

The Terms of Engagement: Elements from the Genealogy of Active History¹

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Jack Granatstein meets Joy Parr
Housemaid's Knee in Ottawa?

'Housemaids' knee in Belleville?'²

This image of Sir John A MacDonalld using a vacuum cleaner came to me on a T-shirt when I delivered the 1998 Underhill Lecture at Carleton University. I spoke then from a forthcoming manuscript on the domestic economy and Canadians' manufacture and use of domestic appliances.³ Earlier that year, a senior historian at York University garnered considerable comment in the popular press by dismissing women's and social history as the "study of housemaid's knee in Belleville."⁴ As the decentring of 'men in politics' within historical studies was still contested, and indeed, to some, threatened to 'kill Canadian History', this divergence of opinion amongst their elders about whether the study of domestic equipment was historically significant or a mortal wound to the field appealed to the sense of fun of graduate students and junior faculty at Carleton.

When the question 'who killed Canadian history?' was asked, the engaged

practices of historians allied with political parties were exempt from interrogation, their behaviour neither putative nor culpable in the alleged crime. Indeed, they were amongst those posing the question. The notion that engagement and mortality were linked arose when the exchange of advice and forging of alliance between historians, women, workers and immigrants- those who needed more power over their lives, rather than those who had power aplenty- began more frequently and publicly to occur.

Let us be clear: a form of Active History, attentive to contemporary concerns, engaged in policy and with an engaged citizenry has existed as long as historical scholarship has existed in Canada, for some time most commonly practiced by political historians allied with and advising mainstream political parties. This activity was regarded not as a threat to public order but a public service. In the postwar era, a period in which the need for domestic stability was taken for granted and experts were king, historians were valued both by the political parties and academic colleagues for what they knew about how stability in the past had been disrupted and maintained.⁵

The Liberal journalists and MPs and professors at Toronto, Carleton, Saskatchewan, Queen's and UBC who had historical training, were historically minded, thought history mattered and were called upon by others who thought the same, were active on the basis of their special expertise in a time when some authority resided in the historical record. These men and women offered expertise on the basis of their scholarly credentials, but they also made common cause with and explicitly worked to forward the interests of the party. They were active as historians in the public sphere.

The historians denounced in *Who Killed Canadian History* as putative assassins were a chronologically later group, also active as historians in the public sphere. These were labour historians allied with unions and women's historians active in the feminist movement, who regarded history, in the words of their friend and guru, Raph Samuel, as "too important to be left just to professional historians."⁶ They too acted on the basis of historical knowledge and arrogated authority or accepted authority on that basis. They hoped to use that knowledge to articulate the possibility of alternatives, to argue on the basis of historical instances that change was possible, to raise consciousness, inflect action and to make change.

This active history had its own contextual specificities. As the engaged historians of the previous period were creatures of a time when domestic stability was taken for granted and experts were king, this succeeding active history was practiced within the context of a strong British Labour party and union movement, the Vietnam war and the golden age of capitalism, when welfare states were growing and the notion that there was something to be done was common, often confident of a consensus that large organisations should do what was to be done. The planning and mobilising for structural change of this active history fit the

time. Often these active historians were eager and confident to set the direction for change, too eager and too confident. There was some wreckage along the way.

People on the ground could be forgiven for not recognising the fine disciplinary distinctions their visitors burnished so carefully. Some were positivist, science-envying social scientists without local anchors in the contested sites they entered. Some were historians. They are remembered locally. Following in their wake, living with and living down their ‘mistakes,’ can take a lot of time for those still not ashamed to be engaged.

The process is not without compensations. For those who struggle to remain watchful and listening, their legacy includes many teachable moments. Ways they messed up, we too can mess up. An example: the pall of Hydrogen Sulphide spewing from the Heavy Water plant by Ontario’s Inverhuron Provincial Park in the early 1970s was a magnet for social science researchers. Local people involved in the campaign to save Inverhuron Park recalled visiting researchers as patronising, self-absorbed, naïve and inflexible. “They wanted us to be a case,” “they treated us as data;” “we were too busy for that, we had a battle to fight.” Recently, I’ve encountered similar complaints in several research sites beset by environmental health crises. “Those medical people just want to harvest our tissue and fluids and turn it into their scientific papers to further their careers.” The ethical and professional circumstances of medical and social sciences are different. But in my experience, these doctors and PhDs from afar look pretty much the same from the ground.

By the 1980s and 1990s popular deference to authority, particularly scholarly authority had diminished; the space which scholarly visitors and tourists might formerly have entered and occupied was now more frequently claimed locally. Scholars who wanted to work in local sites could not set the direction or raise consciousness; they had to show they had learned the kindergarten lesson to share well; to “not to take up too much space.”

These are the current terms of engagement.

NOTES

¹ This paper was originally presented as a keynote address at the Active History: History for the Future conference at Glendon College in September 2008.

² The card accompanying the gift is dated 16 Nov 2000 and attributes the collage of image and text to ‘Kerry.’

³ Joy Parr, *Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral, and the Economic in the Postwar Years* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

⁴ J. L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto: HarperCollins Canada, 1998).

⁵ Among prominent academics, we remember only Harold Innis for challenging these partisan alliances and interventions.

⁶ Anna Davin and Sally Alexander, “Sociology and History,” *History Workshop Journal* 1 (Spring 1976),

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