

Princeton University

HONORS FACULTY MEMBERS
RECEIVING EMERITUS STATUS



May 2019

The biographical sketches were written by staff and colleagues in the departments of those honored.

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ANSON GILBERT RABINBACH



Anson “Andy” Gilbert Rabinbach, the Philip and Beulah Rollins Professor of History, was born on June 2, 1945, in New York City. He came by his wry, seen-it-all sense of humor honestly, growing up in the Bronx and attending public schools there. Andy earned a B.A. from Hofstra University in 1967 and then went on to the University of Wisconsin-Madison to pursue graduate work in history. He studied under the tutelage of George Mosse, a German émigré renowned for pioneering work on the cultural and intellectual history of fascism. Mosse, who had grown up under the Weimar Republic, did not think about ideas in the abstract but as embedded in a historical moment shaped by politics. That approach proved deeply appealing to Andy, and the lessons he learned from Mosse were reinforced by Andy’s own historical moment, the 1960s. Madison at that time was a cauldron of antiwar activism and left-wing dissent. What would a critical-minded analysis of the relations between culture and politics look like? This was the question posed by Andy’s graduate education, both in the seminar room and out, and he found help in framing an answer from a group of Weimar-era intellectuals who had addressed the selfsame question almost a half century earlier, the Frankfurt School. And so, the work of the Frankfurt philosophers, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, became a touchstone for Andy, an oeuvre to learn from as well as to critique.

On completing his Ph.D. in 1973, Andy found employment first at Hampshire College, then at The Cooper Union in New York City. He joined the Princeton faculty in 1996. Along the way, Andy has held numerous visiting appointments in Europe, and he has garnered a raft of honors: the Viktor Adler State Prize, an ACLS fellowship, and a Guggenheim.

Also along the way, Andy has produced a body of scholarship, extraordinary in both its geographic and thematic reach. His first book, *The Crisis of Austrian Socialism* (1983), tracked the fortunes of Austrian Marxists who in the 1920s won decisive majorities on the Vienna municipal council. They set about constructing socialism in one city, a Red Vienna of high-rise apartments with *Bildung* and good hygiene for all. Here was a vision of modernity cut to the measure of the masses, or so the Austro-Marxists believed, but the project was undermined by

intra-party squabbles and uncertainty in the face of a resurgent Right, which eventually seized power in 1934 through an armed coup.

Andy returned to similar themes in his next major publication, *The Human Motor* (1990), although attacking them this time from a different angle. A new understanding of the body emerged in the late 19th century, Andy argued, the body now conceived as a reservoir of energy, a machine ever in need of recharging and ever susceptible to fatigue through overwork. Around this new paradigm crystallized a new science with its own schemes of measurement and experimentation, its own network of laboratories, professional associations, and periodicals. Powerful interests seized on the nascent science of work, attempting to turn it to advantage. Businessmen tried to harness it to maximize output and profit, and state administrators did the same in the name of husbanding national energies. Yet at the same time, there were a handful of visionaries who imagined how energy efficiency might be made to serve other than Fordist ends. Maximum production with minimum effort: such a formula, these hopefuls believed, could be applied to liberating workers from work, thus opening to the laboring classes a utopian future of leisure and recreation. Hope for emancipation through a rational organization of labor was a subject near to Andy's heart, one he reverted to in essay as well as book form, a selection of such essays coming out in a volume published in 2018 under the title, *The Eclipse of Utopias of Labor*.

Andy well understood that utopian aspiration was just one face of the 20th century. The other was fascism and catastrophe. The Nazis also tackled the problem of work. They organized vacation schemes and prettified the workplace, trying to come up with a Nazi aesthetic that would set the regime apart. Andy was among the first to examine such endeavors, which figure as one theme (among many) in a massive and comprehensive document collection he co-edited with Sander Gilman, *The Third Reich Sourcebook* (2013). As for catastrophe, Andy confronted the subject head on in *In the Shadow of Catastrophe* (1997), a clear-eyed examination of how German intellectuals experienced the disasters of the 20th century—the Great War, Nazism, genocide, and the Gotterdammerung of World War II—attempting to recast them in a philosophic idiom with an eye to reaching a diagnosis of modernity's ills and finding a way forward. The Great War fueled dreams of a redemptive, even revolutionary transfiguration of 20th-century life. Post-World War II, however, philosophers emerged chastened, clinging as best they could to spars of Enlightenment value amidst the general shipwreck of European civilization. Andy's most recent work on conceptual history examines 20th-century Europe's intellectual legacy,

and the concepts Andy has fixed on for close inspection— genocide and totalitarianism— suggest it is not a happy one.

Andy then covers the German-speaking world from end to end, from Vienna to Frankfurt, and he writes in a remarkable variety of historical registers. He is as much at home exploring the history of technology or fascist aesthetics as he is untangling the complexities of German existentialist philosophy. Yet, for all its range, Andy's research is informed by a powerful and consistent critical voice, one that is neither nostalgic nor sentimental, and that voice imparts to his work an unusual coherence. What are the possibilities, he asks, for human liberation in a modernity defined by science and the machine and pockmarked by catastrophe? Andy is a genuine intellectual, deeply immersed in the European debates which still roil continental culture today.

Andy's commitment to a critical-minded engagement with European thought shaped his teaching at Princeton. He has taught courses on Europe in the 20th century, on the history of fascism, and on European intellectual history. From 1998 to 2008, he directed the Program in European Cultural Studies, founded by Carl Schorske, whose pedagogy mixed culture and politics in ways that prefigured Andy's own complex approach. Graduate students find bracing Andy's ability to recover a bygone era when the gamut of political options ran far wider than it does today. One student put it this way: "Andy takes us back to the age before 'the end of ideologies' and 'the end of history.' He reanimates our flat political horizon through engaged confrontation with the great utopian and dystopian possibilities that changed the course of modern European history."

Andy, of course, brings the same kind of engagement to his activities outside Princeton. He helped co-found a journal in 1974, *New German Critique*, which remains an ongoing concern even now, and he served for many years on the editorial board of *Dissent* magazine to which he was also a regular contributor. As the very names of these publications attest, critique and dissent are watchwords of Andy's life in scholarship— on the written page as in the classroom, within the university as without. He is an intellectual as well as a scholar and a teacher, someone whose own sense of commitment (and sense of humor) inspires the loyalty of others, whether student, colleague, or friend.