

Review - The History Manifesto

Written by Virginia Berridge

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VIRGINIA BERRIDGE, JAN 18 2015

The History Manifesto

By: Jo Guldi and David Armitage

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

The world is hungry for long term thinking. In October 2013 the report *Now for the Long Term* prepared by a panel headed by a former Director General of the World Trade Organisation focussed on the increasing short-termism of modern politics and a consequent inability to address the challenges which will shape the future. But its perspective was limited. Despite discussion of mega trends such as population growth, migration, employment and health care, few of the examples cited came from before the 1940s. No historian was among those invited to advise.

Such a situation is deplored by Jo Guldi and David Armitage, two American historians. They have written a stirring manifesto for the revival of history as the provider of *longue duree* perspectives and as the key discipline in problem solving in a digitised and globalised world. But, of course, being historians, first they analyse the past role which history has played in policy. Here they identify a type of 'golden age' from the nineteenth century, lasting at least until the 1970s. In the UK, reformers in social and welfare policy such as the Webbs, the Hammonds and Tawney, used history centrally as part of their analysis. In France the work of Braudel and the *Annales* school introduced the concept of the *longue duree* as the unifier of the social sciences, a subject with key influence through networks in French higher education policy. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, the work of E.J. Hobsbawm offered a view of long term political change as a set of precedents for the future. In the post colonial world, in international development, institutions looked to the past to provide a roadmap for the future.

What brought this nirvana to an end? Guldi and Armitage identify a retreat into study of what they call the Short Past. The time span covered by history theses shortened radically. Historical study became professionalised, archival and locally focussed, with the micro history of particular events or areas predominant. Micro history itself had originated in Italy as a means of testing *longue duree* questions as a reaction to the totalising theories of the *Annales* and Marxist schools. In its initial late 60s incarnation, such history remained committed to the study of big questions and social change, but this emphasis died away as radical movements themselves lost their edge. In the British context, this was the period of debates about the economic impact of the industrial revolution, a key touchstone of political as well as intellectual division in academic circles. It was also the era of History Workshop as a people's movement led by academics such as Raphael Samuel, whose work epitomised the micro history tendency the authors identify. This period saw the decline of economic history and the rise of social and cultural history. In part, although the authors do not emphasise this point, long term quantitative history lost purchase because of its association with different political messages, notably in Rostow's *Stages of Economic Growth* and the association with the Vietnam War. The politics of how the long term was used is not fully addressed here.

Now, however, new possibilities have emerged. Long term history is back and is indeed needed. The authors identify issues such as climate change; international governance; and inequality where the work of historians can point to 'paths not taken' or can help undermine comfortable interpretations which argue that nothing can be done by Western nations. They argue '...it is no longer tenable to hold the view that links our current environmental predicament with so remote a cause as the evolutionary inheritance of humankind as an inherently greedy and destructive species' (p.71). Once the roots of causality, agency and alternative are probed by historians, then comfortable universalist and 'value

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free' myths which support inaction in the present are destroyed.

The issues are there. And so, too, are the new methodologies for approaching them. The rise of the digital humanities and the accessibility of online key word search techniques like the Google Ngram (a mixed blessing which needs to be used with care) offers new opportunities for historians, but also for public access to data. Such methods also enable access to what is not public and easily available- the Dark Archive and also collections of unpublished data brought together for activist purposes. The use of the internet for collecting and sharing data has given rise to the bundling of new collections of data by non-governmental activist groups. Wikileaks is one example of a potential historical collection. Historians, it is argued, must engage, take a leading role, in the use and development of such methods. They can start engaging with the big picture, writing in an accessible way for the public but also spending time on how data is being digitised and what is being preserved, in essence returning to those debates about who and what is 'hidden from history' which also animated radical historians in the 1970s.

The digital 'turn' offers many new possibilities. In their enthusiasm, the authors do not discuss the critiques of such methods, some of which have argued that digital sources close down options and encourage easy overuse of particular collections, which have their own biases. As with much writing by US academics, the United States is the primary focus of attention and thus the authors have missed some relevant recent developments in the UK. Here the role of history in relation to policy and the public has already attracted action, funding and debate. The foundation of History and Policy a decade ago emphasised the interest of British historians in addressing the divide; the 'impact' agenda central to the UK government's REF (Research Excellence Framework) has made historians very aware of this aspect of their work and obliged to demonstrate it; and public engagement awards from funders such as the Wellcome Trust have seen historians taking on new roles in the community.

The argument for history as a critical social science is compelling and has already gained widespread attention -in academic circles at least. It's a stirring call for unity and action. I don't dissent in the slightest from the authors' belief in the value of history as a unifying discipline and its potential utility for policy makers. What the authors fail to address is exactly how the new historical influence on policy is to be achieved, especially since much of their discussion is critical of current trends in policy areas they discuss. A few years ago, I published some research on this area, which underlined that getting the message to policy makers was a difficult task, impeded by a host of intervening variables.

The road between evidence and policy is a rocky one, as social scientists in their studies of this area have also amply identified. Ultimately, however, the authors are to be commended. Statistics and long-term trends do convince policy makers. A combination of the new *longue duree* history and micro history, with carefully assessed use of digital possibilities, is needed to curtail short termism. Historians need to be bolder in addressing future policy agendas; they have the ideal combination of evidence and skills to do so.

About the author:

Virginia Berridge is Professor of History and Director of the Centre for History in Public Health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, University of London. She has published widely on the history of health policy and public health as well as on drugs, alcohol and smoking policy and the relationship between evidence and policy. Her most recent book is *Demons: Our changing attitudes to alcohol, tobacco and drugs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).