

Conclusion: *the public future of the past*

History's relationship with the public future lies in developing a *longue-durée* contextual background against which archival information, events, and sources can be interpreted. In the Introduction, we made the case that universities, founded to sustain and interrogate continuous traditions, had to face the challenges of that public future. In Chapter 1, we showed how much of our historical tradition was both public and future-oriented, not least the original *longue durée* proposed by Fernand Braudel. In Chapter 2, we argued that the *longue durée* was reviving after a period of comparative retreat among professional historians, but that its return was related to some of the most pressing global issues in public cultures around the world. In Chapter 3, we showed how that public future was served, albeit poorly and often at cross-purposes, by uncritical speculation about the future perils of climate, global governance, and inequality. We proposed that what was needed as a remedy was a turn towards a public future. And in Chapter 4, we illustrated some of the work for this collective scholarship about the future, based on a new and critical analysis of data about the past, that is already being done.

Responding to the call for a public future demands some rethinking the way we look at the past. We have already talked about the power of big data to illuminate the shadows of history, to test received wisdom and to interrogate reigning theories about the past. But answering the call for a public future also means writing and talking about the past and the future *in public*, in such a way that ideas can be easily shared. We believe that this dedication to the public heralds three new trends in the writing of history: first, a need for new narratives capable of being read, understood, and engaged by non-experts; second, an emphasis on visualisation and digital tools; and third, a

fusion between the big and the small, the ‘micro’ and the ‘macro’, that harnesses the best of archival work on the one hand and big-picture work about issues of common concern on the other.

If long-term historical thinking is to fulfil the promise we have proposed for it here, then we will need a rubric for thinking big with adequate skill and historical finesse. What constitutes a critical eye for looking at long-term stories? What characteristics unite the models that we choose? How would a classroom training young minds to think far back and far forward in time operate? We sum up this book by looking back over the arguments we have drawn together, and by pulling out major ways of thinking about the long-term future. That task, we believe, requires the services of scholars trained in looking at the past, who can explain where things came from, who can examine the precise evidence of the Short Past and the broader picture of big data and the *longue durée*, and who are dedicated to serve the public through responsible thinking about the nexus of past, present, and future. These methods may offer a recipe for change in the university and for the sciences of prediction and future response at large.

In a moment of expanding inequality, amid crises of global governance, and under the impact of anthropogenic climate change, even a minimal understanding of the conditions shaping our lives demands a scaling-up of our inquiries. As the *longue durée* returns, in a new guise with new goals, it still demands a response to the most basic issues of historical methodology – of what problems we select, how we choose the boundaries of our topic, and what tools we put to solving our questions. The seeds of a new conversation about the future of the past and the big picture are already planted, indeed they represent the reasons why Big History, Deep History, and the Anthropocene are on the rise already. In other subfields, a new synthesis has also begun, albeit rarely explicitly critical of data, visualisation-oriented, or directed to the public, activists, or policy.

An era defined by a crisis of short-termism may be a particularly good time to start rethinking attitudes towards the past. Many histories have been written with the express purpose of offering a window into the future, and some – especially long-term histories of capitalism and the environment – are very clear about what they offer. Reflecting on the power of reading a history book that shows how modern game-theory came out of the Cold War industrial complex, the University

of California historian Sanford Jacoby enthuses, 'We should be the ones taking the lead on developing cross-disciplinary, big-think courses'. Jacoby teaches at a business school, where, he writes, 'The students, it is said, fail to get "the big picture" and cannot escape the conceptual fetters of the present moment. Historians have a lot to offer here.'¹ To respond to such challenges, those who deal in knowledge of the past should be unafraid of generating and circulating digestible narratives, condensing new research about political, economic, and environmental history for a public audience.

The public needs stories about how we came to be at the brink of an ecological crisis and a crisis of inequality. The moral stakes of *longue-durée* subjects – including the reorientation of our economy to cope with global warming and the integration of subaltern experience into policy – mandate that historians choose as large an audience as possible for all of the human experiences about which they write – including (but certainly not limited to) problems of the environment, governance, democracy, and capitalism. In the university, much may need to change to make room for forms of inquiry that concentrate on public knowledge of our mutual future. Journals that exist behind pay-walls, accessible only to those with access to major public or university libraries, need to be supplemented by open-access sources available to wider global publics.² We also need informative visualisations of our research and to put them in public, and peer-review the research behind them quickly and efficiently with the agenda of forming a new, crucial, and politically informed synthesis.

Micro-history and macro-history – short-term analysis and the long-term overview – should work together to produce a more intense, sensitive, and ethical synthesis of data. Critical history is capable of addressing both the macro and the micro, of talking about how small and repressed experiences add up to the overturning of nations and empires. As Lynn Hunt rightly notes, 'A global, mega-long-term history is not the only story to be told', but such long-term histories do need to be articulated with the fruits of more precise and local histories and vice versa: 'The scale of the study depends on the question to be answered.'³ It is not that micro-histories or short-term studies of any sort are not critical – far from it. In pointing to the challenge that history can offer to the mythologies of neo-liberal

economics and climate catastrophism, much of our evidence here is gathered from the work of historians who worked hard in the archives, with deeply controversial questions driving their inquiries. But the rule in the training of historians, at least since the 1970s, has been one that often discouraged thinking about the big picture in favour of the assiduous concentration on sources from particular archives approached with particular procedures of critical reading.

With regard to the marriage of micro-historical and macro-historical into a synthetic understanding of our past, the field of anthropology is often ahead of history. Consider the *longue-durée* histories of Southeast Asia by James C. Scott into the deep history of the highland mountains on the fringe of Chinese Empire he calls Zomia. Zomia, he finds, is defined by the flight of people from oppressive political and economic regimes, whence they recoil into a subsistence-like existence, a trade in wild spices and roots rather than cultivated gardens, egalitarian political forms rather than hierarchical ones, a prophetic culture rather than received religion, and timeless stories rather than the recitation of history. Again, a series of micro-histories of hill-people, assembled across the centuries, becomes a powerful macro-story with which to destabilise received accounts of the inevitability of empire, centralisation, capitalism, or hierarchy.⁴

Anthropology is probably able to execute such long-term analysis that wholly overturns received accounts of the institutions that necessarily do or should typify modernity, largely because it is not as exercised by the micro–macro distinctions as history. The micro is allowed to become the ‘exceptional typical’ that both proves the rule and exemplifies how a dominant superstructure is overturned.⁵ No scholar should argue for eliminating this important micro-work, the recovery of the subaltern and the patient sifting of the archives, from the work of history. Indeed, in his daring macro-histories, Scott has lately advised that scholars should revise their studies of nations and peoples into studies of particular families and their interactions over time. In the same way, historians can salvage the search for crucial pivots, turning-points, and clues, by which outstanding normal experience can illuminate the whole. And then history must illuminate the whole again.

The revived *longue durée* that we hope for is one that will continue micro-history’s work of destabilising modernisation narratives,

Whig history, and other forms of teleological thinking. But micro-history that fails to reconnect to larger narratives, and to state frankly what it hopes to overturn and what to uphold, may court antiquarianism. What we hope for is a kind of history with a continuing role for micro-historical, archival work embedded within a larger macro-story woven from a broad range of sources. In this way, the often shocking and informative events drawn from the lives of actual persons must continue to be a source of circumspection and critical analysis for historians, even as they take their arguments wider. It is not necessary to relate every link in the chain of a *longue-durée* narrative in micro-historical detail: a serial history, of richly recovered moments cast within a larger framework, may be adequate to show continuities across time along with the specificities of particular instances.⁶

A *longue-durée* introduction that spans the disciplines and makes the author's targets clear may amplify the message of short-*durée* archival research. But without that *longue-durée* frame, the micro-history may be lost in the debate altogether. Together, micro-historical work in archives and macro-historical frameworks can offer a new horizon for historical researchers who want to hone their talents of judging the flow of events and institutions across centuries and around the globe. A long-term story that reduces a great deal of information into a crystalline packet, writes Paul Carter, has the effect of rendering large numbers of facts compact, transportable, and shareable, 'like a cake of portable soup'.⁷ In any moment of political divergence, historical synthesis can help to form consensus where consensus has been lost. At a moment when the public again needs long-term stories, these modes of analysis become important in how we tell stories, how analysts design tools, and how universities offer historical training to future scholars and citizens.

Not all fields have the same problem manufacturing condensed pictures of their research for public consumption. The discipline of economics specialised in easily transmissible charts and graphs from the 1930s, when new methods of visualisation were pioneered by left-wing economists like Rex Tugwell of the University of Chicago with the agenda of gathering public support for new, government-directed programmes of infrastructure and employment. Those charts and

summaries circulated and were republished in newspapers, magazines, and policy papers, being more concise and reproducible than their equivalent twenty-page essay in the hands of text-based scholars such as historians. To be sure, their policies often flattered entrenched interests and promised little disruption; they bought off potential admirers with promises of unlimited growth.⁸ But the environmentalists, with all their data, never got as far as making promises or describing next steps. They rarely condensed their theories into legible charts and graphics that could circulate widely beyond academic circles.

In the world of the digital university, tools are circulating that can consolidate and condense so much writing into discrete visualisations, which allow historians to imitate economists in sharing one-screen visual versions of their arguments: 'shock and awe visualisations', as their critics call them. Already Twitter and blogs demonstrate how historians are investigating alternative routes in publishing, ones that are easy to pass around, good at going viral, and powerfully infectious of discourse. We were all astonished to see the social network maps of the letters of Smith, Voltaire, and Franklin lit up in orange across the black map of Europe when Stanford released its first Mapping the Republic of Letters Project. But the real significance of that map may be that it was among the first data-driven digital history projects to circulate to a wider public, for example in the pages of the *New York Times*.⁹ These realities should drive scholars, particularly humanists and historians, to be interested in teaching, publishing, and innovating the modelling change over time with various word-count, quantitative, topic-modelling, and other timeline-generating visualisations.

Micro-historians have been working for a long time to challenge claims that capitalism naturally diminishes inequality. Indeed, centuries of data give an enormous pile of evidence to the contrary – that rather than leading to more equality, capitalism tends to exacerbate divides of class, even of race and gender. Despite the enormous number of books that have been written on the subject of perpetuated inequalities of capitalism, the public has rarely paid attention to these arguments. The convenient visualisations of economists, suggesting that capitalism means decreasing unemployment and rising equality, have been easier to circulate. Almost the only

historical data that have been able to challenge that easy consensus have been Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* – historical data that are framed in terms of convenient visualisations of massive data, aggregated over the long term, as discussed in Chapter 3.

There is an older tradition that looks to history as the guide of public conversations about the future. Indeed, the popularity of reenactment, 'reality' history TV, computer games with historical settings, and historical series suggests something of the continuing claims of history on the public imagination.¹⁰ More than that, a public need to make sense of our common past, recent and deep alike, has driven for thirty years the production of historically framed arguments by economists and climate scientists struggling to make sense of prosperity, pollution, and human nature itself. Whether or not professional historians are willing to join these conversations, public discourse cannot do without a long-term perspective on the past and the future. Indeed, for reasons of encouraging this kind of engagement, higher education and research councils in Australia, Europe, and the United Kingdom have mandated public engagement, 'impact', and 'relevance' as criteria for evaluating university performance.¹¹ While some academics shudder at this seeming intrusion into how they choose their audiences and subjects, others see a profound opportunity for service.

The tools of looking at the past in the service of the future offer an important role for the university as arbiter of falsity, myth, and noise in an age overwhelmed by big data, where future risk takes the form of problems of unprecedented scale like climate change and transnational governance. Looking to the micro-past and macro-past together offers a useful model for understanding the stakes and implications of changes that range from institutional forces shaped over the last decade to climatic forces shaped over the millennia of evolution. As the historian of public policy Pamela Cox has noted, historians 'need to be prepared to move beyond the confines of our "period" when necessary and to swap our fine brushes for broader ones so as to paint new "grand narratives" of social change that are not crudely determinist but are critical, structural and sceptical'.¹²

We have argued for History as a critical human science with a public mission. History is not unique in having a vocation to enlighten

and reform, at least if it is compared with the other disciplines – sociology, anthropology, political science – usually collected under the umbrella of the social sciences rather than juxtaposed with sibling disciplines in the humanities, such as philology or musicology. As Craig Calhoun, former head of the American Social Science Research Council and Director of the London School of Economics, has pointed out, ‘Public engagement was a strong feature of the social sciences from their birth’. And yet, he goes on to note, the public relevance of the social sciences declined with specialisation and their retreat into the academy. His diagnosis parallels ours, even though he does not treat History specifically among the human sciences. A lost sense of public purpose; a weakening grasp on the big picture; exploding scholarly productivity (often under externally imposed regimes of assessment and ‘impact’); a proliferation of ‘histories’ rather than ‘history’; greater prestige for novelty and discovery rather than synthesis and theory: all these are familiar features of the human sciences in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.¹³ History has shared many of the same problems of successful professionalisation. The challenge now is to hold on to the palpable benefits of professionalism while also recovering connections with a broader public mission that remains critical rather than merely affirmatory.

Looking to the past to shape the future offers an important call to historians, historical sociologists, historical geographers, and information scientists in particular. It also provides a roadmap for thinking prospectively to all of those institutions – government, finance, insurance, informal, self-organised, citizen-scientific, and other – that we call upon to guide us as we seek the road to better futures. There are traditions available to those who seek that road, and all of them have a track record. The past, we believe, is the best indicator of future behaviour for all of them. ‘Surely history need not simply be condemned to the study of well-walled gardens’, wrote Fernand Braudel: ‘If it is will it not fail in its present tasks, of responding to the agonizing problems of the hour and of keeping in touch with the human sciences, which are at once so young and so imperialistic? Can there be any humanism at the present time . . . without an ambitious history, conscious of its duties and its great powers?’¹⁴ His questions are as timely, as pressing now as when Braudel first posed them, in 1946.

The public future of the past remains in the hands of historians, 'if we are willing to look out of our study windows and to think of history, not as the property of a small guild of professional colleagues, but as the rightful heritage of millions'.¹⁵ The words are those of the American historian J. Franklin Jameson, first delivered in December 1912 but, like Braudel's, they remain urgently relevant today. Over the past century, the historical profession has undertaken the series of turns we anatomised earlier in this book: social, cultural, gendered, imperial, postcolonial, global, and transnational among them. Armed by now with critical transnational and transtemporal perspectives, historians can be guardians against parochial perspectives and endemic short-termism. Once called upon to offer their advice on political development and land-reform, the creation of the welfare state and post-conflict settlement, historians, along with other humanists, effectively ceded the public arena, nationally as well as globally, to the economists and occasionally lawyers and political scientists. (When was the last time a historian was seconded to Downing Street or the White House from their academic post, let alone consulted for the World Bank or advised the UN Secretary-General?) It may be little wonder, then, that we have a crisis of global governance, that we are all at the mercy of unregulated financial markets, and that anthropogenic climate change threatens our political stability and the survival of species. To put these challenges in perspective, and to combat the short-termism of our time, we urgently need the wide-angle, long-range views only historians can provide.

Historians of the world, unite! There is a world to win – before it's too late.