

A SHOT IN THE ARM OR A SHOT IN THE FOOT?

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There is one story from 2012, my lone season on the bewildering ride known as the academic job market, that has stuck with me through the years. I was being interviewed by the faculty at a place we'll call the University of X, doing what most recently minted PhDs desperate for a tenure-track placement do: overselling my underbaked-dissertation-soon-to-be-greatest-book-ever-written. In this instance, I was making the case that the book would have mass-market appeal beyond the halls of academia (spoiler alert: it did not), when one of the more seasoned faculty members (we'll call him Professor X) interrupted me to ask this: Why do historians feel the need to demonstrate that their work will have popular appeal? I'm paraphrasing, as it was thirteen years ago, but he went on ask why this was so, when scientists and mathematicians felt no such need to make their work broadly accessible. I took his point at the time, and I still see its merit today, but the question has been rolling around in my head ever since.

It wasn't that long ago—1992, to be exact—that the political scientist Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the end of history. In his view, liberal democracy had triumphed over its alternatives once and for all to become society's ultimate governing form. With humanity's quest for something better thus rendered futile, it seemed we could all go home. Now, a third of a century later, with liberal democracy buckling under the weight of resurgent right-wing extremism and strongman rule, it seems that Fukuyama's confident declaration might have been premature.

Around the same time that Fukuyama declared history over, the actual discipline of History (which I will capitalize to differentiate it from more casual notions of humankind's past) went into its own kind of death spiral. History,

through most of the twentieth century, had been a public-facing and engaged discipline. As a rule, academic historians attempted to take an objective rather than partisan stance toward the past, even as they became ever more aware of the fact that they could never be truly objective or apolitical. Either way, the discipline of History contributed very directly to our civic life by giving people historical literacy and historical perspective, two of the greatest prerequisites of informed citizenship.

As the United States staggers into an unprecedented era of self-inflicted harm, I can't help but gravitate toward a few conclusions. First, Professor X was wrong. History must reach people to be useful. Astrophysicists can uncover the dynamics of the cosmos without needing to explain the meaning of their equations and theorems to ordinary people, and in all likelihood, society as a whole will not suffer. But if the entire profession of History denies the public the fruits of its insights, society *will* suffer, and indeed it has already.

Second, Fukuyama was wrong. History isn't dead. Taking his thesis as the last word would require that you accept a teleological and social evolutionist view of history. It would also require closing your mind to the possibility of something better in the as-yet-unknown future. Viewing history in such a deterministic way is a disciplinary no-no. Viewing the future as a closed case is downright arrogant. Even if you accept his point that liberal democracy forms the apogee of human political development (again, I emphatically do not), it is no less true that History must stand as one of its guardians. Without it, democracy falters, and fast.

Third, we in the profession of academic History have had a hand in this crisis. We must admit this, atone for it, and then change. The decline of History has been the work of many hands. Cynical political interests have long sought to suppress honest historical analysis, especially in cases in which critical inquiry leads to unflattering truths about the United States. The textbook industry, motivated by profit, stands on the front lines of this political effort to whitewash our own nation's past. The rise of all-consuming digital technology has taken its toll, too. The paradox is obvious to all: despite the aid of talismanic handheld devices that can put the sum total of humanity's learning at our fingertips, humans have lost the capacity for civil discourse, reasoned debate, deep reading, skeptical thought, and critical analysis.

History, which relies on all these things, has been no beneficiary of these processes. University administrators have responded to (and also hastened)

the diminished demand for History by shrinking, merging, and defunding departments. Artificial intelligence has collapsed the incentive to do the hard work of historical research, interpretation, and writing, especially among students. The practitioners of History cannot be blamed for these contextual changes. To say otherwise would be tantamount to blaming the victim.

But in other areas, we have played the role of perpetrator. The great inward turn that History has taken over the past several decades has been mildly interesting for those participating, but for a society screaming out for historical perspective, for reference points not twisted and distorted for political effect, our internal conversations are functionally useless. Post-structuralism, for all the pathways it has opened to understanding the discursive construction of power, and despite its massive and in many ways beneficial impact on historiography, has nonetheless led the discipline to an abyss of circular tautologies and claptrap jargon. Worse, it has been a faithful soldier in the slow war against basic notions of truth, a war that politicians have manipulated with opportunism.

To cite one glaring case: Karen King, a prominent historian at Harvard Divinity School, was forced to admit she had been duped by a shadowy internet personality into believing in the authenticity of a small papyrus fragment that appeared to prove that the disciple Mary Magdalene was in fact the wife of Jesus. A clutch of skeptical scholars, journalists, and clerics cried foul and set about proving that the document was a forgery. They succeeded. A journalist named Ariel Sabar wrote a book about it. King recanted. That was that.

King, who had profited from the inevitable media hype surrounding this salacious story, did not dwell long in contrition. It was precisely her view of history, as being “not about truth but about power relations,” and as “not serious, real or true,” that provided her made-to-order self-defense. In her view, obsessive devotion to the “little tyrannies” of facts, rather than to the task of deconstructing texts to interpret the meaning of the past, results in a crippling “fact fundamentalism.”

The first lesson here is obvious: one can jump from a reasonable acknowledgment of the subjective nature of historical interpretation to an unreasonable disregard for basic truth with relative ease and, in doing so, expose a number of ethical, methodological, and epistemological quandaries. The second lesson is even easier to grasp: endless debates over topics as esoteric as the nature of historical truth, which can range from mindless happy hour fodder

to unconvincing rationalizations of shoddy historical research, do nothing to advance what should be the broader mission of History: to contribute to an informed citizenry and a culture rich in historical awareness.

The historian Timothy Snyder, in his pocket manifesto *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, offers relatively simple actions that ordinary people—those who are horrified by the disintegration of our politics and the erosion of common decency in our society, but who are not inclined toward radical action—can do to stave off, or at least slow down, the onset of authoritarianism. His commonsense recommendations, which range from embracing rather than avoiding talking politics with your neighbors to financially supporting causes that seek to advance the common good, are appealing for those who are not ready to pick up pitchforks and flaming torches just yet.

I would add broad historical literacy to Snyder's list of everyday weapons that people should seize in the fight against the encroachment of fascism. The erasure and distortion of knowledge about the past, and about its connection to the present, are handmaidens of authoritarianism. Citizens cannot be expected to understand issues as complex as institutionalized racism, mass immigration, or trade policy, let alone hold learned opinions about them, without a functional understanding of the past. I call on historians to find ways big and small to contribute to this mission. Our survival depends on it.