

BLOG

The History Manifesto: Vision and Revision

Mar 31, 2015

From Jo and David

The History Manifesto was a first for academic history. By going open-access, it has reached broad audiences. Cambridge University Press put the book online for free; we invited the public in, and when they tweeted at us, we read, and sometimes tweeted back.

Open access has new rules, and the rules keep one busy. The text of The History Manifesto was revised in two parts. The edits were drafted over a period in November, December, and January after closely watching Twitter and the blogs, reading the praise and blame alike, and closely examining critiques. A revised version of Figure 2 came out on November 20, 2014, accompanied by an announcement of **revision as a process**; ten lines of tightened prose and five revised footnotes then appeared on February 5, 2015. At the time, it made sense to draw attention to the way that Twitter and online debate made possible a lively culture of collaborative exchange and thus to talk about a "process" of revision rather than to announce a revised edition.

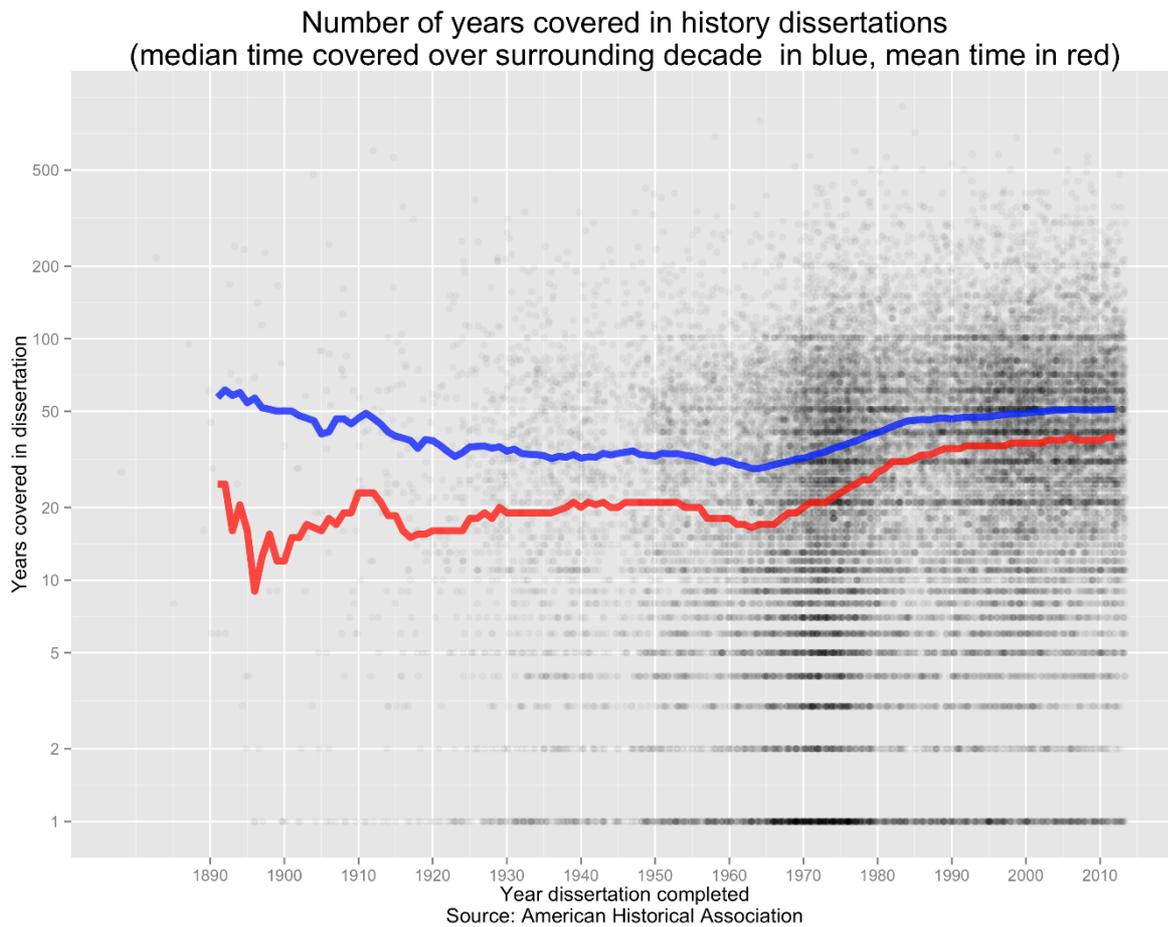
However, there should be an official "revised manuscript" available to readers alongside a "manuscript of record". That is what Cambridge University Press has now posted, listing all of the revisions in detail: the tightened lines of prose, the footnotes, and the altered illustration will all be described exactly as they were to the typesetter. Those who choose "download" on the History Manifesto website will have the opportunity to choose between an "original edition" or a "revised edition", in the knowledge that all subsequent printings and translations of the book will include the changes in the latest revised edition. This process is meant to be as transparent as we, the Cambridge University Press editors and designers, could possibly make it. Nothing was hidden in this process, and what might have been clarified earlier will now be made clear as of this new posting.

Updating Visualizations and the Power of Open Access Review

Nov 20, 2014

By Jo and David

Danny Loss, an enormously creative historian of the idea of spirituality itself, has asked over Twitter about the temporality of our figure 2, which shows the shortening of time scales in dissertations via Ben Schmidt's visual analysis of the temporality of dissertations as recorded by the American Historical Association. When the chart was reproduced for our book, only part of the visual was used -- the mean and median lines indicated in red. Those lines suggest that timescales of dissertation-writing were increasing after about 1962, as Danny Loss points out. Yet if one is particularly interested in our argument about the role of the 1970s in changing the analysis of history -- a point that has drawn in some readers in social history in particular -- the scatterplot that we omitted in the book becomes more interesting than the averages. We therefore attach the visualization here and update the digital copies of the book with Ben Schmidt's original version.



One of the great opportunities made possible by online publishing is correcting a chart in response to dialogue raised by members of one's community. Historians of the book can appreciate the choices that go into selecting a particular visualization for print; the first edition of our book will have only mean and median, but in the online version we can correct the visualization to the more appropriate scatterplot, as indeed we are doing, with direct thanks to Danny Loss for raising the question on Twitter. Capabilities such as these may, in the future, give historians more room to collaborate with their professional readers in a more ongoing and discursive way than that which is currently allowed for by the system of peer review practiced by most journals and book publishers.

Counterfactuals and relevant policy: the case of Iraq and Afghanistan

Oct 15, 2014

By Jo and David

When we talk about the relevance of history to policy, we are frequently asked to point to specific decisions that might have been different had historians been involved. One that immediately comes to mind is the 2002 invasion of Iraq. While hawkish American analogized the moment to appeasement, many a historian on both sides of the Atlantic was appalled, wondering on what pretext we had decided to rehearse the invasion of Vietnam, let alone the expansion of American Empire in the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Panama, Haiti, and Guatemala, so that soldiers of another generation following American sugarcane and bananas to protect commercial interests have been replaced by soldiers following oil.

In broad terms, given the history, policy-makers might in general have known better than to attempt a nation-rebuilding project that involved any expectation of holding and administering territory with recent empires as their model. The cycle of oppression and dissent in Latin America has not diminished with US intervention; rather, those experiments predict a cycle of embittered memory, reconsolidation, and revenge that predicts a heating up of Jihad straight up to ISIS from the moment when the first footage of torture at Guantanamo went viral. Economics might predict a world that in Thomas Friedman's caricature never saw two nations with MacDonal'd's go to war with each other, but history knows no such law; it does know -- courtesy of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries -- plenty of stories about embittered colonial subjects organizing themselves into resistance movements which persist in the cause of evicting the colonizer for generations, whether or not political or economic stability is thereby ensured.

"Iraq would have looked different had historians been involved" is a bold claim, for there are dissenters -- historians who advocate an aggressive role of the US in insuring international stability and trade; historians who hold up Britain's empire in the nineteenth century as a monument worthy of re-enactment. But it is fairly trivial to prove that those historians are in the minority. Count their books and those of their students against the masses of historical scholarship in the last thirty years that demonstrates the long-term results of British empire in creating long-term political instability, oppression, and resistance, and the former is a nightstand worth of reading, the latter a mountain of paper.

One of the forms of what we call the "short past" that emerged among historians after 1968 was a form of historical critique that was absolutely grounded in the experience by baby-boomer historians of the Vietnam War. Dozens of twenty- and thirty-year-olds returned, in 1968 and 1974, from Southeast Asia, morally and politically astonished by the display of disproportionate force that they had witnessed in the name of political stability. Consider the writing careers of historians like Nick Cullather, James Hevia, or Alfred W. McCoy. In the 1970s, 80s, 90s, and 2000s, those historians and their colleagues — many of them with personal experiences of Vietnam or anti-war protests — filled bookshelves of research with new material on the long-term consequences of real human abuse that happened in earlier escapades when American armies and intelligence entered Guatemala, Nicaragua, or the Philippines; or when the British tried to govern India, China, or Singapore. Their inquiries about empire have flooded the libraries with detailed excavations of the ordinary workings of empire -- economic, social, and politics. They are not few in number, and while they apply many different methodologies and look in many different archives, their conclusion icicles around a consensus about how racism has been enshrined in each of these forms of government at a distance, with terrible and lasting results.

The thesis of those studies might be summarized as such: distance of class and racism produced, in most of these empires, a distance between the governed and their subjects that resulted in human abuses so cruel, so scandalous, so contrary to any stated aims of civilization, that they had to be written out of the record altogether; they could not be known and generally talked about at home. We could not bear to look at our own history. Follow that line of thinking a little further, and it runs like this: we should have know better. Even if it was hard to look at our history; we should have done so, and had we done so, there might not have been a Vietnam. Historians themselves often express skepticism that power wants to listen -- or that power can be persuaded by anything other than the self interest of moneyed elites. Consider the following anecdote. A few weeks ago, one of our historian friends -- in this case an Ottomanist -- lifted a glass of wine to her lips and paused to think about the arguments I was telling her about. You know, she said, in the scholarship of the Middle East, it's not that we have no historians who engage in policy, quite the contrary. But the historians who are likely to be taken seriously by policy are cherry-picked for their hawkish opinions. A few of them and their students are beloved by the State Department. The rest of us, however, disagree.

Our friend didn't need to fill in the rest; we both know and love many colleagues in the study of the Middle East. Many of them are activists; some of them keep blogs critical of the US presence in Iraq which are read and commented on by hundreds of individuals every day.

It is true, as well as troubling, that the more conservative and hawkish of Middle Eastern scholars have more ties to the current regime in the US. But is that necessarily how things must play out? Will hawkish elites forever dominate political conversations, and are progressive or radical colleagues forever destined to be ignored?

We know of no law of history, pace Pareto, that says that elites will forever dominate political institutions. Rather, decades of close inspection of the Progressive and Populist Movements, the era of 1968, and the progress of democracy in the west stress how the alliances of power are contingent upon event, institutions, movements, and moments. As we show in *The History Manifesto*, if historians in general haven't been talking to power, it's because of specific, contingent reasons having to do with the changing hierarchy of disciplines around 1968. Caught up with other political events, historians, sociologists, and anthropologists turned to labor politics, feminism, and postcoloniality, often choosing the leading edge of global policy over the failing international institutions like the United Nations whom they had served to date.

Let it not be thought that because historians largely agree about the costs of the Vietnam war and generally shake their heads about Iraq, that we are naive about the geopolitics of protecting energy and creating national stability.

Historians are no strangers to issues of energy security; as Tim Mitchell's work demonstrates, we know only too well how protection of supply chains has overdetermined political action for generations. We know that pattern of protecting national hegemony and shorting investment in alternative energy well enough to hunger for something new in the policy landscape. As Paul Sabin of Yale might suggest, we know how long it takes to build up the alternatives to coal and oil, and the importance of institutions -- from the EPA to Interstate Highway to the the Los Angeles automotive lobby and the Texas Railway Commission -- in influencing new policy. For a policy-maker in favor of radical new possibilities or investment in alternative energy pathways, historians like Sabin could be enviable allies in brainstorming the best allies to pursue in making a new constituency.

In *The History Manifesto*, we insist that a policy governed by history opens up utopian possibilities (peace in the Middle East, for instance?) but offering not static laws of society, but rather multiple possible futures predicated on the different forms of agency realized in many different pasts. "Iraq would have looked different had historians been involved" is a bold claim, but indeed, historians have been wondering for some time about how mistakes of the scale of slavery, empire, and torture are allowed to happen, and how they could be prevented. We now know for certain, thanks to the work of Tim Hitchcock and Simon Dedeo, that the decline in violence in nineteenth-century Britain, long speculated about, is a reality. Might not a global decline in violence be a real possibility in the future, if history were adequately applied to geopolitics as a raw stop to hawkishness?

Who should read The History Manifesto?

Sep 29, 2014

By David and Jo

Historians, first and foremost, but probably students more than their teachers. Other practitioners of the human sciences with a historical bent: sociologists, economists, political scientists, anthropologists. Fellow humanists, in English and other literature departments. Academics and non-academics. Activists interested in utopian thinking and alternative futures. Entrepreneurs wanting to break out of short-termism. Anyone interested in the fate of the humanities in the digital age. Everyone who's ever felt worried about the volatility of the financial system, the fragility of the planet, the corruption of our governments, national and international.

Does that leave anyone out?

More seriously, the book is meant to alert fellow historians to the promise of our practice for what in the book we call "the public future of the past": that is, the role that historians are uniquely poised to play in clarifying contemporary problems and questioning how data is being used to pose and answer them. It is also intended to give courage to younger historians—graduate students and early-career researchers especially—to tackle big questions with big implications and not rest easy with simply reproducing the kinds of problems and parameters adopted by their teachers or predecessors.

Every so often it's necessary to return to essentials: the phrase comes from one of the most conservative of all recent historians, G. R. Elton. The essentials, as we see them, are history's role among the other humanities and social sciences, its responsibility to wider publics, and its transformative potential at a moment of accumulating international and global crises. Some historians might try to damn this by calling it presentism but, while we have a responsibility to the dead—to get their histories right—our primary responsibility is to the living and those yet to come. They'll be our ultimate judges. It's their lives our arguments will shape and influence the most.

Why Open Access Publication for The History Manifesto?

Sep 24, 2014

By David and Jo

Even two or three years ago, most academics in the humanities, and certainly most members of the non-academic public, had not heard much if anything about the Open Access movement. The publication of [the Finch Report](#) in the UK and the great success of open access initiatives in the natural sciences have changed all that. This has led to a broader conversation, around the world, about the accessibility of academic work and the barriers that prevent its widest circulation.

Few historians beyond the most famous—or those who write popular textbooks—expect to make any substantial money from their publications. Most are grateful to be published at all, by prestigious journals and university presses, and the benefits tend to be indirect, in the form of tenure and promotion, for instance. The aim, then, should be to have our work reach the widest audience and have the greatest impact. Open access publication makes that possible.

A major part of The History Manifesto concerns the breakdown of conversations between professional historians and the wider public outside the academy. It was in keeping with the spirit of the book's argument that the work itself should be freely available: free in the sense of unfettered, and free in the sense of gratis.

We have both been involved in discussions, at Harvard, Brown, and [elsewhere](#) about the future of open access publishing. Writing The History Manifesto was a chance to put our money where our mouth is and experiment with an open-access book on the subject, at least in part, of public access to historical research and the public mission of the 21st-century university.

To be quite honest, we hadn't really expected that any of the presses we approached about the Manifesto would agree to publish it as open access—at least, not without much persuasion to overcome scepticism about the potential implications for the publisher's revenue. However, we were very lucky in our timing and in the personnel at Cambridge University Press. CUP had been thinking about open-access publishing models for some time and embraced the Manifesto as its first ever open-access monograph: quite a lot of the thanks for this bold and imaginative move must go to Richard Fisher, the Managing Director of Cambridge Academic, who supported our plans from the very beginning.

Open access publishing raises a host of fascinating and challenging questions—many of them tackled in the Press’s second open access publication, Martin Eve’s [Open Access and the Humanities: Contexts, Controversies and the Future](#), which will appear a few weeks after the Manifesto. Does open access publication hurt or increase hard-copy sales? Will readers prefer one format over the other, or will they use the different formats for different purposes? Will they prefer to download a PDF or work with the HTML text here on [the book’s website](#)?

What is more easy to guess is whether open access publication will increase the readership for the Manifesto. Even if readers are simply curious about the form, they can easily find the text of the book. We’ll see how many choose to download it, how many join the online forum, and how many pay for the book in hard copy, most likely in paperback. Watch this space for updates.

Why The History “Manifesto”?

Sep 22, 2014

By David and Jo

We played around with various titles for the book but the one that stuck, at least by the time we wrote the proposal, was The Historicist Manifesto—on the analogy, most obviously, of The Communist Manifesto. We soon realised, thanks, not least, to the outside readers of the prospectus, that “historicist” wasn’t going to fly: too pretentious for general readers, too imprecise (or loaded) for academic historians, the word undid our strategy of openness and accessibility right from the start. The title soon became The History Manifesto.

But why “the” History Manifesto: could anything be more hubristic? Well, calling it A History Manifesto risked underselling the book and, though a bit more honest, was also much less feisty than we wanted. The book is a deliberate provocation, designed to open up argument not close it down. The aim of most academic monographs is to seal off conversation by making a definitive statement on a subject, as far as that seems humanly possible, even if only for a limited shelf-life. The upshot of this is clear enough: in our efforts to have the last word, we silence critics rather than create a lively discussion.

If the definitiveness of the definite article in our title offends some readers, that’s a risk we’re willing to take. And if some Marxists are more bemused than amused by our riff on Marx and Engels’s incendiary handbook, then we’ll take that, too. The chance to bounce off that classic work to spur even a minor revolution in History departments was too good to miss.

Why Did You Write The History Manifesto?

Sep 22, 2014

By David and Jo

There's no easy answer to the question of why we wrote The History Manifesto. But let's play Fernand Braudel's game and think of three different time-scales which might explain how the book came about.

In the short term, it sprang from writing an article together called, à la Braudel, "[The Return of the Longue Durée](#)". Now, that article will come out in the venerable French history journal *Annales* some time early in 2015 and it both describes and encourages a return to longer time-frames for historical work than had been the case for at least the last forty years. Although the article itself was quite long by historians' standards—about 15,000 words—we still found we had lots of say about the topic and needed the breathing-space of a book to say it. The fact that the article has circulated widely before publication—on Twitter, in [WIRED](#) magazine, in [History Today](#), for example—was also a sign that other readers wanted to hear more.

In the medium term, we'd both been chewing over the challenges of writing books on quite long time-spans. Jo's work-in-progress, [The Long Land War](#), is a global history of land reform spanning well over a century and a half—an unusually long time for a work of institutional and social history. David's [Civil War: A History in Ideas](#) covers more than two thousand years, from ancient Rome to the present, again an unprecedentedly, even absurdly, long period for a work of intellectual history. Why did we find ourselves stretching the bounds of conventional periods at the same moment? And why had we both been told by our fields that we weren't supposed to do that? Curiosity led to wider analysis, much discussion, and, in due course, to the Manifesto itself.

In the *longue durée*, we could both see that the early twenty-first century marked a new era in the writing of history. Universities, libraries, publishing, technology, teaching: all are changing at unimaginable speed. We're almost certainly in the midst of the biggest revolutions in scholarly communications and higher education in at least five hundred years. Even in just the last decade, the landscape has been so fundamentally transformed by digital technologies and the exploding availability of data—textual and in other forms—that the historical profession can never be the same again. This also means the relations between academics and a wider public are being changed out of all recognition. At the very least, there was no history primer that had yet captured these developments in ways that would make sense to our students, our younger colleagues, and many non-academics. The time seemed ripe to write a tract for the times, informed by these epochal shifts but also reflecting them in form as well as in content.