Review of the History Manifesto


Reviewed by Mark Koyama

The History Manifesto is a call to arms for historians urging them to take on social scientists, tackle big questions, and master ‘big data’ in order to return to the tradition of the long durée as famously practiced by the Annales school. This is a worthy aim. And this short, engagingly written book will no doubt successfully inspire many young historians to do just that. Nevertheless The History Manifesto is a deeply flawed book. Despite its promise, I cannot recommend that it be taken seriously either as an account of the relationship between history and the social scientists in recent decades or as a plan of action for historians in the future.

The ambitions of The History Manifesto are twofold. On the one hand, it is an argument for historians to reengage in more wide-ranging and ambitious historical work of the kind practiced by scholars of the longue durée in the 1940s through to the 1970s such as Marc Bloch and Fernand Braudel. Guldi and Armitage claim that historians are uniquely placed and equipped to assess long-run trends and developments due to their specialists skills in handling and interpreting evidence. On the other hand, it is also a call for political engagement by historians. Unfortunately, the latter objective mars much that is valuable and useful in their call for historians to re-embrace the longue durée. Like many economic historians, I am also critical of the narrowness that is characteristic of much academic history. Unfortunately, however the flaws of The History Manifesto prevent it from realizing its promise as a platform for historians who seek to engage with questions of the longue durée. These flaws are flaws of scholarship, notably conceptual and factual sloppiness, and remarkable partiality in its engagement with the research of other historians and social scientists. As I will document, it is precisely the political engagement they call for throughout the book that leads them astray in their treatment of other scholars and in their attempts to engage with the works of social scientists.

The History Manifesto comprises four chapters or essays. Chapters 1 and 2 are the best. They provide a plotted history of the rise of the longue durée and how what the authors call the Short Past came to dominate history departments after 1968. This account has been challenged by some other reviewers but Guldi and Armitage’s version of the rise of detailed micro-history—the result of scholars spending years mastering previously untapped archives—rings true, at least to

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As Guldi and Armitage explain, this shift towards micro-history has been very fruitful, but it has also come at a cost: as historians abandoned the kinds of ambitious long-run studies of a Tawney or a Braudel, they ceded their ability to influence debates in other fields and in policy to either journalists working in think tanks or to other social scientists, notably economists (what the authors call “dirty longue durée history”).

In Chapters 3 and 4, Guldi and Armitage focus on how historians can contribute to current debates on topics such as inequality and climate change. Their aim is to carve out a conceptual space for historians to contribute on these important policy questions. This requires them to enter areas of research in which they are outsiders; a difficult task, but one that is essential for them to make their case that historians are uniquely equipped to make a contribution to these fields.

How successful is The History Manifesto in making the argument that historians have something unique and valuable to add to scholarship in topics like inequality and climate change? Unfortunately, it is a resounding failure, as the job of synthesizing and summarizing research in fields outside history is one for which the authors of The History Manifesto are signally ill-equipped. In writing this review I realized that criticizing a book that calls itself a ‘manifesto’ on grounds on factual accuracy or scholarship risks accusations of pedantry. Nevertheless, this is an important task. This book celebrates the virtues of historians. One virtue most characteristic of historians is careful scholarship; however, it is this virtue that is too often absent in this book.

Chapter 3 of the History Manifesto deals with inequality and particularly the relationship between capitalism and inequality in the nineteenth century. It draws a distinction between economists, on the one hand, for whom the ‘numbers demonstrate conclusively that capitalism banished inequality during the nineteenth century, and could do so again’ and historians who because of their greater sensitive to historical evidence are attuned to the persistence of poverty through the nineteenth century’ (58). Unfortunately, as the anonymous blogger Pseudoerasmus has documented with admirable thoroughness, the ‘American economists’ Guldi and Armitage cite as finding that the heights of criminals admitted into British prisons in the nineteenth century rose are, in fact, Australian and British economic historians and that they actually found a decline in height during the nineteenth century.3 So the entire paragraph summarizing the difference between historians and economists on the standards of living debate turns out to be false. It is false in its particulars and false in the impression it conveys as it does not acknowledge that the topic of the living standards during the British Industrial Revolution is a fiercely debated subject not between economists and historians but among economic historians.

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Moreover, their summary bears no resemblance to the actual scholarly debate that took place among economic historians from the 1980s through to the 2000s in which evidence rather than ideology actually played a role in shifting the opinion of the majority of scholars in the field. The views they attribute to authors in their endnotes simply do not correspond to the actual contents of these references.  

If this description of the standard of living debate might place doubt in the mind of even a sympathetic reader concerning Guldi and Armitage’s ability to accurately summarize topics outside of their field, they follow it up with statements such as: “The data from economics tends to take one aspect of economic experience—wages, the price of grain, or height—and interpret them as a proxy for freedom, democracy, or happiness” (59). Again there are numerous citations in the corresponding endnote, but not one of the papers cited uses the price of grain as a proxy for either freedom, democracy or happiness. Nor can I think of a reason why anyone would.

This is not just a problem in The History Manifesto’s discussion of economic history. Guldi and Armitage commit elementary mistakes in their account of the relevant debates over climate change. In their discussion of the Stern Report in 2006, they write that economists criticized “a near-zero time discount rate’ in scientists’ modeling of possible futures’ because the believed entrepreneurs could ‘suddenly’ come up ‘with more energy-intensive technologies that produced far fewer emissions than the ones in use today’ (63). Setting aside the quibble that it is likely the authors meant less rather than more energy-intensive technologies, this misrepresents the debate that followed the Stern report. It was an economist, Nicholas Stern, who proposed and defended the use of an extremely low discount rate. And the criticism this assumption received was not premised on the future technological innovations, but on a question in moral philosophy about the appropriate way to assess the wellbeing of future generations.  

In their account of a debate between Greg Clark and Karl Gunnar Perrson they report that one of the former’s alleged faults was ‘looking at cross-sections’ (60). Of course, however, it is not ‘looking at’ cross sectional evidence itself that is problematic, but inferring a causal relationship from correlations that exist at a single point in time. Similar misstatements or non-sequiturs abound. A paragraph unsupported by citations asserts: “Historians no longer believe in the mythology that the world was shaped dominantly for the good of economic well-being by the influence of western empire, but many economists still do” (55). It is difficult to know who the authors are thinking of since they name no names. The most prominent defender of the British

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4 Contrary to Guldi and Armitage’s depiction, the evidence that economic historians have accumulated support pessimistic interpretations of the impact of the industrial revolution on living standards up to the 1840s. The real wage data supports more optimistic conclusions from the 1850s onwards (see, for instance Feinstein, 1998; Clark, 2005; Allen, 2009).

5 See Broome (2004). The issue is whether or not the private discount rate individuals use when making savings decisions is the one policy makers should use. Of course this debate goes back to Ramsey (1928).
empire is a historian: Niall Ferguson (2003). And while economists and economic historians have been busy gathering new data about the impact of colonialism it is difficult to think of a single prominent economist who takes the position attributed to ‘many economists’ by Guldi and Armitage.6

The common thread linking many of these misconceptions and mistakes is ideology. Historians are celebrated. Economists and other social scientists are generally presented as either naive number crunchers or outright villains. Therefore Richard Tawney, Eric Hobsbawm, Eric Williams, and other scholars they respect are historians rather than economic historians, while Greg Clark, Simon Kuznets and the other economic historians they dislike are economists and, as such, are ideologically suspect.

The only thing worse than an economist is a ‘neoliberal’; or ‘Cold War’ economist. When we are told that Kuznets was a ‘Cold War economist’ the implication for the reader seems to be that Kuznets’s research and speculations into inequality were politically motivated. Such a reading cannot be accepted by anyone familiar with either Kuznets’s presidential address on inequality or or the body of Kuznets’s work in general. Particularly as Kuznets’s claims were speculative, and he was emphatic in cautioning against drawing too many inferences from the limited data he had at his disposal admitting that it ‘came perilously close to pure guesswork’ (Kuznets, 1955, 6). This political name calling is a barrier to genuine understanding. Following a discussion of Greg Clark’s emphasis on Malthusian factors in A Farewell to Alms, the authors tell us that ‘When neo-liberal economists measure one factor over time not many, they are involved in speculation not long-term thinking’. However, it seems for the authors that when apparently non ‘neo-liberal’ economists focus on measuring ‘one factor over time’ the results are ground breaking as in the case of Thomas Piketty’s Capital in the Twenty-First Century which they hail as exemplifying ‘the power of relevant historical studies, driven by data, to speak to policy and publics well beyond professional history’ (81).

What justifies this animus? Guldi and Armitage claim that “Modern economists have removed the picture of an abusive God from their theories, but their theory is still a root an early nineteenth-century one, where the universe is designed to punish the poor, and the experience of the rich is a sign of their obedience to natural laws” (109). I am unaware of any documented relationship between the Book of Job and Classical Economics.7 But apparently since economics is tainted by some kind of original sin, the authors of The History Manifesto are allowed to

6 Examples of detailed, evidence-based research on the legacy of colonial empires include Iyer (2010); Dell (2010); Bruhn and Gallego (2012); ? and countless other papers ignored by The History Manifesto.

7 Perhaps the most amusing statement is a quote they take from Geoffrey Hodgson saying that modern economics “has neglected the problem of causality”—a statement that might be expected to provoke outright laughter in many economics departments where countless seminars have been derailed precisely because of the obsession of some economists with identifying causal claims.
So political prejudice and perhaps an unfamiliarity with the terrain means that Guldi and Armitage don’t mention some of the biggest recent debates in economic history, many of which exemplify the virtues of *longue durée* history that they celebrate elsewhere in the book. This is both a shame and a missed opportunity. Though they cite David Graeber and Piketty as exemplars of such long-run historical thinking, they could also have mentioned the numerous recent ambitious and wide-ranging works by prominent economic historians but choose not to.\(^8\) The implication seems to be that either they are unaware of these works or they think that they do not belong to the *longue durée* tradition that they associate with Braudel and Tawney.

These are not minor issues. They get to the heart of what *The History Manifesto* is about. If historians are going to have an important role in shaping attitudes towards inequality and climate change as Guldi and Armitage desire they will have to come to grips with what other social scientists have to say on these issues. Guldi and Armitage’s failure to do so means that, while they jump on the Piketty bandwagon, they miss the perhaps biggest debate in the economic history of the last fifteen years. This is the debate surrounding the Great Divergence. If nothing else the large number of articles and books that followed in the wake of Ken Pomeranz’s claim that China possessed as developed an economy as Europe until the eighteenth century testify both to the interest economic historians have in big picture topics and their ability to systematically marshal empirical evidence in a way that enables hypotheses and arguments to be tested against data.\(^9\) Economic history therefore possesses a model for how historians can engage in the history of the *long durée* but it is a model that *The History Manifesto* ignores.

The comparative advantage of historians—perhaps their greatest virtue is their commitment to scholarship: their awareness and appreciation of where data comes from and how to deal with conflicting sources of information. This is an area where economists and other social scientists have much to learn from historians (and economic historians) as they are all too often happy to download whatever data is available on the internet without exploring its provenance and the biases it might embody. Unfortunately, while *The History Manifesto* pays lip service to these virtues, the authors themselves too often treat their material in a slipshod way. The result is a politicized account that does little to point the way for historians interested in engaging in the history of the *longue durée*.

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\(^8\)For example Katz and Goldin (2008), Allen (2009), Kuran (2010), McCloskey (2010), to mention just a few.

\(^9\)Bizarrely, they cite Pomeranz (2000) on a topic completely unrelated to the topic of his book—one of several references that are eccentric to the say the least and have been documented by the blogger Pseudoeramus.