

HISTORY WORKSHOP AROUND THE WORLD

Dig Where You Stand and International History from Below Movements

by Andrew Flinn and Astrid von Rosen

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the emergence of several often interconnected and influential international movements characterized by a ‘history from below’ approach. Among these was the Swedish ‘Dig Movement’, guided by the important and influential book *Dig Where You Stand: How to Research a Job* (*Gräv där du står: Hur man utforskar ett jobb*) which was published in 1978 by the renowned Swedish author, researcher and activist Sven Lindqvist. The book, ‘a research handbook for non-professional researchers’, offered a detailed step-by-step and source-by-source account of how workers could research their own jobs, using the example of an industrial worker employed in the Swedish concrete industry, but intended as a guide to research into any kind of job or employment.¹

Prompting workers to become researchers, to follow the traces of capital through time, take on the role of experts on their job, and ‘dig’ out its hidden histories, the book provides tools to produce a new picture of the company or factory, one ‘that puts workers and their work in the foreground’ as a vital step towards social and economic transformation. Written in engaging and accessible language, it challenges false boundaries between the public and the academy, between workers and experts. Beginning by drawing the reader’s focus away from the local to the international dimension, and ending with a vision of future activist scholars collaborating with academics to work for social change, the book’s thirty chapters create a montage of possible ways to explore a job and the workplace, offering a multitude of dynamic and critically fruitful approaches including oral history, visual analyses, archival research and spatial explorations. The original book consists of 288 pages, divided into short and instructive chapters, with an author’s foreword and a concluding text called ‘The Barefoot Researchers’. Each chapter draws out key critical questions, suggests historiographical approaches, and identifies where and how archival and other materials can be accessed. Even though the examples belong to a different time and place, and do not provide updated details and digital resources, the point they continue to make today is a powerful impetus to ‘dig where you stand’. Firmly grounded in critical thinking, the detailed examples can arguably be transposed to

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other contexts and challenges to convey the material and embodied nature of any research activity.

The book and the movement for which it was written were founded on the understanding that ‘History is dangerous ... History is important because the RESULTS of history are still with us’, and as a result it was imperative that workers (and others) took it upon themselves to research and write their own histories, particularly the histories of their workplace and their employment. Writing history ‘from a fresh point of view’ was not just a defensive reaction to powerful narratives that excluded them, and certainly not a leisure activity.² Rather, Lindqvist explained it could be a foundation for change:

many workers do not know their own predecessors. They know nothing of the history living in the capital. That history must first be explored, concretely and locally, in one company after another. Those who are to conquer the company must also conquer the picture of the company. A new picture must be created, a picture that has the work and the workers at the centre.³

This short essay describes the wider influence of Lindqvist’s work and of the Dig Movement itself, through extensive personal connections with international oral history and history from below movements, including History Workshop.

Dig Where You Stand was an immediate success in Sweden, where the first edition was quickly reprinted after selling out, and was swiftly translated into Danish, Norwegian and German, where it achieved lasting impact. However, no full translation into English was published until 2023, with the result that the full text was still relatively unknown in English-speaking countries forty-five years after its first publication. In 1981 a full English translation was prepared, paid for by Lindqvist, and Raphael Samuel supported efforts to have it issued, but no publisher was found.⁴ As discussed further in the final section of this essay, in the context of the changing political environment or the disputes within British history, the book had perhaps missed its moment. Lindqvist himself wondered whether the book was deemed ‘not Marxist enough’.⁵ The translated manuscript would eventually provide the foundation for the fully realized 2023 publication, but in the meantime English-speaking readers had to rely on short articles and reports in the *Oral History* journal, *History Workshop Journal* and *Radical History* and talks by Lindqvist at some key conferences for news and details of the Dig Movement and his book.⁶ As we shall see, this did not mean that the idea of ‘digging where you stand’ was not influential in the UK, at the time and subsequently.

SVEN LINDQUIST

Lindqvist (1932–2019) was a remarkable writer of breadth and passion. Across the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s he travelled widely, including in Latin America, China and Africa, and wrote about the politics of imperialism, racism, revolution, land reform and war for an increasingly international audience. Among his most famous international books are *Exterminate All the Brutes*

and *A History of Bombing*, both of which explore the origins of twentieth-century genocide and brutality in earlier European colonialism, racism and warfare. Although many of his books share a desire to uncover power and injustice, *Dig Where You Stand* is the only one that makes the case for how power can be challenged through rigorous historical research.

Lindqvist cited a number of different inspirations for *Dig Where You Stand* and workers undertaking their own research. In 2014 he referenced Nietzsche's 'Wo du stehst, grab tiefhinein!' ('Where you stand, dig in deeply!'), *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, Poem 3) as well as ideas of workers researching their own histories from Marx and the Bolshevik revolution. He was also critical of corporate histories from Sweden and Latin America, often funded directly by the employers, from which workers and their experiences were often completely absent, and contrasted these accounts with what he saw in China during his time as a university student in Peking / Beijing in 1961 and 1962. Here he noted a 'resurfacing' of the 'original idea of a workers' history of work and workplace' called 'Dig the Bitter Roots', which aimed 'to uncover the hardships and indignities of pre-revolutionary working conditions' with 'results published in exhibitions, in newspaper articles and over local radio'.⁷ Despite his references to both China and the Soviet Union as inspirations for his workers' history, his connection to Marxism was ambivalent. Lindqvist was certainly aware at first hand of the political and economic crises, famine, and abuses under the Chinese communist regime which characterized this period, referring to 'the immense but misdirected efforts of the Great Leap Forward ... followed by economic chaos and a severe shortage of food' in his 1965 book *China in Crisis*.⁸

Despite the importance of his work, Lindqvist did not invent *Dig* or the Swedish History from Below movement. By the early 1970s Sweden had a flourishing local, community and industrial history movement seeking to preserve disappearing rural and industrial traditions. Through the strategic interventions of the Swedish Workers' Educational Movement (the ABF), local trade union and Social Democratic Party branches, this movement became more directly concerned with history from below and workers' history, eventually becoming the history social movement 'Grävrörelsen', or *Dig* Movement. Between 1975 and 1985 the movement grew rapidly in Sweden, spreading to other Scandinavian countries before fading away. In Sweden alone, it is estimated that 100,000 'barefoot researchers' (as Lindqvist called them, referencing the Chinese 'barefoot doctors') were organized into more than 10,000 local study circles researching their communities and industries, producing histories, exhibitions and theatrical performances from the research; this eventually resulted in the creation of over a thousand local museums of working life as well as the Swedish Museum of Work (or Working Life) in Norrköping.⁹

Nor was Lindqvist the only or the first Swedish writer to produce a guide to researching workers' history. Gunnar Sillen's *Stiga vi mot ljuset* (*We Rise Towards The Light*), published in 1977, offered guidance on documenting industrial and worker memories using archive research, photography and oral history interviews as well as documenting and disseminating the results in

exhibitions, archives and local museums.¹⁰ But while Sillen was an important figure in the development of the Dig Movement, and *Stiga vi mot ljuset* an influential practical guide for doing research, Lindqvist's book expanded the guidance into something much more substantial, providing a fully worked-through description of workers' research into a particular industry (the cement industry) in every aspect and employing every source and method available to the barefoot or worker researcher. Thus Lindqvist's lasting contribution to the Dig Movement (funding the research that underpinned the book from a recently awarded literary prize) was to produce *Dig Where You Stand* as a much-expanded manual and worked-through programme of factory and worker research, designed for use by these new emerging groups and study circles and by the circle leaders.

INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Lindqvist and the Dig movement should be seen within the wider political and historical knowledge production traditions of the time. The ideas and approaches they represented were part of an international new left and civil rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s which promoted historical study of workers' movements, black history and women's history as a part of the struggles of those movements, and advocated collaboration between academics and workers/activists in historical research to support political and industrial struggle. Lindqvist wrote that he was influenced by participatory ideas around knowledge and cultural production in the arts and elsewhere, noting that 'the emphasis is no longer on the mere distribution of culture but rather on active participation in the arts', and he sought to extend these practices to the democratization of history writing.¹¹

In this Lindqvist was part of a developing activist-academic movement and network in Europe, the US and elsewhere. Comparable movements included the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, which incorporated traditions of independent working-class education and research, as well as collaborations with academic historians and other researchers in the History Workshop and oral history movements in the UK and elsewhere, which also recognized that 'history is too important to be left just to the professional historians'.¹² The international network included, in the UK, influential figures in the movement such as Paul Thompson, Anna Davin, Raphael Samuel and Ken Worpole. As in Sweden, Lindqvist's ideas and methods found a receptive audience in workers' educational association branches, oral history conferences and History Workshop meetings.

As readers of this journal will be aware, the History Workshop movement was formed in Ruskin College, a trade union-sponsored adult education college in Oxford, and in seminars there led by Raphael Samuel in the mid-1960s. Over the following years it grew rapidly, organizing large, vibrant, international festival-like conferences in which historians from a range of backgrounds (from inside and outside universities and with different levels of formal education) discussed topics within the broad fields of new social and working-class histories, including women's history, local and oral histories as well as the more conventional

subjects of industrial and political struggles. The Workshops, through national meetings and a network of local groups, supported and encouraged collaborative and non-academic historical research.

Lindqvist's *Dig Where You Stand* shared the principle that research, and particularly history-making, should be a collective endeavour. Although historical research could be undertaken by an individual worker, the real strength of the DWYS approach – as expressed in the study circles, in the labour movement or in workers' educational association classes – lay in the collective activity of history- and knowledge-making and the promotion of a 'participatory historical culture'. A passage from the final chapter focussed on 'Research' expresses the potential strength of this collective and collaborative activity:

Those who are to conquer the company must also conquer the picture of the company. A new picture must be created, a picture which puts the work and the workers at the centre. [...] It must be created by the workers themselves. It has to be built up by the cooperation of workers and scientists. In 30 different areas have we found materials and methods, which anyone can use to trace his own history and that of his workmates.¹³

Evidently there was a continuing exchange of ideas and approaches across borders, inside universities and outside. Lindqvist himself knew some of the leading figures of the new history practices of these movements, including Samuel and Thompson. But more than personal connections, the Dig Where You Stand and History Workshop movements drew upon similar traditions and influences, namely democratic challenges to cultural and knowledge production practices, traditions of independent working-class education, and the role of oral history in amplifying workers' voices. The impact of the views and approaches which emerged from the mid-1960s onwards amongst the civil rights and new left movements shaped many cultural and knowledge production practices. Groups of like-minded individuals challenged traditional demarcation lines between experts and consumers, performers and audiences; and in the arts, in education, in publishing and creative writing, in scientific research, in architecture, and in history they sought to challenge how knowledge and cultural production happened, where it happened and who it involved.

In London and the UK generally such activities were common intellectual currency in the arts and in research. It was the era of the Communist Universities of London, independent working-class writing and publishing houses such as Centerprise in Hackney and QueenSpark in Brighton, the establishment of workers' libraries and museums, and radical experimentation in public involvement in the arts. The History Workshop movement and the ideas and approaches it espoused were part of these broad intellectual and participatory approaches. In the decentring of professional historians and researchers to place the worker at the centre of the process of history-making, so was *Dig Where You Stand*. Lindqvist was also clear about the influence of the emergence of

participatory approaches in Swedish arts and culture in the late 1960s on his own thinking with regard to Dig.¹⁴

It is also important to note that, in the UK as in Sweden, these practices of history from below were not solely rooted in the politics of the new left and its challenges to traditional expertise and authority; they were also influenced by older and resilient traditions of independent working-class history education and activist research, such as those organized and developed by the Workers' Educational Association, trade union education, the Plebs League and local meetings of the Communist History groups. Local labour history groups especially in northwest and northeast England, in Scotland and in Wales, alongside the labour museums, libraries and archives, all stimulated and published local movement histories researched and written by non-academic, working-class researchers.¹⁵ Just as the Dig Where you Stand movement and workers' study circles drew on the long practice of trade union and workers' education via the AFB in Sweden, the History Workshop movement drew upon the traditions of independent working-class education from before and after the Second World War.

ORAL HISTORY

Another 'new' history movement that strongly influenced the ideas and approach of the history from below methods of both History Workshop and Dig Where You Stand was oral history. In contrast to the US, where according to the conventional histories the early post-war development of oral history owed more to interviewing of elites and those with lives of significance, in the UK oral history, with its roots in folklore studies, was strongly associated with history from below approaches in this period, and was particularly favoured as a historical method within the fields of labour history, women's history and later Black and LGBT history research and writing.¹⁶ Oral history and the History Workshop were closely connected, in terms of the people involved, the publication of key oral history texts, and the object of their historical methods, the writing of new, politically engaged histories.

Although the term 'oral history' is not directly used in *Dig Where You Stand*, Lindqvist's repeated advice to ask questions, examine the memories of people, use life story and autobiographical sources, conduct interviews and explore the revelations of life stories suggests similar methods and intentions to those of oral history in valuing, revealing and recording the lived experience of those who have direct knowledge of the subject studied.¹⁷ Certainly the connections and similarities were acknowledged by UK oral historians. Paul Thompson in *History Workshop Journal* 6 reported on lessons to be learnt by British socialist historians from well-established history-making practices in Sweden, including oral histories, touring exhibitions focussing on labour issues and television programmes as well as Sven Lindqvist's book, all suggesting that people should take control of their history as part of the process of making 'history a more democratic activity'.¹⁸

This connection was cemented by Lindqvist's attendance at the first European Oral History conference, organized by Thompson and Brenda Corti at the University of Essex in 1979, and preceded by a pre-conference 'travelling seminar' where international conference participants visited oral history centres around the UK meeting with key figures in oral history and History Workshop in the course of their travels. Participants on this 'travelling seminar', funded by the Social Sciences Research Council, 'joined a lightning two-day tour' covering South Wales Miners Library (meeting Hywel Francis), Hackney's Centerprise (Ken Worpole, Jerry White and Bill Williams), Clerkenwell's Women's Research and Resources Centre (Anna Davin), and finally Suffolk to discuss rural oral history (George Ewart Evans and Raphael Samuel).¹⁹ At the conference Lindqvist introduced the Dig Where You Stand approach as part of a panel chaired by Raphael Samuel on 'democratic history'. The text of this talk was published verbatim in *Oral History* later that year and was the only major article written by Sven Lindqvist on Dig Where You Stand to appear in English before his death in 2019 and the retrospective publication of the first full translation of the book in 2023.²⁰

The closest book in English to *Dig Where You Stand* in spirit and ambition is Paul Thompson's equally influential *The Voice of the Past*, also published in 1978. Thompson's book was both a practical guide to practising and understanding oral history and an account of how oral history raises questions about the social construction of history, asking 'whose voice – or voices – are to be heard'; later editions of *The Voice of the Past* acknowledge the contribution of the Dig movement.²¹ Thompson's book clearly articulated a socialist perspective, suggesting 'that the richest possibilities for oral history lie within the development of a more socially conscious and democratic history', and, in a turn of phrase that strongly echoes Lindqvist's own, that 'History should not merely comfort; it should provide a challenge and understanding which helps towards change ... A history is required which leads to action: not to conform, but to change the world'.²²

There were thus clear connections as well as obvious interest and support for *Dig Where You Stand* from the History Workshop and oral history movements. However, Lindqvist was engaged with them at a period of political upheaval (1979 was the year of Thatcher's first election victory, which ushered in a new period for the labour movement) and of intellectual disputes on the left, not least amongst the historians of the History Workshop and associated movements. The European Oral History conference in March 1979 and particularly the 13th History Workshop conference on People's History and Socialist Theory at Ruskin College Oxford later that year played host to robust and ultimately divisive arguments over a number of issues, including the validity of these more 'democratic' participatory approaches which sought to claim empowerment coming through the presentation of the voices of workers or women, and the related question of the proper place of theory in the production of history. At the 1979 Oral History conference Lindqvist was questioned over whether there was any contradiction between democratic and

academic history, and in his recorded response argued that he ‘felt the scope was vast enough for all to take part in historical research of any type’.²³ The tone of these debates on the value of history from below sharpened at the History Workshop conference later that year, which is perhaps most famous for the polemical debate on the role of theory between, among others, E.P. Thompson and Stuart Hall, but also for ongoing debates about oral history, workers’ history, local history and their value in relation to political projects of social transformation.²⁴ Instead of being a space where workers or other non-academics, and academic historians could collaborate together to produce new rigorous histories, these debates seem to mark a growing divide between the two, exacerbated by the use of polemical rhetoric (with terms such as ‘populist’, ‘theorist’ and ‘academic’ being used, according to Worpole, as terms of abuse) rather than real engagement with the role that theory should and could play in workers’ histories written by workers.²⁵ It was during these debates that Lindqvist’s manual outlining the Dig Where You Stand approach arrived in the UK, and failed to find a publisher.

However, the absence of a complete English text did not mean that the ideas underpinning Dig Where You Stand lacked continuing influence. Knowledge of this approach in the UK rested on word-of-mouth communication among those who had met and heard Lindqvist, and the contents of the short article in *Oral History* based upon one of these talks. Ken Worpole (co-ordinator of People’s Autobiography of Hackney and worker in the Centerprise community bookshop and publishing centre) indicated the strength of the influence of Lindqvist’s approach by describing ‘Dig Where You Stand’ as ‘the motto of the day’ for the local workers history movement and as ‘one of the rallying cries of the History Workshop movement’.²⁶ In this way many community-based and non-professional heritage, folklore, music and literary initiatives continued to use the phrase to describe aspects of their work. The long-running community archive and documentary arts project, the Living Archive from Milton Keynes, is perhaps one of the most interesting and significant of these. The Living Archive adopted the term ‘Dig Where You Stand’ (represented by a flowering spade in their logo) in their publications and imagery to describe their creative use of local history research and oral history practice, though without reference to the specific details of the original approach. According to founding member Roger Kitchen, they operated in the spirit, if not the detailed practice, of Lindqvist’s work.²⁷ More recently in Sheffield the archival justice movement Dig Where You Stand, and its founding member Désirée Reynolds, have drawn direct inspiration from Lindqvist and his work for their active engagement with archive and oral histories to ‘unearth the untold stories of people of colour living, working and putting down roots in South Yorkshire over hundreds of years’.²⁸

As the Sheffield history activism indicates, Dig Where You Stand remains a powerful reference point in the UK for a diverse range of groups, including folklorists, community arts groups, radical history networks and community heritage / local history education research projects. While all these groups take inspiration from Lindqvist’s advocacy of a do-it-yourself history ethic, with the

long absence of the full manual in the UK the political urgency of the original text was sometimes (though not always) replaced by projects that were more locally focussed, less concerned with political and industrial contestation and less explicitly tied to a political agenda of social transformation. It is hoped that the full English language publication (available since 2023 and prepared and edited by the present authors) will extend and deepen both the knowledge and influence of Lindqvist's work and the Dig movement and ethos in the UK and internationally.

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Astrid von Rosen is professor of Art History and Visual Studies, and the director of Centre for Critical Heritage Studies at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Together with Andrew Flinn she initiated the first English translation of Swedish author and activist Sven Lindqvist's critical heritage key work *Dig Where You Stand*. Astrid specializes in performing arts historiography, including participatory and digital humanities approaches to history making. Recent publications include 'Affect and Digital Caregiving: Challenging the Performing Arts Canon with a "Dig Where You Stand" Database', *Archives and Records* 43: 2, 2022, and (with J. Bergenmar and C. Lindhé) 'Infrastructures for Diversity: Feminist and Queer Interventions in Nordic Digital Humanities', *Feminist Digital Humanities*, 2025.

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces the Swedish ‘Dig Where You Stand’ movement of the 1970s and 1980s as an workers’ and community history movement, and then explores Sven Lindqvist’s 1978 book *Gräv där du står: Hur man utforskar ett job* (recently translated for the first time in English as *Dig Where You Stand: How to Research a Job*) which acted as a handbook for historical research for the movement. The article then establishes how Lindqvist and the Dig movement were connected to and influenced similar movements in the UK and internationally such as History Workshop and the oral history movement, and how the ethos of ‘Dig Where You Stand’ remains an inspiration to this day.

Keywords: Dig Where you Stand; Sven Lindqvist; history from below; oral history; workers’ history; activist research