Space, time and the future of the past

The wide-angle, long-range view of historians is crucial to keeping the world's challenges in check.

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The title of this distinguished lecture series gets to the heart of the matter — the question every academic community needs and many a scholar dreads: “So what?” The challenge comes in various forms and in different forums. In a seminar, it is rarely friendly: “So what’s new?” From an administrator, it is hardly reassuring: “Why should we fund that?” And from the general public — the academy’s most exacting critics and ultimately, even in private universities, our paymasters — it is fundamentally probing: “What’s the return on our investment?”

“Your point being?” “Culbono” “Where’s the beef?” There are unavoidable questions and issues in any series like this, addressed to an audience beyond the academy’s walls as well as within it, uniquely well-placed to help answer.

I’ve been asking myself these questions a lot in the past year as I’ve added chairing a department of history to my day-job as a teacher and researcher, mostly in intellectual history and international history. When friends ask me what it’s like to be a chair, on bad days I refer them to the dictionary definition: an object on which other people sit. On the good days, I tell them it’s a great chance to think broadly, not just about the directions my own department should be going in the next few years but also about trends in the field, the meaning of history (as a discipline, not as a past), in the English-speaking parts of it — there is now a much-discussed crisis of the humanities, in the US, Britain, and Australia. The nature of the current crisis, despite its local manifestations in different countries, are many and miscellaneous: sharply declining enrollments in classrooms; the controversial move of massive online courses which threaten to create a hierarchy of institutions and promote easily quantifiable subjects at the expense of those that cannot be reduced to machine-readable responses; the shifting boundaries between scientific and non-scientific disciplines; how a backlash can make humanities studies seem quaint or luxurious to some; genuine concerns about employability among students and their parents; ideologies of “impact” and “relevance,” a creeping instrumentalism among administrators; and the snoozes on public (and private) university revenues that inform them, among others.

Battling these challenges, from within and without, can feel like a struggle against the many-headed Hydra: Herculean (and therefore heroic) but unmitigating because every victory brings a new adver-sary. These challenges affect history as much as the other humanities: although history is not the same as the humanities.

Australia’s histories are exemplary for the kinds of boundary-breaking efforts other historians around the world are now attempting, then, barely 10% of students majoring in humanities subjects, and it was the late 60s and 70s, when enrollments boomed, that appear to be the anomaly.

Deepening digging has also revealed a crucial gender dimension to these figures: much of the alleged flight from the humanities has been the movement of women, first into and then out of humanities subjects; the proportion of men taking these subjects has barely changed since 1950.

cycles of budgets, elections, and investment returns. It is along these lines that universities, especially in Britain and Australia, have been asked by governments to justify the impact of their teaching and research; however, as the V-C of Sydney University, Michael Spence, noted last week, “impact, as defined in this context, is always short-term,” while universities remain “the one place capable of making long-term infrastructure-intensive research investments” over decades, with often unobservable results.

The longer perspectives afforded by the wide-angle, long-range view of historians have obvious relevance to our current situation. Since World War II, planning horizons and budget cycles around the globe have shrunk even more drastically than the timescales of historians. Electoral cycles and fiscal years are drawn originally from military strategy and economic forecasting narrowed the focus of policymakers and NGOs to periods of between one and five years. It is little wonder, then, that global governance in its collapse, inequality within countries is at its highest in history and that the inequalities between them are declining, or that climate change is almost certainly already beyond human control.

All these cities have deep roots, stretching back respectively to the mid-20th century (and the rise of modern international institutions), the late 19th century (and the acceleration of capitalism), or the late 18th century (with the beginnings of the anthropocene), at a minimum.

History text, as some economists might tell us, is redundant to path-dependency: the future need not run in the roots of the past. It is possible to jump the tracks and take a new direction, just as it is possible to go back through the past to discover paths not taken.

Only by scaling our inquiries over so many decades, centuries, or even millennia, can we hope to understand the genesis of our present concerns. And only by delving deep into the past can we hope to project ourselves imaginatively any meaningful distance into the future.

Australia’s histories are exemplary for the kinds of boundary-breaking efforts that other historians around the world are now attempting. The following examples highlight the challenges facing historians and the significance of their work:

1. The Margins are Partly Self-Assignment

One of the many reasons I like to visit Australia frequently is that, in matters of big history, Australian historians’ approach to the past has consistently pointed to the future of the discipline elsewhere in the world. The tyranny of distance — perhaps more optimistically thought of as the thickness of long-distance connections — has encouraged Australian historians to.

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