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## ***History in Crisis? or, Mind the Gap between the Faculty and Mr Every Other***

### **Scenes from a Classroom Engaged in Conversations**

While intellectuals have for centuries stood rather close to God, they have lately come down in the world in the footsteps of their former employer.

Dick Pels, *Knowledge Politics and Anti-politics*, 1995

### **The Opening Scene: *Take Sides*, the Historical Profession Diversified**

It was December, 1988 in San Francisco - that day Joan Wallace Scott delivered a paper before the 109<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the *American Historical Association* in which an answer to the question *Is History in Crisis?* was sought.

Scott's lecture, was published with modifications, in the *American Historical Review* the following year under the title *History in Crisis? The Others' Side of the Story*. Arguing about the relation of historical knowledge and political practice, the paper lays the contours for what came to be defined as radical history. The American historian, a prolific scholar renowned for her outstanding work on gender and feminism, draws insights from the sociology of knowledge and maps out the great social transformation of the university since the 60s, the outcome, to a great extent, of the class, racial and ethnic diversification of the historical profession. Scott's article is not just a scholarly intervention in the field of historical studies, but mostly an assertive intervention in the field of academic politics.

*History in Crisis?* is an epoch making announcement. It is a critical account of 'old history' and a harsh critique of its practitioners; it can be read as a historical document, a kind of manifesto declaring the usher of a new era in historical theory and the history of historical profession. The paper

consists of a set of core arguments on which the postmodern critique against traditional history was grounded, that is the deconstruction of grand narratives, the constructivist character of historical interpretations, the situatedness of knowledge claims, the impact of the historian's subjectivity in the writing of history.

*History in Crisis?* reports the most important changes in historical scholarship and surveys the implications of an increasing and unprecedented social and cultural diversity that marked the faculty after the 1960s. It also provides a sociological explanation of the heated controversy over the present and the future of historiography in the late 1980s, a time when the proportion of historians from lower middle classes who entered the profession rose dramatically.

More than a historical investigation and a critical appraisal of the historical enterprise since the First World War, the paper is made up of a set of conventions about the politics of intellectual inquiry, the social responsibility of progressive historians, the purpose of radical historiography and the mission of its practitioners. Finally and most importantly, *History in Crisis?* alludes to an emerging intellectual sensibility which endowed the new agenda with a distinctive, if not superior, morality by putting forward a visionary set of ideals regarding its privileged subject, i.e. the oppressed minorities, the underdogs, the marginalized, the dominated, the victims of patriarchy, colonialism and western civilization.

Thanks to the clarity of arguments and mostly to its engaged, passionate and polemical style, the teaching of *History in Crisis?* - a core text in our reading list for the postgraduate course about the history of historiography - leaves almost none of the participants unconvinced. The majority of participants in the course enthusiastically embrace the new, radical agenda, tend to regard its arguments as self-evident, identify with its ideals and voice righteous indignation at the injustice and oppression in established power structures. The first encounter with the text raises no critical commentary within classroom, no cheerful exchanges of arguments and counter-arguments; the class is dismissed unanimous, relieved from the burden of critical questioning and reflexive self-questioning.

This outcome, however, runs contrary to the spirit and letter of Scott's piece. In the last two pages of the article some problems are posed. With a series of unanswered questions *History in Crisis? The Others' Side of the Story* invites us next week for a thorough re-reading which destabilizes our hasty and easily gained certitudes.

## Outsiders in the Academy: Their Story

The essay sets as its object the strong controversy within humanities and social sciences, which later came to be known as the postmodern challenge and reached its peak in the late 1980's.

According to the rationale of the paper, the stakes of the heated debate were not only theoretical but social, cultural and political as well. The dispute over historical method and sociological theory is not simply understood as a scholarly discussion or debate but as an expression of an intense social, cultural and political struggle ('contests for power') between academics from different social, ethnic and cultural origins. In *History in Crisis? [HIC]* the academic community is divided into two opposing camps: the conservatives and the radicals; these were the labels each side coined for defining and responding to its 'other', to the opponent: *Is history in a state of crisis or, does it enter in a stage of change and renewal; who have the power to define the boundaries of the field and set the criteria of inclusion and exclusion within academic community; how should history be written and taught;* these were the summarized major stakes of the conflict.

From the perspective of *HIC*, the question is not whether history is in crisis but rather *by whom* the present status of the discipline is perceived in a state of crisis. Shifting the focus from the object under discussion, that is historiography, to the subject, that is the historians who produced the crisis talk, radical historiography adopts the perspective of sociology of knowledge. Thus, it offers us the picture of the field neatly divided in two, clearly demarcated, competing camps of scholars who strive to promote their own definitions of the situation. Conservative historians addressed the new theoretical trends, not as a sign of methodological pluralism and renewal but as a challenge to their dominance, a threat that undermined the dominant historiographical orthodoxies, the grand narratives of western civilization.

*HIC* undertakes to expose the political nature of the debate over the present and future of historiography revealing the factors, the real reasons behind the theoretical controversies, that is, their material, social base. The so-called *crisis* is nothing but a construction from the perspective of elite historiography. It is not an objective reality and it does not convey the truth about the state of history. The crisis talk pertains to the subjective feelings of the practitioners of old history, the experiences of all those members of the upper classes who now feel threatened and marginalized by the new entries in the profession. If there is any crisis, it is theirs; what is under crisis

is the elite's monopoly to demarcate the boundaries of the field, to determine the criteria for inclusion in and exclusion of the profession and define how history should be written. Things, however, have changed. A major rupture in the history of the profession has occurred: the new entries, the excluded from the field, have now a voice over the present and the future of historical scholarship. With their criticism a new generation of historians challenges the established bases of power not only within university but also beyond it, in society at large.

*HIC* comes up with an answer that challenges the trope of crisis and the concomitant, proliferating discourses about the need of defending history from postmodern radicals. Conservatives may bemoan the present state of history by calling attention to the dire situation of the profession: the incredulity towards grand narratives, the repudiation of objectivity, the fragmentation of the discipline, the attacks on the universality of knowledge, the reign of blind advocacy and the politicization of the field. However, one of the main tasks radical historiography sets itself is to unmask these pretensions by exposing the inherently political nature of the debate and of historical scholarship generally. Contrary to their declarations in the name of 'History' and the respective battle cries for the sake of disinterestedness and value freedom, the conservatives advocate an elite history that serves partial interests; a history from the perspective of elites, practised by elites and for the sake of their interests. Contrary to the laments for the disruption of homogeneity and consensus in the field, the article discloses the politics of inclusion and exclusion thanks to which the hegemony of old history was established, secured and maintained. 'The barbarians are in our midst (...). We need to fight them a good long time ( ...). Show them you are not afraid, they crumble' (Scott, 1989: 682). These public outcries against the practitioners of new history at the late 90's are cited in the text and incorporated into the history of the profession, they are the brand-new links in the long chain of attacks and insults against the 'heretics' throughout the twentieth century. By quoting several excerpts from presidential addresses delivered in the American Historical Association, *HIC* sheds light to the numerous attempts made by the 'guardians of orthodoxy' to disqualify members of the lower classes from the ranks of the profession; to abase and depreciate their scientific and cultural capital; to question their inclusion within the field; to doubt their ability to disinterested scholarly research; to point out their 'difference' (in terms of gender, race, class or ethnic origins) with a view to devalue their intellectual achievements. Things, however, have changed. The

outsiders are now in the academia, in a position to bring to the fore what was hidden and silent in history, powerful enough to speak out and tell '*The Others' Side of the Story*, what is foreshadowed in the article's subtitle.

The story of *the Others' Side of the Story* is cathartic; outsiders struggle to become insiders, the weak challenge the strong, the powerless outperform the powerful. Even if the conflict did not result in the victory of one camp over the other, it was unquestionably presented as a important struggle whose motivating force was justified in the name of justice. The ending to the article is optimistically phrased and reassuring; it concludes thus: 'Those who pose critical challenges are not enemies but agents of renewal and change' [692]. However, by shaking the finger to the adversaries, Scott could not avoid a kind of didacticism: 'Those who would write "politics" out of professional life misunderstand the processes by which all knowledge, including knowledge of history, has been produced (...). Those who expect moments of change to be comfortable and free of conflict have not learned their history'.

The last concluding sentence will ring into our ears up to our next meeting and further discussion. The class is dismissed with a vague sense of familiarity, a sense of déjà vu— *the history of all hitherto existing historiography is the history of 'class' struggles*.

### **Our Tension-Ridden Present: Questions 'difficult but not insoluble'?**

*HIC* offers a story that allows us to understand the existential character of the conflict and

the dramatic tone marking radical criticism and the culture wars in the following decades. Since politics is 'not the antithesis of professionalism' but 'its expression', there is 'no single standpoint we can expect from historians', Joan Scott concludes.

However, in the following last lines of *HIC*, the author poses some important questions, 'difficult' as she admits but not 'insoluble' she hopes, that arise from the above premises and disclose some of the tensions inherent in it: 'How then do we understand the relationship between the historian's identity and the group he or she writes about? Do women have a privileged relationship to women's history? Can whites write black history? Is "orientalism" an inevitable feature of First World accounts of the Third World? Is

history a pluralist enterprise in which any assertion is acceptable, in which “anything goes”? (...) How can we maintain a disciplinary organization, with some commitment to shared standards and at the same time tolerate diversity in membership and profound differences in method, philosophy, and interpretation? (...) If the many different stories of the past, based on different historical experiences, are indeed irreconcilable, is there nonetheless a way to think coherently and systematically about the past? What are the contemporary social and political implications of seeking such coherence?” (Scott 1989: 691-2).

These questions which still preoccupy nowadays the practitioners of history but also those of the humanities and social sciences, encourage us to make the most of the opportunities for discussion and debate in the classroom and the seminar room. To a great extent, these questions, pointing out the tensions and the contradictions inherent in the postmodern challenge, define the contours of the *Conversations*, of the six interviews included in this volume. This set of ‘difficult’ questions not only provide a map for navigating the current crisis talks and the concomitant anxieties about the impact of the global financial crisis in the future of higher education but might also allow to endow the current discourses with some historical depth.

Although the discourses about the crisis of the university nowadays point out the neoliberal attack on universities as the source of the malaise, some commentators insist that the crisis cannot be solely attributed to financial or institutional reasons but to epistemological problems as well. Notwithstanding the nuanced arguments of *HIC* and Joan Scott’s subsequent critical interventions against the historians of difference who resort to ‘experience’ as a foundational epistemology of social sciences (Scott 1991; Chakrabarty 2002), academic radicals undertook the role of a professional avant-guard, rejected *in toto* the idea of historical knowledge as an autonomous mode of inquiry and understanding, and appointed themselves as privileged spokespersons of the excluded Other.

The teaching of *History of Crisis?* today, as any other similar text written as an intervention into the historian’s debate at the 1980’s, is an undertaking that could not but be mediated by the passage of time and reconstructed on the basis of our present experience. One may disagree on the consequences of the debate, to resist responding to the call by taking side for or against, or may question the novelty of ‘new history’, as well as the originality of its questions and answers. Yet, one thing seems certain –almost three decades later, the crisis talk has not come to an end. Current discourses

about the crisis of the humanities and social sciences do not focus on the culture wars in the academy, or the heated controversy between the adherents of 'old' and 'new' history, but rather attempt to make sense of the current state of crisis of university caused by neoliberalism and the New Public Management. Debates between historians are still ongoing, but nowadays their content is more outward than inward looking, less concerned with disputes over theory or contests for power within the academic field and more preoccupied with issues pertaining to the challenges facing humanities and social sciences, or the universities today.

It is also ascertained that the innovators, the new historians who challenged the dominant orthodoxies in the eighties, are not shut out from the academy anymore. The exponents of 'new history' have established their hegemony in many subfields of the discipline. They have extended its boundaries and celebrated the introduction of new topics in the curriculum and the inclusion of new entries in the profession. This turning point in historiography is manifested in a new problematic that reigns in the field. There was not only a set of new answers to old questions but new questions and orientations that were expressed by the shift from 'what is history' to 'whose history' or 'history for whom'; and to a new kind of sensibility diffused among radical scholars who appear more anxious to declare the present relevance of their studies, more concerned to define their public role, social mission and political engagement, and more keen to respond to the challenges of the world and to produce history with a view to master the future.

Books and articles on minority groups, the immigrants, the marginalized and so on are published in volumes and become best sellers; proposals for major conferences featuring the *Others' Side of the Story* and highlighting their present relevance stand a better chance of acceptance than other old fashioned topics; to many young scholars the new approaches and agendas seem not only more intriguing, compelling and convincing but also more promising and self-awarding as well. Under the banner of radical criticism and under the motto 'engagement with the oppressed', new authors proliferated and arguably dominated the field during the following decades. Many of the titles they produced became widely read and may be considered classics in the field. The new agenda influenced countless scholars and changed, not so much the way one does and practises history, but mostly the ways one reflects on the utility of history, the social role of the historian and the mission of the university.