
In *Taking History to Heart*, James Green seeks to explore how movement histories are conducted in both the past and present. In the Prologue, Green begins by defining movement history as the study of “the body of work produced by scholars and activists passionately engaged in the study of social protest for moral and political reasons as well as intellectual ones.” This definition sets the framework for Green’s subsequent discussion of “radical historians” and their unconventional methods of using subjectivity to propel the grassroots efforts of lower classes. Likewise, Green believes this new approach will correct the “imbalance in U.S. history” which tended to focus on the history of the elite. He explains that history, and movement history in particular, should be a collaborative effort or ‘plural authorship’ between academics and subjects in which all parties take a participatory role in collecting history. Green warns, however, that while attempting to cross social boundaries to create such an effort, historians should be cautious in order to prevent one from being “captured” by the event and lose the ability to provide critical analysis.

Like many other social historians in the late 1970s early 1980s, Green did not believe he would be doing work with movement histories as his upbringing did not lead him in that direction. Raised in a very conservative, religious household, he learned very little about unions and labor groups. Coupled with the stories from older family members, his brief work in politics, and the current events of the period, he became motivated to become a scholar of social movements as well as an activist for social change. As he trained in the field of movement history, he familiarized himself with scholars from both sides of the movement history dialogue, including Mary Beard, C. Van Woodward, W.E.B. Du Bois, Philip Foner, E.P. Thompson, and C.L. R. James. The challenge for social historians, Green states, is finding the unifying theme that ties the threads of events of the past together in a way that gives the subject agency yet, at the same time, exhibits the ability of the scholar to stay true to the facts. Critics believe this is not possible as the need to be subjective will ultimately mean disregarding historical truth.

In recent years, scholars as well as history publications have embraced social history because many historians, they believed, had become “self-absorbed” and “lost contact with other audiences with whom historians used to talk.” It was during this shift in academia that Green decided to find ways to disseminate social history in non-academic spaces, such as newspapers, festivals, and museums. He became particularly inspired to study labor movements as he felt the need to connect history to people and make it more useful. The author continues in saying that by making the history connect to larger audiences, it is equally as important to explore both the successful as well as the unsuccessful activists efforts so one does not seem as if they are “simply offering elegies to lost causes.” In the end, Green expresses to the reader that in order to tell the stories of social movements, activists and academics must engage in meaningful dialogues to learn from each other to effectively document history of social change.
In Chapter 2, Green illustrates how strategies to study movement history in other parts of the world can be applied to the social history studies in the United States. He begins by explaining his first encounter with these strategies while in Oxford, England during a visit to Ruskin College, a school for workers. Introduced to the school by an English Ph.D. student, Anna Davin, Green toured the school and learned about the history workshops created to teach workers to be “real historians” instead of “passive readers” and engage in the historic material. Green instantly became intrigued at the thought of shedding old methods of writing with objectivity and teaching the subjects to narrate their own stories while holding true to the facts. Motivated by this concept, Green believed he could successfully incorporate these methods back in the states.

His first opportunity to use the new tactics came after a lengthy conversation with a union organizer and decided to organize a workshop with shoe workers and scholars in Lynn, Massachusetts. The goal of the workshops would be to reunite the remaining shoe workers and attempt to record their history and traditions in a safe space. Historians agreed to lead dialogue sessions and the shoe workers would be invited to the workshop that would be described as a “reunion” to attract various age groups. The workshop was deemed a success as it was fairly well attended and “encouraged speech making by women,” even though some individuals spoke much longer than others.

The second workshop was in Lawrence, Massachusetts with textile workers. As the location of the bread and rose strike of 1912, Green and other social historians believed this was a viable topic that needed to be explored and the history of the immigrant workers documented. To organize the event, it was crucial to solicit assistance from various leaders and labor organizations to truly make this a collaborative effort. While there was some fear from union leaders to “speak out” and tell their stories, they were strongly encouraged to do so as historians believed that the workshops needed to work with people who understand the movement because they had first-hand knowledge. Unlike Lynn, historians decided not to be as involved in the workshop, which in hind sight may not have been the best decision. During the workshop, historians did not provide historical context or analysis which led to workers sharing stories that were often highly exaggerated. Women were also omitted or not encouraged to provide their perspective during dialogue sessions. This all proved to be unhelpful to the workshop’s ultimate goal.

After returning from a second trip to England, Green pressed forward to organize a workshop in Boston with the Organization of Women Office Workers. The purpose for this workshop was to develop long term goals to continue educating audiences about the contributions of professional women and produce some sort of tangible result to be shared with the masses. As a result of the dialogue at the workshop, the women published a book of their stories to be shared with other women’s groups and union organizations.

While not all totally successful, they all produced some positive outcomes. Social historians were able to gain new perspectives on previously undocumented topics to understand events beyond “just the facts.” Also, subjects of these social movements were given a safe space to share their memories as well as learn how to effectively share them with larger audiences.

Green uses Chapter 7 to explore the use of documentary films to capture the history of social movements. He presents examples of films such as Harlan County, USA, The Inheritance, and Eyes on the Prize as films that inspired him to see the value in using this medium to document “people’s history” in a visual way. Eyes on the Prize is discussed in great detail as it
is what Green deemed to be a model for future films seeking to do social history documentaries. Produced by former civil rights activists and filmmaker Henry Hampton, *Eyes on the Prize* struck a new chord with American citizens as it moved beyond images of violence and was able to show how the people participating in the Civil Rights Movement had a larger goal of “fulfilling the promise of democracy.” While the film was heavily criticized for not conveying the complexities of the movement, including the inner turmoil or the increase in militancy in the late 1960s, Green believes the film was successful as it gave voice to lesser known figures of the movement and allowed audiences to actual “see the movement through the eyes of the activists.” Green would go on to use this film and others as guidelines as he worked on small labor movement films with Union Side Films. He served as a consultant on two low-budget films for the company, one which received an Academy Award. Green explains that it was the ability to let the laborers tell their own story instead of “talking heads” that made the films a success.

After working with Union Side, Green was approached to work with Blackside Films, the production company founded by Hampton that created *Eyes on the Prize*, to develop a new series documenting the Depression. When meetings regarding the project began, Hampton assembled filmmakers and social historians and required each group to equally contribute to the creative process. This initially surprised Green as most filmmakers were usually dismissive of historians and hardly ever valued their input. Hampton, on the other hand, was very different in his approach to social movement films as he even established a six day summer school in which all parties would learn from each other as well as from prominent New Deal historians. While developing the script for the new film, writers were encouraged not to make subjects look like helpless victims or martyrs. Producers were also asked not to have the film mirror a propaganda piece but make the “stories of struggle and survival” a part of America’s “cultural DNA.” The film should tell the story of great people that would “give people hope.” The process to achieve this goal included endless hours of fact checking, learning how to tell a dramatic story, and deciding exactly what subjects/organizations would be featured.

The end result titled *The Great Depression* received great reviews from the press who said that the series was able to show “how ordinary Americans save democracy in peril while they are saving their own lives.” Other reviewers commented that it highlighted the overall goals of the movement while educating the public about activism. Critics site that *The Great Depression* failed to capture the “spontaneous moments” of the movement, did little to convey the politics and reasoning behind why the activists chose various strategies, and gave very little attention to the Communists groups of the period. Green responds to criticisms of the series explaining that the writers and producers were aware of the shortcomings during production and creative edits did not always allow for these complex topics to translate well to the screen.

Despite these shortfalls, Green believes the film was a success as historians and filmmakers were able to work together to present the stories of everyday people. He encourages further collaboration between the fields to assist historians in writing with “more soul.” Green closes with a quote from prominent film editor, Robert Rosenstone, which eloquently ends the chapter:

“Telling history with pictures, sounds and oral testimonies does not mean sacrificing the truth...but it does mean understanding that the ‘truths conveyed in the visual media may be different from, but not necessarily in conflict with, truths conveyed in words.’”