguise or celebrate the actual history of imperial and colonial domination. They define what it means to be British, to 'belong' today. In so doing they marginalise and oppress black people in Britain whose own history is precisely the reverse side of the conservative chronicles.<sup>7</sup>

More particular political questions are fought out on this ground too. Each major political settlement involves its own historiography, academic and popular. The dominant social-democratic and liberal-conservative post-war tendencies, for example, constructed their own history of the 1940s as a period of massive social transformation. For Labour Party 'revisionism' particularly, the 1950s were a post revolutionary era, to which, therefore, traditional left analyses of a Marxist kind, were quite irrelevant. The dominance of this historical account (classically expressed in the political writing of John Strachey and Anthony Crosland) certainly helped to marginalise socialist and marxist politics in this period. We can, however, see similar processes at work today. Contemporary Thatcherism has constructed its own historical account that centres on the failure of the whole arc of post-war politics and the growth of a bureaucratic statism. Similarly, attempts to create a new liberal and social-democratic centre in British politics are pursued as Dave Sutton has suggested partly by historical means including an extensive re-evaluation of the 'new Liberalism' of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>8</sup> The historiography of the Labour Party, too, has taken on new dimensions in the light of the growth of socialist currents within it.

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The historical debate about the 1930s has acquired a new urgency with the growth of unemployment and the constant referencing (sometimes in very conservative terms) of this decade by Labour politicians and trade union leaders. Here again one finds a significant 'revisionist' project, now very well launched from a position right of centre in British politics, that discovers that the 1930s were not really so bad after all! If we remind ourselves of the centrality of history-writing and teaching for a long succession of left intellectuals in Britain, the fact that Marxism has taken characteristically historical forms and the strength of a feminist, especially a socialist-feminist historiography here, the importance of history as a ground of political struggle seems confirmed. Explanations of this cultural centrality of history are evasive and need a proper comparative context: do all nation states with long histories develop an extensive historiographical culture? Perhaps the very early formation of the nation state and the long subsequent continuities, unbroken, except in the seventeenth century by massive political ruptures and breaks, is one part of an explanation. Certainly, if we are looking to fill the 'absent centre' of British national culture, history and the sense of the past might prove a very strong candidate indeed.

The formation of a popular memory that is socialist, feminist and anti-racist is of peculiar importance today, both for general and for particular reasons. Generally, as Gramsci argued, a sense of history must be one element in a strong popular socialist culture. It is one means by which an organic social group acquires a knowledge of the larger context of its collective struggles, and becomes capable of wider transformative role in the society.<sup>11</sup> Most important of all, perhaps, it is the means by which we may become self-conscious about the formation of our own common sense beliefs, those that we appropriate from our immediate social and cultural milieu. These beliefs have a history and are also produced in determinate processes. The point is to recover their 'inventory', not in the manner of the folklorist who wants to preserve quaint ways from modernity, but in order that, their origin and tendency known, they may be consciously adopted, rejected or modified. In this a popular historiography, especially a history of the commonest forms of consciousness, is a necessary aspect of the struggle for a better world.

More particularly, the formation of a popular socialist memory is an urgent requirement for the 1980s in Britain. Part of the problem here is that such traces of politicised memory of this kind as exist chart, on the whole, a post-war history of disillusionment and decline, in particular a deep sense of loss and alienation so far as the Labour Party is concerned. But the problem is deeper than this difficulty (which, even now, the socialist revival within outside the Labour Party may be lessening). For what are to be the forms of a new socialist popular memory? A recovery of labour's past will hardly do; nor is it helpful to chart the struggles only of the male, skilled, white sectors of the working class who have formed the



main subjects of 'labour history' to this day. We need forms of socialist popular memory that tell us too about the situation and struggles of women and about the convergent and often antagonistic history of black people, including the black Britons of today. Socialist popular memory today has to be a newly constructed enterprise; no mere recovery or recreation is going to do. Otherwise we shall find that nostalgia merely reproduces conservatism.

### Resources

The resources for such a project are great but they are also, in important ways, very disorganised, systematically disorganised that is, not merely 'lacking organisation'. This has much to do with the diverse social origins of different kinds of resource and the immense difficulties of their combination. For many resources have, in the last two decades, been created through the critical work of academic practitioners - especially, in our field, historians, sociologists, philosophers and so on dissatisfied with the limits and ideologies of their professional discipline. 'Cultural Studies' is a growth of this kind but belongs to a very much wider field of radical and feminist intellectual work where much of the stress has been, till lately, upon theoretical clarification and development. But there have been important breaks outside the academic circles too, or in a tense relation to them. They have been most commonly connected to adult education (especially the WEA) or to school-teaching or to post-1960 forms of community action. The principal aim of these tendencies has been to democratise the practices of authorship; or to lessen or remove entirely the distance between 'historian' and what Ken Worpole has called 'the originating constituency'. The characteristic products of this movement have been popular autobiographies, orally-based histories, histories of communities and other forms of popular writing. But it has also produced a characteristic critique of academic practice that stresses the inaccessibility even of good left social history in terms both of language and price, and the absorption of authors' readers in the product (book or journal) rather than the process by which it is produced and distributed. Partly because of the stress on 'language' and the commitment to 'plain speech' oral-historical or popular-autobiographical activists are often deeply critical of the dominant forms of theory. It is this division, indeed, that is, in our opinion, a major source of dis-organisation. The tensions between the 'activist' and 'academic' ends of radical historical tendencies are explosive to a degree that is often quite destructive. They are often qualitatively less productive than directly cross-class encounters in which working-class people directly interrogate academic radicals. Even so there is a beginning of useful connections between academic 'critics' and community activists (who are not always different persons); where patience holds long enough on either side there are the beginnings of a useful dialogue. Some of this can be traced in the pages of History Workshop Journal, the conference volume to History Workshop<sup>12</sup> and in the writings, especially, of some authors whose experience spans an 'amateur' and 'professional' divide.

general History Workshop (as journal and as 'movement') has been distinguished by its attempt to hold together these two unaimable constituencies along with other groups under the banner of 'socialist' or 'people's' history. It is in this sense that History Workshop is the nearest thing we have to an alternative 'historical apparatus'. In what follows we want simply to note some developments, within and outside the History Workshop movement that seem to us to point already towards the study of popular memory.

It is oral history - the evocation and recording of individual memories of the past - which seems, at first sight, nearest to the popular memory perspective, or one aspect of it. In fact the term oral history embraces a very large range of practices only tenuously connected by a 'common' methodology. What interests us most about oral history is that it is often the place where the tension between competing historical and political aims is most apparent: between professional procedures and amateur enthusiasm, between oral history as recreation (in both senses) and as politics, between canons of objectivity and an interest, precisely, in subjectivity and in cultural forms. Later, we want to illustrate these tensions by looking at the early work of the oral and social historian Paul Thompson. There are good reasons for choosing Thompson's work. He is both a socialist and a professional historian. He has done more than anyone to introduce and modify the use of oral methods in this country. With Thea Vigne, he organised the first large-scale SSRC-funded oral history research project. He is also author of the first lengthy 'introduction' to the use of oral sources for the historian. He is editor of Oral History, the main medium of communication between oral historians, and is closely associated with History Workshops.<sup>13</sup>

In focussing part of our argument around Thompson's work, we do not mean to imply that there are no alternative models. Other adaptations of oral history are, indeed, much nearer to our own concerns. We would cite for example the critique of oral history in its more empiricist forms, to be found in Louisa Passerini's work. Her pursuit of the structuring principles of memory and of forgetfulness, her concern with representation, ideology and sub-conscious desires, her focus on 'subjectivity which includes cognitive, cultural and psychological aspects',<sup>14</sup> and her understanding of subjectivity as a ground of political struggle, all bring her work very close to British traditions of cultural studies, where they have been influenced by feminism. Her critique of oral history seems to us much more radical than its sometimes guarded expression might suggest. And we agree absolutely with her criticisms of English debates for the failure to connect oral history as a method with more general theoretical issues. The beginning of her analysis of popular memories of Italian fascism in Turin mark a large advance on most thinking about the cultural and political (as opposed to merely 'factual') significance of oral history texts.

Although there is a beginning of a more self-reflexive mood in Britain, the strengths here lie more in a developed practice of popular history, often building on the social and labour history traditions. This is the case, for example, with the most stunning single work drawing on evoked memories of participants - Ronald Fraser's Blood of Spain.<sup>15</sup> The lessons of this book for future practice lie more in the way it is written than in any very self-conscious prescriptions by the author, a long time practitioner of oral history or 'qualitative sociology'. What we found interesting in Blood of Spain was the use of oral remembered material in something like the form in which it is first evoked: not as abstracted 'facts' about the past, but as story, as remembered feeling and thought, as personal account. The whole book is woven from such stories and retrospective analyses, sometimes quoted, sometimes paraphrased, clustered around the chronology of the Spanish civil war or the make-or-break issues that were debated and literally fought out in its course. There is a sense in which Fraser's interviewees actually 'write' Blood of Spain by providing the author with the cellular form of the larger work: innumerable tiny personal narratives from which is woven a larger story of heroic proportions and almost infinite complication. Blood of Spain is history through composite autobiography, the recreation of experience in the form of a thousand partial and warring viewpoints.

But it is arguable that the most significant development has been the growth of community history, popular autobiography and working-class writing more generally, where the terms of authorship have been more completely changed. In one sense, all these texts and projects are evidence for the forms of popular memory; they are all about the relation of past to present, whether self-consciously 'historical' or not. Some projects, however, have specifically focussed on these themes: the chronologically-ordered sequence of accounts of work in Centreprise's Working Lives<sup>16</sup> part of the People's Autobiography of Hackney is one example, the work of the Durham Strong Words Collective, especially Hello Are You Working? (about unemployment) and But the World Goes on the Same (about past and present in the pit villages) is another.<sup>17</sup> The Durham work is especially organised around contrasts of 'then' and 'now', often viewed through intergenerational comparisons. As the editors put it:

'The past exerts a powerful presence upon the lives of people in County Durham. The pit heaps have gone but they are still remembered, as is the severity of life under the old coal owners and the political battles that were fought with them. As they sit, people try to sort things out in their minds - how were things then? How different are they now? And why?'<sup>18</sup>

Different from either of these projects are the politically-located, culturally-sensitive projects around history and memory that have developed within the contemporary Women's Movement. There is already a strong past-present dialogue at work within contemporary feminism as the previous article in this book shows. Much feminist history also draws on oral materials, sometimes using them in

innovative ways.<sup>19</sup>

The autobiographies evoked by Jean McCrindle and Sheila Rowbotham, and published as Dutiful Daughters are framed by the editors' feminism and by a distinctive politics of publication. The aim is to render private feminine oppressions more public and more shared, thereby challenging dominant male definitions and the silencing of women.<sup>20</sup> Works like this continue a long feminist tradition of writing about past and present through the autobiographical form. We might also note in this collection, in the Durham work, in Jeremy Seabrook's What Went Wrong? and elsewhere the beginnings of an interest in a specifically socialist popular memory. It was interesting that both Dutiful Daughters and What Went Wrong were the subjects of 'collective reviews' at History Workshop.<sup>21</sup>

Not all relevant practices and debates belong to what would usually be thought of as 'historical' work. Indeed, there is a real danger that 'History' who is often a very tyrannous Muse, will draw the circumference of concerns much too narrowly. That is one reason why the broader categories - black, or women's or working-class 'writing' for example - are sometimes preferable. Even here, though, there are unhelpful limitations: the commitment, for example, to the printed word and the tendency to neglect other practices including the critique of dominant memory in the media. It is here that debates on 'popular memory' that come out of a completely different national and theoretical tradition are so important, especially debates in France around Michel Foucault's coinage of 'popular memory' as a term.<sup>22</sup> French debates focus on such issues as the representation of history in film and around the 'historical' policies of the French state - for example the Ministry of Culture's promotion of popular history and archival retrieval during the official Heritage Year of 1979.<sup>23</sup> Another important French voice for us has been Jean Chesneaux's Pasts and Presents: What is History For? a militant and sometimes wildly iconoclastic attack on French academic history, including academic social history written by Marxists.

One importance of the French debates is that they have directed attention to the possibility of radical cultural practice of an 'historical' kind outside the writing of history books.<sup>24</sup> It is important to note developments of this kind in film, community theatre, television drama and radical museum work. The film 'Song of the Shirt', the television series 'Days of Hope', the television adaptation of Vera Britain's Testament of Youth, the strong historical work of radical theatre groups like 7:84, Red Ladder, and The Monstrous Regiment are examples of 'history making' often with a real popular purchase, yet usually neglected by historians. Innovations in this area are intrinsic to popular memory both as a study and as a political practice. They should certainly receive as much interest and support from socialist and feminist historians as the latest historical volume, or of the newest issue of 'the journal'.



### Difficulties and Contradictions

What, then, are some of the difficulties in realising the potential of these resources? Oral history and popular autobiography have, after all, now been around for some time, initially generating a real excitement. Why have the political effects been fairly meagre? What are the remaining blocks and inhibitions here?

There are, perhaps, four main areas of difficulty. Very often these have to do with the tensions that exist between the academic or professional provenance of new practices and their adaptation to a popular politics. We will summarise the four areas of difficulty briefly here, then in the rest of this article, consider each at more length.

The first set of difficulties are epistemological in character. They arise from the ways in which 'historical' objects of study are defined. They revolve around the empiricism of orthodox historical practice. They are not purely technical matters for philosophers to adjudicate. The historian's empiricism is a real difficulty. It blocks political progress. That is why it is so important to return to these questions once more, showing the political effects of this persistently empiricist stance.

The second set of difficulties derive initially from the form in which the 'raw material' of oral history or popular autobiography first arises: the individual testimony, narrative or autobiography. This poses, in a very acute form, the problem of the individual subject and his or her broader social context. In what sense is individual witness evidence for larger social changes? How can these changes themselves be understood, not as something that evades human action, but also as the product of human labour, including this individual life? This difficulty runs through the oral history method and through the autobiographical form. It is also reflected in larger divisions of genres: history, autobiography, fiction (with its particular experiential truth). Such divisions in turn encapsulate hierarchies of significance. The oral-historical witness or the autobiographer, unheld to be a personage of exceptional public power, speaks only for herself; it is the historian who, like the Professor in Lucky Jin, speaks literally for 'History'. Some resolution of this persistent problem, some way of thinking the sociality of individuals, would be an important additional resource.

We have already touched on a third set of difficulties: the tendency to identify the object of history as 'the past'. This largely unquestioned feature of historical common sense has extremely paradoxical results when applied to oral history or popular autobiography. Indeed it shows us that this definition cannot be held without a radical de-politicisation of the practice of research. What is interesting

about the forms of oral historical witness or autobiography are not just the nuggets of 'fact' about the past, but the whole way in which popular memories are constructed and reconstructed as part of a contemporary consciousness. In this section we will look at some of the characteristic ways in which a sense of the past has been constructed in private memories.

The fourth set of difficulties is more fundamental. It concerns not just the manifest intellectual and theoretical blockages, but the social relations which these inhibitions express. In oral history and in similar practices the epistemological problem - how historians are going to use their 'sources' - is also a problem of human relationships. The practice of research actually conforms to (and may in practice deepen) social divisions which are also relations of power and of inequality. It is cultural power that is at stake here, of course, rather than economic power or political coercion. Even so research may certainly construct a kind of economic relation (a balance of economic and cultural benefits) that is 'exploitative' in that the returns are grossly unequal ones. On the one hand there is 'the historian', who specialises in the production of explanations and interpretations and who constitutes himself as the most active, thinking part of the process. On the other hand, there is his 'source' who happens in this case to be a living human being who is positioned in the process in order to yield up information. The interviewee is certainly subject to the professional power of the interviewer who may take the initiative in seeking her out and questioning her. Of course, the problem may be solved rhetorically or at the level of personal relations: the historian may assert that he has sat at the feet of working-class witnesses and has learnt all he knows in that improbable and uncomfortable posture. It is, however, he that produces the final account, he that provides the dominant interpretation, he that judges what is true and not true, reliable or inauthentic. It is his name that appears on the jacket of his monograph and his academic career that it furthered by its publication. It is he who receives a portion of the royalties and almost all the 'cultural capital' involved in authorship. It is his amour propre as 'creator' that is served here. It is his professional standing among his peers that is enhanced in the case of 'success'. In all this, at best, the first constructors of historical accounts - the 'sources' themselves - are left untouched, unchanged by the whole process except in what they have given up - the telling. They do not participate, or only indirectly, in the educational work which produces the final account. They may never get to read the book of which they were part authors, nor fully comprehend it if they do.

We have deliberately overdrawn this case, to make the point polemically. But we do not describe an untypical situation for the more professionalised types of oral-historical practice. The question is what are the wider effects of such social divisions? Are they transformable? To what extent, locally, frantically have they already been transformed? And what are the difficulties and opportunities involved

in further transformations? Much is at stake here. We are discussing a particular form of class relation (that between working-class people and sections of the professional middle class) and how it can be transformed into a more equal alliance. It is an alliance that happens to have been a crucial one in the history of left politics and one which is certainly central to the future of socialism and feminism today.

## NOTES

1. Compare the editorials in History Workshop Journal, no.1 (1976) and Social History, no. 1. (1976)
2. Ken Worpole, 'A Ghostly Pavement; The Political Implications of Local Working-Class History' in Raphael Samuel (ed.), People's History and Socialist Theory (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p.23.
3. Jean Chesneaux, Pasts and Futures or What is History For? (Thames and Hudson, 1978) especially pp. 1 and 11.
4. We draw here on the work of Rita Pakleppa and Hans-Erich Poser who were members of the Popular Memory Group in 1979-80. Their presentations on representations of World War II in Britain and West Germany enlivened and informed the work of the group. We hope their study will eventually be available in English.
5. E.P. Thompson, Writing by Candlelight (Merlin, 1980), pp.130-131
6. This refers to a preceeding article in Making Histories, Bill Schwarz ' "The People" in History: The Communist Party Historian's Group 1946 to 1956'
7. For an example of a popular Conservative history with a proto-racist character see the works of Sir Arthur Bryant (e.g. English Saga, Collins, Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1940). But this is also part of the more familiar modern repertoire of racism, in, for example, Enoch Powell's nationalism.
8. This refers to another essay in Making Histories: David Sutton 'Radicals, Liberals and Fabians'.
9. See especially Chris Cook and John Stephenson, The Slump: Society and Politics During the Depression (Johnathan Cape, 1977).
10. Perry Anderson, 'Components of the National Culture', in A. Cockburn and R. Blackburn, (eds.), Student Power, (Penguin, 1969)
11. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (eds. and trans.), Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci (Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), passim but especially pp. 324-25
12. See especially the debate between Ken Worpole, Jerry White and Stephen Yeo in Samuel, People's History, pp. 22-48
13. See Paul Thompson, The Edwardians (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1975); Paul Thompson, The Voice of the Past: Oral History (Oxford University Press, 1978); Oral History: The Journal of the Oral History Society (First published 1971). Much of the later parts of the article from which this is an extract considers Thompson's early practice and advocacy in oral history. But we do not imply that his work is peculiarly flawed in some way: we are interested in it as typical of the tensions between oral history as related to socialist politics and oral history as an academic and professional practice.



14. Luisa Passerini 'Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism', History Workshop Journal, no. 8 (1979) pp.82-108; 'On the Use and Abuse of Oral History' (mimeo. translated from L. Passerini (ed.), Storia Orale: Vita Quotidiana e Cultural Materiale delli Classe Subalterne, Rosenberg & Sellier, Turin, 1978). We are grateful to the author for sending us a copy of this paper. See also her position paper at History Workshop 13 - 'Oral History and People's Culture (Mimeo, Nov/Dec 1979).
15. Ronald Fraser, Blood of Spain: The Experience of Civil War 1936-39, (Allen Lane, 1979)
16. 'A People's Autobiography of Hackney', Working Lives, 2 vols. (Hackney WEA and Centreprise, n.d.). For Centreprise more generally see Ken Worpole, Local Publishing and Local Culture: An account of the Centreprise Publishing Project 1972-77 (Centreprise, 1977)
- 17 Keith Armstrong and Huw Beynon (eds. ), Hello, Are you Working? Memories of the Thirties in the North East of England (Strong Words, 1977); Strong Words Collective, But The World Goes on the Same: Changing Times in Durham Pit Villages (Strong Words, 1979)
- 18 ibid., p.7
19. e.g. the use of autobiographical materials in J. Liddington and J. Morris, One Hand Ties Behind Us. (Virago, 1978)
20. Jean McCrindle and Sheila Rowbotham (eds.), Dutiful Daughters (Penguin, 1979).
21. Jeremy Seabrook, What Went Wrong? Working People and the Ideals of the Labour (Gollanz, 1978)
22. Michael Foucault, 'Interview' in Edinburgh '77 Magazine. See also Radical Philosophy, 16 (1975)
23. Phillippe Hoyau, 'Heritage Year or the Society of Conservation', Les Revoltes Logiques (Paris,) no. 12 (1980), pp.70-77.
24. Hence the debate in Britain on radical filmic practice and historical drama. See the collection of articles in Tony Bennett, et al. (eds. Popular Television and Film (British Film Institute and Open University Press, 1981)