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You can visit us online at: www.past-tense.org.uk

We've also helped to inspire other groups to set up... in Bristol and North East London. They've gone their own way, and flourished, managing to host more wide-ranging events and meet more regularly than we were able to sustain... They continue, and good luck to them.

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NOT THE END OF HISTORY

The South London Radical History Group winds up

"we never wanted to be merely radical historians and we are so much more than that."

After five and a half years of irregular existence the South London Radical History Group has decided to call it a day. This decision not only recognises that we had effectively ceased to exist already, but also comes out of a questioning of the boundaries we had set for ourselves, of the limits of studying history, and the separation of such study, of activism in the present, and our desires for a future world...

Below is set out a brief account of the group and some of the thinking that created it, as well as some of the reasons we are putting an end to it... it was written by one person, with comments from others, but doesn't entirely represent the views of all the group. Responses to this statement are of course welcome, we will circulate them to our e-list if people so desire.

The group existed in fits and starts, from 2003, when it was set up by several individuals who had been active mainly in anarchist politics in South London for many years, to 2009, when we wound it up. We shared an interest in history, not only of the movements we came from, but the areas around us, the social, economic and political struggles of the people who lived there, and the common experiences that shaped them and us. Several of those involved in setting up the Group had been involved in actions, events or publishing projects based around

radical history before the Group was set up, for example Practical History, which had been publishing subversive/historical writings since 1990; The Radical? Southwark Festival of September 1998, a rip-roaring carnival celebrating over 600 years of rebellion, subversion, and agitation in South London's oldest and baddest borough; and an action at the William Blake exhibition at the Tate gallery sponsored by transnational obscenity-merchants GlaxoSmithKline.

Mostly the History Group's events consisted of talks given by someone who has researched a subject, knew about it from personal experience, followed by a discussion, arguments, disagreements, stormings out, denunciations etc. From January 2003 to September 2004 we mostly met (sometimes monthly... sometimes we rested for a while) in the Use Your Loaf Squatted Social Centre in Deptford High Street, an old bakery that had been empty for years before local anarchists occupied it, did it



...hundreds were locked outside the History meeting again...

up and ran a café, meeting space, and bar there. After Use Your Loaf was evicted (and trashed by its owners) in September 2004, we upped and relocated to the Pullens Estate in Newington, near the Elephant & Castle, meeting either at 56a Info Shop or down the road at the Pullens Centre. Occasionally we instead went on a walk, exploring the subversive past and present in radical history walks round Hammersmith, New Cross, Clerkenwell, Walworth, Camberwell, Bloomsbury, up the river Fleet, in Spitalfields, and more...

We weren't 'experts', or even 'historians'. Our walks and talks were usually shared experiences, where ideas were discussed and viewpoints and interpretations differed widely. Heckling and people speaking up to correct occasional inaccuracies were encouraged. Those who came to listen often had as much input as those who came to stand up and spout forth. We learned from each other. To us learning about the past is not an academic exercise for dry, dusty and neutral debate; it is a living growing community of experience and resistance, that we are as much a part of as the Chartists or the Suffragettes.

Neither The Past Or the Future, But the Here and Now!

The group has never had more than a skeletal existence. A core of 3 or 4 people, with a wider group of maybe 10 or so regular attenders; one or more of us usually gave a talk, on a 'subject' they had researched or a struggle they had themselves experienced. The core who set the group up had known and worked together for several years, in broadly anarchist circles, since the anti-poll tax movement and before; in and out of various ongoing projects, from anti-fascism, squatted centres, subversive newspapers, to reclaim the streets, prisoners support

and promoting fare-dodging on the tube. We shared a desire to create different ways of living, trying to help create a future without exploitation, meaningless work, class inequality and hierarchy; trying to also live a present as free of coercion and full of joy and love as we could. We also shared an interest in history, in struggles and social relations of the past, never as an academic or abstract study for its own sake, but as part of an attempt to understand the present we faced and explore changes in class society and resistance to it, and sometimes to inspiration from past moments/movements, or identify why and how struggles turned out as they did. Before the History Group's existence as such, we had co-operated on occasional projects or actions with a historical connection, as well as having been individually involved in producing 'historically' based material; often relating movements we were involved in to events of past times.

For a full list of our activities see the past tense website at www.past-tense.org.uk

We Fill our heads With Culture...

Another fundamental reason for our decision to dissolve the history group as such is a strong feeling that defining ourselves in this way, and labelling our activities as 'history', straitjackets us into a narrow speciality, confining us to one discipline, reducing our ability to link past present and future, and to relate ideas, places, people, social relations; when our desires, interests and urgent needs, urge us to break narrow sectional borders and transcend the limits of accepted 'study'. In reality we have always leapt from discussing struggles of 300 years ago, to talking about the gentrification in our streets that is still taking place, to examining current struggles, the social spaces and

rebellious networks we create in the light of those of the past; to



combining 'history', 'geography', mapping, exercise, social drinking, music and several other important activities while walk here and there talking bout the subversive past of a given locality... While we're still interested in the past, some of the most useful discussions we have had have been not simply 'historical', and the discovery of the past of the areas we inhabit and the links to our own experience of those areas, in mapping and in

'history walks', has challenged notions of history as rooted in the past and over and done with...

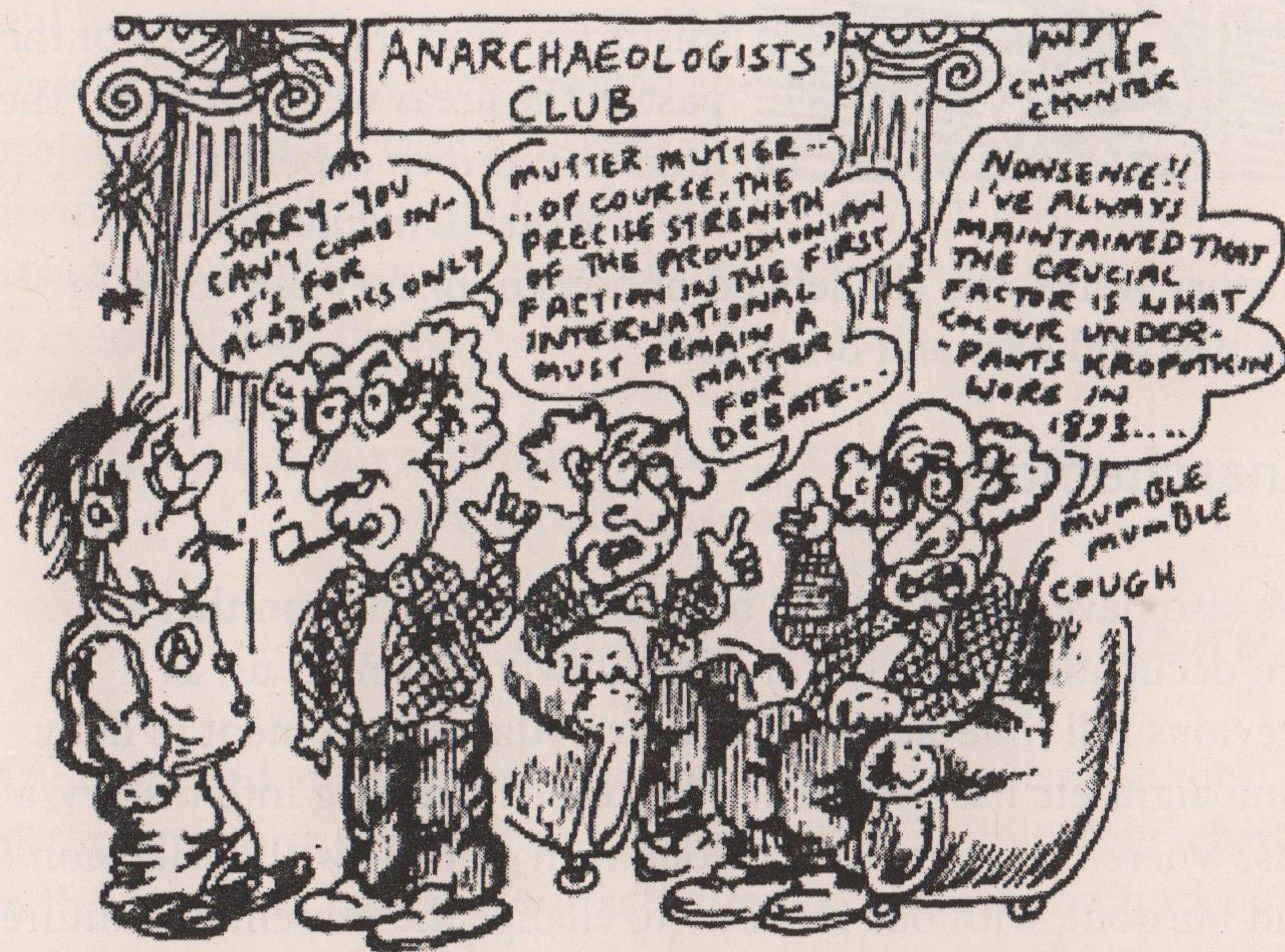
Anarcheology?

We also have found it hard to escape the conclusion that a pre-occupation with 'history' has slowly grown on us, as previous full time 'activism' and everyday involvement in daily campaigns etc has declined... Were we retreating into history, a past where things are safely 'done with' to cope with disillusion and burnout, with our inability to change the present and future as we dreamed?

Or as one group founder put it:

"More generally I struggle sometimes with the focus on history - albeit I am one of the worst offenders! I am haunted by the phrase 'we used to make history, now we write history'. I think it's fair enough to acknowledge that as you move through the life cycle you do develop, for better or worse, a longer-term historical perspective as the youthful hope of imminent insurrection recedes.

Perhaps too an appreciation of the fragile continuities of the human community that have survived several hundred years of capitalism plus a recognition that you can no longer outrun a copper (they do get to look younger). Still we don't want to become like our grandparents stuck in the second world war, which I think is a real danger once you start recycling your youth as history for the next generation (you should have been there in the miners strike! kids nowadays weren't even born when we had the poll tax etc.)."



Another history group stalwart suggests that "Part of the problem was the general malaise of South London in general with very few people around doing interesting stuff politically. The problem we had was that in the end we ran out of stuff to present (without going down the road of presenting our own fairly recent histories - something we consciously wanted to avoid) and thus no new people came forward to present anything. It was impossible

for 4 people to keep researching and digging around to create decent presentations every month."

...We Give ourselves an Ulcer

"The group in the end fell in between the cracks of all the other stuff the members were individually and collectively involved in. It wasn't so much history burn-out, more just too much present and future stuff going on with us all."

It is true that several of us, though always interested in historical perspectives, began to concentrate more on documenting the past at times when we had become less whirlwindingly immersed in five meetings a week, constant demos and leafleting, actions and producing endless free newssheets. We all clearly recognised that you could learn vast amounts about our own situations and possibilities from looking not only beyond our immediate experiences but to previous generations; we saw what we were doing as integral to ongoing attempts to engage with the here and now. But did it become a retreat into itself?

We mostly don't think so. We've mostly moved from full on reactive activism, having other priorities like families, jobs, surviving... but we're still involved in projects of resistance to class society, capital and all the rest of the isms. The investigations into 'history' maybe mirror the process of how our attitude to being 'active' has changed, from youthful headlong all-inclusive lifefilling rioting to a more thoughtful approach.

Questions about activism have arisen: in our own experiences some of us have come to doubt the effectiveness and potential of the traditional activist-centred movements we have been part

of. But others are still happy to describe themselves as activists; others dispute some of the terms:

"I don't think we were ever 're-active' activists. Running 56a or doing Past Tense is something very rewarding even if it's activism in some sense (it definitely involves being active and committed) but I don't think it's reactive. In this sense I am still an active activist (as bad as it sounds) and of course I am still wary and critical of 'activism'."

Study of history has shown us problems thrown up by political groups and activists, their role in change, and the separation of 'activism' and 'daily life'. One thing a historical perspective has helped with is to deal with disillusion and inertia, after the immediacy of youth, the need for things to happen NOW; change is often long term and hard to spot when it is happening, many factors are involved, and politicians are only a small part of it.

But delving into the archives also makes us aware that all those folk who contributed, built movements and fought the power had stories worth telling, their experiences all make up those times and helped to give birth to many social developments. The same goes for our stories too!

"On the other hand I think it is important that we do document the times we have lived through. I think it's a shame for instance that there's so little documenting the early/mid 70s struggles and radical movements from participants. Sad too that people like Joe Thomas died before they could be persuaded to tell their story - but who can blame them for not wanting to be treated as holy relics."

These ideas, doubts, and vague hints would all bear further discussion... Responses, ripostes and general abuse in reply to

this wind-up statement would of course be welcome.

The Way We Walk

"The best bits were the walks (which I maintain are one of the best practical tools for interesting people in radical ideas and connections). The worst bits were the meetings where there was nothing really to be said after the presentation. I don't think this was our fault, just a new generation of people who in essence didn't as yet have a history to reflect on and maybe were not yet comfortable with other people's older histories that had been thought about a lot."

The walks we have done round various localities in London have been one of the best attended and most enjoyable of the SLRHG's activities. Sometimes there were 60 people or more... on the Bloomsbury walk from the squatted social centre in Russell Square, there was such a crowd the police thought we were a demo and started panicking, yelling into radios and running. (This wasn't the only time the group got the police worried totally wrong end of stick-wise: another time two on the ball community cops in Walworth saw a flyer for our meeting discussing the early 1980s Stop the City actions and asked



The speaker came to the history meeting prepared for a rough ride...

us if this was going to be a violent demo... ??! Muppets!) The walks engaged people in a way meetings often fail to do, and crossed borders between history, geography, archeology, drinking and plaque-erecting.

To say that some of the meetings fell flat after the initial presentation is true: it's debateable though how much it is to do with a 'newer generation'. Sometimes the talk's subject could be interesting in itself, but had little connection to us or our lives, didn't stimulate debate, or there seemed little to add.

As with the earlier comment about how few people were doing anything in South London, or how few of us there were organising the group, this is all true, for most of the time the group existed, but in fact none of that explains events that didn't work. When there has been more 'present' action the group has in fact been on the back burner or ceased to exist. So a question hangs as to whether we really did integrate studying history and being active in the present... Is it even possible?

Another question that remains is. How stuck were we in the activist scene, and how much this is a problem. Despite lots of publicity, etc, almost all the people who turned up to meetings were from an activist background. (The walks definitely brought a wider range of folk in).

But then you have to ask, are people interested? Most 'activists' take a dim view of examining history. Does it even matter? For some of best discussions we had, where we really broke ground, there were sometimes like 8 of us there or less. For those that were there, the event had a value and meaning, whether or not it shook the state.

Still Makin Histri

So what are the History Group stalwarts up to in the immediate?

All of us are to some extent involved in ongoing activities which will no doubt spark up some 'historical' aspect in the future; plans for possible future walks and talks are still there in the mix, some more of our past and present is being mapped; a couple of actions relating past and present subversive space are being brewed up.

We also intend to continue publishing under the banner of Past Tense. Material related to talks and walks we or friends and relations have organised has been put out under the Past Tense stable, as well as reprinting interesting texts. There are various half-completed projects being readied for publication, including long-worked on projects around subversive Brixton, and the Elephant & Castle. Watch this space.

Finally, while this grandiose gesture of a final statement may seem like a lot of fuss for a tiny fractious group of malcontents, we have to say we enjoyed the South London Radical History Group's existence and found it useful. We hope those of you who participated in any of its dubious practices, had fun, and came away thinking. See you when we see you.