

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jo Guldi, David Armitage. *The History Manifesto*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. X, 165 S. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-07634-1; \$19.99 (paper), ISBN 978-1-107-43243-7.

Reviewed by Alex Zukas (College of Letters and Sciences, National University)

Published on H-Socialisms (October, 2015)

Commissioned by Gary Roth



The History Guild Manifesto

The History Manifesto was published a year ago and remains the center of controversy thanks in large part to the ingenious social-media promotion of the book as well as a website devoted to the controversy where a “media” section with links to reviews, blog posts, and discussions allows supporters and critics to air their views on its contents. To their credit, the authors Jo Guldi and David Armitage “welcome the broader discussion [our] experiment will open up” and ask that people join the conversation at <http://historymanifesto.cambridge.org> where a free download of the book is available (p. x). Given its style and structure, which evoke *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, what they stirred up is less a conversation and more a series of keen polemics to which the authors have responded in print, in interviews, and in a light revision of the book. The publisher and authors intended that *The History Manifesto* be more than a book; while not exactly a movement, it is a social-media phenomenon.

Emulating the format of *The Communist Manifesto*, the authors organize the book into four main chapters but add an introduction and conclusion. In the introduction, they argue that Western universities were created to preserve and question received traditions and were particularly suited to pondering long-term issues, and Western universities and societies currently suffer from a crisis (“a spectre”) of short-term thinking that make them unable to address dire long-term problems. In chapter 1, they argue that the historical tradition of the West included public and future orientations and focused on long-term de-

velopments, counterfactual thinking, and thinking about utopias. In chapter 2, they contend that from around 1975 to around 2005 professional historians emphasized archival mastery and theoretical sophistication; that an unintended consequence of the new “micro-history” was to kill the relevance of history to the general public; and that the retreat by historians from the public sphere meant that corporate and political leaders and the media heeded other scholars, especially economists, political scientists, and evolutionary psychologists. They argue that a revival of the *longue durée* is needed to address today’s most pressing global issues of climate change, governance, and inequality. Chapter 3 focuses on the rise of economists as consultants to governments and shows how their static, naturalized models came to dominate public conversations about the present and future. As an alternative, the authors recommend three modes of thinking about the future that good history does well: looking at processes that take a long time to unfold, scrutinizing where data come from, and handling multiple perspectives. In chapter 4, they present scholarship concerning the future which analyzes big data about the past using new information-processing software, and they believe that historians will have an increasingly important role to play as arbiters of big data. Their concluding chapter reiterates their view that historians are best able to construct and interpret the big picture for politicians and the general public: historians can explain where things come from, they can move between big processes and small events to see the whole picture, and they can reduce information to a small, sharable narrative.

The book is clearly written and packed with 305 citations, many with multiple entries. While it has a serious scholarly apparatus, the book has a provocative and tendentious style, and other historians and social scientists have responded to it in a similar manner. It has been the subject of a fierce debate in the press, on the web, and in the pages of the April 2015 *American Historical Review* (AHR). In the AHR, Deborah Cohen and Peter Mandler reject the book's key claim that "short-termism" characterized historical writing in the last decades of the twentieth century and offer convincing empirical evidence to support their claim. They also question the operative assumption that, a priori, long-term approaches are better suited to elucidating historical and contemporary issues, carry more influence with politicians, or correlate with greater historical significance. Finally, they point out various ways in which historians continue to play a major role in public life. Guldi and Armitage responded by arguing that Cohen and Mandler are complacent and turn a blind eye to the crisis in the historical profession and history's place in society. However, they supply new data that confirms Cohen and Mandler's claim that short-termism was not a feature of late twentieth-century historical scholarship, thereby depriving their book of one of its main empirical supports.[1]

In their critique, Cohen and Mandler do not dispute the validity of a *longue durée* approach but they do dispute privileging it over other time scales. The same is true of quantitative and digital methods. They favor the social and political engagement of scholars outside the academy. What they object to is what they see as a narrowing (ironically) of historians' scope to the *longue durée* and quantitative methods. Their critiques are well founded and mirror my own concerns as I read the book, but I want to take this review in another direction, one that is less concerned with historiography since that has been well rehearsed elsewhere and is available at the book's website. I would like to focus on a series of crucial contradictions or paradoxes in the book.

There is a profound ambiguity at the heart of *The History Manifesto*. It has a radicalism in tone that is not matched by a radicalism in content or analysis. The authors are critical of what they call a "dirty *longue durée*," an interpretation of history that supports free-market thinking, faith in technological progress, and a rosy capitalist future (p. 16). This criticism sets them against the political-economic status quo. They want public voices critical of current developments and future prospects informed by professional historical research. What they hope is that historians studying various pasts and alter-

native societies can point policymakers and the public to consideration of alternative futures. The problem is that the tools they think will do the job, those provided by modern digital capitalism, are quite mainstream and hardly radical. For instance, they provide a good survey of the digital resources and technologies historians can use to manipulate big data and answer big questions, but, surprisingly given their point that historians are good at assessing the provenance of data, they do not address the problems that the production, accumulation, and acquisition of big data can create (e.g., warrantless wiretapping) or the ethics of the corporations and government agencies that collect and store that data. In the era of WikiLeaks, one would have expected some discussion of these political and ethical issues by the authors. Indeed, they use Google Ngrams, and a Google grant helped fund Guldi's Paper Machines project, but they offer no critique of Google's corporate practices regarding search rankings, users' information, usage and metadata tracking, privacy, National Security Agency and Central Intelligence Agency ties, and antitrust accusations. One would expect a critically aware history to address some of these issues involving a flagship of information capitalism. Instead, part of the authors' message is, "there's an app for that," which highlights one of the book's contradictory messages when the authors note that Guldi's Paper Machines software plug-in was adopted by a military intelligence firm in Denmark. That does not seem like historians challenging the status quo.

The authors are right that new digital tools can manage the information overload that modern historians face but historians also need to know where these tools and information come from. One could argue that the authors exhibit a form of commodity fetishism (informatics fetishism) where the conditions of production of information are hidden and the product has magical qualities of persuasion. This brings to light one of the authors' key assumptions: if everyone just used data properly, there would only be one conclusion to reach and it would always be progressive; contention would end and consensus would reign. They offer no examination of the politics and sociology of knowledge or the ways in which knowledge is embedded in certain practices (although they seem to understand this embeddedness in their analysis of poor practices).

The environmental, political, and social crises that the authors identify are real and need to be addressed, but they do not make clear why a fragmented, disunified professional guild that cannot agree on problems to research, methods to employ, and the political outcomes it wants

would be the vehicle for raising a critical and progressive consciousness among the public. Many of the intellectuals the authors feature who “spoke truth to power” (R. H. Tawney, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, and Lewis Mumford) were tied to social and political movements and wrote their histories as political partisans, not as card-carrying members of the history profession, so it seems naïve to assume an appeal to historians qua historians to change the world would find much resonance today or even a hundred years ago.

Another paradox comes from their call for a socially and politically engaged history profession: “Over at least the last five hundred years, historians have among other things spoken truth to power, they have been reformers and leaders of the state, and they have revealed the worst abuses of corrupt institutions to public examination” (p. 14). However, the authors do not engage or critique real-world power and economic relations themselves. In fact, they expect historians to advise the corporations, governments, and international institutions that have created the crisis-ridden present as if they did it unwittingly. The authors refer to obstacles to realizing “a more just, sustainable, or ecologically attuned civilization,” but they do not assume that the policymakers they propose to lobby are among those obstacles (p. 70). They frame key issues as moral and intellectual rather than social and political. Their “call to arms” wants to effect change which remains within the political, environmental, and social status quo (much like the Fabians’ idea of “permeation”). For instance, they write that “a lack of serious alternatives to laissez-faire capitalism is the hallmark of contemporary world governance from the World Bank to the WTO [World Trade Organization],” yet they criticize “historians of the short term” for not consulting for the World Bank (pp. 4, 83).

A key point they make, and one important for readers of H-Socialisms, is: “put to the service of the public future, history can cut through the fundamentalisms of scientists and economists who preach elite control of wealth.... History can open up other options, and involve the public in the dialogue and reimagining of many possible sustainabilities” (p. 56). Even though the authors clearly know better, these statements treat the history profession and the “public” as homogenous and classless, raceless, and genderless without entrenched interests and contests over power, knowledge, and wealth. The book reads more like a Habermasian than a Marxist manifesto.

There are other methodological and substantive con-

cerns. The authors assert that the humanities, history, and universities are in crisis, with their worth questioned and their mission vulnerable to new technologies, like Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). According to the authors, universities need to deliver value and demonstrate viability, but they avoid interrogating the terms they use, “value” and “viability,” which echo the discourse of neoliberal capitalism. While they do mention “the corporatization of the university” in their rebuttal to Cohen and Mandler, they act as if the crisis has only internal causes and neglect any discussion of the external pressures that are corporatizing the university and of the fortunes being made in education by venture capitalists who are working to commodify everything.[2] In their discussion of the crisis in universities and of inequality as a social issue, there is, surprisingly, no discussion of the “adjunctification” of the professoriat as a long-term trend or the political economy of higher education, topics that strike close to home. One is left to wonder which academics will be left to write histories of the *longue durée* that the authors deem crucial to humanity’s survival.

The authors do mention that Freedom House and the RAND Corporation funded right-wing historical research that reached a public audience during the 1970s and after, but this insight is not deployed to explain the crowding out of leftist views in the public sphere. Completely ignoring the political economy of mass media with its centralization of ownership and control to understand who gets seen and heard on TV and radio and in popular magazines, the authors place all the blame on the left and “short-term historical research” (pp. 11-12). At a substantive level, what the authors seem to forget is that historians on the left, from the 1960s to the present, continued to publish long-term and short-term readable histories with precisely the kinds of critiques the authors endorse with presses like Monthly Review, Verso, Pluto, Haymarket, South End, and others. Like Marx, they spoke back to power and to the institutions of governance—just not through official channels and offices or as salaried advisers.

The authors’ privileging of history over other disciplines in the professoriat has provoked counter-polemics from economists and other academics who have reminded the authors that there are social progressives and revolutionaries in every academic discipline, many of whom are serious about historical scholarship, and that there are many conservatives in the historical profession. The titles of some of the rebuttals available on the book’s website—like Pseudoerasmus’s “La longue purée” and “Errata dentata” and Terence Renaud’s “Historians

of the World, Adapt? ”—convey their point.

Few of their critics argue with their proposition that “thinking with history has always been a tool for reshaping the future” (p. 64). Certainly Marx thought so, and they end their manifesto with echoes of Marx: “historians of the world, unite! There is a world to win—before it’s too late” (p. 124). While Armitage, in a videotaped discussion housed at the website, argues for historians’ engagement with public problems and outlines his view of a manifesto’s function (diagnose, propose, mobilize), unlike *The Communist Manifesto*, *The History Manifesto* is pure diagnosis and exhortation and does not fulfill George Bernard Shaw’s tripartite call to “educate, agitate, organize.”

This is a compressed text that conveys extensive reading in historiography and issues of current concern. The authors explain complex concepts well. The writing is nuanced at times but also contradictory and some broad claims are not well supported. The authors evince no concern with the use of big data or what it means in an age of mass surveillance, so the book is surprisingly apolitical at that level. Reflecting on Audre Lord’s 1984 statement, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the mas-

ter’s house,” maybe historians should become hacktivists and develop digital tools that could point to a different future; begin to liberate people; and help solve the growing crises of inequality, governance, and climate change on a noncorporate, noncapitalist basis—and throw off corporate digital chains to boot.[3] Historians and other academics interested in such a possibility might find Veronica Barassi’s *Activism on the Web: Struggles against Digital Capitalism* (2015) worth reading.

Notes

[1]. Deborah Cohen and Peter Mandler, “*The History Manifesto*: A Critique,” review of *The History Manifesto*, by Jo Guldi and David Armitage, *American Historical Review* 120, no. 2 (April 2015): 530-542; and Jo Guldi and David Armitage, “*The History Manifesto*: A Reply to Deborah Cohen and Peter Mandler,” *American Historical Review* 120, no. 2 (April 2015): 543-554.

[2]. Guldi and Armitage, “*The History Manifesto*: A Reply to Deborah Cohen and Peter Mandler,” 545.

[3]. Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 110-114.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-socialisms>

Citation: Alex Zukas. Review of Guldi, Jo; Armitage, David, *The History Manifesto*. H-Socialisms, H-Net Reviews. October, 2015.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42836>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.